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New Perspectives in Gender Research

Working Paper Series 2026, Volume 1

Friederike Nastold

Queering Minoritarian In_Visibilities in Art and Visual Culture Renegotiated

In Cooperation with Oliver Klaassen

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(ISSN 2509-8179)

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Carolina Borda, Anukriti Dixit, Marija Grujić, Maximiliane Hädicke, Lydia Ayame Hiraide, Yves Jeanrenaud, Sandra Lang, Yvonne Schüpbach, Julia Wartmann

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2026, Volume 1
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Introduction to the Special Issue

Queering Minoritarian In_Visibilities in Art & Visual Culture Renegotiated

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Queering Minoritarian In_Visibilities in Art & Visual Culture Renegotiated. A Plea for Multiple Strategies of In_Visibilities

Visibility, invisibility, and political agency have developed into a solid triad in the recent past. My long-time accomplice in science and art Thari Jungen and I were thinking a lot about this and the associated ambivalences of visibility (Schaffer 2008) again in summer 2023. The reason for this revisit was the conference *Sichtbar machen – werden – sein: in queer_feministischer Perspektive von Kunst und Design* (June 2023), taking place at the Muthesius Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Kiel.[1] I would, therefore, like to share some introductory thoughts from our engagement with the affirmation of visibility and, in particular, highlight the ambivalences of visibility that go hand in hand with this. This serves as a basis for the introduction of the present Special Issue entitled "Queering Minoritarian In_Visibilities in Art & Visual Culture Renegotiated" and at the same time as an invitation to interweave the various contributions of it.

Firstly, Thari Jungen and I asked ourselves why the paradigm of visibility not only opens up a dichotomy between invisible powerlessness and powerful visibility, but may also reproduce the ambivalences of the dominant, marginalizing logic of representation. Secondly, we asked ourselves what exactly the political nature of visibility is if the production of visibility is to become effective as a political act. And finally, which accomplices require visibility to become political? (Jungen; Nastold 2025).

The Conference "Renegotiating Minoritarian In_Visibilities" (2019)

Similar questions were posed by organizers Jana Tiborra, Katharina Wolf, Cathérine Ludwig-Ockenfels, and Oliver Klaassen at the conference they organized, which gave this Special Issue its name: "Renegotiating Minoritarian In_Visibilities," held from November 12 to 14, 2019, at the GCSC at Justus Liebig University Gießen, Germany. The organizers ask:

[1] The article by Thari Jungen and myself entitled „(Un)Sichtbarkeit als ästhetische Strategie mit politischer Wirkung?!" has been published in the following anthology on the conference: Kruse, Christiane; Schuch, Sven Christian; Pascalau, Ileana; Behfeld, Mona (Ed.). 2025. *Make - Get - Be Visible: A Queer_Feminist Perspective on Art and Design*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

"How do strategies of in_visibility in art and visual culture produce and reinforce political agency for minoritarian subject positions? How can minoritarian subjects become visible in art and visual culture but avoid subsequent re-discrimination and stereotyping due to their recently acquired visibility? How are forms of in_visibility modified by processes of imaging, image formation and mediality?"[2]

The goal of the conference was to approach visibility and invisibility as two mutually entangled and interdependent concepts. This was shown by using the underscore in the orthography: in_visibility. On the one hand, the underscore indicates the processual continuum between the two concepts. On the other hand, Jana Tiborra, Katharina Wolf, Cathérine Ludwig-Ockenfels, and Oliver Klaassen want to approach the conceptual gap between visibility and invisibility as a discursive space for the negotiation of ambiguity, vagueness and indeterminacy (ibid.). Furthermore, they write, that the use of the term "minoritarian", moreover, points towards context-specific processes and situations of structural discrimination due to categories of difference, thus, it highlights the process of becoming-minoritarian (ibid.). However, without reducing subjects to this position, they ask how a seemingly minoritarian status can be transformed into political agency (ibid.).

The conference as well as the present Special Issue investigate how minoritarian strategies in art and visual culture can undermine hegemonic regimes of representation and challenge the dominant patterns of visibility, assimilation and intelligibility.

The History of the Special Issue

Following questions about making visible scientific and curatorial issues surrounding the intersection of in_visibilities and Gender Studies, Oliver Klaassen initiated this Special Issue in the aftermath of the conference. In keeping with the dialogical format between contributions and comments, Oliver Klaassen asked me to serve as critical friend for the entire Special Issue. In the process and over time, the critical friend became the editor. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Oliver Klaassen warmly for their energy and initiative. Without their fundamental work and initiative, this Special Issue would not have come about. Further thanks go to the authors of the contributions: for their nuanced discussions and their patience. I am therefore very pleased that this long-standing work is now gaining visibility—since questions of in_visibilities have always been important questions in queer_feminist art and its history.

Ambivalences of In_Visibilities

When reading the contributions to this Special Issue for the first time, it seemed striking that questions of in_visibility manifest themselves in different methodological approaches: in writing, in artistic work, and in curating. These practices (re)produce a making visible, a melting, a becoming invisible. The strategy of making visible ties in with the paradigm of visibility, which has been present in philosophy, art, visual cultural studies, and particularly in feminist and aesthetic-political theorizing in connection with political agency since the 1980s. This connection between in_visibility and agency arises from the fact that political power is linked to the existence of an identifiable subject, which must be represented and visible to be able to act politically (Jungen; Nastold 2025). The cultural scientist Johanna Schaffer even speaks of the fact that in the 1980s an "often unreserved affirmation of the idea of visibility prevailed in anti-racist, feminist and, at the time, lesbian/gay contexts" (Lorenz; Schaffer; Thal 2012: 286), which was based on the assumption of a seemingly direct connection between visibility and political agency.

[2] Klaassen, Oliver; Ludwig-Ockenfels, Cathérine; Tiborra, Jana; Wolf, Katharina. Call for Papers. Renegotiating Minoritarian In_Visibilities. Interdisciplinary Conference, November 12-14, 2019. https://arthist.net/archive/20301 (last accessed 26.02.2026).

In addition, the organizational team of the conference "Renegotiating Minoritarian In_ Visibilities" observe, that in recent years, the relation between visibility and invisibility of minoritarian subject positions has been renegotiated and led to a preliminary re-assessment of the political potential of the concept of visibility.[3] Thereby, invisibility and imperceptibility are subject to significant revaluation. Furthermore, they point out:

"Especially from activist, cultural and political points of view and in the contexts of queer or non-racist politics of migration, attempts have been made to question the topos of visibility and its positive connotations. However, the debate about a possible end of the critique of representation often disregards that politics of becoming imperceptible or invisible can indeed develop new modes of presentation and perception and therefore cannot unfold beyond representation." (Ibid.)

These considerations represent the interplay in which the scientific and artistic-research contributions collected in this Special Issue are located, which are briefly presented below. At this point, I would like to emphasize that the Special Issue consists of two parts: The first part comprises academic articles, each accompanied by a commentary from critical friends. The second part brings together curatorial, artistic-research, and essayistic contributions.

The Contributions

In her contribution, Sylvia Sadzinski devotes herself to the visualization of queer curating and the associated strategy of making visible: With regards to José Estebán Muñoz – "What is queer today, might not be queer tomorrow." (Muñoz 2009) – she discusses strategies of queer curating that also include curating as care. The aim of queer curating is to make (hetero)normative structures visible, to criticize, and to change them. According to Sadzinski, one of the potentials of queer curating is to work increasingly with disturbances – in perception, in the exhibition display, and much more – and to include affect as an actor in curatorial processes:

"The important question in processes of queering exhibitions is thus not only what is presented but also how it is presented – and how it is conceived or, more precisely, how it affects people."

The article of Sadzinski is accompanied by a commentary from Jennifer Tyburczy. Tyburczy points out the following:

"Sadzinski's article encapsulates both the potentials and the risks when curating queerly. Based in a long tradition of feminist and queer disruptions in the public sphere, the article outlines the continental discussion on queer curatorship to foreground how affect plays an indispensable role in the creation and reception of museum display."

Contrary to the affirmation of visibility, art history and philosophy discuss from very different perspectives and motivations why the connection between visibility and identifiability can also generate numerous stumbling blocks that not only complicate political agency, but can also produce its opposite. The aforementioned scholar Johanna Schaffer asks: "How can minoritized subject positions be visually represented without repeating minoritization in the form of their representation?" (Schaffer 2008: 161).

In Magdalena Kallenberger's work, the collective body of *MATERNAL FANTASIES* as an artistic strategy also advances to become a writing collective body – and emerges over time from its minoritarian status without repeating it. As Kallenberger writes, this strategy positions itself within the field of tension between the desire for visibility and the desire to disappear. It should be emphasized that *MATERNAL FANTASIES* critically question the roles of the mother with their collective practices, making them negotiable and at the same time practicing the possibility "of being in-between" or "of being in_visible" as a collective.

Inspired by Kallenberger's writing, at once autotheoretical and collective, Elke Krasny re-

[3] See https://arthist.net/archive/20301 (last accessed 26.02.2026).

sponds to her thoughts with the following questions in her commentary: "What makes a mother a mother? What makes a mother other? What makes (m)others maternal?"

The question of care-work can act as a connecting factor between Kallenberger's contribution and that of Iz Paehr. While Kallenberger's care-work still presents itself in the context of the collective, Paehr continues to engage with it in the form of the disclosure of the methodological approach: care-work around the visualization of text-image relationships that are free of discrimination. Paehr shows precisely that "'Infections' and diseases are not neutral metaphors, but above all lived realities for sick and disabled people of whom many, particularly trans*, queer, and BIPOC disabled people, experience ableist discrimination." The paper incorporates the crip method of image descriptions into a method for analyzing contemporary memes. Furthermore, the article thus proposes writing and speaking otherwise about the sharing of images online. Paehr's contribution is interesting against the background of the sociological studies of Michel Foucault and the postcolonial writings of Gayatri Spivak in that visibility also provides occasions for subjectivization, discrimination, and disciplining – as the article exemplifies. At the same time, it formulates a call to develop other crip-queer sharing terms and practices to counteract the (re)production of discrimination.

Paehr's article is accompanied by a commentary from Simon Strick. He states: This contribution

"provides a brilliant starting point for further necessary critiques of how information systems operate, are operated by eugenic, military, and fascist agents, and how critical strategies of slowing-down, de-jamming, and making legible should put disability studies at their center."

Against the background of these different approaches and criticisms of the paradigm of visibility, I will discuss the other contributions in the Special Issue below. On the one hand, I will discuss how some concepts and phenomena cannot be perceived in one context but can be read in another. On the other hand, the focus will also be on artistic practice as such, which provides other tools for acting beyond discursive cognitive strategies.

The three contributions in the EXTRA section of the special issue by MELT (Ren Loren Britton and Iz Paehr), Sarah Held and Sylvia Sadzinski, as well as William J. Simmons, multiply the political aspect of in_visibilites: The EXTRA section, according to my reading, ties in with Iz Paehr's approach, discussed in the first part of the Special Issue, by presenting the visualization of academic, artistic, and curatorial approaches as mutually dependent sites of knowledge production. The relationship between text and image provides a counterpoint to the previous contributions. Artistic practice becomes effective as a further central site of meaning production and thus also as a site of the production of societies and their orders. In "Archiving the Unstable" by MELT, the central question, for me, is the in-between and/or the ambivalence of in_visibilities:

"What can we learn from the ways melting structures evade capture by staying in-between categories, thereby enfolding queer(ing) potential?"

The queer(ing) potential mentioned here is, according to my thesis, the disruption in the sense of melting that needs political visibility/visibilization to become politically effective. The process of visibility mechanisms becomes perceptible and visible – and melts. And thus, in its temporality, turns into invisibility or eludes a fixed form.

Sarah Held and Sylvia Sadzinski's contribution addresses the visualization of non-heteronormative discourses in the exhibition context: The exhibition *pornotopia revised* is presented as an example of queer curating. Visual disturbances and challenges are actively woven into the exhibition display and the empowering potential of joint porn-watching is highlighted. The exhibition concept operates within institutional logic in that the paradigm of visibility aims to make minoritized topics such as sexuali-

ties and pornography visible within existing museum structures.

I am, therefore, very pleased with the thoughts of William J. Simmons in his discussion of Catherine Opie and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, as he concludes his text with the following sentence:

"For a mirror reflects everything before it, be it one or a multitude, and so too does the camera."

The reference to the fact that what is queer, or what 'we' think should be queer, is always also the result of projection space brings me back to Muñoz – "What is queer today, might not be queer tomorrow."

