

The Transgender Look

Certain social groups may be seen as having rigid or unresponsive selves and bodies, making them relatively unfit for the kind of society we now seem to desire.

—Emily Martin, *Flexible Bodies*

In the last two chapters, we have seen how an archive of print and visual materials have accumulated around the figure of Brandon Teena, a young transgender man who defied the social mandate to be and to have a singular gender identity. Here, I continue to build on that archive with a consideration of the feature film *Boys Don't Cry*, but I also try to expand the archive of visual representations of gender ambiguity, placing this expanded archive within what Nick Mirzoeff calls “the postmodern globalization of the visual as everyday life” (Mirzoeff 1999, 3). I begin with a study of the transgender gaze or look as it has developed in recent queer cinema (film and video), and then in the next chapter, turn to photography and painting to examine the clash between embodiment and the visual that queer art making has documented in vivid detail. Gender ambiguity, in some sense, results from and contests the dominance of the visual within postmodernism.

The potentiality of the body to morph, shift, change, and become fluid is a powerful fantasy in transmodern cinema. Whether it is the image of surgically removable faces in John Woo's *Face/Off*, the liquid-mercury type of slinkiness of the Terminator in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, the virtual bodies of *The Matrix*, or the living-dead body in *The Sixth Sense*, the body in transition indelibly marks late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century visual fantasy. The fantasy of the shape-shifting and identity-morphing body has been nowhere more powerfully realized recently than in transgender film. In films like Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Boys Don't Cry*, the transgender character surprises audiences with his/her ability to remain attractive, appealing, and gendered while simultaneously presenting a gender at odds with sex, a sense of self not derived from the body, and an identity that operates within the heterosexual matrix without confirming the inevitability of that system of difference. But even as the transgender body becomes a sym-

bol par excellence for flexibility, transgenderism also represents a form of rigidity, an insistence on particular forms of recognition, that reminds us of the limits of what Martin has called “flexible bodies.” Those bodies, indeed, that fail to conform to the postmodern fantasy of flexibility that has been projected onto the transgender body may well be punished in popular representations even as they seem to be lauded. And so, Brandon in *Boys Don't Cry* and Dil in *The Crying Game* are represented as both heroic and fatally flawed.

Both *The Crying Game* and *Boys Don't Cry* rely on the successful solicitation of affect—whether it be revulsion, sympathy, or empathy—in order to give mainstream viewers access to a transgender gaze. And in both films, a relatively unknown actor pulls off the feat of credibly performing a gender at odds with the sexed body even after the body has been brutally exposed. Gender metamorphosis in these films is also used as a metaphor for other kinds of mobility or immobility. In *The Crying Game*, Dil's womanhood stands in opposition to a revolutionary subjectivity associated with the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and in *Boys Don't Cry*, Brandon's manhood represents a class-based desire to transcend small-town conflicts and a predictable life narrative of marriage, babies, domestic abuse, and alcoholism. While Brandon continues to romanticize small-town life, his girlfriend, Lana, sees him as a symbol of a much-desired elsewhere. In both films, the transgender character also seems to stand for a different form of temporality. Dil seems deliberately removed in *The Crying Game* from the time of the nation and other nationalisms, and her performance of womanhood opens up a ludic temporality. Brandon in *Boys Don't Cry* represents an alternative future for Lana by trying to be a man with no past. The dilemma for the transgender character, as we have seen in earlier chapters, is to create an alternate future while rewriting history. In *Boys Don't Cry*, director Peirce seems aware of the imperative of queer time and constructs (but fails to sustain) a transgender gaze capable of seeing through the present to a future elsewhere. In experimental moments in this otherwise brutally realistic film, Peirce creates slow-motion or double-speed time warps that hint at an elsewhere for the star-crossed lovers that is located in both time and space.

The transgender film confronts powerfully the way that transgenderism is constituted as a paradox made up in equal parts of visibility and temporality: whenever the transgender character is seen to be transgendered, then he/she is both failing to pass and threatening to expose a rupture between the distinct temporal registers of past, present, and future. The exposure of a trans character whom the audience has already accepted as male or female,

causes the audience to reorient themselves in relation to the film's past in order to read the film's present and prepare themselves for the film's future. When we "see" the transgender character, then, we are actually seeing cinematic time's sleight of hand. Visibility, under these circumstances, may be equated with jeopardy, danger, and exposure, and it often becomes necessary for the transgender character to disappear in order to remain viable. The transgender gaze becomes difficult to track because it depends on complex relations in time and space between seeing and not seeing, appearing and disappearing, knowing and not knowing. I will be identifying here different treatments of the transgenderism that resolve these complex problems of temporality and visibility.

In one mode that we might call the "rewind," the transgender character is presented at first as "properly" gendered, as passing in other words, and as properly located within a linear narrative; her exposure as transgender constitutes the film's narrative climax, and spells out both her own decline and the unraveling of cinematic time. The viewer literally has to rewind the film after the character's exposure in order to reorganize the narrative logic in terms of the past. In a second mode that involves embedding several ways of looking into one, the film deploys certain formal techniques to give the viewer access to the transgender gaze in order to allow us to look *with* the transgender character instead of *at* him. Other techniques include ghosting the transgender character or allowing him to haunt the narrative after death; and doubling the transgender character or playing him/her off another trans character in order to remove the nodal point of normativity. *The Brandon Teena Story*, discussed in chapter 2, provides an example of the ghosting technique, and in this film, Brandon occupies the space of the ghost; he literally haunts the film and returns to life only as an eerie voice recorded during a brutal police interrogation. Two other transgender films, Kate Davis's documentary *Southern Comfort* (2001) along with Harry Dodge and Silas Howard's feature film *By Hook or by Crook* (2001), work through the strategy of doubling. In *Southern Comfort*, the transgender man, Robert Eads, is in the process of disappearing as the film charts his decline and death from uterine and ovarian cancers. Robert is doubled by other male transgender friends, but also by his transgender girlfriend, Lola. By showing Robert to be part of a transgender community rather than a freakish individual, the film refuses the medical gaze that classifies Robert as abnormal and the heteronormative gaze that renders Robert invisible. Instead, *Southern Comfort* portrays Robert as a transgender man among other transgender people.

In *By Hook or by Crook*, transgenderism is a complex dynamic between the two butch heroes, Shy and Valentine. The two collude and collaborate in their gendering, and create a closed world of queerness that is locked in place by the circuit of a gaze that never references the male or the female gaze as such. The plot of *By Hook or by Crook* involves the random meeting of two trans butches and the development of a fast friendship. Shy tries to help Valentine, who has been adopted, find his mother, while Valentine introduces the lonely Shy, whose father has just died, to an alternative form of community. The dead or missing parents imply an absence of conventional family, and afford our heroes with the opportunity to remake home, family, community, and most important, friendship. As the story evolves into a shaggy-dog tale of hide-and-seek, we leave family time far behind, entering into the shadow world of queers, loners, street people, and crazies. Transgenderism takes its place in this world as a quiet location outside the storm of law and order, mental health, and financial stability. Unlike other transgender films that remain committed to seducing the straight gaze, this one remains thoroughly committed to the transgender look, and it opens up, formally and thematically, a new mode of envisioning gender mobility. In this chapter, I pay close attention to three versions of the "transgender film"—*The Crying Game*, *Boy's Don't Cry*, and *By Hook or by Crook*—to track the evolution of a set of strategies (each with different consequences) for representing transgender bodies, capturing transgender looks, and theorizing transgender legibility.

Crying Games

crying—*verb*: announce in public, utter in a loud distinct voice so as to be heard over a long distance; *noun*: the process of shedding tears (usually accompanied by sobs or other inarticulate sounds); *adj.*: conspicuously bad, offensive or reprehensible.

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

When *The Crying Game* was released, the media was instructed not to give away the "secret" at the heart of the film—but what exactly was the film's secret? Homosexuality? Transsexuality? Gender construction? Nationalist brutalities? Colonial encounters? By making the unmasking of a transvestite character into the preeminent signifier of difference and disclosure in the film, director Jordan participates, as many critics have noted, in a long

tradition of transforming political conflict into erotic tension in order to offer a romantic resolution.¹ I want to discuss *The Crying Game* briefly here to illustrate the misuse or simply the avoidance of the transgender gaze in mainstream films that purport to be about gender ambiguity. By asking media and audiences to keep the film's secret, then, *The Crying Game's* producers created and deepened the illusion that the film would and could offer something new and unexpected. In fact, the secrecy constructs a mainstream viewer for the film and ignores more knowing audiences.

The Crying Game concerns a number of different erotic triangles situated within the tense political landscape of the English occupation of Northern Ireland. The film opens by animating one triangle that links two IRA operatives, Fergus and Jude, to the black British soldier, Jody, whom they must kidnap. Jude lures Jody away from a fairground with a promise of sexual interaction, and then Fergus ambushes Jody and whisks him away to an IRA hideout. The whole of the opening scene plays out to the accompaniment of "When a Man Loves a Woman." The song equates femininity with trickery, falsehood, and deceit, and it sets up the misogynist strands of a narrative that envision the white male as unknowing victim of feminine wiles. The first third of the film concerns the relationship between captors and captive, and particularly between the warmhearted Fergus and the winning Jody. Fergus and Jody bond and connect over the picture of Jody's absent lover, Dil. After Jody dies in a foiled escape effort, Fergus leaves Ireland to escape the IRA and heads to England, where he becomes a construction worker. Fergus goes looking for Dil, and when he finds her, he romances her while seemingly unaware of her transgender identity. The last third of the film charts the course of Fergus's discovery of Dil's secret and his reentanglement with the IRA.

There are three major narrative strands in *The Crying Game*, all of which seem bound to alternative political identities, but none of which actually live up to their own potential. In the first strand, which involves the IRA, we expect to hear a critique of English colonialism, English racism, and the occupation of Northern Ireland by England. Instead, the film uses Jody to critique Irish racism and Fergus to delegitimize the IRA. The second narrative strand, which concerns the romance between Fergus and Dil, seems committed to a narrative about the "naturalness" of all types of gender expression, and here we expect to see the structures of heteronormativity exposed and the male gaze de-authorized. Instead, *The Crying Game* uses Dil's transvestism only to re-center the white male gaze, and to make the white male into the highly flexible, supremely human subject who must counter and cover for the gen-

der rigidity of the transvestite Dil (rigidity meaning that she cannot flow back and forth between male and female; she insists on being recognized as female) and the political rigidity of the IRA "fanatic" Jude. The triangulations that prop up each half of the film create the illusion of alternatives, but return time and again to the stable political format of white patriarchy. The third narrative strand has to do with cinematic time, and it projects an alternative ordering of time by positioning Dil as a character who seems to be able to cross back and forth between past, present, and future. When we first see Dil, she appears in a photograph representing Jody's past. When Fergus finally meets Dil, she represents his new present-tense life away from the IRA, and as the film winds down, Dil represents for Fergus a conventional future of marriage and family that awaits him when he obtains his release from jail, where he is "doing time." The seeming temporal fluidity of Dil is undercut, however, by the normative logic of the narrative's temporal drive, which seeks, through Fergus, to pin Dil down within the logic of heteronormative time.

Ultimately, the transgender character Dil never controls the gaze, and serves as a racialized fetish figure who diverts the viewer's attention from the highly charged political conflict between England and Ireland. The film characterizes Irish nationalism as a heartless and futile endeavor while depicting England ironically as a multicultural refuge, a place where formerly colonized peoples find a home. To dramatize the difference between Irish and English nationalism, the kidnapped black soldier, Jody, describes Ireland as "the only place in the world where they'll call you a nigger to your face." England, on the other hand, is marked for him by class conflicts (played out in his cricket tales), but not so much by racial disharmony. By the time Dil enters the film, about a third of the way in, England has become for Fergus a refuge and a place where he can disappear.

Disappearing is, in many ways, the name of the crying game, and the film plays with and through the fetishistic structure of cinema itself, with, in other words, the spectator's willingness to see what is not there and desire what is. In a series of scenes set in the gay bar, the Metro, where Dil performs, the viewer's gaze is sutured to Fergus's. In the first few scenes, the bar seems to be populated by so-called normal people, men and women, dancing together. But in the scene at the Metro that follows Fergus's discovery of Dil's penis, the camera again scans the bar and finds the garish and striking faces of the drag queens who populate it. Like Fergus, we formerly saw bio men and women, and like Fergus, we suddenly see the bar for what it is: a queer

site. And our vision, no matter how much we recognized Dil as transgender earlier, makes this abrupt detour around the transgender gaze along with Fergus. Indeed, *The Crying Game* cannot imagine the transgender gaze any more than it can cede the gaze to an IRA perspective. Here the revelation of a queer bar community sets up new triangulations within which the relationship between Fergus/Jimmy and Dil is now coded as homosexual. The homo context erases Dil's transsexual subjectivity, and throws the male protagonist into a panic that is only resolved by the symbolic castration of Dil when Fergus cuts Dil's hair. He does this supposedly to disguise Dil and protect her from the IRA, but actually the haircut unmasks her and serves to protect Fergus from his own desires.

If we recall the three definitions of "crying" with which I began this section, we will see that Jordan's film makes use of all of them in order to confirm the alignment of humanity with Fergus and otherness with Dil, Jody, and Jude. The first definition—"to announce in public, utter in a loud distinct voice so as to be heard over a long distance"—references the open secret of Dil's gender, and equates the "crying game" with the subtle interplay between being "out" and being "in." While Dil's secret is equated with dishonesty and sickening deceit (literally since Fergus/Jimmy vomits when he sees Dil's penis), the film makes no particular moral judgments about the secret that Fergus keeps from Dil—namely, his involvement in the death of her lover. Only Dil is shown to be playing the crying game and so it is her treacherous deceptions rather than his that must be punished. His punishment (jail time) is earned for his traitorous behavior of the nation rather than his betrayal of Dil. The second definition—"the process of shedding tears (usually accompanied by sobs or other inarticulate sounds)"—speaks to the potential for tragedy in and around the transgender figure. The tragic transgender, indeed, weeps because happiness and satisfaction, according to transphobic narratives, is always just out of reach. In this film, Dil cries when she thinks that Fergus is leaving her for Jude. Fergus uses Dil's tears to wipe her makeup off her face and begin the transformation from female to male that he says will be her cover from the violence of the IRA. By using her tears to erase her mask, the film once again creates a model of true humanity that is equated with gender and temporal stability. Dil's transformation from girl to boy matches up both sex and gender, past and present. The final definition of crying is "conspicuously bad, offensive or reprehensible," and ultimately this is the judgment that the film hands down on the transgender character and the fanatic IRA members.

