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**»You're the best of both worlds« –**

**»You don't belong here«.**

**Loren Cameron's *Distortions*  
of Heteronormative Gender Dualism**

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The quotes in the title, »you're the best of both worlds« and »you don't belong here,« are extracts from citations used in artist and transman Loren Cameron's photographic series *Distortions* (1996). These statements mark two different yet equally problematic perceptions of transsexuals. The one view idealizes and elevates transsexuals based on their supposed transgression of both gender boundaries, while the other formulates a clear exclusion. In both cases, it seems that belonging to one of two existing worlds, the world of men or the world of women, is impossible. This impossibility of receiving recognition/acknowledgement as a man or woman has been the reality of transsexuals for a very long time, and for many it still is the case even today.

In 1980, the Federal Republic of Germany issued the Transsexuellen-Gesetz or TSG (*Transsexual Law*), creating the first significant legal basis for transsexuals to ensure state recognition of their gender and state health insurance coverage for medical treatment costs. However, in practice, this form of institutionalization and normalization (see Hirschauer 1999) soon proved to be quite limited. Since the mid-1990s, transsexuals and transgender persons have advocated more and more for the recognition/acknowledgement of their forms of existence. In doing so, they have also utilized art projects, an international example of which are the works of Loren Cameron. This increased visibility, along with the changes

in the German Federal Republic's legislature, particularly the repeal without substitution of section 175 in the German Criminal Code which criminalized homosexuality (also known as the »gay paragraph«), the introduction of *registered partnerships* for same-sex couples and the ruling of the German Federal Constitutional Court declaring the Transsexual Law unconstitutional in its present form have set in motion ongoing debates on reforming the law.<sup>1</sup> The discussions are concerned with ways of legally securing the fundamental rights to the free development of one's personality and physical integrity. The question that arises, then, is what artistic works can contribute to this debate and to what extent they can specifically challenge and/or enhance current *realpolitische* practices.

### **The Paradox of the Debates on the German Transsexual Law**

The Transsexual Law defines a two-step process of gender transition. The first step involves registering a change of one's first name at the local court.<sup>2</sup> In order to do so, the applicant must »feel they belong to the opposite sex« and »have felt compelled to live according to their desires for at least three years« (TSG 2007: section 1). In addition, the applicant must provide two expert opinions attesting, based on the findings in medical science, the applicant's condition is indeed permanent (*ibid.*: section 4, subsection 3).<sup>3</sup> The law does not, however, require a diagnosis or indication.<sup>4</sup> The second step concerns changing one's civic status (i.e., one's personal information in legal documents), which requires a new expert opinion. This step calls for the applicants to be unmarried, permanently incapable of reproduction, and have undergone sex reassignment surgical procedures to change their physical sexual characteristics, thus coming closer to visibly resembling the opposite sex (*ibid.*: section 8, subsection 4).

Yet, it was not long before applicants developed a practice that gradually undermined this two-step procedure. The standards of treatment and of the expert opinion in combination with the efforts of many transsexuals eager to complete the procedure as quickly as possible led to a dominant practice in which the legal opinion for the name change was simultaneously used as an indication and diagnosis for medical treatment. As a consequence, transsexuals must already undergo a tedious evaluation process for their name change, which often includes the one-year »real life experience« test that is necessary for a diagnosis. Those who do not intend to change their civil status and therefore choose to go with the so-called »small solution« explicitly provided for by law are, to some extent, forced to present false data or else risk the rejection of their application to change their first name.

Over the past few years, transgender organizations and individuals have become more vocal in criticizing this practice as well as the Transsexual Law. The critique focuses, on the one hand, on the inextricability of legal and medical procedures and the abuse by experts issuing opinions, and on the regulation that makes sex reassignment surgery contingent on a person being permanently incapable of reproduction, on the other. Being forced to undergo surgery or remain unmarried infringes on the basic civil rights to physical integrity and the freedom to develop one's personality, and reduces transsexuals de facto to »a look between their legs« (Alter 2000: 14-15).