Conclusion

I would, therefore, like to conclude with a plea for the ambivalences of visibility and invisibility: We must change and challenge heteronormative structures from within in the Foucauldian sense. However, we must not forget that different strategies of in_visibility are required in art and science – depending on the context in which we operate. Because something may become invisible in one context, but be legible and capable of action in another.

And this is precisely what the present Special Issue shows – in writing, in artistic work, in curating. Or in making visible, in melting, in becoming in_visible.

This Special Issue thus makes an important contribution to the ongoing debates surrounding in_visibilities. I would like to thank the authors, reviewers, critical friends, the editorial team at gender[ed] thoughts, and in particular Oliver Klaassen for their fundamental preparatory work and collaboration, as well as Lucia Toman for the proofreading, and Philipp Wix for the final layout and support with the graphic design.

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Magdalena Kallenberger

MATERNAL FANTASIES.
The Collective Body as an Artistic Strategy of In_Visibility.

With a Commentary by Elke Krasny

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MATERNAL FANTASIES

The Collective Body as an Artistic Strategy of In_Visibility

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Abstract

This article looks critically at the value and desirability of 'visibility' in relation to art which revolves around motherhood and 'artist mothers' by focusing on the Berlin-based collective *MATERNAL FANTASIES*. I will not only situate *MATERNAL FANTASIES*' collective art production as *a posteriori* critical-activist exercise in the context of artistic research, but I will also outline its self-reflexive, aesthetic, practice-based, and improvisatory methods for making meaning and recording knowledge. Specifically, I will look closely at two artworks by the collective to point out how their *collective body* becomes a method and a tool to make polyvocal, collective, lived experiences of motherhood visible at the expense of the individual body. In addition, I will use my entangled position as researcher and active member of *MATERNAL FANTASIES* to investigate maternal in_visibilities and care work through collective art production *together with* its members. In doing so, I identify the concept of 'autotheory' as a central part of the collective's artistic practice.

Keywords
motherhood(s), in_visibilities, feminist practices, collective art production, artistic research

Introduction

In most capitalist societies, care work such as social services, cleaning, cooking, elderly care, and child-rearing are still mostly unpaid or low-paid tasks, mainly carried out by women in private households and thus invisible. A similar situation can be observed in the arts and cultural industry when it comes to the subject of motherhood. In this article, I will lay out a trajectory of 'maternal art' exhibitions to show how this topic has shifted in the last twenty years (since 2000) from the margins towards the center. I will critically discuss remain the art world has focused on a specific type of 'maternal art', particularly the isolated, biological 'mother with child' constellation, drawing on the Christian 'Virgin Mary with Child' of the Western art history canon. Of course, over the past decades, there have been attempts to offer alternative visions and voices,[1] but they rem tied

[1] Other voices I am thinking of include (but are not limited to) Bracha Ettinger's *The Matrixial Borderspace* (2006), Andrea Liss' monograph *Feminist Art and The Maternal* (2009), Myrell Chernick and Jenni Klein's *The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art* (2011), Rachel Powers' *The Divided Heart: Art and Motherhood* (2012), Rachel Epp Buller's *Reconciling Art and Motherhood* (2012), and Rachel Epp Buller and Charles Reeve's *Inappropriate Bodies, Art, Design, and Maternity* (2019). All of them are situated in the Anglo-

to the mother/child dyad because our dominant model of motherhood in the arts is an individualistic one, as I will point out in this article.

Questions around multifaceted and ambiguous experiences of motherhood became the starting point for my research and the foundation for the artists group *MATERNAL FANTASIES*.[2] In this article, I will trace the history of feminist (mother) art collectives and (critically) situate *MATERNAL FANTASIES* within their tradition. I use *MATERNAL FANTASIES* as a case study to analyze how to curate – in the double sense as both an artistic practice and a practice of *curare* = caring – a collective process which can give rise to new infrastructures, tools, and methods for intergenerational, collective art which considers care work and affective labor part of the production process. *MATERNAL FANTASIES* can thus be seen as part of the wider notion of the "organisational turn" (Holm / Beyes 2021: 1).

I identify the concept of autotheory as a central part of the artistic practice of *MATERNAL FANTASIES*. First coined by Stacey Young to counter discourse that homogenizes "women" (Young 1997: 61), Lauren Fournier applied the term on contemporary works of literature, art, and art-writing. These works integrate autobiography and other explicitly subjective and embodied modes with discourses of philosophy and theory in ways that transgress genre conventions and disciplinary boundaries (Fournier 2021). By implementing autotheory as a method in artistic research and by "facilitating quick movement back and forth between different modalities of thinking and examining the world" (Zwartjes 2019: 3), I foreground the value of situatedness, of doing research *inside-in* (Hannula / Suoranta / Vadén 2014: xii): "It creates a sense of parallel, rather than of hierarchy, between different ways of knowing, thinking and analysing" (Zwartjes 2019: 3) while artistic research emphasizes reflexive, aesthetic, practice-based, and improvisatory methods for making meaning and recording knowledge (Leavy 2020; Rolling Haywood, Jr. 2013). As an artistic researcher, I do not study something, but rather study *with* something (Hannula / Suoranta / Vadén 2014: 50). In my case, I investigate *maternal in_visibilities* and care work through collective art production together *with* the members of *MATERNAL FANTASIES* as an *a posteriori* critical-activist exercise. In this sense, I apply autotheory as a method in artistic research to explore and test theory through investigations of maternal, lived-body experiences and collective art production. I consider visibility and invisibility "two mutually entangled and interdependent concepts" following the proposal of the *CfP: Renegotiating Minoritarian In_Visibilities*. As suggested by the editor, I am using an underscore in the orthography to highlight the "conceptual gap between visibility and invisibility as a discursive space for the negotiation of ambiguity, vagueness and indeterminacy."[3]

I will argue that the individual is rendered invisible within the collective body. To demonstrate this in detail, I will turn to the method of 'collective automatic writing' in the first part of this text. The work "Like so Many" (2018) by MATERNAL FANTASIES used automatic writing, historically associated with the surrealist movement, as a tool to unearth individual, lived experiences. I will illustrate how individual lived experiences can be transformed into polyvocal collective art in which the *collective body* is a fluid, osmotic structure oscillating between internal and external processes and interconnections instead of a fixed, stable entity. As I will show, "Like so Many" serves as a best practice example in the context of artistic research on how to generate new knowledge. It further exemplifies how artistic research constitutes a collection of acts that are not a progress, but a process: a

American discourse around the maternal which is far estranged from the German discourse.

[2] *MATERNAL FANTASIES* is a Berlin-based feminist art collective, founded in 2018. It counts as its members Lena Chen, Mikala Hyldig Dal, Maicyra Leão, Hanne Klaas, Isabell Spengler, Aino El Solh, and myself, Magdalena Kallenberger.

[3] Oliver Klaassen / Jana Tiborra / Katharina Wolf / Cathérine Ludwig-Ockenfels: CALL FOR PAPERS. Renegotiating Minoritarian In_Visibilities. Interdisciplinary Conference, November 12-14, 2019. https://www.uni-giessen.de/en/faculties/ggkgcsc/events/conferences-symposia-summer-schools/conference-sites/In_Visibilities.

never-ending, self-critical, and self-reflective creative process (Hannula / Suoranta / Vadén 2014: 27).

After showing how the individual is rendered invisible through the process of collective writing, I will turn to another example of in_visibility in the context of maternal art. In the photograph "Tell Me How to Disappear" (2019), the *collective body* becomes a skin that makes the collective visible as a single artistic entity. I describe how this aesthetic, collective skin becomes a method and a tool to make polyvocal, collective, lived experiences visible at the expense of the individual body. For a mother artist, the notions of visibility and invisibility, individuality and collectivity are complex. In the conclusion, I will present an outlook on my analysis in terms of the power dynamics in the art canon.

Feminist Maternal Art at the Margins of In_Visibility: From Mother/Child to the Collective

In January 2019, the German art and cultural magazine *Monopol* titled "Kind und Kunst – Das letzte Tabu" (Child and Art –The Last Taboo) (Buhr 2019) and asserted that art considers itself as avant-garde in many social issues, except when it comes to the subject of parenthood. Children are rarely the subject of art and, for mothers, they are considered the killer of an artist's career. This assumed role of the mother artist has been questioned from the margins and pushed onto the public stage from time to time, usually in self-organized, ambitious, small-scale, insufficiently funded group shows, such as "doublebind. art children career" (2003) curated by (mother) artist and curator Signe Theil at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin and "Maternal Metaphors I" (2004) and "Maternal Metaphors II" (2006) curated by artist Myrel Chernick at Rochester Contemporary Art Center, New York.[4] "New Maternalisms" (2012), a show curated by art historian Natalie S. Loveless traveled to Santiago de Chile, where it expanded through a collaboration with the Chilean curator Soledad Novoa to include Chilean artists in "New Maternalisms" (2014). The last chapter of this series was again shown back in Canada as "New Maternalism Redux" (2016).

All these exhibitions were self-organized by ambitious individuals who were also mothers. Signe Theil told me in a 2018 conversation how important it was for her personally to become active and to raise visibility for this marginalized topic. Another, equally important, aspect was to build and grow a network between mother artists themselves and towards an outside audience, using public visibility as a tool of self-empowerment. However, all these group exhibitions have featured works of individual mother artists questioning the representation of motherhood(s). Most of these counter-images can still be traced back to the isolated, biological mother. They mostly portray one mother with one child, not more or many children. Usually, the child is pictured in the infant-toddler stage, as this is the most transformative period for the newborn mother artist. Anthropologists have coined the term "matrescense" to describe this developmental identity transition (Raphael 2011: 65-72), which implies 'giving birth' to both a child and a new identity for oneself. For those mothers who continued working as artists, this identity transition has often led to a radicalization of their art practice. This can be observed in the works of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Mary Kelly, and Susan Hiller from the 1970s, to Renée Cox and Gail S. Rebhan in the 1990s, to contemporary works by artists like Birgit Dunkel, Katharina Bosse, Judith Samen, Elinor Carucci, Catherine Opie, and Hannah Cook.

This trajectory delineates a history of struggles of visual artists fighting, on the one hand, the norm of who is perceived as mother (Renee Cox' series *Yo Mama (*1992-1996) and Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Nursing (*2004)) or challenging the representation of motherhood through an iconization of a secular motherhood based in everyday moments (Birgit Dunkel's *Madonnas* 2001, Katharina Bosse's *A Portrait of the Artist as*

[4] "Maternal Metaphors II" expanded into the publication "The M Word: Real Mothers in Contemporary Art" (2011) by Myrel Chernick and Jenni Klein.

a Young Mother 2011, and Judith Samen's *o.T. (Brotschneiden)* 1997). On the other hand, artists like Elinor Carucci or Rineke Dijkstra depict intimate but ambivalent moments in the mother-child relation such as bodily exhaustion after childbirth (Rineke Dijkstra's series *New Mothers* (1994)) or as sensual dramas of intimacy (Carucci's *Mother* (2013)). Hannah Cook's work, which was recently awarded the prestigious art prize by Museum Ostwall in 2022, confronts head-on the most prominent voices critical of mother artists. In *Ada vs. Abramović* (2018) and *Ada vs. Emin* (2018), Cook stages herself nursing her baby while sitting on Emin's bed or by facing Abramović in her performance work "The Artist Is Present" (2010).

Gradually in the past years, the topic has evolved from small-scale project spaces and galleries towards larger institutions. The Photographers' Gallery and The Foundling Museum in London presented "Home Truths: Photography and Motherhood" (2013/14) curated by Susan Bright, while the Palazzo Reale in Milan showed "The Great Mother" (2015) curated by Massimiliano Gioni. In the same year, "Rabenmütter / Mother of the Year"[5] (2015/16), curated by Stella Rollig, Sabine Fellner, and Elisabeth Nowak-Thaller, opened at Kunstmuseum Linz. These three exhibitions were accompanied by extensive, well-produced exhibition catalogues, which, in doing so, left a visible trace of the exhibited works. These exhibitions excluded artworks by (feminist) art collectives like *Mother Art*, *Desperate Artwives*, and *Polvo de Gallina Negra*. Instead, they focused solely on the individual mother-child(ren) relation. It can be argued that these exhibitions reproduce the capitalist ideology of the bourgeois nuclear family and the Christian 'single-mother-artist / Mary with a child' constellation. They continue the classic narration of the Western art canon of the (fe)male/single artist/genius that 'gives birth' to art. Structural forms of discrimination are being kept in the private realm, motherhood remains an individual choice and responsibility. Merely by assembling these individual artist positions in the form of group exhibitions (such as "doublebind" (2003)), a multifaceted picture of motherhood(s) appears.