Boys Don't Cry: Beyond Tears

Given the predominance of films that use transgender characters, but avoid the transgender gaze, Peirce's transformation of the Brandon story into the Oscar-winning *Boys Don't Cry* signaled something much more than the successful interpretation of a transgender narrative for a mainstream audience. The success of Peirce's depiction depended not simply on the impressive acting skills of Hilary Swank and her surrounding cast, nor did it rest solely on the topicality of the Brandon narrative in gay, lesbian, and transgender communities; rather, the seduction of mainstream viewers by this decidedly queer and unconventional narrative must be ascribed to the film's ability to construct and sustain a transgender gaze. Debates about the gendered gaze in Hollywood film have subsided in recent years, and have been replaced by much more flexible conceptions of looking and imaging that account for multiple viewers and perspectives. The range of subject positions for looking has been expanded to include "queer looks," "oppositional gazes," "black looks," and other modes of seeing not captured by the abbreviated structures of the male and female gaze (hooks 1992; Gevert 1993). But while different styles of looking have been accounted for in this expanded range, the basic formula for generating visual pleasure may not have shifted significantly. In other words, while different visual styles and palettes have helped to construct an alternative cinema, the structures of mainstream cinema have remained largely untouched. The success of *Boys Don't Cry* in cultivating an audience beyond the queer cinema circuit depends absolutely on its ability to hijack the male and female gazes, and replace them surreptitiously with transgender modes of looking and queer forms of visual pleasure.

In a gesture that has left feminist film theorists fuming for years, Laura Mulvey's classic essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" argued, somewhat sensibly, that the pleasure in looking was always gendered within classic cinema. Mulvey went on to claim that within those classic cinematic narrative trajectories that begin with a mystery, a murder, a checkered past, or class disadvantage, or that advance through a series of obstacles toward the desired resolution in heterosexual marriage, there exist a series of male and female points of identification (Mulvey 1990). In other words, to the extent that the cinema depends on the power to activate and attract desiring relations (between characters, between on-screen and offscreen subjects, between images and subjects, between spectators), it also depends on a sexual and gendered economy of looking, watching and identifying. The desiring



Hilary Swank as Brandon Teena in *Boys Don't Cry*. Press packet for *Boys Don't Cry*.

positions within conventional cinematic universes tend to be called “masculine” and “feminine.” While the masculine character in the film (whether or not that character is male or female) negotiates an obstacle course in order to advance toward a romantic reward, the feminine character waits at the course’s end for the hero to advance, succeed, and arrive.² These gendered characters play their parts within a field of extremely limited and finite variation, and yet, because gendered spectators have already consented to limited and finite gender roles before entering the cinema, they will consent to the narrow range of narrative options within narrative cinema. Entertainment, in many ways, is the name we give to the fantasies of difference that erupt on the screen only to give way to the reproduction of sameness. In other words, as much as viewers want to believe in alternatives, the mainstream film assumes that they also want to believe that the choices they have made and the realities within which they function offer the best possible options. So for example, while gay or lesbian characters may appear within heterosexual romances as putative alternatives to the seemingly inevitable progression within adulthood from adolescence to romance to marriage to re-

production to death, the queer characters (say, Greg Kinnear in *As Good as It Gets*, or any and all lesbian characters in films about homo triangulations like *Basic Instinct*, *French Twist*, and so on) will function only to confirm the rightness of heterosexual object choice.

How does conventional narrative cinema allow for variation while maintaining a high degree of conformity? Sometimes the masculine character will be a woman (Barbara Stanwyck in *Walk on the Wild Side*; Michelle Rodriguez in *Girlfight*; Mercedes McCambridge in anything) and the narrative twist will involve her downfall or domestication. Sometimes the feminine character will be a man (Jeremy Irons in *Dead Ringers*; Jet Li in *Romeo Must Die*) and the narrative will compel him to either become a male hero or self-destruct. And sometimes, as we saw in *The Crying Game*, the transgender character will be evoked as a metaphor for flexible subjecthood, but will not be given a narrative in his/her own right. But every now and then, and these are the instances that I want to examine here, the gendered binary on which the stability, the pleasure, and the purchase of mainstream cinema depend will be thoroughly rescripted, allowing for another kind of gaze or look. Here, I track the potentiality of the transgender gaze or the “transverse look,” as Nick Mirzoeff describes it. Mirzoeff suggests that in an age of “multiple viewpoints,” we have to think beyond the gaze. He writes about a “transient, transnational, transgendered way of seeing that visual culture seeks to define, describe and deconstruct with the transverse look or glance—not a gaze, there have been enough gazes already” (Mirzoeff 2002, 18).

While Mulvey’s essay created much vigorous debate in cinema studies on account of its seemingly fatalistic perspective on gender roles and relations, the messenger in many ways was being confused with the message. Mulvey was not *creating* the gendered dynamics of looking, she was simply describing the remarkably restricted ways in which spectators can access pleasure. And so, for example, conventional narratives cannot conceive of the pleasure of being the image, the fetish, or the object of the gaze. Nor can they allow for the ways in which thoroughly scrambled gender relations might impact the dynamics of looking, at least not for long. Within conventional cinema, Mulvey proposed that the only way for a female viewer to access voyeuristic pleasure was to cross-identify with the male gaze; through this complicated procedure, the female spectator of a conventional visual narrative could find a position on the screen that offered a little more than the pleasure of being fetishized. Mulvey suggests that the female viewer has to suture her look to the male look. Others have talked about this as a form of

transvestism—a cross-dressed look that allows the female spectator to imagine momentarily that she has the same access to power as the male viewer. The problem with the cinematic theory of masquerade, of course, is that it requires no real understanding of transvestism and of the meaning of male transvestism in particular. Mary Ann Doane, for example, in “Film and the Masquerade,” simply theorizes all female subject positions as masquerade, and makes no particular distinction between a cross-dressing masquerade and a hyperfeminine one (Doane 1990). In doing so, she misses the queer dimension of the masquerade. In a trenchant critique of Doane, Chris Straayer in *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies* has described the appeal of the “temporary transvestite film” for mainstream viewers, and she claims that the popularity of these films has to do with “the appeasement of basic contradictions through a common fantasy of over-throwing gender constructions without challenging sexual difference.”³ But what happens when the transvestite narrative is not temporary, and when gender constructions are overthrown and sexual difference is shaken to its very foundations?

In the classic Hollywood film text, the camera looks from one position/character and then returns the gaze from another position/character, thereby suturing the viewer to a usually male gaze and simultaneously covering over what the viewer cannot see. This dynamic of looking is called shot/reverse shot and it occupies a central position within cinematic grammar. The shot/reverse shot mode allows for the stability of narrative progression, ensures a developmental logic, and allows the viewers to insert themselves into the filmic world by imagining that their access to the characters is unmediated. The dismantling of the shot/reverse shot can be identified as the central cinematic tactic in *Boys Don't Cry*. In her stylish adaptation of the true-to-life story of Brandon, director Peirce self-consciously constructs what can only be called a transgender look. *Boys Don't Cry* establishes the legitimacy and the durability of Brandon's gender not simply by telling the tragic tale of his death by murder but by forcing spectators to adopt, if only provisionally, Brandon's gaze, a transgender look.⁴ The transgender look in this film reveals the ideological content of the male and female gazes, and it disarms, temporarily, the compulsory heterosexuality of the romance genre. Brandon's gaze, obviously, dies with him in the film's brutal conclusion, but Peirce, perhaps prematurely, abandons the transgender look in the final intimate encounter between Lana and Brandon. Peirce's inability to sustain a transgender look opens up a set of questions about the inevitability and dominance of both the male/female and hetero/homo binary in narrative cinema.

One remarkable scene, about halfway through the film, clearly foregrounds the power of the transgender look, making it most visible precisely where and when it is most threatened. In a scary and nerve-racking sequence of events, Brandon finds himself cornered at Lana's house. John and Tom have forced Candace to tell them that Brandon has been charged by the police with writing bad checks and that he has been imprisoned as a woman. John and Tom now hunt Brandon, like hounds after a fox, and then they begin a long and excruciating interrogation of Brandon's gender identity. Lana protects Brandon at first by saying that she will examine him and determine whether he is a man or a woman. Lana and Brandon enter Lana's bedroom, where Lana refuses to look as Brandon unbuckles his pants, telling him, “Don't. . . I know you're a guy.” As they sit on the bed together, the camera now follows Lana's gaze out into the night sky, a utopian vision of an elsewhere into which she and Brandon long to escape. This is one of several fantasy shots in an otherwise wholly realistic film; Peirce threads these shots in which time speeds up or slows down through the film, creating an imagistic counternarrative to the story of Brandon's decline.

As Brandon and Lana sit in Lana's bedroom imagining an elsewhere that would save them from the impoverished reality they inhabit, the camera cuts back abruptly to “reality” and a still two-shot of Brandon in profile and Lana behind him. As they discuss their next move, the camera draws back slowly and makes a seamless transition to place them in the living room in front of the posse of bullies. This quiet interlude in Lana's bedroom establishes the female gaze, Lana's gaze, as a willingness to see what is not there (a condition of all fantasy), but also as a refusal to privilege the literal over the figurative (Brandon's genitalia over Brandon's gender presentation). The female gaze, in this scene, makes possible an alternative vision of time, space, and embodiment. Time slows down while the couple linger in the sanctuary of Lana's private world, her bedroom; the bedroom itself becomes an otherworldly space framed by the big night sky, and containing the perverse vision of a girl and her queer boy lover; and the body of Brandon is preserved as male, for now, by Lana's refusal to dismantle its fragile power with the scrutinizing gaze of science and “truth.” That Lana's room morphs seamlessly into the living room at the end of this scene, alerts the viewer to the possibility that an alternative vision will subtend and undermine the chilling enforcement of normativity that follows.

Back in the living room—the primary domestic space of the family—events take an abrupt turn toward the tragic. Brandon is shoved now into the

bathroom, a hyperreal space of sexual difference, and is violently de-pantsed by John and Tom, and then restrained by John while Tom roughly examines Brandon's crotch. The brutality of John and Tom's action here is clearly identified as a violent mode of looking, and the film identifies the male gaze with the factual, the visible, and the literal. The brutality of the male gaze, however, is more complicated than simply a castrating force; John and Tom not only want to see the site of Brandon's castration but more important, they need Lana to see it. Lana kneels in front of Brandon, confirming the scene's resemblance to a crucifixion tableau, and refuses to raise her eyes, declining, again, to look at Brandon's unveiling.

At the point when Lana's "family" and "friends" assert their heteronormative will most forcefully on Brandon's resistant body, however, Brandon rescues himself for a moment by regaining the alternative vision of time and space that he and Lana shared moments earlier in her bedroom. A slow-motion sequence interrupts the fast and furious quasi-medical scrutiny of Brandon's body, and shots from Brandon's point of view reveal him to be in the grips of an "out-of-body" and out-of-time experience. Light shines on Brandon from above, and his anguished face peers out into the crowd of onlookers who have gathered at the bathroom door. The crowd now includes a fully clothed Brandon, a double, who returns the gaze of the tortured Brandon impassively. In this shot/reverse shot sequence between the castrated Brandon and the transgender one, the transgender gaze is constituted as a look divided within itself, a point of view that comes from two places (at least) at the same time, one clothed and one naked. The clothed Brandon is the one who was rescued by Lana's refusal to look; he is the Brandon who survives his own rape and murder; he is the Brandon to whom the audience is now sutured, a figure who combines momentarily the activity of looking with the passivity of the spectacle. And the naked Brandon is the one who will suffer, endure, and finally expire.

Kaja Silverman has called attention to cinematic suture in an essay of the same name, as "the process whereby the inadequacy of the subject's position is exposed in order to facilitate new insertions into a cultural discourse which promises to make good that lack" (Silverman 1983, 236). Here, in *Boys Don't Cry*, the inadequacy of the subject's position has been presented as a precondition of the narrative, and so this scene of the split transgender subject, which would ordinarily expose "the inadequacy of the subject's position," actually works to highlight the *sufficiency* of the transgender subject. So if usually the shot/reverse shot both secures and destabilizes the spectator's

sense of self, now the shot/reverse shot involving the two Brandons serves both to destabilize the spectator's sense of gender stability and confirm Brandon's manhood at the very moment that he has been exposed as female/castrated.

Not only does *Boys Don't Cry* create a position for the transgender subject that is fortified from the traditional operations of the gaze and conventional modes of gendering but it also makes the transgender subject dependent on the recognition of a woman. In other words, Brandon can be Brandon because Lana is willing to see him as he sees himself (clothed, male, vulnerable, lacking, strong, and passionate), and she is willing to avert her gaze when his manhood is in question. With Brandon occupying the place of the male hero and the male gaze in the romance, the dynamics of looking and gendered being are permanently altered. If usually it is the female body that registers lack, insufficiency, and powerlessness, in *Boys Don't Cry*, it is Brandon who represents the general condition of incompleteness, crisis, and lack, and it is Lana who represents the fantasy of wholeness, knowledge, and pleasure. Lana can be naked without trauma while Brandon cannot; she can access physical pleasure in a way that he cannot, but he is depicted as mobile and self-confident in a way that she is not. Exclusion and privilege cannot be assigned neatly to the couple on the basis of gender or class hierarchies; power, rather, is shared between the two subjects, and she agrees to misrecognize him as male while he sees through her social alienation and unhappiness, recognizing her as beautiful, desirable, and special.

By deploying the transgender gaze and binding it to an empowered female gaze in *Boys Don't Cry*, director Peirce, for most of the film, keeps the viewer trained on the seriousness of Brandon's masculinity and the authenticity of his presentation as opposed to its elements of masquerade. But toward the end of the film, Peirce suddenly and catastrophically divests her character of his transgender look and converts it to a lesbian and therefore female gaze. In a strange scene following the brutal rape of Brandon by John and Tom, Lana comes to Brandon as he lies sleeping in a shed outside of Candace's house. In many ways, the encounter between the two that follows seems to extend the violence enacted on Brandon's body by John and Tom since Brandon now interacts with Lana *as if he were a woman*. Lana, contrary to her previous commitment to his masculinity, seems to see him as female, and she calls him "pretty" and asks him what he was like as a girl. Brandon confesses to Lana that he has been untruthful about many things in his past, and his confession sets up the expectation that he will now appear before

Lana as his "true" self. Truth here becomes sutured to nakedness as Lana disrobes Brandon, tentatively saying that she may not know "how to do this." "This" seems to refer to having sex with Brandon as a woman. They both agree that his whole journey to manhood has been pretty weird and then they move to make love. While earlier Peirce created quite graphic depictions of sex between Brandon and Lana, now the action is hidden by a Hollywood dissolve as if to suggest that the couple are now making love as opposed to having sex. The scene is disjunctive and completely breaks the flow of the cinematic text by having Lana, the one person who could see Brandon's gender separate from his sex, now see him as woman. Moreover, the scene implies that the rape has made Brandon a woman in a way that his brutal exposure earlier in the bathroom and his intimate sex scenes with Lana could not. And if the scene seems totally out of place to the viewer, it apparently felt wrong as well to Hilary Swank. There are rumors that Swank and Peirce fought over this scene, and that Peirce shot the scene without Swank by using a body double. A close reading of the end of the scene indeed shows that the Brandon figure takes off his T-shirt while the camera watches from behind. The musculature and look of Brandon's back is quite different here from the toned look of Swank's body in earlier exposure scenes.

