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How to Queer Things with Images? On the Lack of Fantasy in Performativity and the Imaginativeness of Desire

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The power of images is a common subject of debate and a popular phrase used extensively in the titles of exhibitions, conferences, and books. It is, correspondingly, unlikely that by repeating the phrase a shift in meaning will occur. I would like to modify the topos slightly. By speaking of the social productivity of images, I will, for one, identify their power as a productive, creative power, and for another, outline a site where this power unfolds, namely, the social sphere. This implies an understanding of cultural politics as aspiring by means of symbolic and imaginary practices to achieve effects in the cultural realm and shape subjectivities, social relationships, and relations within society. The present text aims to clarify what is meant by the social productivity of images, and the ways that images are employed in cultural politics. What does that mean when we are dealing with queer cultural politics that aim at provoking the norms and hierarchies of a strict binary sex/gender model and a rigid heterosexuality through interaction with a variety of further social differences? In queer/feminist contexts, as well as others, the concept of performativity plays a crucial role in understanding the processes through which representations and discourses become effective. In the following, I will show how the concept of performativity can contribute to analyses of power and dominance and support changes that do not fit within the conceptual grid of a hegemonic order. My thesis is that the lack of fantasy in performativity must be problematized in order to support challenges to the hegemonic order and anticipatory transformations. Based on a pictorial

reading of *pinups for beginners*, which were created as computer drawings by *durbahn in 2005, I would like to show how the queer productivity of images changes when the concept of performativity is connected with that of fantasy.¹

The social productivity of images

The possibilities of cultural politics are sounded out in the context of post-structuralist art theory and cultural studies by referring to the thesis that representation does not depict, but rather, constructs meanings and reality.² But what methods and arguments can we use to support the postulate that representation is an intervention (Engel 2002) without asserting a simple mirror-function of image and the social sphere? It is necessary to keep in mind that neither provocative, subversive, and innovative, nor devaluing, discriminating, and violent cultural production or readings have linear effects on social practices and social relations. If a porno were to automatically lead to sexual acts or a violent video cause its consumers to suffer or cause injury, per se, then the political option would be replaced by determinism (see Hentschel 2008).³ It is thus crucial to find methods for perceiving the contingent, digressive, and roundabout effects of images and cultural imaginaries. Perhaps one even needs methods for sounding out and if necessary intensifying their sociopolitical relevance. Within this context, I will now critically evaluate the concept of a performativity that aspires to identify repetitions and the displacements within those repetitions.

The distinction between performativity and the performative

The concept of performativity explains the interplay of meaning production and reality construction by pointing out how social effects are achieved through signification processes. The concept developed vibrantly from J.L. Austin's formulation in the context of the speech act theory, according to which speaking is considered to be acting (Austin 1962), through Jacques Derrida's suggestion that this process is fundamentally bound to conventions (Derrida 1986), to Judith Butler's understanding of performativity as a repetition of social norms (Butler 1993). In the course of its development it was increasingly extracted from the autonomous, acting subject and instead considered a process of constituting (sexed/gendered) subjectivities. Accordingly, the criticism has emerged that in Butler's model, the only possibility for changes to occur is through shifts in the

process of repetition. No shaping power is conceivable that transgresses its own conditionality (Lorey 1996; Engel 2002). For that reason, I recently suggested re-introducing the moment of agency into performativity; without, however, returning to Austin's intentional subject (Engel 2008). By assuming that the image has an agency function (Brosch 2004), reception and reading processes unfold as reflexive power relations within which the mutual constitution of visual representation, subjectivity, and meaning takes place.