Attempts to reform the German Transsexual Law or replace it with a Transgender Law<sup>5</sup> have been bolstered by rulings of the Federal Constitutional Court.<sup>6</sup> A particularly important ruling in this matter took place in 1996, entitling transsexuals to the right to their form of address and to self-determination.<sup>7</sup> Referring to the personality right anchored in German Basic Law, it is argued that »the question of a person's gender is expressly linked to the realm of sexuality, which includes the genital area, both of which belong to the private sphere explicitly protected under the Basic Law... This includes the obligation to respect a person's individual decision regarding the gender to which they choose to belong « (Alter 2007: 4). Despite this criticism, the German government assessed the situation in 2002 in quite a different light. In a response to a query by Christina Schenk, at the time a member of Parliament for the Party of Democratic Socialism or PDS, the government responded by asserting that neither sex reassignment surgery nor permanent incapability of reproduction were actually forced, as people voluntarily consent to these procedures. It upheld that »... it makes sense to have a regulation preventing someone with the personal status of a man from becoming a mother or someone with the personal status of a woman from becoming a father. Section 8, subsection 1 of the German Transsexual Law aims to avoid creating any discrepancy between one's gender and sexual function«<sup>8</sup> (Deutscher Bundestag 2007).

Yet, is it possible to speak of a person voluntarily undergoing treatment if the law formulates that in order to receive treatment a person has to suffer to such an extent that a life worth living as the sex they were born with is considered impossible? By referring to voluntary acts, the legislature sidesteps the core of the problem and conceals the contradiction inherent in conflicting concepts of gender. On the one hand, gender is relegated to the private sphere and the individually assigned self-responsibility; on the other hand, in matters of reproduction gender becomes a biopolitical issue, which provides legal legitimacy for extremely invasive operations on the body.<sup>9</sup>

This creates a paradoxical situation in which the German Transsexual Law suggests a basis for the recognition and legalization of transsexuals while simultaneously insisting on a definition of gender that contradicts the very transsexual experience that sex and gender are precisely not primarily attached to genitals. This denies a real recognition of transgender modes of existence. Although relocating gender in the private sphere could be a possible step toward extending the protection of personality rights and the right to physical integrity, it remains problematic all the same. For, it is based on a liberal concept, according to which individuals have fixed and preconceived identities that have emerged independent from their cultural and social environment. Under the pretense of self-determination and an ideologically whitewashed concept of freedom, the constitutive entanglement among relations of power and identity and their contradictions is denied. The main issues I will discuss below, using the example of Loren Cameron's *Distortions*, are if and to what extent artwork is able to critically address and shift these problematic issues and intervene in current *realpolitische* practices and debates.

## The Paradox of Gender Dualism

*Distortions* (1996) is a series of three photographs, which are all structurally composed in a similar manner (fig. 1-3). Each of the black and white photographs shows a bust portrait of the artist and features black boldface lettering that runs in a double-row spiral around the image. Through the use of strong light and dark contrasts, the photographs call attention to the naked, muscular, tattooed upper body, and to the head and face. This evokes the impression of an obvious form of masculinity that stands in direct contrast to the content of the sentences framing the images.<sup>10</sup> The text is entirely composed of interpellations, such as »You're just a dyke with a beard,« or »You're not a man: you'll never shoot sperm,« which deny the represented person's masculinity. This lends to an interpretation of the text as a representation of how transmen are seen (see Prosser 1998: 229) and consequently to reading the contradiction between the image and the text as a contradiction between self-perception and the perception by others. In this interpretation, the images can (possibly) be understood as a reflection of the experience of transsexualism. This reading, however, overlooks crucial aspects by interpreting the text as coming from the viewer's position and the image as a self-representation. The work's title, *Distortions*, already identifies the images as distortions and suggests an analysis of the images and texts as contradicting and as a construction based on the interplay between the two.<sup>11</sup>

Has the naturalized notion of ›real‹ masculinity persisted to such an extent that it still remains bound to having a penis? *Distortions* questions the self-evidence of this naturalized notion by inextricably linking two contradictory articulations of masculinity. In the images, the impression of an obvious form of masculinity is produced through the bust portraits. Here, masculinity is constructed by means of gender identity signifiers without making the genital area visible. In contrast, the text questions masculinity by referencing primary and secondary sexual characteristics, such as: »Do you have a penis?« (fig. 2) or »You piss like a woman.« (fig. 3) These articulations of defensiveness, desire, and sexual identity expose a threat to heterosexual identity that recognizing/acknowledging transsexuals produces:<sup>12</sup> »My attraction to you doesn't mean I'm gay: you're really a woman« (fig. 2).<sup>13</sup> This defensiveness and feeling threatened must, however, be taken seriously, as many people's own gender identification and sexual orientation are bound to specific bodily and sexual characteristics. Because this is their everyday reality, they cannot simply give it up. In order to create a situation where arising conflicts become negotiable, I believe it is necessary to take a closer look at the impossibility of really recognizing/acknowledging transsexuals while maintaining heteronormative identity positions. In Cameron's work, this impossibility is exhibited through the close association of affirmative images of masculinity with negating texts, which simultaneously destabilize one another: if the image is true, then the text must be false and vice versa. Thus, the question of what masculinity or what a man is becomes discussible.