The "love" scene raises a number of logical and practical questions about the representation of the relationship between Brandon and Lana. First, why would Brandon want to have sex within hours of a rape? Second, how does the film pull back from its previous commitment to his masculinity here by allowing his femaleness to become legible and significant to Lana's desire? Third, in what ways does this scene play against the earlier, more "plastic" sex scenes in which Brandon used a dildo and would not allow Lana to touch him? And fourth, how does this scene unravel the complexities of the transgender gaze as they have been assembled in earlier scenes between Brandon and Lana? When asked in an interview about this scene, Peirce reverts to a tired humanist narrative to explain it and says that after the rape, Brandon could not be either Brandon Teena or Teena Brandon and so he becomes truly "himself," and in that interaction with Lana, Brandon "receives love" for the first time as a human being.⁵ Peirce claims that Lana herself told her about this encounter and therefore it was true to life. In the context of the film, however, which has made no such commitment to authenticity, the scene ties Brandon's humanity to a particular form of naked embodiment that in the end requires him to be a woman.

Ultimately in *Boys Don't Cry*, the double vision of the transgender subject gives way to the universal vision of humanism; the transgender man and his lover become lesbians, and the murder seems to be simply the outcome of a vicious homophobic rage. Given the failure of nerve that leads Peirce to conclude her film with a humanist scene of love conquers all, it is no surprise that she also sacrificed the racial complexity of the narrative by erasing the story of the other victim who died alongside Brandon and Lisa Lambert. As discussed earlier, Philip DeVine, a disabled African American man, has in general received only scant treatment in media accounts of the case, despite the connections of at least one of the murderers to a white supremacist group (Jones 1996, 154). Now in the feature film, Philip's death has been rendered completely irrelevant to the narrative that has been privileged. Peirce claimed that this subplot would have complicated her film and made the plot too cumbersome, but race is a narrative trajectory that is absolutely central to the meaning of the Brandon murder. Philip was dating Lana's sister, Leslie, and had a fight with her the night he showed up at Lisa's house in Humboldt County. His death was neither accidental nor an afterthought; his connection to Leslie could be read as a similarly outrageous threat to the supremacy and privilege of white manhood that the murderers Lotter and Nissen rose to defend. By taking Philip out of the narrative and by not even mentioning him in the original dedication of the film ("To Brandon Teena and Lisa Lambert"), the filmmaker sacrifices the hard facts of racial hatred and transphobia to a streamlined romance.⁶ Peirce, in other words, reduces the complexity of the murderous act even as she sacrifices the complexity of Brandon's identity.

In the end, the murders are shown to be the result of a kind of homosexual panic, and Brandon is offered up as an "everyman" hero who makes a claim on the audience's sympathies first by pulling off a credible masculinity, but then by seeming to step out of his carefully maintained manhood to appear before judge and jury in the naked flesh as female. By reneging on her earlier commitment to the transgender gaze and ignoring altogether the possibility of exposing the whiteness of the male gaze, *Boys Don't Cry* falls far short of the alternative vision that was articulated so powerfully and shared so beautifully by Brandon and Lana in Lana's bedroom. But even so, by articulating momentarily the specific formal dimensions of the transgender gaze, *Boys Don't Cry* takes a quantum leap away from the crying games, which continued in the past to locate transgenderism in between the male and female gazes and alongside unrelenting tragedy. Peirce's film, in fact,

opens the door to a nonfetishistic mode of seeing the transgender body—a mode that looks with, rather than at, the transgender body and cultivates the multidimensionality of an indisputably transgender gaze.

What would a transgender film look like that did not punish the transgender subject for his or her inflexibilities and for failing to deliver the fantasy of fluidity that cinematic audiences so desire? *By Hook or by Crook* offers the spectator not one but two transgender characters, and the two together represent transgender identity as less of a function of bodily flexibility and more a result of intimate bonds and queer, interactive modes of recognition.

Lovely and Confusing:

By Hook or by Crook and the Transgender Look

We feel like we were thrown almost every curve in the game. And we managed to make this thing by hook or by crook.

—Harry Dodge and Silas Howard, *By Hook or by Crook* directors

By Hook or by Crook marks a real turning point for queer and transgender cinema. This no-budget, low-tech, high-concept feature, shot entirely in mini digital video, tells the story of two gender bandits, Shy and Valentine. Described by its creators as “utterly post-post-modern, a little bit of country and a little bit of rock and roll,” the film conjures up the twilight world of two loners living on the edge without trying to explain or rationalize their reality.⁷ The refusal to explain either the gender peculiarities of the heroes or the many other contradictions they embody allows directors Howard and Dodge instead to focus on developing eccentric and compelling characters. While most of the action turns on the bond between Shy and Valentine, their world is populated with a stunning array of memorable characters like Valentine’s girlfriend, Billie (Stanya Kahn), and Shy’s love interest, Isabelle (Carina Gia). The film also features fabulous guest appearances by queer celebrities like Joan Jett as a news interviewee, the late Kris Kovic typecast as a crazy nut in the park, and Machiko Saito as the gun store clerk. These cameos establish the world of *By Hook or by Crook* as a specifically queer universe and clearly mark a studied indifference to mainstream acceptance by making subcultural renown rather than Hollywood glamour into the most desirable form of celebrity.

Both *The Crying Game* and *Boys Don’t Cry* relied heavily on the successful solicitation of affect—whether revulsion, sympathy, or empathy—in order



Silas Howard and Harriet Dodge in *By Hook or by Crook*. Reproduced by permission of the filmmakers.

to give mainstream viewers access to a transgender gaze. And in both films, a relatively unknown actor (Jay Davidson and Hilary Swank, respectively) performs alongside a more well-known actor (Stephen Rea and Chloe Sevigny, respectively); the relative obscurity of the transgender actors allow them to pull off the feat of credibly performing a gender at odds with the sexed body even after the body has been brutally exposed. *By Hook or by Crook* resists the seduction of crying games and the lure of sentiment, and works instead to associate butchness and gender innovation with wit, humor, and style. The melancholia that tinges *The Crying Game* and saturates *Boys Don’t Cry* is transformed in *By Hook or by Crook* into the wise delirium of Dodge’s character, Valentine. Dodge and Howard (Shy) knowingly avoid engaging their viewers at the level of sympathy, pity, or even empathy, and instead they “hook” them with the basic tools of the cinematic apparatus: desire and identification.

Dodge and Howard pioneer some brilliant techniques of queer plotting in order to map the world of the willfully perverse. As they say in interviews,

neither director was interested in telling a story about "being gay." Nor did Dodge and Howard want to spend valuable screen time explaining the characters' sexualities and genders to unknowing audiences. In the press kit, Dodge and Howard discuss their strategy in terms of representing sexuality and gender as follows: "This is a movie about a budding friendship between two people. The fact that they happen to be queer is purposefully off the point. If you call them something, other than sad, rambling, spirited, gentle, sharp or funny . . . you might call them 'butches.'" Instead of a humanist story about gay heroes struggling to be accepted, Dodge and Howard tell a beautifully fragmented tale of queer encounter set almost entirely in a queer universe. In other words, the heroes are utterly unremarkable for their queerness in the cinematic world that the directors have created. In this way, Dodge and Howard offer a tribute to the San Francisco subcultural worlds that they inhabit. As Howard remarks, "We've always hoped this project would reflect the creativity and actual valor of the community of people we came from. And I think it does. From the get-go, this movie had its roots in our extended family of weirdos in San Francisco."

In the film, Shy and Valentine visit cafes, clubs, shops, and hotels where no one reacts specifically to their butchness. This narrative strategy effectively *universalizes queerness* within this specific cinematic space. Many gay and lesbian films represent their characters and their struggles as "universal" as a way of suggesting that their film speaks to audiences beyond specific gay and lesbian audiences. But few do more than submit to the regulation of narrative that transforms the specific into the universal: they tell stories of love, redemption, family, and struggle that look exactly like every other Hollywood feature angling for a big audience. *By Hook or by Crook* actually manages to tell a queer story that is more than a queer story by refusing to acknowledge the existence of a straight world. Where the straight world is represented only through its institutions such as the law, the mental institution, or commerce, the queer cinematic world comes to represent a truly localized place of opposition—an opposition, moreover, that is to be found in committed performances of perversity, madness, and friendship. While some of Dodge's comments in the press notes imply a humanist aim for the project ("We wanted to make a film about people with big ideas and big dreams who end up dealing with the shadowy subtleties of human life"; "I want to make work that touches people's hearts. . . . I am interested in the human spirit"), the film resists the trap of liberal humanism (making a film about gays who are, in the end, just like everybody else). So *By Hook or by Crook* universalizes

queerness without allowing its characters to be absorbed back into the baggy and ultimately heterosexist concept of the "human."

Different key scenes from the film build, capture, and sustain this method of universalizing queerness. In one scene soon after they meet, Shy and Valentine go to a club together. The club scene, filmed in San Francisco's notorious Lexington Bar, is a riotous montage of queer excess. The camera lovingly pans a scene of punky, pierced, tattooed, perverted young queers. The montage lasts much longer than necessary, signaling that the beauty and intrinsic worth of this world transcends its diegetic purpose. In *The Crying Game*, the bar scenes were used first to establish the credibility of Dil's womanhood and then, after she has "come out" to Fergus as male bodied, the bar scenes are used to cast her womanhood as incredible. So while *The Crying Game* casts the bar as a place of perversion and a primal scene of deception, Dodge and Howard situate the queer bar as central to an alternative vision of community, space, time, and identity. In the bar, Valentine dances wildly and ecstatically while Shy sits apart from the crowd watching. The camera playfully scans the bar and then lines up its patrons for quick cameos. Here, Dodge and Howard are concerned to represent the bar as both a space of queer community and a place of singularity. The singularity of the patrons, however, does not create the kind of transgressive exceptionalism that I discussed in chapter 1; it instead reveals a difference to be a shared and a collaborative relation to normativity rather than an individualist mode of refusal.

After watching Valentine dance, Shy gets up and steals Valentine's wallet before leaving. The theft of Valentine's wallet should create a gulf of distrust and suspicion between the two strangers, but in this looking-glass world, it actually bonds them more securely within their underground existence. Shy uses Valentine's wallet to find out where she lives, and when Shy returns Valentine's wallet the next day, she is greeted like a long-lost brother—this has the effect of inverting the morality of the world represented in this film by the police. Other scenes deepen this refusal of conventional law and order. The two butches as wannabe thieves try to hold up a drugstore only to be chased off by an aggressive salesclerk; they try to scam a hardware store and, in a citation of Robert De Niro's famous scene from *Taxi Driver*, they pose with guns in front of the mirror in Shy's run-down motel room. All of these scenes show Shy and Valentine as eccentric, but gentle outlaws who function as part of an alternative universe with its own ethics, sex/gender system, and public space.

De Niro's taxi driver, muttering "you looking at me" as he pointed a loaded gun at his own mirror image, is a vigilante loner, a man turned inward and lost to the city he skims across in his yellow cab. But while De Niro's character accidentally hits a vein of humor with his mohawked "fuck you," Shy and Valentine deliberately ride butch humor rather than macho vengeance into the sunset. If the vigilante wants to remake the world in his image, the queer outlaws of *By Hook or by Crook* are content to imagine a world of their own making. When asked about the title of the film, Silas Howard responded: "The title refers to what is involved in inventing your own world—when you don't see anything that represents you out there, how can you seize upon that absence as an opportunity to make something out of nothing, by hook or by crook. We take gender ambiguity, for example, and we don't explain it, dilute it or apologize for it—we represent it for what it is—something confusing and lovely!"

The recent explosion of transgender films forces us to consider what the spectacle of the transgender body represents to multiple audiences. For some audiences, the transgender body confirms a fantasy of fluidity so common to notions of transformation within the postmodern. To others, the transgender body confirms the enduring power of the binary gender system. But to still other viewers, the transgender body represents a utopian vision of a world of subcultural possibilities. Representations of transgenderism in recent queer cinema have moved from a tricky narrative device designed to catch an unsuspecting audience off guard to truly independent productions within which gender ambiguity is not a trap or a device but part of the production of new forms of heroism, vulnerability, visibility, and embodiment. The centrality of the figure of Brandon in this drama of postmodern embodiment suggests, as I argued in chapter 2, that we have a hard time thinking of seismic shifts in the history of representations separate from individual stories of transformation. The hopes and fears that have been projected onto the slim and violated body of one transgender loner in small-town Nebraska make clear the flaws of "representative history," and call for the kind of shared vision that we see in *By Hook or by Crook*—a vision of community, possibility, and redemption through collaboration.

Technotopias

Representing Transgender Bodies in Contemporary Art

For visual culture, visibility is not so simple. Its object of study is precisely the entities that come into being at the points of intersection of visibility with social power, that is to say, *visuality*.

—Nick Mirzoeff, "The Subject of Visual Culture"

Contemporary images of gender-ambiguous bodies by artists like Del LaGrace Volcano, Linda Besemer, and Jenny Saville, when considered in conjunction with the surprising success of the transgender film *Boys Don't Cry* and the subcultural popularity of *By Hook or by Crook*, imply that the transgender body represents something particular about the historical moment within which it suddenly and spectacularly becomes visible. While the transgender body has been theorized as an in-between body, and as the place of the medical and scientific construction of gender, when it comes time to picture the transgender body in the flesh, it nearly always emerges as a transsexual body. In the images I consider here, the transgender body is not reducible to the transsexual body, and it retains the marks of its own ambiguity and ambivalence. If the *transsexual* body has been deliberately reorganized in order to invite certain gazes and shut down others, the transgender body performs self as gesture not as will, as possibility not as probability, as a relation—a wink, a handshake and as an effect of deliberate misrecognition.

In one particularly stunning example of the representation of transgender hybridity by way of faux collage, JA Nicholls's paintings imagine transgenderism in the form of conglomerate creatures who emerge from the paint itself. In a painting titled *in another place*, for example, the body is postmodern surface, the very gesture of representation, and it struggles to emerge from the canvas enclosing its form. *in another place* splits the body into two non-complementary forms, each one in motion on the road to "another place." Each figure stands on his or her own path, in his or her own place, and the two exchange a look that can never arrive. The roads that frame each hybrid

body lead in different directions and the two separate(d) selves can never meet. The body itself in Nicholls's painting is a collage form, but the collage is made up of not only different body parts but different perspectives (a side view, full frontal) and different modes of representation. Resisting the traditional form of collage that draws other materials into the sphere of painting, Nicholls creates the effect of collage with paint and canvas alone. She refuses the clear separation of the real and the represented that collage implies, and makes representation into a primary realm of signification. Nicholls's work lies somewhere between abstraction and figural representation, marking out beautifully the other place of queer embodiment in contemporary aesthetics.