On several occasions the critique has come up that performance theory (Phelan 1993; Fischer-Lichte 2000) and the linguistic-philosophical concept of performativity are treated as one without differentiation (Sedgwick 1993; Bal 2002; Adorf 2007; Oster/Ernst/Gerards 2008). This imprecise amalgamation, as carried out for example by Christoph Wulf and Jörg Zirfas in their introduction to *Ikonologie des Performativen* (2005), is problematic in a variety of ways. For one, the term »performative« is expanded to the vague and equally banal meaning of »effect achievement« (ibid., and Wulf 2005; transl. here and the following: Rosenblatt/Eckler); for another, it is constricted to the »staged aspects and performance character of cultural action and behavior« (Wulf/Zirfas 2005: 7).⁴ The result is that the aspect of power analysis that gained central meaning in the reading of Austin suggested by Derrida and Butler steps back to the status of a possible but not necessary side effect (see ibid.: 10f.). The critique of power concentrates on the concept of the ritual, which defines the mode by which power and conventions become effective *in* the performative or *as* performance (ibid.: 14), but does not explain the performative as power's mode of action.⁵ The performative is thereby neutralized, whereas from a poststructuralist, feminist, queer-theoretical, and anti-racist perspective, it is viewed as that which assures the reproduction of arrangements of oppression and normalization.

The approach by Wulf and Zirfas nonetheless appears interesting in terms of the theme dealt with here. It creates a direct connection between the performative aspect and fantasy, and does so by identifying fantasy as a performative force (Wulf 2005: 43). Fantasy uses cultural images (and thereby repeats what exists), but also generates images (and thus has the potential to allow something new to arise). Nonetheless, although a productivity is defined here, it quickly becomes clear that the approach has little to offer with regard to the significance that fantasy has for the reproduction and transformation of power relations. Fantasy itself remains beyond socio-cultural processes of constitution. It appears as a universally human capacity for image generation »... which is rooted in the human body's vegetative system« (ibid.: 39). Fantasy is presented as an alternative to the symbolic order of signs, which appear as alienated

forms, or as an expression of ideology, power, and coercion. The images generated through fantasy and their performative acting out, however, are assigned a direct, physical event character: In the performative, »the focus on signification processes is dissolved through the focus on the concrete materiality of spatial, temporal conditions and objects, on physicality and perception processes—on the concrete, singular event« (Wulf/Zirfas 2005: 14). An anthropology of physicality and of the senses is activated, which at least implicitly reproduces the familiar nature/culture differentiation, to the extent that in the reversal, the categorical separation and hierarchical order of nature/culture and body/mind also hold.

But how can the connection between fantasy, image production, and social productivity be understood in a different way? In a way in which fantasy appears constituted in social power relations and is, likewise, capable of contributing to their political contestation? What role can it be assigned in performativity? Is the performativity of fantasy at issue? Or is it about understanding performativity as a mode of power realized through the repetition of norms and fantasies?⁶

The lack of fantasy in performativity

Fantasy does not play a role in Austin's, Derrida's, or Butler's understanding of performativity, which makes it seem appropriate to assume a »lack of fantasy« in performativity.⁷ Although in Butler (1993), the *imaginary* morphology of the body is deemed important with regard to the constitution of gendered, heterosexual subjectivity, imagination appears solely as the effect of repetition of norms (see *ibid.*: 14). »Rewriting the morphological imaginary« (*ibid.*: 72) occurs as work on prohibitions and laws, so that in this case, it is actually possible to say that imagination is no more than a convention. In fact, Butler rarely uses the term fantasy. Also when she evokes the fag and the dyke she prefers the term phantasm to signal the threat they pose to the hetero-normatively composed subject (see Butler 1993: 103-105 and 265 n2). Undoubtedly, imagination can repeat conventions, norms, clichés, and violent stereotypes. But might it also be possible that imagination, or, for that matter, fantasy could cause displacements, refutations, reworkings, and inventions of images?