## Masculinity in/as Contradiction

Cameron's work uses the media of photography and text to identify two predominant modes of producing both identity and knowledge as they have emerged in Western modernity. By pitting these two modes of expression against each other, *Distortions* challenges us to reflect on what we seemingly know (from the image, we take the knowledge that this is a man) and what we knowingly see (because we know this is a man, we see genitals), i.e., what we believe to know and see. With this, Cameron's artistic line of argumentation creates critical distance from claims of objectivity and the certainty of knowledge. At the same time, his piece opposes fantasies of *anything goes* by referring to specific traditions of representation, thus embedding the discussion of masculinity in a cultural context.

On a visual level, masculinity is mainly created here through the bust portrait. The person in the three-quarter portrait shot looks directly into the camera. In this way, the images make use of a representation format that is commonly used to depict white, bourgeois masculinity and tied to

connotations of the rational subject. This format »traditionally [functions] as a pictorial processing of biographical experience and [serves] as a form of visualizing ›psychological insight« (Rogoff 1989: 22). Visually, masculinity is produced through the employment of the figure of the »face as a mirror of the soul,« avoiding making any reference to the category sex (Foucault 1990), which is the focus of queer debates.<sup>14</sup> Thus, on a visual level, it is not sex but the face that functions as a production machine for the unified body (Deleuze 2000) and as a signifier of a person's inner truth.

Nonetheless, Cameron's images decisively shift the format of the classical bust portrait. The distinct light and dark contrasts transport the anticipated ›psychological insights‹ from the inside of the body to its outer surface. The composition of the photograph references photographic traditions that have been more concerned with creating specific ›character types‹ than creating individuality. In their dramatization of the facial features and the series of varied poses, the photographs are reminiscent of representational conventions used in physiognomic and psychiatric photography that dates back to the 1860s.<sup>15</sup> The dark background keeps the viewer from establishing any particular setting in the photos, contributing to this association. This ›neutralization‹ underscores the body as the primary element in the photo and favors a connotation tending toward general validity, making the body readable as a type. This mode of portrayal also sets these images apart from socio-politically motivated documentary photography, which brings the social and cultural contexts into the picture. Simultaneously, by evoking emotional states of mind, such as melancholy (fig. 1), skepticism (fig. 2), and reflectiveness (fig. 3), this form of representation steers clear of simply reproducing images of psychiatrization and pathologization. These are some of the few emotions that are traditionally associated with figures of masculinity and not necessarily with notions of sickness. The combination of bourgeois modes of depicting masculinity and psychiatric photography, reminiscent of a picture puzzle with varying contours, problematizes the categorical difference between hegemonic and transsexual forms of masculinity by intrinsically linking them together. The naked torso in the image ultimately breaks with the representational conventions of the bourgeois bust portraits and of psychiatric photography. By connecting the head and face to the upper body, the uniqueness of the face as a ›mirror of the soul‹ is called into question.<sup>16</sup> While the naked chest evokes associations of corporeality and sexuality, the tattoos and sculpted muscles are visible signs of cultururation that contradict the myth of the body as ›whole‹ and unscathed.<sup>17</sup> By addressing various and contradictory traces of traditional forms of representing masculinity, Cameron's work exhibits how masculinity is produced through codes and meaning ascription within culturally and ideologically charged structures of meaning, and

thereby resists being fixated, through dominant ordering patterns as well as essentialist notions of identity.