[5] "Rabenmütter / Mother of the Year: Zwischen Kraft und Krise. Mütterbilder von 1900 bis heute / Between Empowerment and Crisis". The much-disputed term 'Rabenmütter' is culturally framed. In the German version, "Rabenmütter" is a pejorative stereotype of mothers who fail being mothers, while the English title is positively but maybe ironically connotated.

Questions of In_Visibility as a Central Trope Organizing Western Feminist Thinking and Feminist Art Practice

Why are questions of in_visibility such a central organizing trope of the Western feminist thinking and feminist art practice? Questions of in_visibility are deeply rooted in the legacy of the Enlightenment period and closely linked to the consecutive primacy of vision and the hu(man) logic of an "expansionist, colonising mind in pursuit of clarity and classification" (Parkins / Karpinski 2015: 1). Feminist philosopher of science Evelyn Fox Keller calls scientific enlightenment "a drama between visibility and invisibility, light and dark, a drama in need of constant reenactment" (Keller 1986: 69-70), while Ilya Parkins and Eva C. Karpinski illustrate how "in/visibility has surfaced again and again as a shifting signifier of feminist desire for presence" (Parkins / Karpinski 2015: 3). Historically, feminists like the suffragettes have taken to the streets marching and occupying public spaces as an effective strategy of protest and resistance. This strategy of visibility is still being pursued today, as I will demonstrate in the following section.

Mother Art Collectives Creating Visibility in Public Space

An example of a mother art collective which confronted straightforwardly the factual discrimination of artists is *Mother Art*. This group met through their involvement in the Woman's Building in Downtown, Los Angeles in 1974.

They were active during the 1970s and 1980s and tackled a vast array of social and political issues in their art. Their collective action started out of the indignation over the Woman's Building passing a rule that dogs, but not children, would be allowed into the artists' studios. As a first collective action and pointed response, *Mother Art* built a play structure for children on the outdoor premises of the Woman's Building. Andrea Liss describes how their "other installations similarly pinpointed the amazing lack of attention and respect accorded to mothers, their families, and the work they perform to maintain self and family" (Liss 2009: 2).

Around the same time, the *Hackney Flashers Collective*, active between 1974 and 1980, arose in England from a similar concern with regard to women's roles as mothers and workers. With its twenty members, the collective produced two seminal exhibitions that toured for several years. The first exhibition "Women and Work*"* (1975) consisted of nearly two hundred photographic prints and accompanying texts documenting the typical roles taken on by women, which were often unskilled and low-paid at that time. The photographs documented women protesting domestic violence, families campaigning for nursery provision, as well as women and siblings providing care to young children. The second exhibition, "Who's Holding the Baby?" (1978) tackled the then (as now) poorly publicly funded childcare in Britain and required the use of additional tools: illustration, collage using advertising imagery, and graphics. *Hackney Flashers*' feminist critique was intended as an agitprop (agitation propaganda) tool to be deployed in a range of settings, among them women's liberation conferences, trade union meetings, libraries, and institutions concerned with social policy. Their work positions itself between photojournalistic and conceptual art practices while taking a strongly political, activist approach.

In the last couple of years, there seems to be a revival of feminist public activism in various forms. *Desperate Artwives,* established in 2011 by artist and mother Amy Dignam, was the self-proclaimed only platform for artist mothers (basically since *Women Art* and *Hackney Flashers*) at that time. They performed public action by hosting a series of 'takeovers', collaborative performances staged as a collective response to specific events, sites, and current issues faced by women and mother artists. In 2018, the group took to the business district of London, positioning themselves in plain sight in front of the banks, with faces covered with bedsheets and tablecloths.[6] According to the group, "this action represents the still ever-present invisibility of women within the workplace, as well as the invisibility of the domestic paid and unpaid work in homes still undertaken mostly by women" (*Desperate Artwives* 2018).

This local public action expanded into the virtual space under the hashtag *#united-despitethedistance*. In this collective virtual action, participating international artists shared online images of themselves hiding under bedsheets and tablecloths in solidarity, building a virtually visible alliance. Supporters who joined the *Desperate Artwives* takeover via social media were, among others, Martha Joy Rose of *The Museum of Motherhood,* Deirdre M. Donoghue, founder and curator of *M/Other Voices*, Suzy Spence, director and curator of the *Womenhouse Archive*, Dyana Gravina, founder and artistic director of *ProCreate Project*, and initiator and curator of the Israeli "mamactivist chapter" Shira Richter. This form of feminist activism combining public actions performed at local, urban spaces and connecting them to international public actions on virtual platforms like *Twitter*, *Tumbler* and *Instagram* shows how the struggles of motherhood regardless of national borders are a unifying momentum within an international women's movement even though or most probably because motherhood has not yet been recognized as a marginalized identity and is still confined to the private realm (Jolly 2017: 74).

[6] The visuality of the images relates to the popular online collections and archives (*Pinterest*) of "Hidden Mothers", a genre of photography common in the Victorian era, in which young children were photographed with their mothers present but hidden in the photograph. It arose from the need to keep children still while the photograph was being taken due to the long exposure times of early cameras (Cheng / Barnett 2020).

But how to shift political action from the margins? The political was formerly imagined as practically synonymous with the public sphere and with conflicts between institutions or nation-states. Even though its meaning has evolved over the course of history (MacCabe / Yanacek 2018), mainstream discourse still draws on Hannah Arendt's understanding of the political as any action that is performed in public (Arendt 1963: 124). Johanna Hedva, artist and author of the "Sick Woman Theory" (2018), is very critical of this definition and the implications of what and who this definition excludes: "If being present in public is what is required to be political, then whole swathes of the population can be deemed a-political – simply because they are not physically able to get their bodies into the street" (Hedva 2018: 2). Or, as Judith Butler puts it in her 2015 lecture *Vulnerability and Resistance*, "Arendt failed to account for who is allowed into the public space, of who's in charge of the public. Or, more specifically, who's in charge of who gets in" (Butler 2015). For mother artists, this access to non-domestic space – from art residencies to exhibition openings – is crucial. But where to leave the child(ren)? In the following section, I will show how *MATERNAL FANTASIES* has found solutions to the question of access and visibility on the organizational and aesthetic level.

"Like so Many" (2018): Becoming In_Visible Through Collective Writing

In this section, I will highlight how the *collective body* became a tool to unearth and share our lived experiences, and, at the same time, a tool for community building through writing, reading, and listening to each other's stories, fostering intergenerational dialogue. As a starting point for our initial meetings in spring 2018, we had asked everyone to contribute one text that we would read together and discuss. Aino El Solh shared with us Hélène Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976). As we were reading out loud collectively, Cixous' sentences were rolling towards us like waves with their inherent reverberating repetitions: "And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (Cixous 1976: 876). This text resonated deeply with all of us and pushed us to start our first collective writing session more than forty years after Cixous had first drafted her essay. Since none of us had much previous writing experience and because we wanted to bring personal and troubled experiences to the surface that we would probably not express publicly outside the safe space of our group, we decided to use automatic writing as a technique, encouraging an unconscious stream of thought and words. Automatic writing is a spiritual practice, also known as psychography, which was adapted by the Surrealist Avantgarde to create an illusory stream-of-consciousness association (Breton 1924: 298). We have used automatic writing as a method to build from single words or, later on, from word clusters a starting point for accessing fractions of our hidden memories and experiences. We decided on a restricted time frame of around 20 minutes, not too long to become overwhelmed by the task or to fall into overthinking and self-censorship. The atmosphere that built up in the room during this collective writing session was also a great source of energy, joined by the feeling of becoming a community, of building a *collective body* from/through materialized stories and voices. Through the collective automatic writing technique, we could write from the heart without filtering and judging the result immediately through a conscious mind. We have adapted, modified, and reshaped this practice during our different residencies.[7]

[7] This collective endeavor was supported by my individual research as part of the Ph.D. Program *Art and Design* at Bauhaus University Weimar, where I was looking into feminist autobiographical writing strategies (Rich 1976, Kristeva 1984, Haug 1987, Baraitser 2009, Lorde 1982), feminist manifestos (Carla Lonzi „Rivolta Femminile" (1970), Mina Loy „Feminist Manifesto" (1914), Gisela Erler „Das Müttermanifest Thesenpapier" (1987)) and feminist experimental writing practices (Blau DuPlessis 1990, Gallop 1988), autoethnography (Ellis 2004, Adams et al. 2015, Bochner / Ellis 2016), life-writing (Smith / Watson (2017), auto/biography (The Routledge Au-

In the following part, I will describe the initial collective writing exercise "Like so Many" (2018), which we executed during this first residency in the evenings after the kids had been put to bed. This writing exercise was our first attempt "to embrace, discuss, elaborate and exhale contrasting experiences and family stories, memories, fantasies, desires and horror scenarios related to Maternal Fantasies" (Kallenberger 2018) while still getting to know each other and each other's stories. "Like so Many" (2018) is built on fragments and prompts from Adrienne Rich's essay "Anger and Tenderness" (1976). Rich's essay interweaves her thoughts and reflections on becoming a mother herself with excerpts from her own diary, written twenty years earlier in 1959 and 1960. The essay was published as part of her seminal book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) at a time when Rich was already an established feminist poet and writer.[8] Her essay was a complete revelation for us. We were struck by how she articulated maternal ambivalence through her personal struggles and shifting emotions as she confronted the conflicts of the writer mother and the hold of patriarchy over the experience of birth and motherhood. Alice Braun has stated in a more recent review of Rich's book:

What was truly new about her approach was, first, the blend of personal testimony and academic reflection (which has now become the new normal with the trend of personal essays), and second the intensely political focus. In effect she was dragging motherhood from the confines of the bedroom or the nursery to the public sphere of intellectual debate. She showed that mothers, far from being proverbial angels in the house, were every bit as part of the world of ideas as men, whose fatherhood does not seem to affect their ability to speak, think or write. (Braun 2019)

Inspired by Cixous, we took up the challenge *to write ourselves in* this history of feminist struggle and, more specifically, into this essay on anger and tenderness. To do so, we extracted fragments from Rich's text and used them as prompts to inscribe, expand, and continue the storyline more than fifty years later. Hereby, we used the following fragments as starting points for inserting our own personal experiences:

- *"Entry from my journal (month, year)"* – to situate our experience within a specific time and location;
- "*Like so many women, I …"* – to insert our individual selves and struggles into the wider context of historical and contemporary feminist struggles;
- "*I could love so much better …"* – to take agency and make individual proposals on what should change, so that we individually could do a better "job" loving;
- *"I have a very clear, keen memory of myself the day …"* – to access a cathartic moment which would possibly initiate change;
- "*In order to live a fully human life we require …"* – ending with another proposal, opening up from the individual perspective towards the *we* as a collective of humans.

The topics ranged widely: One member was not able to "tell the difference between the rash caused by the hand, foot, and mouth disease and the rash caused by a sun allergy" (MATERNAL FANTASIES 2018). Another member chronicled how she unquestionably fell "into the role of automatically caring and preparing food for my family. To ask visitors if they would like to drink or eat something. My husband doesn't have this reflex" (ibid.). Executing this role, she states, led to her complete exhaustion. Another member thought that she "could have loved so much better, if I had learned to love myself unconditionally first and as patient-

to/Biography Studies book series) and anecdotal theory (Gallop 2002) as possible research strategies in artistic research next to discourses on maternal theory (O'Reilly, 2007) and feminist collective practices (Martinis Roe 2018).

[8] Rich's timing parallels that of other artist mothers we encountered in our research, who only confronted the topic of giving birth to and raising another human being after they had already proven to be successful in other areas.

ly, forgivingly, gently and faithfully as I learned to love my child" (ibid.). A third member details in her text how she is "structurally and dramatically underpaid" (ibid.) and, like so many women, reliant on a partner for financial security. She succinctly describes in her text the feeling of alienation, of becoming disentangled from her own body, adopting a male gaze that judged other women's bodies. From this estranged perspective, she reflects on her choice to prioritize her child's well-being over her career. She assumes that she might get blamed for this "by all parties involved at a later point" (ibid.).