Postmodernism and Transgenderism

Postmodernism, as I proposed in chapter 1, cannot simply be reduced to the cultural formations that accompany a new mode of capitalism; as Anna Tsing points out, this kind of reductive reading of culture misunderstands the potential for cultural production to exceed and resist economic imperatives (Tsing 2002). Indeed, the assumption that cultural production will always only represent the dominant economic order, erases the multiple disruptions to hegemony that have emerged from subcultural and avant-garde art practices in the past, and it leaves us with a sense of inevitability about our relation to the dominant. Debates about the relationship between the economy and art production, base and superstructure, have a long history in art criticism, and I attempt to revisit some of these debates here in order to refute the return of a Frankfurt school paradigm of cultural capitulations, on the one hand, and to define the political and aesthetic contributions made by "ludic" body artists to oppositional politics in postmodernism, on the other. In this chapter, I define postmodernism as the generative clash between new modes of cultural production and late capitalism. Within postmodernism, subcultural activities are as likely to generate new forms of protest as they are to produce new commodities to be absorbed back into a logic of accumulation; and new sites of opposition or "geographies of resistance" become available even as new modes of domination are formed (Pile 1997).

The link between transgenderism and postmodernism has emerged in a number of late-twentieth-century philosophies of embodiment, from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, to Jean Baudrillard's essay "Transsexuality," to Rita Felski's "Transsexuality, Postmodernism, and the Death of History" (Butler

1990; Baudrillard 1990; Felski 1996). Butler takes the transgender subject seriously and uses transgenderism to represent the contradictions of being—specifically gendered being—in postmodernism. Baudrillard, on the other hand, uses transsexuality and, by implication, transgenderism as simply a metaphor for the unlocatability of the body. For Baudrillard, no one actually inhabits transgender subjectivity; rather, transgenderism represents the subject floating free of the body in cyberspace. And for Felski, the fate of the transsexual body in postmodern theory spells out the "death of history" in that transsexuality as an experience, as a specific history of gender and sexuality, has been cast as a disembodied, metaphoric signifier of pure difference. Felski argues for an ethical account of difference that respects the specific historical locations of embodied forms in space and time. My account of the representations of transgendered bodies in this chapter takes heed of Felski's challenge to "remain attentive to disjuncture and nonsynchrony in the experience of temporality while simultaneously acknowledging systematic connections and relations among discrete cultural practices" (Felski 1996, 348), and provides an account of the emergence of the transgender body within art in relation to the various histories of art making that have involved the visibly gendered body.

The connection between postmodernism and transgenderism also makes an oblique and somewhat surprising appearance in Fredric Jameson's classic essay "The Cultural Logic of Postmodernism" (Jameson 1997). In this essay, Jameson sounded the warning bell on a new form of cultural production, which, he believes, participates in a global cultural industry. Jameson noted that "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally" (4). He was concerned to point out that the seemingly resistant and oppositional strains of postmodern cultural production (the blending of high and low culture, for example, or the inclusion and even foregrounding of sexually explicit material) were actually the marks of institutionalization rather than revolution, and he identified a postmodern aesthetic of pastiche with "a consequent weakening of historicity" (6). Jameson identified high modernism with the singular master works of artists like Vincent van Gogh and Edvard Munch, and postmodernism, for him, could be grasped through the easily reproduced silk screens of glamour icons by Andy Warhol. Jameson identifies political postmodern only in relation to the historical novels of E. L. Doctorow and, ultimately, expresses a pessimistic vision of the political utility of postmodern cultural production—a pessimism, moreover, that has been echoed in the work of other Marxist theorists like

David Harvey, and that has been subtly blamed on the preponderance within postmodernism of a ludic and parochial body politics.

As Mandy Merck has pointed out, Jameson's rigid identification of postmodernism with queer consumption and of modernism with heterosexual production is startling and troubling (Merck 1996). And indeed, his essay depends utterly on a homophobic repudiation of the superficial, the depthless, and the spectacular. In his essay, Jameson sets up a binary division between postmodernism and modernism that in its comparison of a van Gogh painting called *Peasant Shoes* and a Warhol silk screen titled *Diamond Dust Shoes*, associates modernist work with politically urgent representations of working-class and male labor, and postmodernist art with politically anemic representations of bourgeois and female leisure. Jameson deepens this contrast by noting the three-dimensionality of the painting versus the one-dimensionality of the silk-screened image. Van Gogh's shoes, he observes, are caked with mud and materiality; they are of history, nature, and the world. Meanwhile, Warhol's shoes are clean, new, manufactured; they speak only of consumption and luxury. Van Gogh's painting tells us about class struggle, exploitation, and historical process while Warhol's image transmits only the triumph of global capitalism. In her reading of Jameson's art history lesson, Merck restores a queer history of sex work and gay community to Warhol's pile of unmatched footwear, and she situates van Gogh's matched pair firmly in relation to the centrality of heterosexual domestic arrangements within the stability of capitalism. Jameson's narrative of aesthetic (and specifically queer) capitulation to the forces of consumption falters in the face of this buried "other" history and his evolutionary cycle of cultural collusion with economic imperatives grinds to a halt.

Surprisingly, then, Jameson unwittingly offers a queer proposal as the only antidote to global capitalism. Jameson claims repeatedly that postmodern architecture is the best example of the sinister underside of postmodern cultural production. "Of all the arts," he writes, "architecture is the closest constitutively to the economic, with which, in the form of commissions and land values, it has a virtually unmediated relationship" (5). And architecture, he proposes, serves as the clearest example of the momentous changes within late capitalism that have unsettled relations between subjects and objects. Postmodern architecture, Jameson alleges, constitutes a "mutation in built space itself" with which we humans have not kept pace: "there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject." Here, Jameson dips into the very body politics that he else-

where seems to hold in such contempt. This spatial mutation, he argues, constitutes a form of postmodern evolution, and indeed "stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions" (39). This utopian, technotopian, or spatially imaginative formulation of a body with new organs and expanded sensorium corresponds precisely to the new forms of embodiment that have come to be called transgender in certain queer communities.

Apart from the patently homophobic rejection of postmodern cultural logics as queer and ludic, Jameson's casting of postmodern cultural production as a logic of late capitalism resonates with, and in many ways simply replicates, many of the earlier twentieth-century debates about art and politics. Jameson's essay, in some respects, is an update of Clement Greenberg's famous essay from 1939, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." Greenberg's piece is often located in art history as something of an anomaly in Greenberg's own output given its avowedly Marxist emphasis and its critique of bourgeois culture. Later on, of course, Greenberg became the foremost defender of abstract art, and his work led the way to an association of modernist aesthetics with political autonomy and disinterestedness. And the early essay, in some sense, paves the way for later proposals by Greenberg about the subordination of ideology to form. Yet in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Greenberg still has one eye on a utopian socialist future and the other on the growing global threat of fascism, and in this historical context, he defines the role of the avant-garde as "not to 'experiment,' but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and violence" (Greenberg 2000, 49).¹ Greenberg then contrasts and opposes the avant-garde to "kitsch," which he associates with "folk or rudimentary culture" (55). Despite positing a seemingly clear-cut opposition between kitsch and the avant-garde, Greenberg does argue that kitsch and the avant-garde are "simultaneous cultural phenomena," and that they can coexist organically in a stable society; but where fascism or demagoguery take hold, kitsch can provide the dictator with access to the masses. Greenberg writes: "The main trouble with avant-garde art and literature, from the point of view of the Fascists and the Stalinists, is not that they are too critical, but that they are too 'innocent,' that it is too difficult to inject effective propaganda into them, that kitsch is more pliable to this end. Kitsch keeps a dictator in closer contact with the 'soul' of the people" (57).

Many critics have detailed what is wrong with Greenberg's delineation of the relations between avant-garde culture and kitsch, and as Thomas Crow summarizes it in his "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," "The critique of Greenbergian modernism is now well advanced and its defenders are scarce" (Crow 1996, 9). But Crow goes on to reexamine contradictions in Greenberg's opus in order to recast the relationship between high and low cultures in modernism as well as to demonstrate, in fact, the indebtedness of avant-garde cultural production to what Crow calls oppositional publics. T. J. Clark also returns to Greenberg in an essay titled "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art" to propose other histories of the relationship between artistic production and political resistance. By tracing other, somewhat buried histories of modernism itself, Clark is able to claim that far from being totally disarmed by the rise of mass politics and publics, "the avant-garde . . . has regularly and rightly seen an *advantage* for art in the particular conditions of 'ideological confusion and violence' under capitalism" (Clark 2000, 75). Both Crow and Clark stop short of endorsing or even describing the "cultural possibilities," as Clark puts it, of postmodernism, but both do reject completely the formalist solution to the problem of the commodification of art. I will return later to the provocative way that Crow rehistoricizes the relationship between subcultures and avant-garde cultural production as one way out of the retreat of art into formalism; but Clark's rejection of Greenbergian modernism also has appeal to my project in that he resists both the retreat into abstraction and grim, fatalistic conclusions about the function of art in late capitalism. As Clark reminds us forcefully, "Art wants to address someone, it wants something precise and extended to do; it wants *resistance*, it needs criteria; it will take risks in order to find them, including the risk of its own dissolution" (83).

Given the vehement rejections in art history of gloom-and-doom scenarios within which art either withdraws into a private world of abstraction or becomes completely complicit with capitalism, it is surprising to see the notion of an oppositional modernism overwhelmed by mass culture reassert itself so insistently in Jameson's essay without the accompaniment of an historical accounting by him of the relationship between art and capitalism, bourgeois avant-garde traditions and aristocratic patronage, mass culture and subcultural resistance. It is surprising too that a one-to-one relationship between capitalism and culture would emerge so strongly among Marxist critics of postmodernism when even Friedrich Engels himself warned against seeing "the economic situation" as "cause, solely active while everything else

is just passive effect." Engels continues: "No. Men make their history themselves, only they do so in a given environment" (Engels 1894).² Just as Greenberg could only see kitsch as the debased alternative to a rigorously committed avant-garde tradition, so Jameson can only cast postmodern pastiche as a dehistoricized and depoliticized capitulation to an economic imperative.

Our present, of course, is no longer the present that Jameson wrote about just a decade ago; and the new aesthetics he explored in the late 1980s have been upstaged by another aesthetic that does develop along the lines of pastiche but also exceeds it. And while for Jameson, a grand narrative of historicity allowed him to trace the passage from the modern to the postmodern, this new moment is characterized by the tumbling and uneven advent of an era of simultaneity and instantaneous communication. One aesthetic no longer follows neatly on from another (if it ever did), replacing it and critiquing it at the same time; rather, one aesthetic collides with the next, and hyperrealism will compete and collude with high abstraction, which will supplement and contrast with the return of narrative and a new experimentalism. This overlap of styles signifies not cultural confusion but an immense array of strategies deployed to make sense of and resist capitalism at a historical moment within which several generations can neither remember nor imagine the world otherwise. What constitutes the alternative now is, as Jameson predicted, a technotopic vision of space and flesh in a process of mutual mutation. But while for Jameson, hyperspace was always corporate space, for some postmodern artists, the creation of new bodies in an aesthetic realm offers a way to begin adapting to life after the death of the subject.

In what follows, I want to trace the collision of postmodern space and postmodern embodiment in a technotopic aesthetic, or one that tests technological potentialities against the limits of a human body anchored in time and space, and that powerfully reimagines the relations between the organic and the machinic, the toxic and the domestic, the surgical and the cosmetic. In doing so, I will try to account for new relations between what was earlier called the avant-garde and contemporary subcultural production. While Marxists see the disappearance of the avant-garde accompanied by the rise of mass culture, in actuality, postmodernism elevates the subculture to the status of the avant-garde. Since the avant-garde no longer solely represents class interests and class contradictions, and since subcultures, as I will show in my next chapter, cannot be understood as simply the localized containment of class struggle, we need to rethink the definitions of advanced, subcultural, and mass cultural production in an age of diversified struggle and multiple

hegemonies. Representations of the transgender body by both advanced and subcultural artists provide one arena for the examination of new dynamics of resistance.

Since gender assignments rely so heavily on the visual, the postmodern dismantling of gender certainty in the realm of the visual has wide-ranging effects. Even though postmodernism tends to be represented by Jameson and others as a definitive break between different modes of capitalism, the lines of rupture are not so easy to trace in different genres of cultural production. And while literary history or even architecture may well show signs of a rupture between the formal complexities of high modernism and the emphasis on pastiche, repetition, and nonoriginality in postmodern works, visual culture contains different histories of transition between old and new modes of representation. Or at least, the changes in visual culture have adhered to different schedules and have played out somewhat differently from changes in literary culture. The break between abstract expressionism and pop art perhaps comes closest to replicating the rupture that cultural critics identify in literary histories, but even here the debates about the avant-garde, ideology and art, and genius look different.³ And abstract expressionism, unlike experimental writing, neither faded away nor remained the location of an avant-garde impulse. While experimental writing still represents some kind of resistance to the easily digested narratives and ideas of what used to be called a "culture industry" (Adorno 1993), and while experimental film is still closely associated with independent, alternative, and often queer cinemas, abstract expressionist work is quite likely to find a place on the walls of a bank or a corporate office. And so the cultural logic of late capitalism that Jameson wants to attribute so completely to postmodernism does not pan out as neatly as he proposes. Some postmodern work certainly collaborates with corporate interests just as some strands of modernism line up with the political mandates of fascism. But the wholesale reduction of postmodernism to a cultural logic of late capitalism looks particularly suspect when we turn to visual culture, where some of the art objects, like certain forms of sculpture for example, change and age over time, giving rise to a sense of the impermanence of the art object as well as a different sense of both history and futurity.

The artistic rendering of ambiguous embodiment as representative of an unstable and chaotic self emerged in late modernism/early postmodernism. Mostly queer and female artists in the late 1960s used representations of the body to resist the move to total abstraction and, by implication, to return a

representational mode of political urgency to the practice of making art. While Warhol's work represents one obvious rejection of abstract expressionism, Eva Hesse's work, which I discuss in detail later in this chapter, is representative of a wide range of art that rejected the U.S. turn to abstraction. Hesse, for instance, began her career making abstract paintings, but she quickly expressed dissatisfaction with a total emphasis on abstraction and began to produce organic, sculptural "part-objects." As Hesse explains, "I don't believe art can be based on an idea of composition or form" (Nemser 1970, 6). This chapter gathers together a scattered and selective history of the representation of gender ambiguity in art in order to chart the new understandings of time, space, and cultural production that emerge from a "transgender aesthetic." Indeed, the sliding of the postmodern into the transgender, which has been noted with concern by some transgender theorists (most notably Jay Prosser), is not simply an appropriation of the material body of the transsexual by queer theorists or postmodernists (Prosser 1998). The appearance of the transgender body in visual culture is instead part of a long history of the representation of unstable embodiment. We might even say that this form of postmodernism can be read as the cultural logic of anticapitalist, subcultural queer politics.