## Transsexuality as Contradiction

This questioning of an essentialist identity, which also implies a notion of transsexuality as being imprisoned in the wrong body, is amplified through the combination of the image and text. The shift that takes place, from a contradiction of the represented bodies to a contradiction of image and text makes transsexuality no longer appear as an essentialist identity, but as an identity that is in fact the outcome of relational processes of meaning ascription. Thus, the written text is assigned a determining function to a certain extent, as the text's placement as the frame suggests it be read as a representation of social order and abstract universal laws. The highly subjective and somewhat emotional phrasings, however, subvert claims to objectivity and rationality. In fact, they mark this order as inherently contradictory and also as extremely emotionally charged: »This is a womyn-only space.... You're not a man.... You don't belong here« (fig. 3). These contradictions are not marked visually. They only become recognizable after reading and reflecting on the text, thus creating a distance founded on a pseudo-rationalization process. A modification of Georges Didi-Huberman's critique of nineteenth-century psychiatric photography could read *Distortions* as a way of articulating transsexuality as based on two forms of art: the »art of obtaining facts« and the »art of putting them to work« (Didi-Huberman 1990: 19). Thus, similar to hysteria, it may also apply to transsexuality that »... it bears the mark of an *idée fixe*, which may be implicated in an almost desperate debate: the debate between knowledge and bodies, acts and ›observations‹ that, although ›put to work,‹ remain permeated and knotted with contradictions« (ibid.: 20). *Distortions* differs from hysteria in that it does not relate to a situation of representation in which the doctors project various ideological positions onto the psychologically ill person. In fact, *Distortions* is more about a form of representation that negotiates plain everyday feelings and reactions in relation to transsexuality, the implicitness of heteronormative gender dualism, and the resistance to homosexuality. In this way, *Distortions* can be read as a series of photographs that articulates transsexuality as an effect of two intricately connected yet contradicting heteronormative machineries that produce the body as intact and the subject as unified, that is, one that produces the face and the other that produces sex. Rendering visible these inherent contradictions challenges a blind faith in facts and calls to our attention forms of knowledge production.

## What about *realpolitische* Practice?

In summary, *Distortions* can be read as a work that articulates contradictions that resemble those in the debates on the German Transsexual Law. However, the piece simultaneously produces decisive displacements wherein its critical potential lies.

First, *Distortions* visibly demonstrates that a non-pathologizing form of recognizing transsexuals remains impossible as long as notions of heteronormative gender dualism still remain in place. This opens up a political dimension within the relationship between the artwork and recipient. Adrian Piper shows that discrimination largely depends on cognitive errors and pseudo-rationalizations, on the production of stereotypes and denials, which are the ways unified subjects react to destabilization (Piper, quoted in Kravagna 2000: 24f). By rendering these defensive motions visible, Cameron's piece enables its viewers to further reflect on the affects and feelings they experience when looking at it. Second, *Distortions* radicalizes the most basic, persistent and still highly naturalized question of what a man is and puts it up for discussion. Third, the way contradictions are expressed in *Distortions* reflects the constitutive function of the image and text for the intrinsically intertwined phenomena of transsexuality and gender dualism and refuses to provide any simplistic or final answer to the question of what masculinity or being a man is.

In this way, *Distortions* is able to provide a significant impulse for political debates on the reform of the German Transsexual Law. Rather than basing gender on definability, this piece makes a case for accepting that it is not possible to ever locate gender once and for all. *Distortions* also calls for a discussion of different and even contradictory manifestations and conceptions of gender rather than a definition of gender. As the use of terms of naturality/that which is naturally given does not serve to substantiate the arguments from any standpoint, the question also remains as to why the legislature is trying to prevent any divergence between gender and its function. In addition, the piece raises the principal question of what the right to the freedom to develop one's personality and the right to physical integrity are supposed to mean if power relations operate through and on the body. Ultimately, these problems cannot be solved on a *realpolitische* level alone. It is much more necessary, instead, to address the fears, aspirations and forms of desire that motivate us. In this respect, it could be helpful to be more vocal about these within *realpolitischen* contexts. A political practice that takes seriously and negotiates fears, aspirations and desires also calls for images that portray its representatives in a different way than the conventional bust portraits of the rational man in a suit with his masculine emotional expressions typical in today's ›real‹ politics.

## Notes

**1** There had already been two verdicts in 1982 and 1983 that repealed the age limit for a sex change, which had been set at 25. In addition, in 2006, the German Federal Constitution Court ruled the TSG unconstitutional in its existing form, as it solely applies to those defined under the German Basic Law as German citizens, to stateless and displaced persons who are legal residents of Germany, to refugees and those entitled to asylum legally residing in Germany (while it does not apply to other types of persons living in Germany, such as citizens of other countries).

**2** The necessity of changing one's first name is relevant here, because every person is officially ascribed and registered under a first name that clearly signifies one's sex. (According to German law, newborns must be given a first name that clearly distinguishes one's sex and corresponds with the sex registered in one's official records.)