Butler explicitly invokes fantasy in a brief passage in *Undoing Gender* (2004), but then immediately loses sight of it. It is interesting that this appears in a context fathoming the possible extent to which social transformations arise not only through the failure of norms, but also through collective practices. Butler stresses the potential of a »cultural life of fantasy« (*ibid.*: 216) with reference to social transformations. Though the ambiguity of this term causes a wavering between promise and

hopelessness: Fantasy, which claims a cultural life and finds expression in social practices, versus a cultural life that follows fantasy-filled stagings but falls short of social norms and comprehensibility. The linking of fantasy and practice plays a decisive role when Butler characterizes the transformative moment of fantasy as: »... what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise« (ibid.: 216). In an aside she claims that (collective, lived) fantasies organize the material conditions of life and can offer protection against violence. Unfortunately, she does not go into any greater detail on this. Yet she does explain that the practice of imagining something differently or something different gains social relevance because it structures relationships and changes practices as well as forms of embodiment: »Fantasy is not simply a cognitive exercise.... Fantasy structures relationality, and it comes into play in the stylization of embodiment itself« (ibid.: 217). The current text will return, in a different way, to this meaningful reference to the material effects of a transformed mode of imagination, which vanishes in the further course of Butler's essay, as do any further references to fantasy.

Sexy someones – self-satisfied, unproductive, and cheerful

You are confronted with a series of strange figures, self-satisfied and cheerful, entirely self-involved rather than outwardly productive. They are naked or perhaps outfitted in a single piece of clothing, provided with substantial female gender markers, but not clearly gendered; human and likewise bearers of animalistic aspects, comic-like, but without being cliché (fig. 1-3). Their faces speak of pleasure. Since no other sources are hinted at, this pleasure must come from the figures themselves, from the way they touch their bodies, from a fantasy or memory. The lush pink bodies present themselves singly, void of context, before an evenly colored light blue backdrop. Each one is special, has a name: and yet through their similarities they form a community.

The figures are drawings that the artist *durbahn first published on the twelve pages of a 2006 calendar, *pinups for beginners*.⁸ *Pinups*, whose large breasts, wide hips, ample thighs, and a few demonstrative poses let us interpret the drawn images as sexy. Still, there is an instant hesitation. The bodies contradict familiar ideas of beauty. They are fat and disproportioned, have minute heads and crippled hands, are awkward and twisted. They are, undoubtedly, beloved figures. But is it their smiling mouths, the demonstrative display of their bodies, the fingering of nipples and cunts, or the ambiguities of their bodies that stir our desire? Do they stir desire? As individual pages of a calendar, each one, Matti, Sofna,

Gnirrt, and so on, offer pleasure a whole month long. I'd like to call them *sexy someones*, whereby *ones* emphasizes their uniqueness, *someones* plays with the fact that they can't be arranged in the categories male/female, and *sexy* highlights their erotic aura. Whether presented together as a poster or juxtaposed on the wall,⁹ also the relations they develop amongst themselves remain fascinating.

By calling her drawings *pinups for beginners*, *durbahn inscribes the works in the field of commercial erotica and its queer/feminist critique, appropriation, and reworking.¹⁰ Traditionally, pinups are accompanied by culturally coded, normative expectations of the bodies on display, usually visions of idealized femininity. As use objects, pinups let viewers identify with the camera's gaze. They allow desire to create its object through a »sexual investment in looking« (Mercer 1998: 244). But what happens when there is no ideal offered as a fetish, as in the case of *pinups for beginners*? For one, it can be argued, the *pinups* exemplarily fulfill the function of the fetish, of offering something unseemly to see: denying the dictate of the masculinized phallus and displacing its power to represent desire onto other objects or signs (Lauretis 1996). For another, a queering potential develops. They suggest a new relationship between cultural body norms and social bodies by presenting as sexy, bodies that do not correspond with heteronormative or body-normative ideas of *sexiness*.¹¹ My theory is that fantasy plays a decisive role in this productivity.