In these early days of motherhood, all of us had experienced firsthand a rupture to the fantasy that "women can now do it [all], even have it, or that they would have it if they just tried hard enough" (Ahmed 2017: 5). This was the initial impetus to gather as a collective in 2018 and to deliberately join this intergenerational dialogue, building up on prompts of one of our self-chosen feminist ancestors. In order to create spaces and opportunities for people to express difficult experiences, the first step is turning to each other and acknowledging that we all have some kind of wound. Our collective automatic creative writing sessions offer a framework for vulnerability and for inscribing care, allowing us to "converse with each other and heal each other" (Ndikung 2021: 68) through reading and listening as a *collective body*. The process of our collective writing enables us to name, engage, encounter, and tackle the unresolved and expanding social, economic, and political inequalities that have harmed and pained us.

Building a communal safe space for interpersonal engagement requires a foundation of solidarity and mutual trust. Through automatic writing and listening to each other, we reveal ourselves layer by layer, releasing what we might not have shared in a personal conversation nor in a more formal text.[9] Over time, these collective writings became central elements to our work, as, for example, material to build voiceovers and statements performed individually or collectively in choirs for our film. To hand over our individual writings to other members to edit and perform them, elevated our experiences from the personal and transferred them to the surface of our *collective body*. In this way, we responded to the second-wave feminist mantra "The Personal is Political" by adding "Motherhood is not Personal" (MATERNAL FANTASIES 2020). As an experience and an institution (see Rich 1995), motherhood is a social institution that functions ideologically and politically (see *Encyclopedia of Motherhood* 2010). Thus, motherhood can be understood as a social and political position; a relationship and a responsibility; a metaphor (see Cixous 1976: 881) and much "more than a metaphor" (Haraway / Goodeve 2000: 82-83) for a situated self, engaged in complex sets of relations formed by inevitable interdependence (see Engster 2005: 50-74; Kittay 2001: 530).[10]

Polyvocality, an important term for our practice, enables a work to have multiple narrators and/or follows varied narrative voices and perspectives from different characters. Later, we discovered how polyvocality was described and introduced as a method in the social sciences in order to enhance an intersectional analysis, which can "shift from one voiced interpretation to another and, in so doing, deepen, expand, and problematize these same analyses" (Thimm / Chaudhuri / Mahler 2017: 1). Our *collective body* generates a polyvocal visibility for our individual concerns while at the same time bypassing the conventional mainstream single hero storyline. This single hero storyline is just "another part of our rugged individualism and hero culture, the idea that all problems are personal and they're all soluble by personal responsibility" (Solnit 2019). Feminist writer Rebecca Solnit denounces it further as "a framework that eliminates the possibility of deeper, broader change or of holding accountable the powerful

[9] For this reason, I have not directly referred to the authors' names.

[10] This second reading embraces the existence of caregivers who are men, transgender, two-spirited, and non-binary. The maternal encompasses the full array of human identities, expanding along with our imaginations and senses of self.

who create and benefit from the status quo and its myriad forms of harm." (ibid.) According to Solnit, these "lone hero narratives," which "push one figure into the public eye, but they push everyone else back into private life, or at least passive life" (ibid.), paralyze us and withhold any actual change.

From the beginning, it was a crucial act for us to read out loud from the texts that we had written for ourselves, to read them for and with each other in order to speak about "unspeakable things unspoken" (Morisson 1994: 123). Through listening to each other's stories, we carved out a communal space of sharing and relating to one another's personal histories, sensing each other's individually and culturally framed perspectives and lived experiences. By witnessing and relating to each other's autobiographical writings, we began to slowly connect our divergent opinions and journeys to build affective relations with one another. They became a fundamental collective working technique, which we used in a ritualistic way before or after collective work sessions. To hide our individual identities and concerns while simultaneously gaining empowerment and strength from and through the communal power of solidarity, which is inherently part of the collective entity of being many, we have built *MATERNAL FANTASIES* as our *collective body,* able to speak polyvocally *in* and *with* many voices. From the text material of this writing exercise, we created a collage built out of fragments of our individual responses floating around a large photo collage condensing one scene from our shooting at *betOnest*, where mothers and children were climbing up and rolling down from a massive sand pile, into one time-lapse still image. In the process of working on the image-text installation "Like so Many" (2018), we strongly debated which pronoun our collective text should use: The *I*, the *she*, the *we*? In the end, we settled on the pronoun he, once more, as an experimental try-out to change the biologically framed position of speaking when thinking about motherhood.

"Tell Me How to Disappear" (2018): Regretting Motherhood in Full Sight

The desire to subvert the easy understanding of visibility as an act of empowerment led to the artwork "Tell Me How to Disappear" (2018) (Fig. 1), a long-shot image depicting four women and one child. They are staged in front of a former storage building between industrial remnants, such as cement pipes and tubes. In the center of the image stands a female-read person in a bright blue jumpsuit. Her body forms a C-shaped bow, with the head resting on a large concrete pipe. On her head sits an oversized green tube that connects to the pipe like a charging cable. The pipe is pointed towards the sky. Her posture exemplifies the mother figure leaning on, resting, recharging, and possibly receiving support, or even recovering strength from the boldness and stability of the cement pipe. Another mother's body on the left side of the depicted scene is dressed in black. Her shoulders are covered by a light purple shell, similar to a beetle's armor. Her upper body and her head bend towards the inside of a spacious metal tube creating the outline of a cracked arc. The metal tube is covered by a mix of spalling colors. Two other performers with masks are staged in seated positions in-between. Their postures echo Auguste Rodin's famous sculpture "The Thinker" (1904). The pregnant performer close to the center of the image in a bright yellow dress is wearing objects that look like large blisters, breasts, or thorns on one of her feet and hands.

"Tell Me How to Disappear" was the first image we produced together with the children at *betOnest*, an artist residency at a former cement factory in the vast rural area of Uckermark in East Germany. This post-industrial complex became a temporary location for filming and action, a rehearsal stage for the group's first artistic collaboration. To this residency, we took our 'body extensions', *papier mâché* props of oversized feet and arm extensions, wings, and other fantastical objects that we had pre-produced with the children. Papier-mâché is a

very easy-to-use technique that most kids are familiar with from nursery school. It is cheap, fast, and accessible, consisting merely of ripping old newspapers and soaking them in glue.

Mikala Hyldig Dal describes in one of our writing sessions the imaginative differences she observes between the kids' design drafts and drawings in comparison to the extensions produced by us the adults:

"My daughter created a birdlike-dinosaur (does she know birds are the last dinosaurs?), with extending elements to be attached to her bottom and her nose; Hanne's boys created monsters, oversized paws of claws and green, a huge lizard foot to go with it; Rosemarie, Olga's daughter, was becoming a mythological creature that, too, can fly (are angels remnants of dead birds?). The grownups' extensions were abstract, mostly: a device that will ground you by making the bottom half of your body into one piece, melted into the pavement; one that will draw silence to your headspace by removing all upper orifices; one that connects your breast with your mouth so you may continuously feed yourself; one that makes of your uterus an expandable housing project with the capacity to accommodate inhabitants of all ages"
(MATERNAL FANTASIES 2021)

We used these playful objects to interact cheerfully with the location, with each other, and with the children. With these minimal visual elements, our body extensions, and a specific color scheme of our clothing, we sought to create a colorful tension between the social invisibility of maternal care, which is commonly reduced to isolation in private homes, and this pale, bleak, post-industrial stage and artificial (non-)white cube outdoor setting.

For "Tell Me How to Disappear", we used the "freeze game" as a playful method to integrate the children in the artistic process. In this children's game, everyone dances as the music plays. When the music stops, each player must freeze immediately and hold that position until the music begins again. If a player does not freeze immediately, s/he does ten jumping jacks during the start of the next round and then rejoins the dance. We liked this 'kids' game because it resembled the tableaux vivants, a 17th-century parlor game, where actors or amateurs imitate statues or paintings as 'living images'.[11] Our collectively set up instructions state that we will produce the tableaux vivants in rotational order. Each role, from director to performer and camera person, is rotated within the collective. Each director chooses an art-historical reference and a location, and directs the performer in the scene. As the director of this image, I wanted to create generic figures of absence, colorful 'hidden mothers', which was originally inspired by the uncanny vintage photographs of Italian-Swedish artist Linda Fregni Nagler. My hidden mothers are stand-ins for all mothers longing to (temporarily) disappear. They are placeholders for mothers who might even regret their motherhood (see Donath 2015: 353-359.). There were many days in my early experience as mother of an infant child on which I felt strangled and confined by this omnipresent social expectation to present to the public (whether in real life or on Instagram) always a happy, caring, loving mother while the concealed work of calming tantrums, cleaning up poop, and interrupted nightly sleep should stay forever hidden in the private sphere.

Haytham El-Wardanys monograph "How to Disappear" (2013) was an additional inspiration for the above-described image. His text had provided us with a set of aural exercises on how to disappear, reappear, join a group, leave a group, and other necessary skills. Somehow, these exercises had triggered the visualization of 'my maternal fantasy' wanting to disappear. There were so many moments in my early days of motherhood where I wished someone would take over to take my son to the playground or to pick him up from the nursery when I needed to work longer hours. I was missing this village that everyone says you need to raise (your) children in, and it was tough for me to be the only caregiver to my son as a single mother. On the other hand, El-Wardany's aural exercises in-

[11] Performed in large groups, these living images were an integral part of military parades and a major feature at festivities for royal weddings, coronations, processions, and royal entries into cities. Sometimes the living images were mounted on elaborate temporary stands or performed on the stages of school plays or at fairground sideshows.

spired the concept of our *collective body* on how to work and be with each other as individual artists merging with but not submerging into a collective form. Individually, we come from diverse artistic and cultural backgrounds. We raise our children in differing family constellations and apply various parenting techniques. In this sense, as a collective, we have developed a communal form and a collective, artistic practice which allows us to "oscillate between being deeply inside the collective process and taking some distance" (Silva 2021: 129). After spending some intense days at a residency together, eating, sleeping, and producing at one location together, we would return to our individual lives and to a mode of meeting every three weeks for an afternoon at the studio. "Unintentionally, we established as a strategy the possibility of being in-between" – of being in_visible – "which allowed us our differences in approaches and opinions, precisely because we recognized each other's mutual commitment to a collective aim" (ibid.: 129).[12] We have accepted that we do not speak as one voice. Instead, we implement "the right to opacity" (Glissant 1997: 190) as "the real foundation of relation, in freedoms" (ibid.) while our individual voices are amplified through the polyvocality ingrained in the collective body.

Conclusion & Outlook

As I have shown, our *collective body* emerges from a seemingly minoritarian status and has grown through our collective journey during the past five years, the exhibitions, workshops, and presentations we were invited to, and the connections we have made and built both locally and virtually. It seems to me that the discourse around 'maternal in_visibilities' has moved from the margins towards the center. It was greatly magnified through the COVID-19 pandemic, which has highlighted rising inequalities and structural forms of discrimination of people with care duties. However, the pandemic has also enabled us to expand our virtual bonds, to present and share our work and tools in online conferences and exhibitions.[13] Through Instagram and the international distribution of our publication "Re-Assembling Motherhood(s)" (2021), our wider network of allies has grown and we are receiving messages from other mother artists, ranging from Australia, to the Philippines, Brazil, Sweden, and many more countries, on how empowered they feel by the work we do as mother artists.

In recent years, a couple of initiatives have emerged in Germany that address these issues on a political level: from *Kunst und Kind Berlin* (2018) and München (2018) to *proparents* (2020). In 2019, German artist Marcia Breuer wrote a manifesto titled "More Mothers for the Arts" ["Mehr Mütter in der Kunst"], asking: "Do we want to live in a society that disqualifies women in the arts for being a mother? Do we want to renounce the artistic works of women that have gained access to another field of experience through their motherhood?" (Breuer 2019). In March 2021, researcher and writer Hettie Judah presented guidelines she had written with a group of artist mothers on "How Not to Exclude Artist Parents" (Judah 2022) at an online discussion hosted by *The Freelands Foundation* in London. These instructions were widely shared on social media and have by now been translated into more than 15 languages.

[12] Hans-Peter Thurn observes this mechanism as typical for the initial phase of an artist collective, where everyone is able to push aside individual ambitions in favor of a social commitment towards a common aim (Thurn 1991: 124).