Building on the insights about a transgender look that emerged out of my detailed consideration of transgender cinema in the last chapter, I now turn to representations of the transgender body in contemporary art and photography. While there are some fascinating areas of overlap and dialogue between cinematic modes of representation and other methods of visualization, "still" images actually offer different logics of gender flexibility and dynamism; in highly abstract representations of embodiment in painting, sculpture, Web art, and photography, we find new formulations of the transgender look and different applications of this look to an understanding of the meaning of gendered embodiment in late postmodernism. The museum, as opposed to the cinema, offers a different set of opportunities for the representation of gender ambiguity and the reception of those images by a viewer. In the cinema, the viewer is positioned in a seemingly passive mode of reception, but in a studio, installation, or museum space, the viewer walks, sits, observes, and passes through space, and thus creates meaning in a different way.

In my reading of *Boys Don't Cry*, I suggested that the shot/reverse shot building block of contemporary cinema comes apart under the pressure of representing a subject essentially divided within himself and explicitly

unreadable through the logics of visual gender. This dismantling of the shot/reverse shot forms the basis of two quite different art installations that can be called transgender for very different reasons. The first provides an eccentric example of transgender forms of looking that are not anchored solely to transgender identity and that create a "turbulent" field of vision. In Iranian-born artist Shirin Neshat's installation art, viewers are trapped between two mutually inclusive video spaces in which competing narratives unfold about the relations between men and women in Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution. In *Rapture*, for instance, one wall tells a story of female flight and the resistance of veiled female bodies to the religious male gaze; and simultaneously, the other wall shows males massing to pray and to participate in the rituals of a militaristic faith. In *Turbulent*, the two walls depict singers, one male and one female. The male singer faces the camera as he stands in front of a full auditorium of men, and he sings a haunting and moving piece to wild applause. The female singer stands opposite in real time with her back turned to the camera and occupies a space utterly apart from the homosocial auditorium, and she waits until the male singer completes his song. Once he has concluded, the male singer turns to face the female singer, who now sings her response to an empty hall; she is greeted by silence. The video installation as a whole addresses the exclusion of women from public space, and the difficulty and heroism of female art production in the absence of audience, publicness, liveness, and voice. Neshat has said that *Turbulent* was inspired by the experience of seeing a young, blind, female singer on the streets of Istanbul. The woman was singing for money, but could not see her audience. The piece as a whole, Neshat has said, is "based on the idea of opposites, visually and conceptually" (Danto 2000, 64). Like the young blind woman, the singers in *Turbulent* cannot see their audiences, and the female singer literally has no audience except the museum patron, who situated in the dark space of the installation, becomes a silent witness to the staging of gender. The space where the viewer sits is a space most significantly of turbulence, a place where lines of sight between the two singers cross, where their voices compete, where they perform for each other and for the audience that remains invisible to them. And it is the space of the museum itself, the location where value is ascribed to culture and where bodies navigate the cultural codes of relevance. But the turbulence that Neshat's video creates is specifically a gender turbulence, and the space between the male singer and the female singer could provisionally be called a transgender space in the sense that it conjures up a site between two

distinct genders where social conduct, religious doctrine, performance rituals, and cultural histories clash.

I want to claim for the images that I examine here an aesthetic of turbulence that inscribes abrupt shifts in time and space directly onto the gender-ambiguous body, and then offers that body to the gaze as a site of critical reinvention. Within this turbulence we can locate a transgender look, a mode of seeing and being seen that is not simply at odds with binary gender but that is part of a reorientation of the body in space and time. In her remarkable installations, for example, Neshat conjures up something like the transgender look that I identified as central to *Boys Don't Cry*. Neshat also rearticulates the shot/reverse shot sequence of Hollywood cinema so as to force spectators to acknowledge and confront their role in the process of suturing. By taking the shot/reverse shot sequence apart, as Neshat does in *Turbulent*, the male gaze and the female spectacle are fragmented, and viewers themselves become the camera pivoting their own gaze back and forth, looking at the singer singing, looking at the witness witnessing, and all the time making space for their own turbulent relations to seeing and being seen. The camera hardly moves in either video; rather, the spectators' bodies are forced to turn and look, look again, look back, modulate, mediate, hesitate, and finally see.

For a different example of manipulations of the shot/reverse shot sequence and the anchoring of transgenderism to tragedy, we can turn to an experimental video, which also constructs and explores the possibilities of the transgender gaze, and also plays in and is made for gallery rather than cinematic viewing. In his video *I probably want perfection in everything and a little more. Maybe that'll be my downfall*, Brian Dawn Chalkley uses a combination of bodily and vocal immobility to reorganize space and subjectivity in relation to gender ambiguity. Relying not at all on the trickery of visual gender attribution, Chalkley deliberately makes his gender work "voice activated." Chalkley effectively splits his selves between Brian and Dawn, and allows them to dialogue. The dialogue becomes an auditory equivalent to the sequence in *Boys Don't Cry*, which split Brandon in two, and allowed one self to remain whole while the other is brutally and violently disassembled. In Chalkley's video, Chalkley supplements the image track of a bulky woman/transvestite lying lifeless in a floodlit forest while night creatures fly back and forth in front of the camera light with a sound track of a conversation between a transvestite and a john in a transvestite pickup bar. The spooky combination of the inert body and the lively insects makes it hard to

concentrate on the banter between "Brian" and "Dawn," or the John and the tranny, all of which is rendered in one male voice.

As so many transsexuals will attest, the voice can be a powerful gender marker for the person trying to pass, and the "wrong" voice can confuse or even anger an unsuspecting listener who may have already made a confident gender attribution that must now be reversed. Chalkley does not attempt to make his voice higher when speaking as Dawn or lower when speaking as Brian. Instead, he just patters on at an even and banal clip as the transvestite and her John exchange irrelevant information before deciding to leave the bar together. The ominous figure laid out on its bed of leaves in the background of the shot, however, suggests that the subsequent encounter slipped violently from desire to rage. As in *Boys Don't Cry*, violence is almost an inevitable outcome when the gender-ambiguous subject inspires not disgust but desire; the desire directed at the transgender body is a turbulent desire—one that must be paid for in blood. Because *Boys Don't Cry* is very much a narrative film with only a few experimental moments, it is not, in the end, entirely successful in sustaining a transgender gaze; but Chalkley's piece offers a more critical perspective in its depiction of the parameters of a transgender gaze. This work violates genres as well as genders by using video to create a *still life* as opposed to a moving picture and by calling attention to the violence, which literally stills the shot/reverse shot sequence of transgender reality. Nothing moves in *I probably want perfection*. The camera remains fixed on the immobile body, and the voices that crisscross the surface of the text cannot call the body back to life.

As Chalkley's video makes clear, subcultural or avant-garde as opposed to mainstream configurations of the transgender look refuse to subordinate narratives of alternative embodiment to the rigidly conventional plot sequences of mainstream cinema. The temporal space opened up by *I probably want perfection* clashes with normative expectations about character development and action. In a long twelve-minute sequence, everything and nothing happens, and the still figure of the transvestite testifies to the violent consequences of being out of time, out of sync, or out of place. Chalkley's work, like Neshat's, is most often viewed in the space of the gallery rather than in a cinema, and viewers may be expected to watch the tape for a while, wander off, and then return to enter into Chalkley's nightmare world at a new point without necessarily "missing" anything. While a film like *Boys Don't Cry* is motored to a certain extent by suspense, by the development of a central love relationship, by the mounting sense of doom, Chalkley's video de-

pends on viewers' ability and desire to read the image track against and through the monotone of the voice track. The split voice, in combination with the ominously and persistently still image, forces viewers to recognize the different registers within which processes of differentiation take place. It also reminds us that difficult narratives sometimes require difficult forms—forms that unsettle, disturb, and render turbulent the forms of knowing on which we usually rely.

To make sense of the different uses made of subcultural material in the mass media and artistic avant-garde contexts, we can turn to Crow's brilliant essay "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts" (Crow 1996). Crow connects elitist avant-garde cultures in modernism to resistant subcultures. He claims that subcultural productions, before they are overwhelmed and absorbed by the culture industry, mark out original and inventive uses of leisure in a society within which leisure is usually tied to profit maximization and normalization. While subcultural challenges to the culture industry tend to come in brief but effervescent bursts, their forms may be adopted by an artistic avant-garde and kept alive elsewhere. Crow writes that "in their selective appropriation from fringe mass culture, advanced artists search out areas of social practice that retain some vivid life in an increasingly administered and rationalized society." The avant-garde thus provides, according to Crow, "a necessary brokerage between high and low" culture (35). This important essay brings subcultural theory and theories of the avant-garde into the same space rather than seeing one as the antithesis of the other. I follow up on this productive move by building on Crow's observation that the subculture is not exhausted by its exploitation:

Exploitation by the culture industry serves at the same time to stimulate and complicate those strivings in such a way that they continually outrun and surpass its programming. The expansion of the cultural economy continually creates new fringe areas, and young and more extreme members of assimilated subcultures will regroup with new recruits at still more marginal positions. So the process begins again. (35)

We can interpret Crow's description of this process of resistance and incorporation as a model for understanding the ways in which queer subcultural production can live on, often separate from the subculture, in "difficult," experimental, or highly abstract artworks, thereby merging the function of the avant-garde and the practices of the subculture. In what follows, I trace

images of resistant gendering from the spectacular images of subcultural life made by transgender photographer Del LaGrace Volcano, to the collage paintings by JA Nicholls, to the abstract large-scale paintings of Linda Besemer. Arguing that these relays between subculture and avant-garde create a powerful venue of political postmodernism, I look at aesthetic practices shared by both avant-garde and subcultural artists, and aimed at representing new logics of embodiment and space. These new logics resonate in particular and even peculiar ways with the spectacle of transgenderism.

Bodies with New Organs

Tracking an art practice that Neshat calls turbulent and I label as a transgender aesthetic, I want to examine the framing of bodily ambiguity from the highly figural and representational to the impossibly abstract. Looking at Saville's epic-scale oil paintings of scarred and surgically altered female bodies from her collection *Territories*, I consider the ways in which this work stretches the epistemology of transgender embodiment from sex reassignment surgeries to the complex project of bodily transformation in general. But I will also consider Hesse's fetishistic latex sculptures from the 1960s that seem to detach organs from bodies altogether, and create technotopic erotics from new configurations of flesh, decay, seriality, and randomness as their forms shift and change over time.⁴ And while Volcano's work leads us through a spectacular parade of shape-shifting portraits to convey the instability of even the most deliberately performed gender identity, Besemer's colorful abstractions—her circles, lines, and strokes—will articulate, like Hesse, the formal qualities of perverse and abject gendering. Nicholls's work, like Besemer's, turns to the abstract to represent ambiguity apart from identity, and both Nicholls and Besemer seem to build on the work of the earlier "queer" art practices of Hannah Hoch, Louise Bourgeois, Hesse, and others to place themselves within a discernible genealogy of queer artistic production. Finally, the *Tissue Culture and Art Project* from Perth, Australia, represents "semi-living" objects (some of which the artists refer to as "wetware") as a futurist vision of in-betweenness, a state between life and death, animate and inanimate, organic and synthetic. Not every artist discussed here sets out to represent transgenderism and yet each project attempts to capture ambiguous states of being that can be summarized as transgender. Much of this artwork conceptualizes embodiment in Butlerian terms as a repetitive series of

gestures that in these instances, depict identity as process, mutation, invention, and reconstruction.

Like a sly pun on the meaning of "inversion," Saville's painting of transgender photographer Volcano turns the body inside out, upside down, and forces the viewer to contemplate the image of a man trapped *outside* a woman's body. First you see the genitals, splayed out like a slab of meat on the butcher's block, and then, as your eye travels up the scary and distorted landscape of an ostensibly female body, you come face-to-face with the ruddy and bearded visage of the model, and inevitably, you must now travel back down the pink slopes of breast and belly to see if this head belongs to this vagina. The body is just barely draped over the platform, half on and half off, the head slumped and lifeless, one breast endlessly falling to earth, pulled downward by gravity, and the other breast seemingly moving in some other direction. Body parts hang and droop, smudge and blur, into an approximation of wholeness. The model looks uncomfortable, the viewer shares in his discomfort, and the artist deliberately frames the whole as a study in body dysphoria by calling the picture of the man with a vagina simply *Matrix*, meaning, of course, womb.

In his essay "On Being a Jenny Saville Painting," transgender photographer Volcano discusses the strange "out of body experience" that he had while posing for another artist as a woman. As Saville took pictures of what Volcano calls his "naked and corpulent hybridity," he feared that her photographs and then the final painting might "dislocate and/or diminish my transgendered maleness" (Volcano 1999, 25). Having carefully created and sustained his own "mutant maleness," Volcano feels threatened by the sheer excess of the Saville portrait, its curves and crevices, its gynecological, intrusive gaze. And yet, Volcano's mutant maleness does indeed survive the painting—and it even becomes the very point of the painting, highlighting the drama of a disidentification that can only ever be imperfectly realized. The imperfection of the body is precisely what Saville is drawn to; and in its flawed balance between maleness and femaleness, Volcano's body offers a map of the loss and longing that tinges all *transsexual* attempts to "come home" to the body. But that same map locates the *transgender* body as a paradigm for the impossibility of bodily comfort. Saville's transgender portrait of Volcano, of course, is no more or less grotesque than her other paintings of rearranged female flesh. Whether her female subjects have been surgically altered or simply captured at a particularly undignified angle, female flesh in

these paintings just looks excessive and somehow hypernatural. For Saville, femaleness resides in the flesh, but comes apart at the seams, bleeds over the edges of the body, and makes us unsure as to the limits of skin or self. Saville's all-too-fleshy subjects come to be defined by the distortion of the body, its inability to carry the heft of social identity. In many ways, Saville wields her paintbrush as surgeons may manipulate their scalpels. Indeed, her gallery catalog includes an interview with a plastic surgeon whose operating room Saville would visit while completing her paintings (Weintraub 1999, 27). The surgeon comments on the similarities between his manipulations of flesh and Saville's, and calls them both sculptors of human tissue. What the plastic surgeon does not comment on is the obvious difference between his aesthetic project and Saville's. He admits that he works on "youthening" the human face, yet he fails to notice that Saville paints the same subjects not in "before" and "after" modes but in the in-between stages—the transgender stages—of bodily alteration. Saville paints the bloated and bruised face rather than the rearranged and aquiline nose. She captures the intractability of the flesh and its transformation nonetheless; she freeze-frames the catastrophic consequences of surgical intervention, its aftermath rather than its outcome. In this way, her paintbrush is a scalpel digging into messy flesh rather than a suturing device that smoothes over and masks the evidence of intervention. Identity in Saville's paintings of bodies lies in between, and it is captured as a crease in the flesh, an unhealed wound, a scab, a pimple, signs of the skin's rupture. And her painterly gesture, in the end, consists in a refusal to put the unsightly bodies back together again in a pleasingly symmetrical arrangement.