**3** The expert opinions submitted must be obtained from specialists who »have sufficient knowledge of the specific problems of transsexualism on the grounds of their education and professional experience« (TSG 2007: § 4). Although the law does not specify what profession the specialists must have, in practice, accepted opinions are predominantly from doctors, psychologists and psychiatrists.

**4** The name change becomes invalid if the applicant bears a child after the legally prescribed period of 300 days, if a child born within this term receives legal recognition as the applicant's child or if s/he marries within this time period (TSG 2007: § 7).

**5** For more on the Transgender Law see [www.dgti.org/trggtx.htm](http://www.dgti.org/trggtx.htm) (12 November 2007).

**6** For more on this ruling, see Alter 2007.

**7** Until this ruling, changing one's gender-specific first name was not linked to the right to be addressed as »Mr./Ms.« and »he/she« to conform to the name change. The 1996 verdict unmistakably grants this right; in practice, however, little has changed (see Alter 2007).

**8** For a different take on this discussion, see the British debates on the Gender Recognition Act, which forwent requiring the enforcement of medical treatment and questioned the extent to which the recognition of transsexuals could possibly affect the rights of other social groups (see Da Silva 2007). A critical reading of this discussion raises the question if insisting on the requirement in Germany that a person be permanently incapable of reproduction is also founded on legal concepts as articulated in German Citizenship Law, which still grants citizenship on the basis of one's biological family line and along issues of reproduction.

**9** For more on biopolitics and the category of sex as an interface between technologies of life and sexuality, see Foucault 1990.

**10** The complete text for these images reads: »Men are jerks, why would you want to be one? You're just a dyke with a beard. Are you misogynist? I just can't get used to calling you »he.« You want to cut off your tits? Maybe you're just homophobic. Your voice doesn't sound very masculine. Why can't you just be a butch dyke? Does this mean you're heterosexual? You still look female to me.« (fig. 1). »You're so exotic! May I take

your photograph? I've always been attracted to hairy women. You're the third sex! You intrigue me. My attraction to you doesn't mean I'm gay: You're really a woman. I think transsexuals are sexy. I like very butch women. You're the best of both worlds. Do you have a penis?» (fig. 2). »This is womyn-only space. Where's your dick? Sorry, but I don't like men. You're not a man: you'll never shoot sperm. You must be some kind of freak. I can't be with you: I'm not a lesbian. Do you have what it takes to be a real man? You're kind of short, aren't you? You piss like a woman. You don't belong here.« (fig. 3).

**11** Prosser argues that showing the scars from surgery draws the viewer's eye to the referent and thus to the real of transsexuality. It is important to note here that the real per definition *always* escapes any possibility of representation. The error Prosser makes here reveals the existence of different *realities* of transsexuality as competing inscriptions within the socio-symbolic realm (see Lummerding 2007).

**12** Johanna Schaffer (2008) coined the term of *conditional recognition* (*Anerkennung im Konditional*) to describe an ambivalent form of recognition that becomes possible through the use of pathologizing representations. The term describes recognition that applies only as long as the majority position's feeling of sovereignty remains untouched. *Distortions* can be read as a way of visualizing this conditional recognition. In this way, the critique shifts somewhat in that it insists on the impossibility of recognition while the claim of omniscience by majoritarian, sovereign subjects is simultaneously called into question.

**13** The associations and words for bodily sexual characteristics vary here. Fig. 1 is the only piece with a text that is not entangled in contradictions and the only one that articulates more a desire for homosexuality rather than resisting it, as in figs. 2 and 3. On the whole, fig. 1 reduces the potential for tension, which is depicted in the lowered eyes, the textual form of the question, and through the inclusion of the »I« or first person.

**14** Foucault shows how »the notion of »sex« made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, patterns, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified« (Foucault 1990: 154). Problematizing a second production machinery is a possible mode of breaking up this artificial unity.

**15** See, for example, the studies of French neurologist Guillaume Benjamin Amand Duchenne de Boulogne from the mid-nineteenth century; see Didi-Huberman 1990.

**16** For more on the significance in separating the head and the body in constructing bourgeois-rationalist masculinity and a discussion of this particular issue in terms of politician's clothing, particularly men's suits, see Ellwanger 2002.

**17** For more on critiques of this myth, see Schade 1987.

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