[13] "International Perspectives (2): MATERNAL FANTASIES" (2022), Culture Collective Scotland; "Domestic Documents: Spaces of Care & Crisis" (2022), Pleasure Dome, Toronto, Canada; "ART/MAMAS – Film and Motherhood" (2021), VIVO Media Arts Centre, Vancouver, Canada; "Reading Assembly: Care" (2021), University of Reading, UK; "Opening Up / Closing in" (2021), Performance Art Bergen, Rogaland Art Center, Norway; "January Blues" (2021). SPILL Festival of Performance, Ipswich, UK; "A Woman's Work" (2021), European Prospects & Fotogallery, Cardiff, Wales; "Caring Infrastructures" (2020), HKW New Alphabet School #Caring, Berlin; "personal space" (2020), Surface Gallery Contemporary Art Gallery of Nottingham, UK; "Café fotográfico - Maternidad, Identidad y Representación", (2020), Youtube channel hosted by NOTRO espacio, Ushuaia, Argentina.

To conclude, I would like to contextualize *MATERNAL FANTASIES* within the current transgressive moment in (art) history, which seeks to propose an alternative to the concepts of the 'rational mind', 'the visible', and 'light' as the primary conditions of the singular modern self. The (late) capitalist logic of expansion and growth seems to expose the limits of this post-Enlightenment paradigm. *MATERNAL FANTASIES* seeks to undermine an easy understanding of visibility, which is something that differentiates them from earlier generations of feminist artists and that goes in agreement with Johanna Schaffer's critic of the prevailing conditions and modes of becoming visible (Schaffer 2008: 234) and with Peggy Phelan's concern about how visibility is falsely equated with a more political and economic power (Phelan 1993: 10). As outlined above, MATERNAL FANTASIES' works revolving around in_visibility address a complex relation between wanting to be seen and wanting to disappear. All members of MATERNAL FANTASIES are artists and mothers (or, in one case, a longtime aspiring mother), who are *performing* the role of the mother in both daily life and on MATERNAL FANTASIES' "stage", e. g. the *betonest* setting of "Tell Me How to Disappear" (2019). These roles are not identical or necessarily autobiographically intertwined. The "performer mother" is aesthetically accentuated through monochrome-colored clothes, props, and tools and becomes hyper visible on stage, while actually disappearing and representing something else (Phelan 1993: 150), driven by "the recognition of the desire to be seen *by* (and within) the other" (ibid.: 153).

In addition to the critique of the modern Eye/I, the collective body has become increasingly important in contemporary art. The Documenta fifteen exhibition signals a paradigmatic shift in the re-evaluation of collectivity and collective work as an alternative to a market-driven art world. Documenta fifteen's curatorial approach, based on the practice of lumbung[14], implements for the first time large-scale strategies of co-curation, decentralization, and a collaborative model of resource use – in economic terms but also with regards to ideas, knowledge, programs, and innovations. *Ruangrupa*, the artistic directors of Documenta fifteen, initiated from the beginning collective negotiations for the distribution of funding, while later, in the exhibition space, making transparent the networks of relations in which the exhibited artworks were produced and are situated. This resonates with the art of *MATERNAL FANTASIES,* which combines utopian world-building, artistic strategies of in_visibility, an intergenerational discourse, and collective artistic production with a recurring pragmatic re-evaluation and re-negotiation of their collective working structure and collective body.[15] Collectivity is crucial to our practice, in particular because the maternal body has the "potential to become two" (Battersby 1998: 2). Yet, how we can avoid the risk of biological determinism in relation to women's physical capacity to become pregnant is an important issue in this case. Defining the collective from the maternal standpoint is complex and requires further thought.

[14] "Lumbung, which directly translates as "rice barn", refers to a communal building in rural Indonesia where a community's harvest is gathered, stored and distributed according to jointly determined criteria as a pooled resource for the future. As a concrete practice, lumbung is the starting point of documenta fifteen: principles of collectivity, resource building and equitable distribution are pivotal to the curatorial work and impact the entire process—the structure, self-image and appearance of documenta fifteen" (Documenta Fifteen 2022: 8-9).

[15] See "Curating a collective body: A Non-Idealized Concept of Care" in *Curating with Care*, London: Routledge 2023.

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New Perspectives in Gender Research
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Maternal Thinking.

A Commentary on the Article by Magdalena Kallenberger

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In a seminal essay titled "Feminism and Modernism", which was included in *Framing Feminism. Art and the Women's Movement 1970 – 1985*, art historian Griselda Pollock thought about the "role of culture in social reproduction" (Pollock 1987: 79). Cultural theory thus turned its focus on the role of culture. But what about the complementary observation to think about the 'role of social reproduction in culture'? We need to understand both: the role of culture in social reproduction and the role of social reproduction in culture. Today, there is the emergence of feminist and queer feminist practitioners active at the intersections of art-making, theory-making, and collective organizing who redefine the image and imaginaries of the labors of social reproduction. Berlin-based artist group *Maternal Fantasies* have chosen to invest their energy in joining together culture and social reproduction arriving at new ways of practicing cultures of social reproduction collectively, collaboratively, and maternally. Magdalena Kallenberger, who is part of *Maternal Fantasies*, unpacks and critiques the maternal individualism/individualized maternalism that was invented and implemented by colonial-imperial-patriarchal modernity and popularized by Western art by way of continuation of Christian iconography-as-ideology. Defying the imperative of maternal individualism, Kallenberger investigates lineages of mothering otherwise by inscribing *Maternal Fantasies* into stories and narrations of feminist mothers who formed feminist art collectives and brought together self-curation, collective care as mothering, and practices of art-making that resisted individualization/isolation as mothers and as artists. While (feminist) mothers are made hyper-visible by the role culture performed in social reproduction, (feminist) artists were being made invisible by the role social reproduction performed in culture. Entering deliberately, decisively, and fearlessly into the gap between visibility and invisibility, Kallenberger inhabits the gap with un/ease and makes her reader feel the frictions and potentials, tensions and desires that come from redefining and reorienting the relation between culture and social reproduction from the in_visible gap. Inspired by Kallenberger's writing, at once autotheoretical and collective, I would like to respond to her thoughts with the following reflections:

What makes a mother a mother?
What makes a mother other?
What makes (m)others maternal?
How does the maternal other mothers from others who are not mothers?

In Western art history the ideal(ized), norm(alized), norm(ative) image of the mother can be traced back to the Madonna who nurses, the Madonna who embodies and makes visible the capacity of the female body to be bodily re-

productive. Bodily reproduction became social reproduction became essentialized maternalism/essential maternality.

Fig. 1: Madonna Litta, attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, circa 1490, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.

Per the Madonna, the maternal became a belief system. Beliefs are never natural. Beliefs are always social. Yet, beliefs can naturalize. The naturalization of the maternal became a source for primitive accumulation and relentless capitalist extraction. The regulation of the maternal became the blueprint for the coloniality of gender through the colonization of motherhood.
The definition of the maternal became the projection for changing patriarchal norms, expectations, and desires that continue to impose themselves directly into the chain of life.

These are the legacies that created the conditions of colonial-capitalist-patriarchal maternalism. These are the legacies which radical maternalism resists, unlearns, and undoes.

Today, as artists are re-entering into the fraught and complex and complicated and contested body-territory of the maternal, they make daring and productive use of autotheory and of new and vibrant materialism to imagine new maternalisms.

While fighting the ideological legacies of essentialized maternalism, artists like *Maternal Fantasies* also aim to re-invent the imaginaries of the maternal by way of image-making. Visibility is not the answer to invisibility. But making visible can be a way to change imaginaries through images. Therefore, image-making remains a territory of feminist, queer feminist, and trans feminist visions for re-defining and re-claiming what the maternal can, could, and will be.

Literature

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New Perspectives in Gender Research

Working Paper Series
2026, Volume 1

Iz Paehr

Infectious Ideas and Viral Images.
Questioning Immunological Metaphors in Digital Communications.

With a Commentary by Simon Strick

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2026, Volume 1

Iz Paehr

Infectious Ideas and Viral Images. Questioning Immunological Metaphors in Digital Communications.

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Infectious Ideas and Viral Images

Questioning Immunological Metaphors in Digital Communications

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Abstract

Why are images and imaginations of 'infections' and virality so appealing for digital communications? This article problematizes immunological metaphors by discussing a research report submitted to the United States (U.S.) Department of Defense entitled *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns* (Zakem / McBride / Hammerberg 2018), in which the authors develop an epidemiological model to analyze and engage memes to 'inoculate', 'infect', and 'treat' the effects of adversarial messaging for influence campaigns. As work pursued in feminist/gender and critical disability studies shows, these framings of communications as 'infectious' resonate with immunology's historical framing of the body as a bounded object at war with the outside world, the immune system as a normative cognitive system, and the ableist idea that sickness, disability, and queerness result from and lead to moral failures. Images of viruses and infections are present in the recent memetic alt-right trope of the Social Justice Warrior (SJW), and they echo with National Socialist (NS) propaganda posters that equated social groups with infectious diseases. Following 'infectiousness' as part of the basic aesthetic vocabulary of racist, anti-Semitic, and ableist ideologies, this article offers an analysis of selected alt-right memes and NS visual propaganda materials by incorporating the crip method of image descriptions into a method for analyzing contemporary memes offered by Nowotny and Reidy (2022). By critically following immunological metaphors through both textual and visual depictions I hope to show some of the concerns that arise when understanding images as 'infectious'.

Keywords
Infectious Images; Virality; Digital Communications; Memes; Ableism and Anti-Queerness

Author's note

In this article, I am working with and extending the work pursued by Johanna Schaffer and me for two lectures[1] we prepared in 2019 that thematized the research report submitted to the U.S. Department of Defense entitled *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns* (2018) by

[1] Was tun mit „Sichtbarkeit" in kritischen digitalen Realitäten? [What to do with "visibility" in critical digital realities?], Ringvorlesung „Digitale Sichtbarkeit" [lecture series "Digital Visibility"], Alfried Krupp Wissenschaftskolleg Greifswald, IZG University of Greifswald, 30.10.2019; Ambivalences of Visibility (Revised), GCSC/GGK Keynote Lecture, Justus Liebig University Giessen, 12.11.2019, in the context of the interdisciplinary conference "Renegotiating Minoritarian IN_VISIBILITIES" (Nov 12-14, 2019).

Vera Zakem, Megan McBride, and Kate Hammerberg with a focus on its bioinformational understanding of people's behavior as programmable. With Johanna's consent, this text contains excerpts from our lecture in section one and three. This article contains discussions of racist, ableist, anti-queer, and anti-Semitic memes and NS propaganda posters.

Introduction

Immunological imaginations are ever present in discourses around digital images and platforms: Memes go 'viral', fake news are 'spread' and computer malware is commonly called a 'virus'. The quotidian ease with which immunological metaphors are taken up in the field of digital communications is taken to an extreme in a 2018 research report developed for the U.S. Department of Defense entitled *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns*. In their publication, Zakem, McBride, and Hammerberg develop an epidemiological model to analyze and engage memes to 'inoculate', 'infect', and 'treat' the effects of adversarial messaging for influence campaigns. After introducing core concepts of the report, I will question the apparent readiness of epidemiological and immunological metaphors for the field of digital communication by taking up the work of feminist/gender and critical disability studies scholars that discusses paradigms of war and cognitive ableism in the field of immunology. What are the implications of understanding memes as infectious, and which understandings of immunology are at play when rendering images as carriers of (unnamed) disease? While the first part of this paper critiques immunological metaphors used to describe the distribution of memes online, the second part attempts to close a gap the report leaves: In right-wing online circles, memes are produced and circulated that equate marginalized social groups with viruses and infections – an image practice that also belonged to the basic aesthetic vocabulary of National Socialist propaganda. Instead of attending to these two lines of analysis – immunological metaphors when discussing the sharing of images online, and widely shared images of eugenicist hate speech – as separate issues, this paper reads them as intertwined phenomena that render sick and disabled life as less valuable. By critically following immunological metaphors through both textual and visual depictions I hope to show some of the concerns that arise when understanding images and the ways in which they are shared online as 'infectious'.