The surgeon and the painter both consider themselves to be sculpting flesh, albeit for different purposes—the surgeon to approach perfection; the painter to disturb it—but both still insist on using the body as the ground or canvas for their new creations. An Australian art research group named SymbioticA has dispensed with the body altogether by making flesh sculptures separate from human bodies. In its *Tissue Culture and Art Project*, the group uses recent medical research into human tissue growth for artistic rather than medical purposes. SymbioticA describes its sculptures as "still in the realm of the symbolic gesture representing a new class of object/being. These objects are partly artificially constructed and partly grown/born. They consist of both synthetic materials and living biological matter from complex organisms."⁵

While medical researchers have to justify their interest in tissue growth by demonstrating the potential for their research to improve the quality of

human life, the *Tissue Culture and Art Project* creates a complex set of ethical problems by growing tissue "sculptures" for art's sake. The goal is to create "semi-living objects" and to produce a "new artistic palette."⁶ The group does provide an environmental justification for its research, arguing that semi-living objects shift processes of production from manufacturing to growth and therefore "could reduce the environmental problems associated with manufacturing." But mostly the group is interested in creating a "new breed of things," and a new set of relations between humans and inanimate as well as semi-living objects.

Like the transgender person who may desire body modifications without desiring sex reassignment, the tissue sculptures produce spare body parts with no practical use and they eschew the logic of the perfectible body offering instead the body, as mutant form. One project in particular by this group participates in a transgender aesthetic. The *Artificial Womb* project imagines an external womb as a laboratory, and in SymbioticA's version of the womb, the artists "grow modern versions of the legendary Guatemalan Worry Dolls." These dolls are handmade from degradable polymers and surgical sutures. The group describes them in the following terms:

The dolls were sterilized and seeded with endothelial, muscle, and osteoblast cell (skin, muscle and bone tissue) that are grown over/into the polymers. The polymers degrade as the tissue grows. As a result the dolls become partially alive. . . . The process in which the natural (tissue) takes over the constructed (polymers), is not a "precise" one. New shapes and forms are created in each instance, depending upon many variants such as the type of cells, the rhythm of the polymer degradation and the environment inside the artificial womb (bioreactor). It means that each doll transformation cannot be fully predicted and it is unique to itself. Our "next sex" is still in the realm of a dialogue with nature rather than a complete control over it. Our dolls are not clones but rather unique.⁷

Putting aside for a moment the symbolic or psychological function of the dolls (worry dolls), these semi-living objects, grotesque little conglomerates of plastic and flesh, challenge our usual conceptions of dolls as cuddly and warm, and offer instead something that is hard and wet, but closer to being human because nearly alive. The dolls solicit our emotional investments and they soothe humanist fears over cloning by representing *unique* forms of degradation and decay. In true Frankensteinian form, they are not of woman

born and their monstrosity finds expression in echoing the parts of the human (uniqueness, individuality) that humans most fear to lose through technological innovation. The SymbioticA group also creates other monstrous entities through tissue engineering: for example, it grows “unnecessary” animal organs such as pig wings, and is working on a project called *wetware* that merges material grown from fish neurons (wetware) with software and hardware devices. The unpredictability of the behavior of the semi-living objects and the potential relationships that we may form with them, through them, and to them creates a living workshop of bodily mutation and affective adaptation.

The technotopic potential of the semi-living objects has to do with the function and meaning of neo-organs and body bits once they are removed from the frame of the human body. Lifted from this frame, the body bits take on different meaning—while the worry dolls retain a human resemblance, their liveliness resides less in their replication of human form and more in their ability to mimic fleshly processes of decay. We are more used to thinking of mutation as a process that alters the whole body. Transgender photographer Volcano captures both whole body mutation and neo-organ growth in his work. Generally speaking, Volcano explores the contours and erotics of what he calls “sublime mutation” by glorifying bodies and body parts that might otherwise be read as freakish or ugly. His photographs of drag kings and female-to-male transsexuals as well as his self-portraits over the last fifteen years make use of the body as a canvas for spectacular and often highly aestheticized gender transformations. In his collection *Transgenital Landscapes*, however, Volcano specifically focuses on the technotopic project of lovingly fetishizing the testosterone-enhanced clits, the “dick-lits,” of FTMs daring the viewer to laugh at or reject the hormonally managed genitalia. Here, a neo-organ is literally grown onto the body and then isolated and eroticized by the photographer, who endows the neo-organ with erotic meaning and creates new gender associations through it.

In other work in *Sublime Mutations* under the heading of “Gender Optional,” Volcano performs what Prosser has cleverly called a cross between photography and autobiography: “ph/autography” (Prosser 2000; Volcano 2000). In this series, Volcano leaps from one creation to another, morphing from the sexy Delboy, to an older balding man, and finally to an “androskin” clone. As “Balding Del,” Volcano looks sinister, gray, and oddly sick. This photograph belies the myth of testosterone as the wonder drug that imparts sexual energy and new life to the female-to-male transsexual. Here, the

testosterone has worked its magic only into a male balding pattern, and the slight sneer on the mutant man’s face hints at the “side effects” of becoming male and the new pattern of decay produced through gender transition. Reading Del’s mutational self-portraits in relation to the *Tissue Culture and Art Project*, we can reconceptualize the relations between various historically located selves in terms of the ever mutating relations between the polymers and the tissue that we saw in the worry dolls series. Self, in both cases, is a dance of decay and growth. In “Androskin,” gender markers are literally removed from the flesh as a platinum head leaps out from a checked background and returns the gaze with a fearful intensity. While “Androskin” refuses to suggest maleness or femaleness in any explicit way, it is not beyond gender or genderless but it does conjure the awful image of the clone that haunted the SymbioticA group’s experiments with reproduction. The clone threatens the viewer with the terrifying possibility of reproduction without difference, the replication of the same, the creation of stasis.

In the same book, *Sublime Mutations*, that houses his transgender self-portraits, Volcano explores the multiple mutations of a wide range of transsubjectivities from what are now being called “transsensual femmes” (women who desire trans bodies) to “lesbian boys” and “hermaphrodykes.” At the end of the book in a section titled “Simo 2000,” Volcano photographs a butch who has appeared many times with Volcano in his earlier work as his hermaphrodyke double (Volcano 2000). Simo, in her solo portraits, bares a body twisted by intense scarring, the aftermath of a brutal accident. While the *Transgenital Landscapes* series shows bodies that have morphed elegantly, almost seamlessly, from female to male, bodies budding micropenises, bodies with neat surgically constructed chests, Simo’s torso is contorted and twisted, a turbulent field of trauma, and it appears transformed by its new features, at once new and old. Simo emphasizes her own sense of Baconian grotesqueness in this shot by pulling her face away from the camera with her own hand, marking the ways in which her body has been knocked off its pivot. In another shot, a fetishizing close-up of the scarred belly, a line of sewn flesh proceeds around a distorted navel. The navel sits now atop the distended belly like a new genital, far more compelling, in many ways, than the micropenises—a rude protuberance that in no way mimics the phallus, but that marks this body as literally an assemblage, a rough draft, or skin and tissue pulled together around a literally de-centered self. It is in these portraits more than any others in *Sublime Mutations* that the transgender body approaches sublimity.

"Her scars are my scars," says Volcano when asked about these images, noting a kind of turbulent twinning, which links Volcano's whole but transgender body to Simo's patchwork flesh.⁸ In this act of identification, Volcano refuses the traditional divide between artist and object, refuses to take up the position of the look, and allies himself firmly with the damage, trauma, scar. As Amelia Jones notes about Hannah Wilke's grueling self-portraits taken when Wilke was undergoing treatment for lymphoma, artistic acts of radical narcissism "de-objectify" the body, and allow it to express something through pain and sickness (Jones 1998). The self that pain expresses is in trauma and in doubt; but it is also in the grips of a visible process of self-negotiation that can then stand for the many ways in which the flesh roughly encounters a technology that extends, supplants, and distends it. Just as Saville's portraits of cosmetic surgeries reveled in the scars and tracked the lines of the surgeon's intrusion, so these portraits of Simo give us close-ups of the self's improvisation of wholeness. All of these representations of sutured embodiment echo a curious painting of Warhol from 1970 by Alice Neel. Painted a few years after Warhol was shot by Valerie Solanas, Neel captures perfectly Warhol's own understanding of self as a patchwork surface. But notice too how the scars and the hips make this look like a "portrait of the artist" as an old woman. The uncertainty of gender here, the transgender aspect of Warhol, is all the more pronounced for the fact that he is specifically not in drag here but captured for the first and last time, naked. Warhol hated the idea of nakedness, saying, "Nudity is a threat to my existence" (Warhol 1975, 11). Here, his nakedness both undoes him, but also makes him otherwise. Like Saville's mottled bodies and Volcano's portrait of Simo's damaged torso, the representation of the scars on Warhol's body conjures a technologic body, a body situated in an immediate and visceral relation to the technologies—guns, scalpels, cars, paintbrushes—that have marked, hurt, changed, imprinted, and brutally reconstructed it. Remarkably, in all three instances, the impact of technological intervention is to disrupt gender stability, and so gender ambiguity becomes the sign of other more invasive alterations to the human form.

If we return once more to Saville's paintings, we notice the way Saville also literally paints trauma into and onto the raw flesh; she tattoos the skin with the demands that have been made of it and binds the flesh in its own undergarment. This painting, titled *Trace*, acknowledges how female flesh in particular is already a form of tissue engineering, a culture grown in a lab; Saville's portraits suggest, however, that we should locate femaleness not as

the material with which we begin nor as the end product of medical engineering but as a stage and indeed a fleshly place of production. Saville, echoing Chalkley's eerie title, captures beautifully the body on its way to a perfection it can never achieve. And this *Trace* rhymes with the scars Volcano studies obsessively in order to remap the body's erotic potential. Of course, there is nothing so new in and of itself in the representation of the body as a form of montage, collage, assemblage, or aesthetic hybrid. Artists like Hannah Hoch, Louise Bourgeois, and Nancy Grossman have all represented the body, and often the female body at that, as a grotesque but beautiful patchwork of the bodily and the machinic, the fleshly and the metallic, the unfinished, imperfect, and incomplete. Saville, Volcano, and others draw from a vast archive of hybrid images by avant-garde artists, but they address the specific emergence of the transgender body in subcultural terms.

One artist who has proven to be particularly influential on contemporary artists grappling with the dimensions of gender ambiguity in an age of flexibility is the late Hesse; and her work can stand in here for a long tradition of work on embodiment by women that, in a way, predicted the aesthetic and physical phenomenon of transgenderism. Hesse's work, unlike that of her contemporaries, can be considered both modernist and postmodernist: on account of the materials that Hesse used to create her sculptures, her work has entered into a process of decay that has changed its meaning and context, and provided it with a new, if temporary and fleeting, moment of reception. Hesse's work, in fact, gives us access to and puts us in proximity with the primary processes of decay itself. Hesse produced a huge and eclectic body of work at a fever pitch between 1960 and 1970, but died young, tragically, at age thirty-four. She worked in cramped quarters with some extremely toxic materials like latex and fiberglass, which may or may not have contributed to her death from brain cancer. Hesse worked with these toxic materials because she loved their malleability and she experimented widely with their properties.

A retrospective of Hesse's work in 2001 at San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art displayed some pieces from her rapidly decaying collection of sculptures and installations made from latex and fiberglass. Many of the essays in the catalog that accompanied the show and much of the conversation surrounding the show concerned the relationship of the decaying work on display to the original as created and installed by the artist herself. Some commentators, critics, and curators claim that the work has degraded so much that "it is not a work of art any longer" and "it would not be right to show

it" (Timpanelli 2002, 295). Others argue in the catalog that the work should be shown in its degraded condition because "it is the contemporary appearance of these works, degraded or not, that has been important and influential for younger artists" (310). Hesse herself was quite aware of the work's fragility and she told one interviewer that she felt guilty about selling works that would not last. But she also stood by her decision to use nonpermanent materials, saying, "Life doesn't last, art doesn't last. It doesn't matter."⁹ While Hesse produced her sculptures a good thirty years before Saville, Volcano, and SymbioticA, and while her work must be situated on the cusp between late modernism and early postmodernism, her work becomes significant today precisely because it has aged and decayed over time, and while it may have represented modernist concerns with form and antiform in the 1960s, now it represents postmodern preoccupations with mutation, space, decay, and hybridity. Hesse predicted the evolution of the status of her sculptures over time, and she said: "I would like the work to be non-work. This means it would find its way beyond my preconceptions. . . . It is my main concern to go beyond what I know and what I can know. The formal principles are understandable and understood. It is the unknown quantity from which and where I want to go. As a thing, an object, it accedes to its non-logical self. It is something, it is nothing."¹⁰

Hesse's installations and sculptures resemble the semi-living objects produced three decades later by the SymbioticA collective, and they achieve the status of animation because they are actively eroding, rotting, and transforming. *Contingent* features material dipped in latex that would have glowed amber and caught the light when originally displayed, but that later became rigid and began to disintegrate. The title of the piece itself conveys the conditional and fragile status of the work. These latex works by Hesse also prefigure Saville's attempt to capture the in-betweenness of identity, which for Saville is captured in bodily trauma, but that Hesse constructs through the work of "salvage." Briony Fer in "The Work of Salvage" has called attention to this activity of salvaging in Hesse's opus, noting that she was an artist who worked with the very materials that other artists would discard after creating a sculpture. "Salvage," writes Fer, "is what binds together the two aspects of Hesse's procedure, the undoing and the layering. But it is a kind of salvage that is permanently incomplete" (Fer 2002, 85–86).

