



Why the Art World is Focusing In on Gender Fluidity



Painting by Christina Quarles

by [Arthur Lubow](#)
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In 1982, when Dan Cameron, then a young curator, was putting together a New Museum exhibition on contemporary gay artists, he was warned—mostly by other gay men—that he was committing career suicide. “The idea that anybody would be out as an artist was unthinkable,” Cameron recalls. “You were not allowed to point to a person’s artwork and say it was closely related to a sexual sensibility.” Cameron’s exhibition is said to have been the first institutional one of its kind. The participants he managed to enlist were for the most part just starting out, with relatively little to lose; and even the curator, by his own later admission, pulled his punches. “I found that I, too, was not immune to internalized homophobia, in that I let other people’s fears and paranoia inhibit me,” he says. “I was censoring myself. A kind of eroticism was not possible; nudity was not at all possible; and that lesbians could have sexual, and not just metaphorical, relationships wasn’t possible either.”



Beyond boundaries: David Hockney's early work *Cleaning Teeth, Early Evening (10 PM) W11, 1962*

Painting by David Hockney

How the cultural fault lines have shifted. In the Michelangelo and David Hockney blockbuster shows at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, last winter, the artists' gay orientation was highlighted by the curators as a way to further the understanding of their work. Soon thereafter, two edgy queer artists who enjoyed a cult reputation during their lifetimes were finally being given recognition: Peter Hujar, with 143 photographs now on view at the Morgan Library & Museum, and his close friend David Wojnarowicz, the subject of a full-scale retrospective that opens at the Whitney Museum of American Art in July. Danh Vo and Zoe Leonard, both openly gay artists who have made work that directly

addresses their sexuality, currently have midcareer surveys at the Guggenheim and the Whitney, respectively.

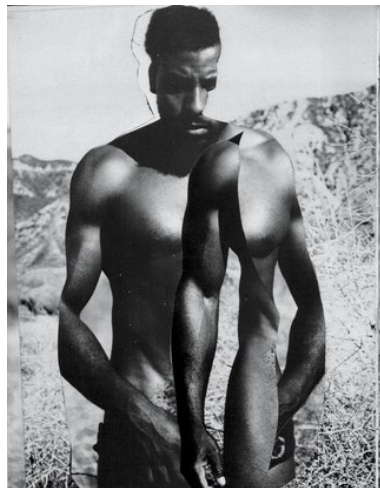


Friends and muses: Peter Hujar's *David Wojnarowicz Reclining (2)*, 1981

Photograph by Peter Hujar

In an era of marriage equality, homosexual attraction barely raises an eyebrow among museum visitors. Even a blatantly homoerotic image, such as the large photograph of a man's naked hairy ass and balls in a welcoming position at Wolfgang Tillmans's exhibition last year at Tate Modern, fails to provoke. In both the art world and the culture at large, the spotlight has turned away from sexual orientation and desire to focus on gender identity and fluidity. And, in

many ways, the current challenge disrupts more deeply. Overturning the presumption that everyone is straight helped ignite the fulminating culture wars of the 1980s and '90s; but it is far more foundation-shaking to question the principle that we are all located—congenitally, unequivocally, and immutably—on one side or the other of the male-female divide.



Authenticity and self-construction: *Arroyo*, 2016 Collage

Troy Michie's *Arroyo*, 2015

"The trans impulse, I think, is profoundly exciting," says Lawrence Rinder, the director of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. "We have reached a stage in our culture where we are open to people choosing their gender." After the inviolability of the gender dichotomy is undermined, can any convention feel safe? "It is a kind of radical destabilization," says Johanna Burton, the curator of "Trigger: Gender As a Tool and a Weapon," a show at the New Museum last winter that surveyed the thorny tangle of gender in contemporary art.



Authenticity and self-construction: Tschabalala Self's Garter, 2015
Tschabalala Self

There are some suggestive parallels to the past. A generation ago, gay men in leather jackets and flannel shirts popularized an exaggerated form of masculinity, even though—or perhaps precisely because—they were thought not to be “real men.” Trans women today are unafraid to present themselves in ultrafeminine postures that “real women” might shun as retrograde. Juliana Huxtable, a trans woman who is an artist, poet, and DJ, uses her body as an instrument. She participated in “Trigger” with text pieces and videos produced by the House of Ladosha, a queer

collective to which she belongs; but her breakthrough appearance came three years earlier, at the New Museum 2015 Triennial, in which a lifelike sculpture of Huxtable made by the Brooklyn-based artist Frank Benson showed a comely naked African-



American body with all the attributes of traditional feminine beauty—plus a penis. - Alongside the sculpture, Huxtable displayed her own photographic images of her stylized nude figure and wall texts of her writings.