The analysis of memes in this article follows a multifaceted methodological approach as suggested by Joanna Nowotny and Julian Reidy in their book *Memes. Formen und Folgen eines Internetphänomens* (2022). According to Nowotny and Reidy, a formal-aesthetic analysis of a given meme calls for a description of the multimodal dimensions of the meme such as text and image (ibid.: 67). I will, when formally analyzing a given meme, offer an image description in the form of an alt text, which is a textual description of visual material for the purpose of accessibility for low-vision and blind readers (Coklyat / Finnegan 2020). In the continued text, I will analyze additional visual information and provide translations into English. I introduce this two-step method into Nowotny and Reidy's approach because of my commitment to access for other disabled people, and to disconcert seeing/visibility as presumably natural or normal ways of knowing, as they are often built on the assumption that "everyone sees, speaks, hears, feels, and moves in the same (nondisabled) ways" (Schalk 2013). This use of alt text makes a discussion of eugenicist visual materials possible without sharing images that embed photos of people without their consent and disrupts what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has called "the politics of staring" (2002). For academic traceability, links to the original images can be found in the footnotes. Nowotny and Reidy suggest two contextual analyses to place the meme within a possible cluster of memes that may follow a certain template, and to understand the meme within social, historical, and po-

litical contexts. This approach allows for an analysis of how memes "participate in the construction and maintenance of categories of difference such as gender, race, class etc." (ibid.) and thus opens the analysis to strands of representational critique (Hall 2013), giving particular attention to histories of visual stereotyping (Schaffer 2008), which, as I will argue, prevail in contemporary memes.

1. 'Inoculating', 'Infecting' and 'Treating' the Effects of Images through Memetic Engagement

The research report *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns* was submitted to the U.S. Department of Defense under the sponsorship of the Center for Naval Analyses. The 84 pages long report attributes great significance to images in digital media realities, as they facilitate rapid comprehension of complex relationships and arouse emotional reactions much more than other media (Zakem / McBride / Hammerberg 2018: 12). The authors claim that images in the form of memes can effectively be used in U.S. government influence campaigns. To facilitate this usage, they develop an epidemiological model in which memes are supposed to help "spread" (ibid.: 5) ideas. Their abstract reads:

> *"The term meme was coined in 1976 by Richard Dawkins to explore the ways in which ideas spread between people. With the introduction of the internet, the term has evolved to refer to culturally resonant material […] spread online, primarily via social media. This CNA self-initiated exploratory study examines memes and the role that memetic engagement can play in U.S. government (USG) influence campaigns. We define meme as 'a culturally resonant item easily shared or spread online,' and develop an epidemiological model of inoculate/infect/treat to classify and analyze ways in which memes have been effectively used in the online information environment. […]" (Zakem / McBride / Hammerberg 2018: i)*

One goal of the report is to develop an epidemiological framework through which "memetic engagement" (ibid.), the activity of using memes for a purpose such as an influence campaign, can be understood as well as practiced (ibid.: iii). Epidemiology, a term that is only briefly covered in the report,[2] comes from the Greek *epidémiā nósos* and means 'disease spread across the entire people' (Brockhaus). The epidemiological model that the authors propose consists of three categories: *inoculate, infect,* and *treat.*

The report constructs several adversarial actors in the field of online information such as the Islamic State, North Korea, and Russia, which are then used as examples to be countered through memetic engagement. As an example, Zakem, McBride, and Hammerberg explain how a "Russian attempt to infect" (ibid.: 34) is 'treated' via memetic engagement (ibid.: 34-38). The authors show two tweets that I will briefly describe and contextualize in written form by using the crip practice of alt texts (Coklyat / Finnegan 2020) without providing the original visuals.

[Image Description: The first tweet features text written in Russian by the user @rentvchannel. An embedded photo shows an elderly white man from the waist up. He has short white hair and is wearing glasses and a beige coat. Multiple microphones and a large camera lens point towards him, while his mouth

[2] The report is an interesting but challenging artefact to work with for multiple reasons: In the authors' recounting of a history of memes, and in their argumentation on why they develop an "epidemiological model" (ibid.: 15) for influence campaigns, core claims are often not supported by academic references. Further, the authors describe part of the research on memes that they recount as "contested" (ibid.: 10) and the literature as "messy" (ibid.: 11), while not mentioning less contested academic work on memes (see Jenkins / Ford / Green 2013; Nahon / Hemsley 2013; Nakamura 2014; Shifman 2013) or actively distancing themselves from said work. Central terms for the development for an epidemiological model such as the term 'epidemiology' are not mentioned outside of footnotes, while the term 'ISIS' appears 182 times throughout. Lastly, and as I will revisit later, the term 'right' never points to the infamous memes of the U.S. American alt-right but is only used to describe the positioning of an image on a page, meaning that the alt-right and their usage of memes are plainly not discussed.

is slightly open as though he is about to give an interview. Behind him there are many people walking down a street; one of them is wearing a sign that is cut off from the view. Below the photo, the time and date of the tweet are displayed as "11:00 AM - 20. Sept 2015".]

This Twitter post displays an 'infection' in the form of a post by *rentv*, a pro-Russian TV channel. Translated from Russian, the text reads: "U.S. Ambassador in Russia John F. Tefft at a rally by the opposition in Maryino [Moscow neighborhood]". The 'infection' occurs because the U.S. Ambassador John F. Tefft is visually connected to a protest held by the opposition in a way that is both compromising for the ambassador and the opposition.

[Image Description: A Twitter post by the user @USEmbRu shows text in Russian along with four embedded pictures of the same elderly white man as in the previous image. While the man looks the same across the pictures – same hair, coat, posture, opened mouth – and while the same microphones point towards him, the background is different on each photo. Behind him there are: a different street, another demonstration, the surface of the moon, and an ice hockey match. The time and date of the tweet are displayed as "4:22 AM - 21. Sept 2015".]

In this second Twitter post, the ambassador is photoshopped into a variety of places and events. The tweet reads: "The ambassador John F. Tefft spent last weekend at home. But thanks to Photoshop he can be everywhere." This counter-memetic engagement was published by the U.S. embassy in Moscow. As a 'treatment', the images are supposed to "contain the effect of adversary messaging" (ibid.: 6) by revealing that the ambassador was photoshopped into the protest.

The application of the epidemiological model that the report suggests thus frames the images published by *rentv* as a memetic 'infection' which was met with a counter-meme by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, finally resulting in a successful 'treatment'.

2. 'Infectious' Ideas: Problematizing Immunological Metaphors in Digital Communications

As a primary reason for their analytical usage of biological-medical terminology, Zakem, McBride, and Hammerberg name the writings of the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who developed a concept termed *meme* in 1976 "to explore the ways in which ideas spread between people" (ibid.: i). Dawkins asserted that ideas were transmitted through memes in a similar way to how physical attributes were passed on through genes (Dawkins 1989: 192). The meme, as an idea, is self-replicating and bound to spread, following the principles of evolutionary biology, "from brain to brain" (ibid.). For Dawkins, the authors explicate, the idea of information being passed on between individual people by means of "human imitation" (Zakem / McBride / Hammerberg 2018: 4) is central, but later research would describe the focus on the "transmission of ideas" (ibid.) in terms of contagion or infection, leading to what the authors call the "imitation/contagion debate" (ibid.: 5). The contagion debate posits that individuals can be infected with ideas in similar ways as they would be infected by a virus and thus would become a "host" (ibid.) for information. For the fitness, that is, the success of a meme, it is fundamental for the meme to be compatible with the "hardwiring" of the brain, for instance (ibid.). In this recounting of the history of memes, cognitive processes and processes of infection are linked, and the brain is named a site where information in the form of messages resides.

Zakem, McBride, and Hammerberg's reliance on metaphors of infection is contested in the field of digital communications: Scholars Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green have stressed in their book *Spreadable Media* that culture does not self-replicate but is driven by human agency, arguing that the way in which audiences actively share materials "is distorted by the metaphor of infection that "viral" invokes" (2013: 20). However, they critique virality mostly for its imprecision, a position that also

Joanna Nowotny and Julian Reidy take by explaining that virality cannot account for the copies, transformations and variations memes go through (2022: 37). Others such as Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley (2013) as well as Jussi Parikka (2007) have embraced 'virality' as an analytical category. A critique of immunological metaphors that is devoted to questioning their ableist implications is still underrepresented in the field.

Questioning the proximity between medical and communications terminologies that the report constructs, I wondered how bodies are conceptualized in relation to infectious diseases in medical discourses. As I will show, these discourses position the immune system as a site of encounter between the outside world and the body, and they tend to employ terms borrowed from the field of communication to explain the workings of this system (consider Biss 2014; Haraway 1992 & 1999; Martin 1990). Tending to the work of gender/feminist and critical disability studies scholars, I will in the next step trace paradigms of war and cognition in the field of immunology to explain why they might spark metaphors around supposedly 'infectious' ideas in digital communications.

Bodies at War: Connections between Military and Immunological Language

The scholarship of the anthropologist Emily Martin is dedicated to the cultural and political dimensions that shape definitions of immunity. In her 1990 article "Toward an Anthropology of Immunology: The Body as Nation State", she analyzes the textual images that dominate the popular and scientific literature on immunology employed at the time in the U.S. The body, equipped with an immune system, is often understood and described in terms of a nation state at war (1990: 410). According to her research, imaginaries of the immune system rely on an understanding of a "clear boundary between self and non self", in which "the non self world" is "foreign and hostile" (ibid.: 411). This supposed hostility is met with metaphors of warfare such as the description of T-lymphocyte cells as "special combat units" (ibid.: 412) that fight cancer. In scientific literature of the time, Martin argues, the body is often described as a police state in which cells that have false "identity papers" (ibid.) must be found and destroyed. In this imaginary, all bodies are "imperiled nations continuously at war to quell alien invaders" (ibid.: 421), always on the lookout to assess which elements in their interior are impure and always ready to try and eliminate them. Roberto Esposito describes the differentiation between an individual's identity and "the threatening magma that presses on its outer boundaries" (2011: 155) as "the fundamental distinction around which the most widely accepted immunological theory has constructed its story, and thus its meaning" (ibid.). Conversely, as Donna Haraway writes, discourses within the U.S. military borrow metaphors from immunology, which positions immunology and military cultures in a symbiotic relation (Haraway 1992: 321). This relation becomes evident in visual material too, as Esposito recalls when contemplating illustrations of the workings of the immune system in *The Body Victorious* (Nilsson / Lindberg / Lindqvist / Nordfeldt 1987), "if these are medical accounts explained using military images, or military strategy books illustrated by medical metaphors" (2011: 156).

The ease with which the authors of the report *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns* engage the terms 'inoculate', 'infect', and 'treat' follows a longstanding tradition of a shared vocabulary between military language and immunology. While Martin analyzes the nation state as an underlying concept that has shaped metaphors in immunology (1990), the report has been sponsored by and written for two military departments of the United States, which means that actors of a state are not (only) a metaphor but actual agents in the making and the reception of the report. Government actors are prompted by the report to recognize the use of memes for influence campaigns in the face of the already ongoing memetic 'infections' of the other state and non-

state actors that it constructs. The report thus relies on immunology's rendering of the body as a nation state at war to convince government actors of an actual state to deal with images shared online as though they were infectious diseases released as forms of warfare. The actual immunological terms that the authors engage leave one question remarkably open: If an 'infection' occurred when people of a "target population" (Zakem / McBride / Hammerberg 2018: 17) looked at a meme, what then is the disease that is contracted or treated (ibid.: 6)?

Countering Paradigms of Cognitive Ableism in Immunology

According to the report, some memes are 'infectious' *per se*, which makes it the task of the U.S. government agencies to decide which infections are welcome and which must be 'treated'. Implied throughout is the belief that a person can be 'infected' with a message and that such an 'infection' can have consequences for their behavior – even though the authors warn that "changes in attitude do not necessarily correlate to changes in behavior" (ibid.: 60).

The workings of the immune system are often imbued "with essentially human characteristics" (Biss 2020: 60) such as "interpretation and communication" (ibid.). While immunology as a field and practice does not suggest that minds can be 'infected', it does employ metaphors that render the immune system itself as a normatively functioning cognitive system. If the immune system is positioned as having the ability to differentiate between a strict binary of self and other, as Martin argues (1990: 411), then it must decide what belongs inside the bounded realm of the body and what needs to be kept out, which means that it somehow must *know* itself. In his article "Cripping immunity. Disability and the immune self" (2019), Travis Chi Wing Lau details this idea of supposed decision-making as immunology's cognitive paradigm. Under the cognitive paradigm, the functional or healthy immune system is understood as "capable of perception, recognition and learning in response to microbes and other environmental stimuli" (ibid.: 165), while the disabled or non-healthy immune system is framed as unable to differentiate, memorize, and learn. As Lau reminds, cognitive ability and rationality, as ascribed to the healthy immune system, were defined as foundational for humanness by philosophers of the Enlightenment (ibid.: 168). The conflation of cognitive ability as a precondition for humanness led to disabled people, particularly people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, at the time labeled with terms such as "the 'mad' or the 'idiot'" (ibid.), being pictured as "incompletely human and consequently unworthy of fundamental human rights" (ibid.). According to the author, immunology in its naming and defining of the default immune system as a healthy and normatively functioning cognitive system follows an "ideology of ability" (ibid.) that equates disabled immune systems, because they are not cognitively able to tell themselves apart from outside stimuli, with failures of the self.