But what does fantasy mean in this context? If we follow Laplanche/Pontalis (1986), a fantasy is an imaginary image charged with desire. It allows the displacement of the wish from a real object of gratification of needs to a phantasmatic object of sexual desire. The interpretation of the fantasy image in the form of representations (signs, objects, or subjects) gives rise to the contact or mediation between inner and outer worlds. For Lauretis (1994), this means that fantasy is a key element in the constitution of the psycho-socio-sexual subject and its integration into social and societal relations. She thereby understands fantasy as social process that becomes productive by projecting norms onto the body. One then has to ask very specifically whether the concrete fantasy makes available images of identification, similarity, or difference; whether certain body zones are given an erogenous charge; whether certain characteristics, which are culturally sanctioned, are affectively appropriated. Furthermore, the bodies are invited to enact their relationship to the norms in shared fantasy scenarios. For Lauretis, fantasy is not something internal and personal, but rather, an enacted, socially experienced happening. To the extent that this always involves mediating diverse, possibly incoherent cultural and individual fantasies, it is not possible to say beforehand whether a fantasy contributes to the reinforcement of dominant norms or to their reworking or replacement (see *ibid.*: 84; 307-312).

Returning to performativity, I find it promising that in the case of fantasy, the question of the ›success‹ of the speech act or the successful repetition of norms is abandoned. The mishaps, abuses, and breaches of rules, which according to Austin mark a failure of the performative act, could possibly constitute precisely the effectiveness of a fantasy. For example, in the case of *pinups for beginners*, the non-fulfillment of the norm allows for a situation in which desire is able to try out moving in new directions. But an orientation on the norm still persists, even if it is one in which the norm is ignored or denied.

Are pinups in the locker, closeted pinups?

Fantasies (images or scenarios) are thereby the form or vehicle in which desire moves. With a mobile desire, something enters performativity that has the potential to be something different than repetition of the norm, something that, at the least, adds an affective or sexual charge to the repetition of the norm (see Butler 1993; Lorenz/Kuster 2007), but quite possibly unfurls entirely different alignments, interconnections, and directions of motion than those craved by the norm (see Probyn 1996; Lorenz/Kuster 2007). When *durbahn's images combine with other ideas, images, or stories and their related psycho-social, material, and discursive contexts, fantasy has a productivity that can no longer be explained through orientation on the norm. What happens, then, when *durbahn's *pinups for beginners* move in the direction of the factory locker room, a favored place for presenting pinups?

Similar to the way that self representations of lesbian and gay desire were, for quite some time, meant to be removed from the hegemonic public realm and expelled to the closet of subculture, pinups appear as images of a desire that breaches the public's social values. They suggest a relationship involving desire for depicted characters unavailable to the beholder in social life. These ideal characters do not exist, or if they did, relations would entail a border transgression of economic, gender, sexual, ethnic, or religious status. In a queer-inspired way, I would like to ask whether this form of presentation means that we are dealing with closeted pinups?

Indeed, although pinups in the closet display representations that should actually not be available to my desire, they are nonetheless part of an exchange among colleagues and thereby of a social practice and sexual culture. In the words of Michael Warner (1999), they are part of a ›public sex culture.‹ Is it possible that this does not present as clear an affirmation of heteromasculinized dominance over feminine objects as suggested by a pornographic and anti-pornographic understanding of voyeuristic

control? When the moment of the closet and that of the social practice of gaining pleasure from pinups become intertwined, it is necessary to also bear in mind that the closet is no longer frowned upon as it was in the early days of homo-emancipation discourse. Coming out, the means of liberation from the closet, is meanwhile also criticized for its part in creating norms of visibility, sexual norms, moral and political ones (see Butler 1993). The closet thus does not escape from these norms, but can be seen as their ›backroom‹: on the one hand, it enables the norms to exist as norms, while on the other, it has a considerable power of definition over the norms, which cannot help but sense the challenges put to them from the backroom.