Beyond boundaries: Frank Benson's sculpture of Juliana Huxtable, Juliana, 2015
Frank Benson

From one angle, there is nothing new here. The body that is both male and female has been an artistic subject at least since classical times. The most celebrated example is the Louvre's Sleeping Hermaphroditus, a life-size marble Roman copy of a Greek bronze, depicting a recumbent beauty whose male genitals are so discreet that a spectator might

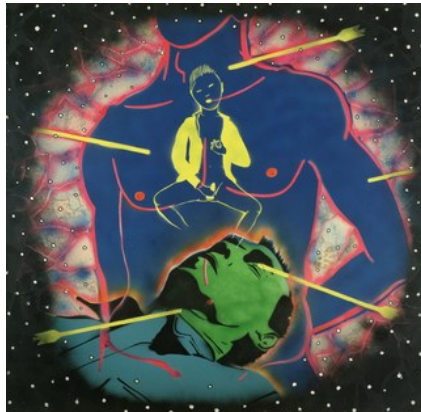


easily overlook them. Ever the pioneer, **Marcel Duchamp** played around with gender as performance back in 1921, when he had Man Ray photograph him as his feminine alter ego, Rose Sélavy—more than a half-century before **Andy Warhol** and **Robert Mapplethorpe** posed in drag.

Authenticity and self-construction: Paul Mpagi Sepuya's Darkroom Mirror (OX5A1531), 2017
Photograph by Paul Mpagi Sepuya

More immediately relevant is the way the theme was portrayed by Hujar, who, in one picture at the Morgan, studies the nude back of a figure, the head obscured, hips wide, buttocks pear-shaped, a form as feminine as a Titian Venus or an Ingres odalisque. And then you spy the

scrotum tucked between the legs. Hujar repeatedly explored the subject of ambiguous gender in his portraits of drag performers, some of whom wear beards as well as skirts. Most memorable is his deathbed picture of the Warhol actress Candy Darling, née James Slattery, who is posing in a hospital room decorated with chrysanthemums and roses, made up as glamorously as Joan Crawford in a Hollywood tearjerker. Hujar also photographed Charles Ludlam, Ethyl Eichelberger, Jackie Curtis, and the Cockettes, who were all cross-dressing on stage to hilarious, subversive effect.



Friends and muses: David Wojnarowicz's Peter Hujar Dreaming/Yukio Mishima: Saint Sebastian, 1982.

Photograph by David Wojnarowicz

Yet today's scrutiny of gender identity, especially by trans artists, is indeed something new. Although Hujar's subjects play with the gender binary, they don't refute it. Far from denying the wall that divides males from females, Hujar's photographs—and the drag performers he depicted—ricochet off it, their humor and poignancy resting on a gender distinction that is flamboyantly flouted. "It's about screwing with codes," says Joel

Smith, the Morgan's photography curator. "'Genderfuck' is the operative term. I'm pretty sure it's the first time it's appeared on a wall label at the Morgan Library." (Hujar, who didn't want to be seen as a "gay photographer," declined to participate in Cameron's 1982 show at the New Museum.)



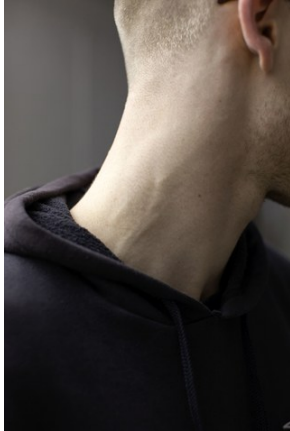
Beyond boundaries: Man Ray's portrait of Marcel Duchamp in drag as Rose Sélavy, 1921.