Research on the effects of discourses that position sickness and impaired immune systems as failures of the self has been conducted, among others (see Day 2021; Waldby 1996), by Susan Sontag in relation to her personal experience with cancer, as well as the socially prevalent stigmatization of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and the resulting acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). Both diseases, Sontag explains, were understood as consequences of "unsafe habits" (1989: 25), but AIDS was linked specifically to drug addiction and queer sex. Drug addicts were framed as "committing (or completing) a kind of inadvertent suicide" (ibid.: 26), which positioned their lives as 'close to death anyways', and queer people, homosexual men in particular, were framed as getting infected through sex deemed "unnatural" (ibid.) and constructed as "more willful, therefore deserv[ing] more blame" (ibid.). Acquiring a disabled immune system was framed as a direct consequence of "perversity" (ibid.), and accordingly, disability and queerness were forced into a stigmatizing and deeply ableist logic in which a disabling disease was misunder-

stood as a punishment, and queerness was warped into a failure deserving the punishment of disease. The consequences of this logic were, as Catherine Waldby reminds, that gay men were "effectively treated by much public health discourse *as if they themselves were the virus*" (1996: 11). Almost 30 years after Sontag's writing, the field of immunology is still just starting to grapple with the implications of its construction of the non-disabled immune self as a supposedly superior default, and Lau's wish for the field to "shift its conceptual models away from both an ableist ideal of bodily self-management and a curative telos that seeks to correct or eliminate" disabled immune systems (2019: 169) has yet to come to fruition. For this to happen, the immune system needs to be understood in different terms than as a normative cognitive system that positions disabled cognition as less than.

In the report, the terms 'inoculate', 'infect', and 'treat' are shifted into the realm of communications, while other related terms such as 'disease' or even 'immune system' remain absent. According to Zakem, McBride, and Hammerberg, who mention the term 'disease' only twice in a footnote and the term 'ISIS' 182 times, memes can 'infect' populations with messages such as understandings of Islam that "prevent the spread of extremism" (2018: 27). The report echoes immunology's usually more subtle cognitive paradigm and applies it to actual cognitive processes: Instead of a cell potentially learning about and rejecting a disease, a message 'infects' information that reaches a target population through a meme (ibid.: 24). For these messages to work, the authors rely on ableist tropes: The appendix of the report is dedicated to the term "memetic warfare" (ibid.: 50) and one of the ideas presented is to describe terrorists as, among other attributes, "weak" and "mentally unstable" (ibid.) – a logic that only works when people who present outside of the norms of compulsory able-mindedness are already pictured as less valuable.

To summarize, the report builds on immunological metaphors around infectiousness without dealing with the ableist implications of turning images into carriers of unnamed diseases, and further links the realm of online images with the biopolitics of war. In the following second half of this paper, I will turn my attention towards the ways in which diseases and disabilities themselves are used as visual devices to devalue social groups. The next section discusses selected right-wing memes and NS propaganda materials that equate social groups with viruses and cancer or that perpetuate hostile ideas about disability and disabled people.

3. 'Infectious' Images: Viruses and Sicknesses as Right-Wing Aesthetic Vocabulary

In the formulations of their epidemiological model and in their analysis of adversarial actors in the report *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns*, Zakem, McBride and Hammerberg do not discuss the enormously successful discursive and memetic tactics of the U.S. alt-right at all. To close this gap, I will recall one of the central memetic figures of the *#GamerGate* movement and discuss along historical depictions that ideas and images of viruses and infections belong to the basic aesthetic vocabulary of National Socialist, anti-Semitic, ableist, and racist ideologies.

In journalistic texts like "How an Online Mob Created a Playbook for a Culture War" (2019) by Charlie Warzel in the *New York Times*, *#GamerGate* is described as a central moment in the formation and radicalization of U.S. fascists and their online tactics. In 2014, the group *#GamerGate* emerged on the platforms *4chan* and *Twitter* in reaction to persons active in the field of games as players or developers who were advocating for more diversity. The latter were being attacked by the *#GamerGate* members with death threats and other threats of violence. *#GamerGate* first formed in a moment of outrage when the ex-boyfriend of independent game maker Zoë Quinn released a manifesto that contained the information that Quinn had slept with a video games journalist, thus supposedly influencing reporting on games. For many users of the hashtag *#GamerGate* violence

seemed necessary to defend gaming as 'their' *per se* unpolitical medium, which they saw as being threatened by political correctness and various persons (see Cross 2017: 179 and Strick 2021: 219ff).

Social Justice Warriors and Depictions of Social Groups as Diseases

One of the caricatures and memes that *#GamerGate* produced are the so-called Social Justice Warriors (SJWs). *#GamerGate* uses the feminist-activist concept of social justice in their terminology, but they caricature it and then transport that caricature into the mainstream. In their article "Attack of the 50-Foot Social Justice Warrior: The Discursive Construction of SJW Memes as the Monstrous Feminine", Adrienne L. Massanari and Shira Chess write that SJWs are characterized as individuals who are overly invested in identity politics and political correctness, and therefore, in the eyes of *#GamerGate* proponents, would be a threat to freedom of expression (2018: 2). In their analysis of SJWs as derogatory caricatures, they point to three main traits of the SJW: The SJW has a body that deviates from the binary norms of cisgender male or female (ibid.: 531-32), a fundamentally different, namely "emotional rather than rational brain" (ibid.: 533) and is ultimately sick and monstrous. The latter can be seen in memes that show the SJW as afflicted with tumors or viruses, or that even show them as a tumor or virus (ibid.: 537). Ultimately, as Massanari and Chess argue, SJW memes are trying to deny the humanity of the groups caricatured there and reproduce the rhetoric of elimination and genocide (ibid.: 538). They show that SJW memes equate femininity and nonconforming gender presentation with monstrosity by using cancer and other diseases as visual devices.

Building on Massanari and Chess' work, I will analyze two alt-right SJW memes and pay attention to how divergences from heteronormativity and compulsory abled-bodied and -minded-ness are co-constructed (see McRuer 2006) visually, and what role ideas of infections play in the selected memes. For reasons of space, I am focusing on memes that equate feminism with cancer and refer to Massanari and Chess for a close reading of memes that work with visual depictions of viruses. The first meme features faces of existing persons and is therefore not embedded.

Fig. 1: Shave Your Head for Social Justice. Source: Internet Search[3].

[Image description: Two photos show two white people presumably in their 20ies with shaved-off hair. The left person has a greyish-looking pale face and their gaze turned slightly downwards; a locker behind them suggests a location such as a hospital. The person on the right is looking slightly upwards and is wearing a colorful blouse and earrings. Their lips are glossy and they are wearing mascara. Behind them is a decorated room. A text across both photos reads in the top: "Shave your head for social justice", and in the bottom of the image "so you can look like a cancer patient while being a cancer to society."]

In this meme, the left person is framed as a patient likely situated in a hospital and having had their hair shaved off in response to cancer treatment, while the person on the right is depicted as wearing short hair as a choice. This short hair and the wording "social justice" marks the femme presenting person on the right as a feminist, while the person on the left mostly serves as a reference image for a sick person, manifest in the naming of the meme "a cancer patient". The written message of the meme addresses feminists who do not have cancer, asking them to voluntary shave off their hair to look like what the meme suggests they already are: "a cancer to society". This phrasing mocks the person on the right, suggesting that they look sick, while further claiming that they themselves and people who share their beliefs regarding social justice are a disease that affects not bodies, but society as a whole. As discussed in the previous section by drawing on Sontag's

[3] https://funnyjunk.com/Cancerous+sjws/funny-pictures/6349564/ (last accessed 27.11.2021).

work, the idea that someone is a "cancer to society" is a metaphorical usage of cancer that depicts them as destructive and unwanted.

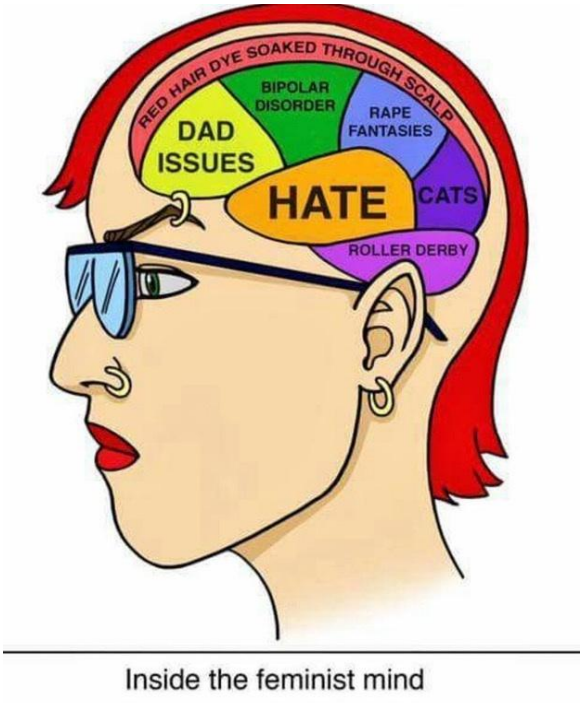

Fig. 2: Inside the feminist mind. Source: Internet Search[4].

[Image description: An illustration with defined black outlines and flat coloring depicts a person's head from hair to neck in a sideview cross-section that allows insight into their brain. Below is a line separating the image and from short description that reads: "Inside the feminist mind". The depicted person has light beige skin and is wearing glasses, red lipstick, and three piercings: one in their eyebrow, on in their ear, and one in their nose. The hair of the person is red. The brain is visually split into seven sections, each labeled. Underneath the red hair is a red section that reads "Red Hair Dye Soaked Through Scalp". Of the other areas, "Hate" is labeled in the largest font. The rest of the sections read in a capitalized font: "Dad Issues", "Rape Fantasies", "Cats", and "Roller Derby".]

This meme, posted on *reddit* under the title "Feminism is cancer" in 2017, equates a feminist's mind with their brain and provides labels for what is supposedly going on in various brain regions. Stereotypically, the feminist has some space in their brain reserved for roller derby and cats. One layer of their brain consists of hair dye only, which suggests that the habit of using hair color has caused brain damage. Further, the feminist is depicted as having bipolar disorder, as having problems in relationships to men because of past experiences with their father, and as holding rape fantasies. The space reserved for "bipolar disorder" is visually directly wedged between "dad issues" and "rape fantasies", which positions bipolar disorder in a highly stigmatizing way. Only one area of the feminist's brain is reserved for emotion, and the chosen emotion is hatred. The meme follows the trope of the angry, men-hating, and mentally ill feminist with unresolved personal issues and a hidden desire to be subsumed by patriarchal violence. The habits and political beliefs of feminists are linked to their different brains, and the context in which the meme appeared – which links feminism with cancer – suggests that the kind of brain shown in the meme is disordered, all while presented in a cultural setting that understands neurodivergence, such as bipolar disorder, and sickness, such as cancer, as wrong.[5]

The idea of 'infections' is core to these depictions: The displayed memes do not just show an individual SJW with a supposedly different brain and body. Visually encoded is also the idea that feminist beliefs which are linked to the mental state of the SJW will 'spread' like cancer if not eliminated. Feminism and other hallmarks of social justice are framed as able to modify mental and bodily configurations with the result

[4] https://www.reddit.com/r/dankmemes/comments/5qkhjk/feminism_is_cancer/ (last accessed 30.05.2022).

[5] I am writing this text from a position that refuses stances that wish to rid queerness of the stigma of mental illness and neurological difference/disability and, instead, work towards dismantling how heteronormativity and compulsory abled-bodied and minded-ness are co-constructed (see McRuer 2006), to figure how anti-queer and ableist sentiment can be challenged together. For suggestions of coalescing trans* and autistic theorizing read MELT (Britton & Paehr). Con(fuse)ing and Re(fusing) Barriers, A Peer Reviewed Journal, 2021, https://aprja.net/article/view/128188 (last accessed 27.11.2021).

that those 'afflicted' with them end up with different brains. And of course, the equation of social difference with being diseased or being a disease only makes sense when understanding life with a disease as less livable.