And finally, Hesse's work echoes all the other work we have looked at so far, but particularly Volcano's, in terms of her fetishistic practice of detach-

ing organs from bodies. Hesse's work veers back and forth between the abstraction of layers and boxes to material representations of odd organic shapes—balls, breasts, and penises (often bent or in pieces) as well as intestines. In *Ringaround Rosie*, the abstract and the literal come together and form two neat circles, slightly raised from the canvas; this relief with rope coiled around it produces the effect of a cross section of embodiment and again a neo-organ, detached from any recognizable body and representing the impact of detachability itself. As Hesse said of the circles she obsessively produced, "I think that there is a time element. I think that was the sequence of change and maturation" (Nemser 1970, 8). Hesse's work, in some sense, is all about temporality, but not in a conventional way; not in terms of placing herself in a tradition or racing with time. Hesse places herself quite firmly at odds with time, tradition, and futurity. She wrote in her diaries that painting had too much to do with being placed within a tradition or art history; she avoided painting, and turned to reliefs, sculptures, and serial projects in order to escape the notion of progressive order: "Making art. 'Painting a painting.' The Art, the history, the tradition, is too much there. I want to be surprised, to find something new. I don't want to know the answer before but want an answer that can surprise."¹¹

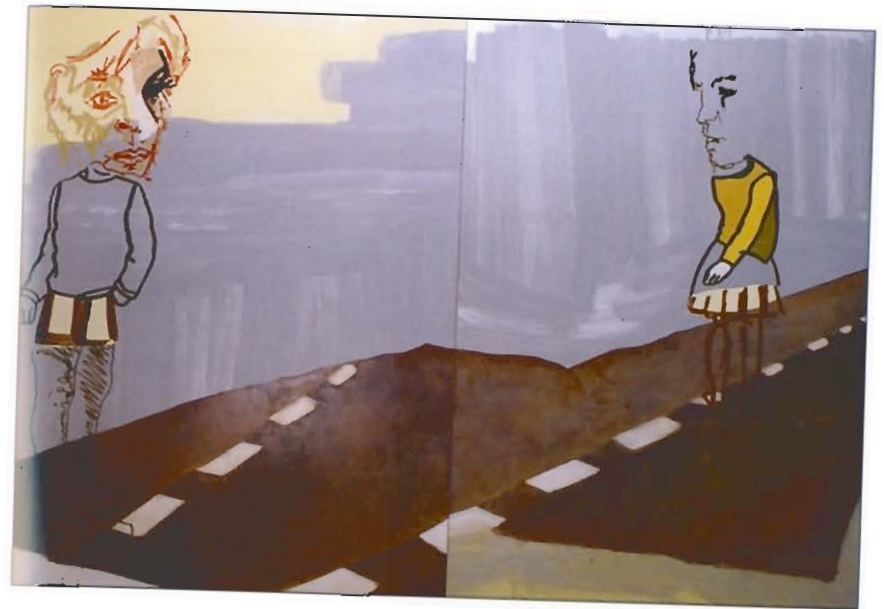
Because they change over time and reproduce the process of fleshly decay, Hesse's sculptures emphasize what is to be gained in moving away from both hyperabstract and hyperrealist images of the body in order to explore gendered subjectivity as a set of dislocated experiences. While representational art pins bodily ambiguity to this or that subject, abstract forms lose a connection to any specific subjectivity at all. Hesse steered a course between the figural and the abstract, making process itself into the form. In this way, she was able to make the provisionality of identity, subjectivity, and gender a universal or at least generalizable condition. A contemporary artist, much influenced by Hesse, who creates abstract representations of gender indeterminacy and who locates her aesthetic in the process of detachability is California-based painter Besemer. In her huge installation paintings of circles, slabs, and folds, Besemer seems at first glance to be saying little about the postmodern body, with its transitivities and traumas. The clean lines of the circles hint at perfection and a little bit more, but still bear the marks of a faint smudging effect that troubles the spiral and flirts with the flaw. Like Hesse, Besemer invests in the circle in order to trouble its symbolic representation of life cycles, progress, and development. While Hesse built the flaw into her work through

her choice of material, Besemer marks the flaws on the very surfaces of her art, elevating the flaw, the queer, and the trouble to the level of form.

In her slabs, Besemer seems, again like Hesse, to have dispensed even with the canvas itself. Here we see paint layered on paint; no longer anchored to a pliant and absorbent canvas, the paint announces its own artifice, detachability, and even performativity. And by calling attention to the act of painting itself as a gesture that has left the canvas behind, Besemer rescripts the traditionally gendered relationship between figure and ground that locates the canvas as female body and the brushstroke as male genius. While for Jackson Pollack, the paint and the paintbrush represent the exertion of a phallic will, for Besemer, the paint, the canvas, the stroke, and even the brush all come apart in unnerving ways, allowing for the prosthetic essence of the brush to surface. In her paintings titled *Detachable Strokes*, we see the logical culmination of Besemer's method of peeling dried paint off of glass and mounting it directly onto the gallery wall. The sturdy thickness of the paint, its ability to stand alone, as it were, its distinctive folds as it hits the gallery floor, all suggest the plasticity of the paint and its remarkably controlled flow. Here, the paint does not spurt or splatter as in a Pollack piece; rather, like Hesse's art sculptures, it refuses to be absorbed into the softness of the canvas, and it deliberately ignores the boundary between wall and floor, plaster and wood. This paint is defined by its transferability and the way it bears the imprint of the brush, but circulates apart from the brush and makes a canvas of whatever material is at hand.

But Besemer's paint sculptures announce their affiliation with artifice through more than just their materiality; the colorfulness of the paintings also announces a gleeful refusal of the grim monochromatic palette of minimalism. In a study of the ways in which color, bright color, has been devalued in Western art, and particularly in modernism, David Batchelor writes:

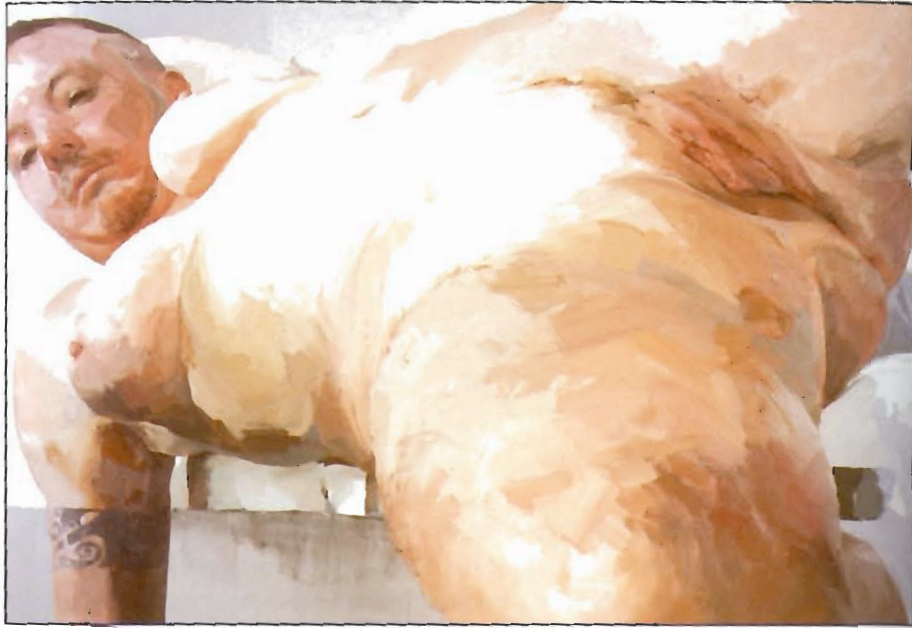
It is, I believe, no exaggeration, to say that, in the West, since Antiquity, colour has been systematically marginalized, reviled, diminished and degraded. Generations of philosophers, artists, art historians and cultural theorists of one stripe or another have kept this prejudice alive, warm, fed and groomed. As with all prejudices, its manifest form, its loathing, masks a fear: a fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable. This loathing of colour, this fear of corruption through colour, needs a name: chromophobia. (Batchelor 2000, 22)



Ian Nicholls, *in another place*, 2000, oil on canvas, 102 x 152 in. Printed by permission of the artist.



Brian Dawn Chalkley, still from *I probably want perfection in everything and a little more. Maybe that'll be my downfall*. Printed by permission of the artist.



Jenny Saville, *Matrix*, 1999, oil on canvas, 84 x 120 in. Printed by permission of the artist.



Jenny Saville, *Cindy*, 1993, oil on canvas, 22 x 18 in. Printed by permission of the artist.



Jenny Saville, *Knead*, 1994, oil on canvas, 60 x 72 in. Printed by permission of the artist.



Del LaGrace Volcano, "Cooper," 1999, *The Drag King Book*. Printed by permission of the artist.



Del LaGrace Volcano, "Crevice," 2000, *Sublime Mutations*. Printed by permission of the artist.



Del LaGrace Volcano, "Delboy,"
2001, *Sublime Mutations*. Printed
by permission of the artist.



Del LaGrace Volcano, "Balding
Del," 2001, *Sublime Mutations*.
Printed by permission of the
artist.



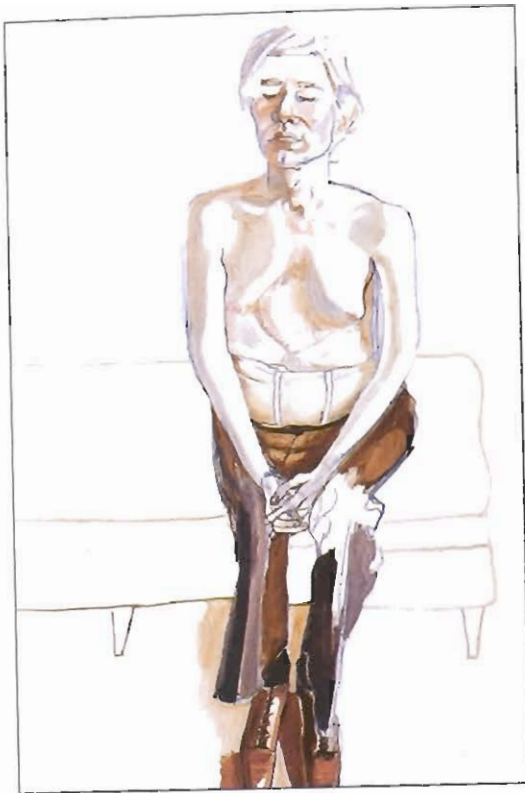
Del LaGrace Volcano, "Androskin,"
2001, *Sublime Mutations*. Printed
by permission of the artist.



Del LaGrace Volcano, "Trauma,"
2001, *Sublime Mutations*. Printed
by permission of the artist.



Del LaGrace Volcano, "Scar,"
2001, *Sublime Mutations*. Printed
by permission of the artist.



Alice Neel, *Andy Warhol*, 1970, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 in. Whitney Museum of Art.

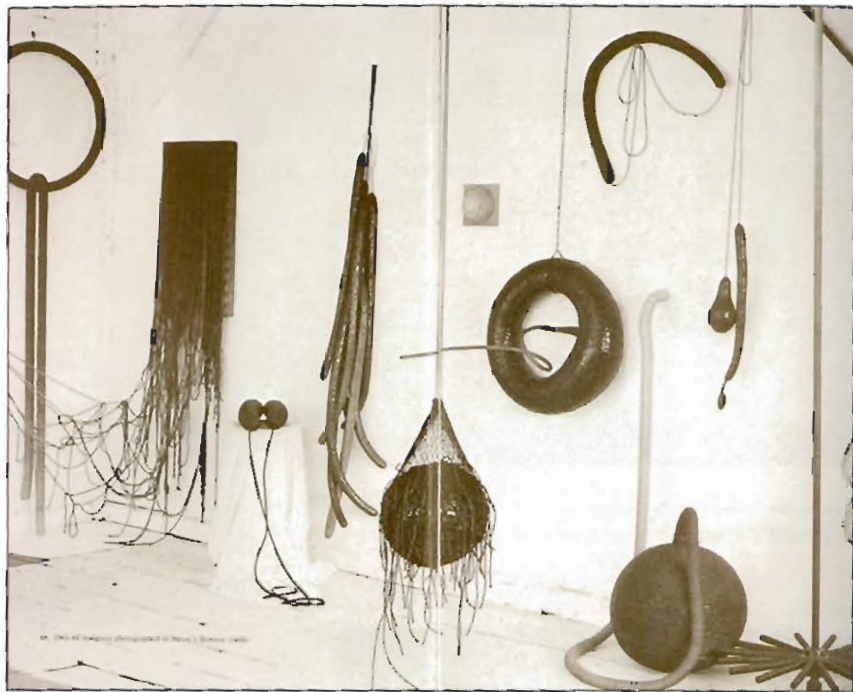


Eva Hesse, "Augment in Decay," 2002. From *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman. Copyright The Estate of Eva Hesse Zurich/London.

Jenny Saville, *Trace*, 1993/4, oil on canvas, 84 x 72 in. Printed by permission of the artist.



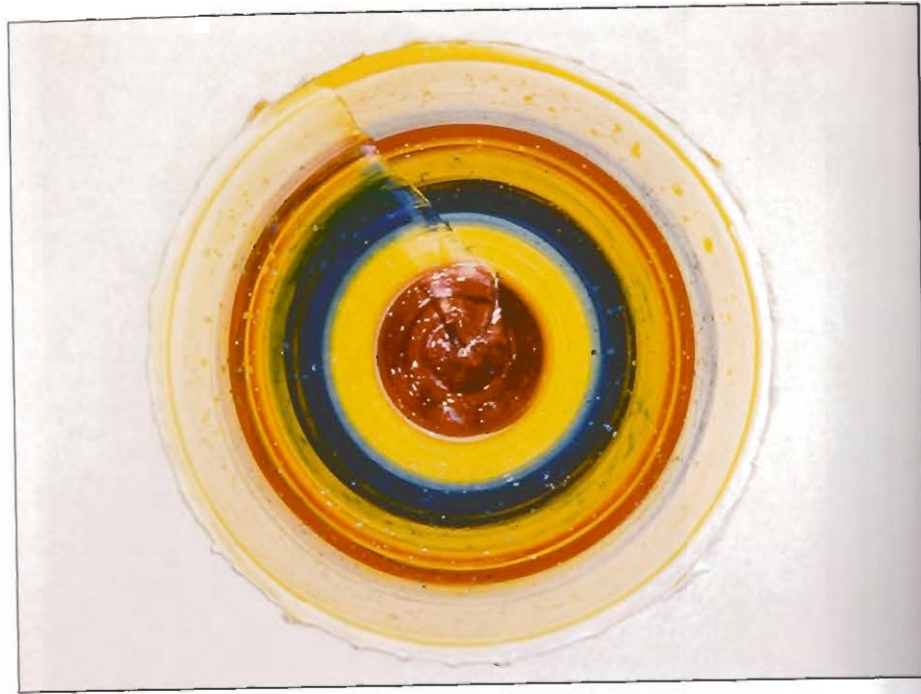
Eva Hesse, *Contingent*, 1968-9, fiberglass, latex, cheesecloth. Copyright The Estate of Eva Hesse Zurich/London.



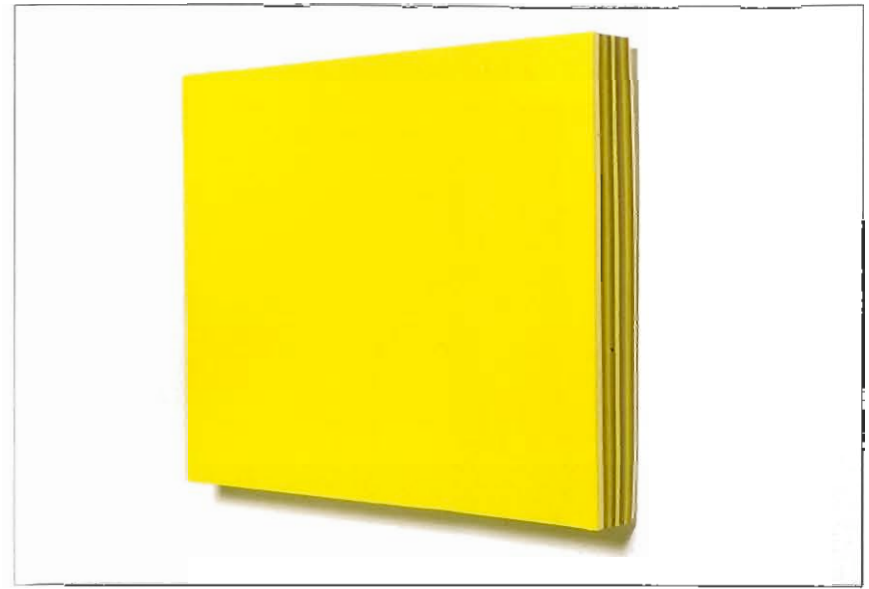
Eva Hesse, "Bowery Studio View," 1965–6, mixed media. Copyright The Estate of Eva Hesse Zurich/London.