Photograph by Man Ray David Wojnarowicz Reclining (2): © Peter Hujar Archive, LLC/courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York, and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Peter Hujar Dreaming/Yukio Mishima: Saint Sebastian: courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P.P.O.W., New York. Arroyo: courtesy of the artist; Garter: Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London/T293, Naples and Rome/Thierry Goldberg, New York; Beautiful Mourning: courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery; Darkroom Mirror (0X5A1531): Courtesy of the artist and Yancey Richardson, New York/Document, Chicago; Cleaning Teeth, Early Evening (10 PM) W11: David Hockney/Courtesy of The Astrup Fearnley Collection, Oslo, Norway, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Juliana: Courtesy of the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; I Want a President: Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth; Shia the cabbit: Courtesy of the artist; Collum: Courtesy of the artist; Sycorax's Collections (Happiness): Courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles;

Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy: © Man Ray Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/ADAGP, Paris 2018/Courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The art world's current exploration of gender and identity has less to do with the irony and theatricality that appealed to Hujar and more to do with authenticity and self-construction. These artists aren't play-acting at aping feminine icons—or masculine icons, either. Patrick Staff, an artist who identifies as trans and showed in "Trigger," made a video in 2015, *The Foundation*, in which he visits the testosterone-heavy Los

Angeles headquarters of the Tom of Finland Foundation. That organization is devoted to the artistic legacy of the late illustrator, who was the influential creator of images of ultramacho gay men. In the foundation's environment of leather, chains, and handcuffs, Staff, with his eye makeup, is touchingly out of place. "Treat this place as your community center," a **Tom of Finland** stalwart proclaims in the video. Can Staff really do that?



Beyond boundaries: Wolfgang Tillmans's Collum, 2011
Image courtesy of Maureen Paley, London

Despite the many triumphs of the gay liberation movement, some queer people feel they were never invited to the celebration. The gay artist most associated with the controversies of the '80s is Robert Mapplethorpe, whose homoerotic photographs of muscular men, naked or in leather and denim, and often performing sexual acts, incited a political uproar that led to the cancellation of an exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., and the criminal indictment of the Contemporary Arts Center and its director in Cincinnati. (The director was led out of the museum by the vice squad.) That controversy is behind us. "Mapplethorpe won," says the artist and curator Nayland Blake. "Everywhere you go there are black and white photographs of white men with six-packs. We have the moment of gay marriage, but okay, what about all the people who are left out?" As a self-described "fat, hairy mulatto," Blake can't relate to the Mapplethorpe clones or their Abercrombie & Fitch descendants. He has become active in a subculture known as the furry fandom, whose participants identify with, and attend conventions dressed as, animals. Blake's favored avatar—his fursona—is a bear-bison hybrid of changeable gender, named Gnomen.



Beyond boundaries: Tommy Bruce's exploration of furry fandom in Shia the Cabbit, 2013
Photograph by Tommy Bruce

Describing the furry fandom, Blake says, "It's a really interesting, complicated community, where people have been making and circulating images of their dream identity, making an argument that there is an identity that is not essentialist but a kind of construct, different from your biological body." It often serves, he says, as an environment in which younger people "who are starting to come to an understanding of themselves as trans can experience this without the risk of repercussion." In "Tag: Proposals on Queer Play and the Ways Forward," an exhibition curated by Blake that is now running at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, the furry fandom is one of many kinds of play arenas in which queer artists toy with new ways of imagining gender and sexuality.

For some, the ripples of the "trans impulse" spread beyond the borders of gender. One of the most impressive artists in "Trigger" was a Los Angeles painter, Christina Quarles, whose work, while seemingly at home in a show about gender, actually originates

elsewhere. Quarles is not trans, and although she is in a same-sex relationship with her high-school girlfriend, she doesn't much partake of lesbian culture. As the child of a black father and white mother, her preoccupation since childhood has been her racial makeup. "My experience is firmly rooted in whiteness and blackness, rather than a hybrid one," she says. "In a space made for black women to get together, I feel the most white. In settings that are white, which happens fairly often in the art world, I feel the most black." Quarles's paintings present a disorienting surfeit of material, so that, for example, a torso will seem attached to too many limbs. "I work with the idea of ambiguity as an excess of information that can lead to a contradiction, and legibility can fall apart," she says.