Playing out a fantasy scenario

Following from Lauretis, I would like to propose a fantasy scenario inspired by potential happenings in the backroom. The scenario has beholders, a closet, and images in which the hetero-normatively stabilized relations are cancelled out through triangulation and reflexivity of the lines of sight. And additionally, it helps activate the fantasy in performativity. Since the preferred site for presentation of pinups is the locker, to be precise, the inside of the locker door, which is usually also decorated with a mirror, a scenario unfolds that places a reflection of the voyeuristic gaze (the face of the beholder in the mirror) alongside the object of the voyeuristic gaze (depicted figure). For beholders, their gaze wavers between the pinup character and their own mirror image, as they are looking at both. Reading the mirror scene as one in which the ego misrecognizes itself as an imaginary whole functions in this case only when aspects of the pinup are worked into the self-image. The experience that I am always already another means, in this case, that I am always already a pinup. Rather than producing a coherence of the autonomous, masculine subject, a realignment occurs undermining the smooth demarcations of categories of social difference, whether defined by gender, desire, class, origins, or ethnicity. The mirror scenario is thereby far removed from staging sexist macho fantasies of a cliché-ridden, white, working class, hetero-masculinity as the cultural imagination might anticipate with regard to the theme of the pinup. The mirror scene produces a fragmented image in which identification and desire are not mutually exclusive processes forced to supplement one another heterosexually. Instead, it depicts a potential state of uncertainty of the controlling power and a de-centering of the voyeuristic subject, while likewise opening up new axes of desire.

I find *durbahn's *pinups for beginners* entirely suitable for provoking such experiences of de-centering. In that traditional ideas of female beauty

are disturbed, beholders are confronted by the issue of which identifications are available, which are refused, and what feelings are evoked by viewing a body that squats on the floor like a little monkey, that is adorned with a mustache and full breasts, that chirps with its beak but doesn't deem me worthy of a glance. Do the bulging thighs and minute heads represent my own bodily sense? And do they promote my own self awareness of becoming an object of desire? For Butler, such experiences of de-centering, which I would say are inspired equally by norms as they are by fantasies, provide a sound base for her understanding of sexuality: »If we understand sexuality not as an attribute of the subject, but as a set of relations that de-privilege or undermine the autonomy of the subject, then it seems to me that sexuality gives us an understanding of how we are socially constituted by our relations to others; and even how we are impressed upon by others in ways that we might never have chosen« (Butler 2008: 137).

The closet reaches its borders as a normative institution in the face of this type of understanding of sexuality, and becomes a fantasy scenario in which the heterosexual's homosexual secret plunges into queer practices. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) identifies the *closet* as an epistemological figure of unexpressed/inexpressible homosexuality that is constitutive for heteronormative culture. In modern literature it serves as the favorite screen upon which normative heterosexual masculinity forms, whether as a homoerotic counterpart or internal secret. Both possibilities turn the demarcation between the self and the other into a problem that can be encased with the help of the closet: »It is not a closet in which there is a homosexual man, for Marcher is not a homosexual man. Instead, it is the closet of, simply, the homosexual secret – the closet of imagining a homosexual secret« (ibid.: 205). Expelling lesbians and gays, with their social lives and intimate love practices to the closet also has the function of maintaining and embodying the heterosexual's homosexual secrets. *Pinups* blur precisely this border and do not shy away from turning the closet into a locker that could stand either in a lesbian soccer club or in a factory locker room.

From the closet to productivity

Although *durbahn's *pinups for beginners*, presented on a neutral, light blue background, do not reveal any indications of work or cultural capital whatsoever, statements on productivity are still possible. Made clear thus far is that the social productivity of images does not develop outside of reception and the associated work of reading, and that this analytical work can be inspired and unsettled by fantasy. Opportunities to disrupt the habitual repetitions of normative heterosexual, rigid binary gender

conventions and provoke transformations thus become evident. We are hereby dealing with transformations that are played out in the interactions of image and beholder rather than those intended or controlled by a political/artistic subject, or occurring as the result of coincidental dislocations caused by the failure to produce exact repetitions. These transformations arise through the opening of a fantasy scenario that allows beholder and image to emerge from a juxtaposition that poses them as separate units. It is thus not the reading itself that makes the image productive, and also not some sort of magical quality of the image. Instead, it is a socio-cultural happening in which fantasy is afforded the decisive role of creating connections within and between beholder and image, as well as beyond, out to the social and discursive contexts. Understanding performativity as entailing not just the repetition of norms, but also the repetition of fantasies thus becomes productive, as does understanding the connection between the two as a contingent and contested relationship in which the reworking of power relations takes place.