Eva Hesse, *Ringaround Arosie*, 1965, pencil, acetone, varnish, enamel, paint, ink, and cloth-covered electrical wire on papier-mâché and masonite. Copyright The Estate of Eva Hesse Zurich/London.



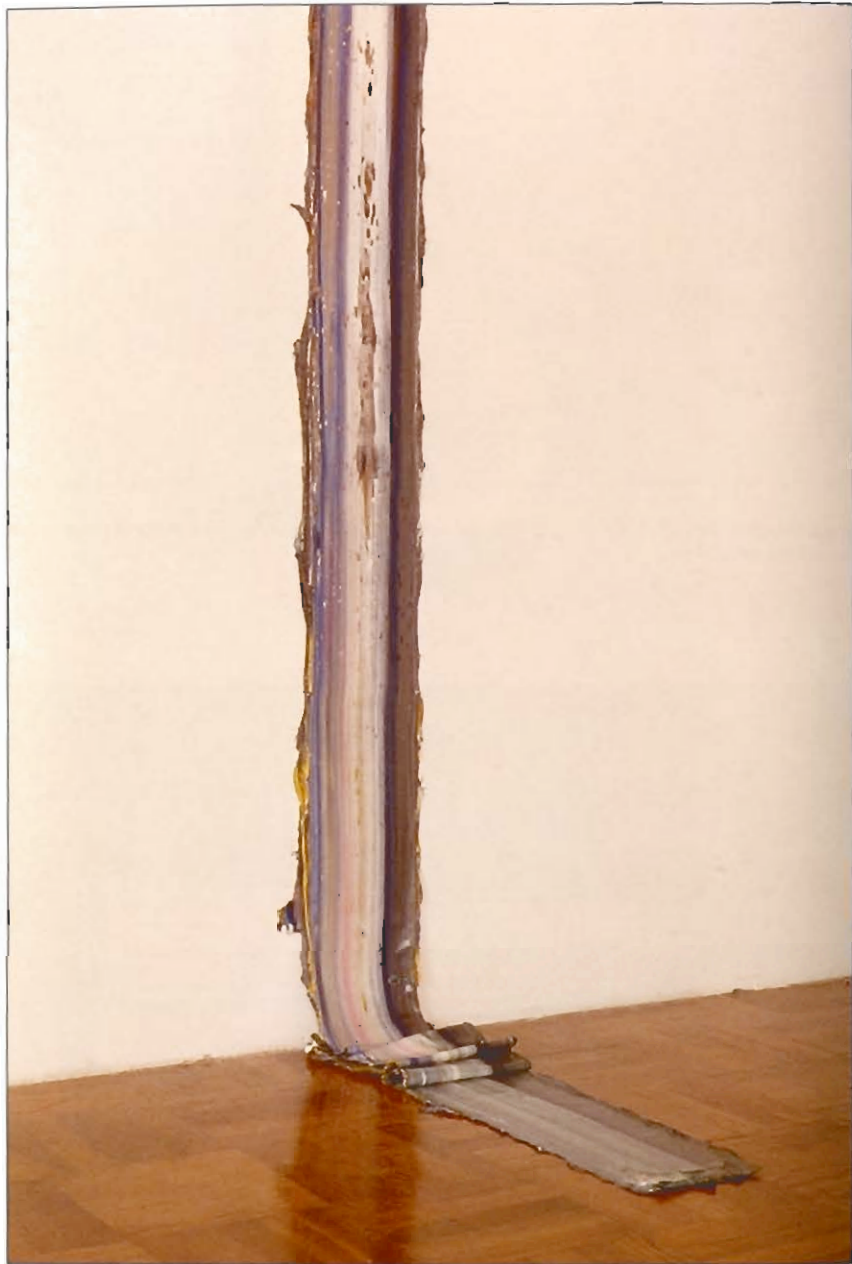
Linda Besemer, *Circle #1*, 1996, pure acrylic paint. Printed by permission of the artist.



Linda Besemer, *Slab #8*, 1999, solid slab of consecutive layers of acrylic paint. Printed by permission of the artist.



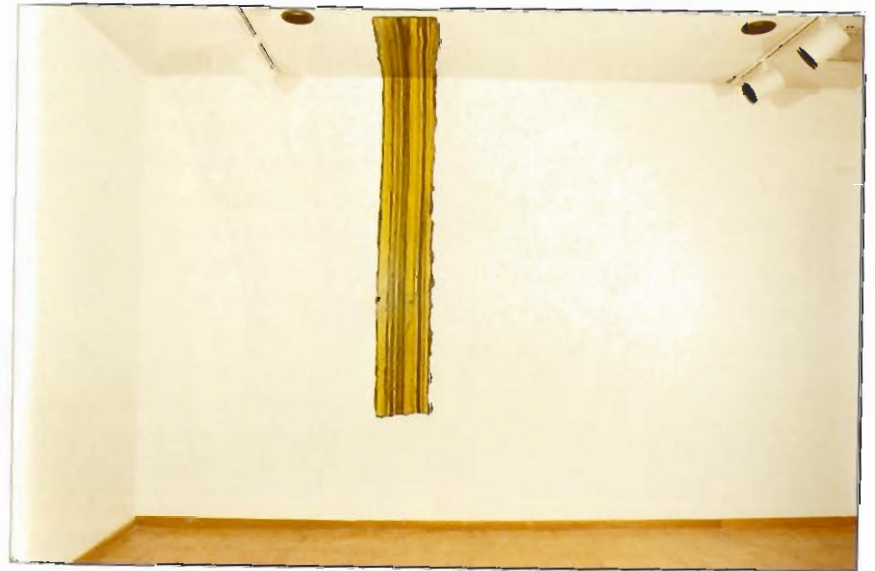
Linda Besemer, *Detachable Stroke #1*, 1993, acrylic paint. Printed by permission of the artist.



Linda Besemer, *Detachable Stroke #9*, detail, 1993. Printed by permission of the artist.



Linda Besemer, *Large Zip Fold*, 2002, acrylic paint, fiberglass, aluminum. Printed by permission of the artist.



Linda Besemer, *Tall Girl*, 1994, acrylic paint. Printed by permission of the artist.



JA Nicholls, *let me be*, 2001, oil on canvas, 108 x 84 in. Printed by permission of the artist.

In the world of painting, color, as Batchelor implies, sparks irrational responses that mirror homophobic responses. If straightness (masculinity in particular) is associated with minimalism, then excess (of form, color, or content) becomes the signification of the feminine, the queer, and the monstrous. In a published conversation titled “Too Colorful” between Besemer and Batchelor that accompanies the catalog for Besemer’s exhibition in 2002 at Cohan, Leslie, and Browne, the two artists discuss color, formalism, plasticity, and painting. Batchelor notes that “any art that craves respectability will have a problem with color” and that this has to do with color’s relationship to language (Batchelor 2002, 20). To the extent that abstract work, in other words, is about the art practice itself and wants to avoid being subordinated to the literary, intense color must be avoided; intense color speaks, it adorns, it brings the artwork dangerously close to the feminine and decorative. Besemer confirms that she is interested in excessive and vivid color, and she associates formalism not simply with the retreat from language and ideology but with “non-narrative.” Besemer says, “I was always taken by Meyer Shapiro’s idea of the non-narrative. Unlike Greenberg, Shapiro did not see abstraction as a transcendent, apolitical or ‘purely formalist’ art form. Rather he viewed ‘Abstract Expressionism’ as a salient critique of a burgeoning post-war industrial culture” (20). Besemer uses color and her plastic forms to reclaim formalism for a queer artmaking practice and to adapt the nonnarrative potential of abstract art into an oppositional practice.

Besemer’s attempt to find a place for her work in the tradition of abstract art acknowledges the ways in which queer artists, feminist artists, and artists of color have been left outside of art history canons. As Ann Eden Gibson notes in her history of the “other politics” of abstract expressionism, this happens subtly and overtly in art history narratives. Sometimes, marginality itself has been claimed by the canonical artists, leaving no room for “disenfranchised groups to affirm their difference” (Gibson 1997). At other times, the explicitly political nature of the work of disenfranchised artists would disqualify that work from the category of “universal.” Finally, once universality has been defined in relation to the aesthetic practices of a group of elite artists, all other artists are cast as unoriginal. As Gibson summarizes it, “To the extent that the work of an artist who is not in the canon looks like that of one who is, the noncanonical artist’s work is derivative. To the extent that the noncanonical work does not resemble that in the canon, the contending work is not Abstract Expressionist.” With such methods of evaluation, historical narration, and aesthetic selection in play, queer traditions, as Richard

Meyer's *Outlaw Representation* has brilliantly shown, have to be excavated, restored, invented, and imagined (Meyer 2002).

In her work, Besemer uses nonnarrative abstract forms in order to circumvent the imperative on the female artist to tell stories, to narrate self, and to reveal psychology. She playfully flirts with "feminine" arts and crafts forms in her large textilelike paintings, and yet she uses her rigorously formalist compositions to comment on the folly of essentialism. Both Besemer and Batchelor embrace a return to abstraction as a way of resisting the binary opposition between abstract and conceptual art, and they turn a genre that has been historically hostile to marginalized artists into a postmodern location for artistic practices associated with color, plasticity, and repetition. Hesse and, then following her example, Besemer both invest heavily in the notion of seriality, and it is this temporal construct that marks the distinction between the art traditions tracked by conservative cultural critics like T. S. Eliot or Greenberg and Marxist critics like Jameson and Harvey, and those that must be pieced together in more haphazard and productively random ways. While conservative and Marxist critics chart art traditions and narrate a history that is properly cyclic, progressive, and yet marked by ruptures and breaks as an innovator or genius male does the work of interrupting the cycle and beginning a new one, queer and feminist art histories are produced through seriality, repetition, absurdity, and anomaly. Hesse elevated repetition to the level of structure in her work and she talked about it as obsessive. When asked why she repeats a form over and over, Hesse responded, "Because it exaggerates. If something is meaningful, maybe it's more meaningful said ten times. It's not just an aesthetic choice. If something is absurd, it's much more greatly exaggerated, absurd, if it's repeated" (Nemser 1970, 11). Repetition, after Butler's work on performativity, has taken on the status of queer method in postmodernism, and so Hesse's prescient comments about repetition and seriality outline the terms of a queer practice to come. In Besemer's work, repetition becomes performance; circles and slabs are detachable paint sculptures, and they are numbered and labeled in order to place the objects in relation without implying advancement. In their art practices, both Hesse and Besemer convey performance but not maturation, mobility but not progress, change and transformation but not rupture and newness. Besemer sees herself as quoting Hesse, not only through the repetition of forms, but also in her blurring of the boundaries between painting and sculpture. Besemer explains that "Hesse's famous 'Hang Up' and really all the floor-wall pieces have had a great impact on me. I particularly love the resin

Judd-like pieces which run the wall down to the floor. I like the symbiosis of geometric and organic forms, the translucency of the resin, and as you [Batchelor] say its 'flexibility'—particularly as it relates a condition of gravity in the pieces" (Batchelor 2002, 22).

The intersection of flexibility and seriality thus becomes a way of allowing the paint sculptures to comment on, indeed participate in, definitions of bodilyyness in postmodernism—the flexibility of the paint, its plasticity, gives it a utopian sense of pliability that is captured in Besemer's "sheets" as a fold. The fold promises unlimited pliancy, but actually delivers elasticity only within a constrained and bounded space. The zip fold flows onto the floor from the wall; it seems to refuse containment altogether and yet it is held motionless by nearly invisible supports, by the fold between the wall and the floor, by gravity itself. Thus, Besemer eloquently captures the precise formal coordinates of the transgender body—pliant to a point, flexible within limits, constrained by language, articulation, and gesture. But as if to immediately refute the limits placed on form, one final detachable stroke defies even gravity. Besemer has said of her *Tall Girl* painting: "I attached and reattached my strokes to various architectural environments. . . . This painting I titled *Tall Girl* to literally describe the way the painting is too tall for the architecture."¹² The painting, she also says, represents a female who exceeds the boundaries of the structures put in place to accommodate her. *Tall Girl* slips onto the ceiling and dangles above the floor, thereby calling into question the rightness of the four walls that mark the gallery space. Here we come face-to-face with the subject, the tall girl or large woman or male-to-female transvestite, who exceeds the new architectures that baffled Jameson, and who has grown new organs and expanded the body to meet the "impossible dimensions" of postmodernism itself. Besemer's wry formalist paintings offer both a realistic look at the dimensions of flexibility and a utopian vision of genders without sexes; they beckon and seduce the viewer with the clean, precise, and pure abstractions of flesh into paint while constructing, in Besemer's words, "a recipe of 'purity' which is wholly impure" (Batchelor 2002).

"Let me be"

Nicholls's large painting *let me be* echoes the sense of excess in Besemer's *Tall Girl*. Her tall figure threatens, like Alice in Wonderland, to grow beyond the framework of the painting, to crawl off the canvas and onto the wall. S/he also threatens the viewer with the sheer size of her body, and this body also

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lounges against the deep empty space filling the rest of the canvas. Nicholls finds an interesting place somewhere between figural and abstract to launch a new chapter in transgender aesthetics—one in which the abstract and the figural are not binary opposites but where they inhabit the same space at the same time, letting us know what it means to live in a queer time and place. This chapter has traced a postmodern aesthetic through eccentric and extravagant representations of the body, body parts, neo-organs, and trans bodies. I have used the term technotopia, or technotopic, to refer to the spatial dimensions of this aesthetic, its preoccupation with the body as a site created through technological and aesthetic innovation. Technotopic inventions of the body resist idealizations of bodily integrity, on the one hand, and rationalizations of its disintegration, on the other; instead, they represent identity through decay, detachability, and subjectivity in terms of what Hesse referred to as “the non-logical self.” The transgender form becomes the most clear and compelling representation of our contemporary state of permanent dislocation. Semi-living objects, semi-dying art pieces, and semi-coherent human bodies express and condense the set of relations that Jameson referred to as postmodern; but while he feared the loss of historicity, the waning of affect, and the decline of the masterwork, these “nonworks” remind us that political defiance in late capitalism has a powerful place, takes unexpected forms, and hides out in the seemingly superficial and ludic forms of experimentation that have been dismissed as a form of superficial body politics. Superficiality, Besemer’s and Nicholls’s work suggests, may not be a symptom of a diseased political culture but a marvelously flat and uninhibited repudiation of the normativity inherent in “deep” political projects.