Authenticity and self-construction: Christina Quarles's *Beautiful Mourning*
Painting by Christina Quarles

Quarles's art has political implications, but politics is not its subject. Seen from a political perspective, the queer art of our time is divided into before and after AIDS. Hujar was among the many artists who died of the disease, as was Wojnarowicz. The trajectory of Wojnarowicz's career illustrates how, in the hands of an artist, a queer person's personal crisis can be made to resonate with wider significance—much as the trans experience does today. When he started producing art, in the late '70s,

Wojnarowicz was already an alienated observer. The earliest work in the upcoming Whitney exhibition is the series “Arthur Rimbaud in New York,” for which Wojnarowicz



photographed friends wearing a mask he made of the 19th-century poet, posing them in some of his favorite venues, such as diners, the subway, and the gay cruising ground of the crumbling West Side piers. The blank, youthful face of Rimbaud (whose dictum *Je est un autre*, or “I is an other,” could have been the caption for the sequence) stares out impassively from each scene.

Beyond boundaries: Candice Lin's *Sycorax's Collections (Happiness)*, 2012

Painting by Candice Lin

Wojnarowicz, however, was hardly impassive. He was fueled by fury, and, in the mid-'80s, the indifference of those in power to the onset of AIDS provided a fitting target for his rage. Explicitly in his writings, and more obliquely in his increasingly ambitious paintings and collages, he linked the government's willful disregard of the disease to wider catastrophes, particularly environmental degradation. “The tone got a bit angrier after Peter was diagnosed,” says David Kiehl, the co-curator of the exhibition. “There was real frustration at not being able to help this person so important to him.” Moments after Hujar's death, Wojnarowicz photographed his friend's body, including close-ups of

I want a dyke for president. I want a person with aids for president and I want a fag for vice president and I want someone with no health insurance and I want someone who grew up in a place where the earth is so saturated with toxic waste that they didn't have a choice about getting leukemia. I want a president that had an abortion at sixteen and I want a candidate who isn't the lesser of two evils and I want a president who lost their last lover to aids, who still sees that in their eyes every time they lay down to rest, who held their lover in their arms and knew they were dying. I want a president with no airconditioning, a president who has stood on line at the clinic, at the dmv, at the welfare office and has been unemployed and layed off and sexually harrassed and gaybashed and deported. I want someone who has spent the night in the toms and had a cross burned on their lawn and survived rape. I want someone who has been in love and been hurt, who respects sex, who has made mistakes and learned from them. I want a Black woman for president. I want someone with bad teeth and an attitude, someone who has eaten ~~shit~~ hospital food, someone who crossdresses and has done drugs and been in therapy. I want someone who has committed civil disobedience. And I want to know why this isn't possible. I want to know why we started learning somewhere down the line that a president is always a clown, always a john and never a hooker. Always a boss and never a worker, always a liar, always a thief and never caught.

the hands and feet, with a gravity and empathy that evoke Renaissance paintings of the deposition of Christ from the cross. But a few years later, as his own illness worsened, - Wojnarowicz staged a photographic self-portrait in which he appears to be buried in a makeshift grave, his face mostly covered with dirt and rocks. He was forecasting his own death confrontationally, not elegiacally.

Beyond boundaries: Zoe Leonard's *I Want a President*, 1992

Text by Zoe Leonard

Wojnarowicz's apocalyptic pageantry resonated in the Reagan-Bush years as loudly as the crossing and blurring

of gender boundaries by trans artists do today. The mainstream visibility of trans culture is so new that it is not yet possible to guess where it is going or what it will achieve. In 1995, Rinder and Blake co-curated an exhibition, “In a Different Light,” at Berkeley, that attempted to look beyond the AIDS cataclysm to investigate, Rinder says, the “idea of queerness that transcends gay and lesbian experience” and becomes “almost a tool kit for the radicalization of life in a productive, positive way.” Although they aimed to encompass all kinds of artists, pointedly not limiting themselves to gay ones, Rinder admits to a glaring omission in the show, when he looks back on it now: There were no trans artists. They were still invisible in the wings. Nonetheless, he can detect a strain of gay consciousness that connects the art of the past to what is being created today. “There's something in the experience of queerness that is about contradiction,” he says. “And that may be fundamentally different from the impulse of resolving the contradiction.” Incongruent, recalcitrant, the queer sensibility refuses to add up neatly.