Notes

1 In the following, I identify as an ›image,‹ a materialized visual representation, and as an ›imagination,‹ a mental image. ›Fantasy‹ is either understood generally as the ability to imagine, or as an image or scenario charged (consciously or unconsciously) with desire and/or identification including images of one's own body.

2 See, in particular, Schade/Wenk 1995, Lauretis 1994, Hall 1997, Holert 2000, Lummerding 2005, and Hentschel 2008.

3 Early feminist representation critique, developed in the context of film theory, in particular, began precisely with these questions of the effect of violent and pornographic depictions and countered deterministic accounts through references to the complexity of fantasizing; see Burgin/Donald/Kaplan (eds.) 1986.

4 Similar to Dagmar von Hoff (2005), who following Erika Fischer-Lichte emphasizes the event nature of the performative and its materiality. She contrasts this with the concept of representation, which she understands as mirroring or standing in for something or somebody. She considers the performative repetition of norms only in reference to Butler.

5 Andrea Kern (1999) insists on differentiating between the performative as a description for all of those conceptual activities that are determined by norms (that implement/don't achieve them) and the performative as characterization of the norms that only become such through their repetition and practical implementation. The subject, which is assumed in the first instance, is the effect of the process of repetition in the second.

6 Here I let stand an ambiguity of fantasizing and fantasy image/scenario, whereby I agree with Astrid Deuber-Mankoswky (1998), who sees the reference to practices of imagination and fantasizing as an opportunity to analyze the effects of power and domination that arise from a denial of the visual nature of thought. Teresa de Lauretis (1994) activates a similar ambiguity when she understands fantasy as a psycho-social process that structures subjectivity by mediating external and psychic reality together through fantasy images (see *ibid.*: 285).

7 In conclusion, Austin differentiates five classes of expressions that fulfill the performative roles (169–183); none of them offer room for ›imagining, dreaming, or picturing one's self‹ or similar practices. Butler (1990) is concerned explicitly with fantasy, but concedes the performative understanding to her opponents, while she narrows her own concept in that she equates it with phantasm (so that fantasy is the constitutive exterior of a phantasmatic construction of the Real that is based on exclusion) (106–110). See also Butler 2000: 151f.

8 The works by *durbahn discussed here are part of a series of digital drawings. *durbahn produced the calendar *pinups for beginners*, which uses the sheets from this series, in 2005 in a limited edition for the sponsors of *bildwechsel – dachverband für frauen/medien/kultur* in Hamburg (size of the individual calendar sheets: 15 cm x 21 cm). *durbahn lives and works in Lübeck, Germany. For many years, drawings have been a central component of her work. Meanwhile, they are made primarily on the computer and

are printed on special paper and laminated. See <http://www.durbahn.net>, »Biographie« (03 August 2008). *durbahn is also a co-founder and on the staff of *bildwechsel*.

9 The drawings were presented as laminated DIN A4 sheets compiled to a tableau or in a linear series in the exhibitions *Der andere Blick* (Erotic Art Museum, Hamburg 2006) and *Behauptungen Ausstellen* (galerie broll, Hamburg 2007).

10 With regard to critical feminist and queer appropriation, see Straayer 1996; Lauretis 1994; Mercer 1998; Buszek 1998; Schaffer/Stecker 2004; Bourcier 2006, and Annie Sprinkle's works *Anatomy of a Pin-Up* and *Post-modern Pin-Up Pleasure Activist Playing Cards*, www.anniesprinkle.org/html/art (17 January 2008).

11 See Engel 2008, where I worked out these thoughts by first introducing a post-oedipal understanding of desire and then connecting this with the discourse of the critical *Disability Studies*.

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