Echoes of SJW Memes with National-Socialist Propaganda

By drawing the SJW as cancer or a virus, *#GamerGate* and other right-wing groups stand in a long tradition of anti-Semitic, ableist and racist propaganda. A flyer from the collection of the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* names a variety of diseases that are also referenced in the two epidemiological sources of the meme report, for instance syphilis and cancer.

Fig. 4: NS Propaganda depicts Jewish people as cancer. Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of Rudy Appel[6].

[Image description: A flyer painted with watercolors shows various font and picture elements on a dark gray background. Next to the words "Tuberculose", "Syphilis", and "Cancer", a white person wearing white medical attire including a face mask is looking through a microscope. Below on the left side is a round cutout that shows what is visible through the microscope: A crab-like entity in orange with six legs and two claws has a human face featuring a large and hooked nose, big teeth, brown hair, and eyes without pupils. The claws are holding a piece of something that resembles tissue or skin, and the teeth are biting into it. Next to this depiction, a font reads in capital letters: "sont guérissables… Il faut en finir avec le plus grand des fléaux: le Juif." Like the names of the above diseases, "le Juif" is written in white lettering with red outlines, while the rest of the text appears in white without outlines.]

Translated from French, the text reads: "Tuberculosis, syphilis, cancer are curable… It is necessary to finish the biggest curse: the Jew!" The human face of the creature that is chewing on cellular tissue is marked by means of the anti-Semitic visual code *par excellence* for marking a face as Jewish, the large, hooked nose (Gilman 1994). Visually, the red outlines of the lettering link the names of the diseases with what the flyer calls "the Jew". As the website of the *U.S. Holocaust Museum* explains, the flyer builds "upon centuries-old anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews as dirty and vectors of disease".[7] The flyer depicts Jewish people as a disease and a curse, while suggesting that this 'disease' is affecting healthy tissue. Found by Rudy Appel between 1942 and 1945 in wartime France, this flyer remains a horrible reminder of stereotypical anti-Semitic visuality and the violence of depicting social groups as diseases. Other archived artifacts confirm that NS propaganda routinely relied on this logic, as for example another poster refers to their enemies as the plague.[8] Many of the archived flyers and posters were shared widely and publicly, calling to attention that "abject images of racialized others were 'viral media' long before the internet" (Nakamura 2014).

Diseases and divergences from abled-bodied and -mindedness in NS visual propaganda come to signify needs for elimination, which becomes most clear in the National Socialist representations of disabled and sick people: On one propaganda poster, composite photographs of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities are accompanied by the sentence that

[6] https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/artifact/antisemitic-poster (last accessed 30.05.2022).

[7] https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn4822 (last accessed 30.05.2022).

[8] https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1123134 (last accessed 30.05.2022).

"The National Socialist State in the future will prevent people whose lives are not worth living from being born."[9] Another poster features photographs of disabled adults with the statement "Hereditary loaded, inferior and terminally ill."[10] Seeing these photos of disabled people was supposed to convince the viewer that the lives of the depicted were worthless. These eugenicist sentiments were mirrored in NS discourse, for example in the demands for a "healthy Volkskörper" (see Graf / Schiefeneder 2020), and they were violently actualized.

Social justice warrior memes re-articulate an equation that was also made by National-Socialist propaganda: the equation of social groups with viruses and cancer and the framing of disabled and sick life as less worthy – with thoughts of elimination not far away. It is conspicuous that the authors of the report examine memes without thematizing the intertwining of the histories of the meme and of the alt-right movement. Epidemiological ideas of 'infections' are not only used in research *on*, but above all *within* right-wing and radicalized online contexts.

Towards Other Metaphors

An analysis of the suitability of immunological metaphors for digital communications needs to consider that images that equate social groups with infections, diseases, and viruses were constructed and distributed long before the internet, and with the intent of dehumanizing and eliminating the depicted groups. In the memetic continuation of image practices that engage infections, depictions of sickness and disability are employed in ableist ways to degrade social groups such as feminists by either depicting them as disabled, particularly neuroatypical, or by suggesting that the depicted groups look like sick people, most prominently like people with cancer. Disabilities that are not based on infections and that factually cannot spread between people are rendered as though they could: In the discussed memes, feminism is equated with cancer and is shown to alter a person's brain structure, and because feminism is rendered as being able to 'spread', cancer is depicted as able to 'spread' between people too.

What then does it communicate to disabled and sick people that all the language available for the sharing of images online draws on 'virality', or as suggested in the report, even 'infections' and 'treatment'? Cyrée Jarelle Johnson warns in hir essay *Disease is Not A Metaphor* (2014) about "re-entrenching able-bodied supremacy in language", and through powerful rhetoric repetitions of what the sick and disabled body will not do in language for nondisabled people, Johnson asserts that "the body will not untwist itself, anti-virus itself, or cover itself up […]". Listening to Johnson means to think with Sami Schalk about how to "adopt a reflective political commitment in which we more diligently interrogate the assumptions that underlie our theoretical practices and more closely consider the implications of the words we use—especially our metaphors—in order to prevent further marginalization of disempowered social groups […]" (2013).

As I conclude this paper, I would like to leave you with some suggestions of writing and speaking otherwise about the sharing of images online. None of these are 'solutions' to the dominance of immunological metaphors online and in scholarship, but I hope they offer some of the playfulness that may be needed to subvert dominant metaphorical frameworks letter by letter:

Sharing/Distributing: "This meme on autistic joy has been shared/distributed 500 times." / Alt-texting: "This image is so good that it has been alt-texted across multiple platforms." / Commoning: "No one knows where this image came from, but people keep commoning it." / Cultivating: "People keep cultivating this image, and it is starting to flower." / Permeating/Fermenting: "Do you know the meme that permeated the internet yesterday? – Yes, but it's been fermented so heavily that I don't understand it anymore." / Circling: "The meme cir-

[9] https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1146880 (last accessed 30.05.2022).
[10] https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1146881 (last accessed 30.05.2022).

cled around for a few weeks." / Attracting: "I'm studying the attraction of memes on rest." / …

Conclusion

As I have shown, the report *Exploring the Utility of Memes for U.S. Government Influence Campaigns* proposes that opinions present in a "target population" (Zakem / McBride / Hammerberg 2018: 24) can be adjusted by 'infectious' messages communicated via memes. With their research, Zakem, McBride, and Hammerberg tap into a larger pattern in which immunological metaphors are employed to describe how ideas and images circulate online and how their effects on viewers can be understood. While immunology does not suggest an application of its metaphors for the field of digital communication, its reliance on metaphors of war as well as its cognitive paradigm are increasingly and easily picked up in discourses around 'infectious' images and ideas. 'Infections' are a traditional part of the aesthetic vocabulary of anti-Semitism, racism, and ableism, and these ideologies rely heavily on the field of the visual to translate socially produced differences into the viewability of physically visible evidence (Schaffer 2008). This assumed self-evidence of visibility can be questioned through the crip practice of writing alt texts (Coklyat / Finnegan 2020), which as a method provides ways of discussing harmful images beyond the often practiced binary of either erasing or replicating them. As shown in the last section, images that equate social groups with viruses and diseases suggest their elimination. In response to this article's brief insight into NS visual history, I call for a careful evaluation of immunological metaphors in digital communications, particularly in times of a global pandemic that meets social conditions in which predominantly disabled people are left to die from the COVID-19 virus (Office for National Statistics 2021). 'Infections' and diseases are not neutral metaphors, but above all lived realities for sick and disabled people of whom many, particularly trans*, queer, and BIPOC disabled people, experience ableist discrimination. Instead of re-performing equations with diseases, be it of social groups or of communication paradigms, I suggest we find other terms, methods, and imaginations to describe how we share materials online. Instead of viral and visual, let's invent towards other crip-queer sharing terms and practices ☺.

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Insert Anti-Dawkins Meme

A Commentary on the Article by Iz Paehr

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Memes are not alive, and they do not infect anyone. They do not die, reproduce, or spread. There is no immunization against them or the (mis)information they supposedly carry. Cultural ideas and/or political propaganda do not spread like viruses. They do not pour over or pierce through borders. They do not attack, invade, or corrupt host bodies. There is, to bring this enumeration to one possible conclusion, no vaccine against fascism.

These are plain truisms from where I'm sitting, and they render the author's careful intervention into the muddling of immunology and information all the more alarming and acutely important. I don't have much to add to Iz Paehr's insightful tackling of the arguably immense problem that languages about digital information are steeped in metaphors of biology, immunology, warfare, and eugenic tropes of fitness and resilience, of sickness and corruption. T-cells are not combat troops and memes are not viruses.

Besides its forceful argument, the author's intervention points to genealogical questions to further investigate the coupling of biology and information, of medical language and communication. They name Richard Dawkins, who in the 1970s so successfully rhymed "Gene" and "Meme" to cook up the populist notion that culture is made up of "units of meaning" (aka memes) – supposedly subject to mutation, spread, and the law of "survival of the fittest" ideas.[1] Dawkins' fateful invention of the "meme" subjects knowledge and culture to seemingly biological aka "natural" laws, and its popularity arguably disproves the theory itself: that Dawkins is still cited by anyone from the U.S. Department of Defense to the *Critical Meme Reader* (Arkenbout/Wilson/de Zeeuw 2021) demonstrates that truly bad and misleading ideas – such as conceiving of "info" in terms of "bio" – can and do have the most longevity.

Why did Dawkins' malevolent concept endure? If anything, because it was stylistically opportune: It provided military agencies, such as the Department of Defense, with opportunities to update myths of the "national body" assailed by "foreign invaders" for the age of information warfare. Just as the invisible threat of "computer viruses" threatening "home computers" became popular at the height of the domestic AIDS hysteria,[2] the military apparatus keenly adopts Dawkins' language of genes=memes to cloak itself as the immune system of the information-nation: Surveillance of communication becomes resilience of national health, preventing information sickness and corruption of American data. As the author shows, such metaphorology allows to adopt antisemitic and

[1] Richard Dawkins, The Selfish Gene, Oxford University Press 1976.
[2] Casilli, Antonio A. (2010): "A History of Virulence: The Body and Computer Culture in the 1980s." In: *Body & Society* 16(1): 1–31.

xenophobic tropes that national socialism and the eugenics movement had established long before. It further renders the fuzzy concept of "memetic warfare" as some form of "ethical bioweapon" in the information war. The author's examples of alt-right memes – two drops in a virtual ocean of memetic hate-splicings – merely explicate the Department of Defense's point: phrenology and ableist cancer jokes pair seamlessly with antifeminism and add bodily-political insult to military injury.

The last paragraph's intuitive wordplay in the semantic field of *bio-info-war* should demonstrate that metaphors of biology (immunity, virus, spread, infection, cancer) indeed work *too seamlessly* when employed within information systems and defense budgets. This should give pause to any person with a concern for how to do things with words. The author enacts such a pause by deftly turning to Disability Studies, which among many insights tell us that a) the immunocompromised body is everybody's body, and b) that the phantasmatic states of inoculation, immunization, and ultimate resistance against alien agents (or cancer, or fascism, or feminism) serve only to bolster very material regimes of discriminatory policing: between those designated as healthy and those abjected as sick, between native and alien, between worthy and unworthy lives. Such metaphors keep up defense budgets and regulate access to medical insurance.

In this regard, one cannot simply pivot to conclude that *ableism is a virus*, infecting metaphors and material repercussions of everything from far-right antifeminism to Homeland Security to insurance premiums. This commentator, therefore, agrees with the author that other metaphors are highly needed to leave behind languages of eugenic (information) warfare and its material effects. But to do this is no easy task, and the article carefully hints towards alternative metaphors in its last paragraph, suggesting themes and practices of commonality, sharing, distributing: Memes and their circulation are what people do, not what is done to them. It is not this commentary's task to wholly invent other vocabs. But the opportunity to advance the article's forays should be taken, albeit speculatively, by thinking briefly about memes.

In many regards, Dawkins was a nightmare starting point to do that, to think about memes, to think about how ideas or meaning are distributed in digital vernaculars. Because instead of functional "units of cultural meaning" (such as genes are thought to be units of biomeaning), memes point to a different way of conceptualizing information – namely that of unlikely navigational acts in digital archives. Take only one of the alt-right meme examples the article mentions: It navigates past scientificking (racist phrenology) and present antifeminist/misogynist stereotypes (red hair dye,[3] Roller Derby, daddy issues), jamming them together in one complex image to articulate a point that is more affective than informative: all feminists are women*, and all women* are pathologically – not politically – minded. Where Dawkins would find a "unit of cultural meaning" in this assembled invective is a polemical question and beside the point: the meme stages a meeting of disparate visual archives (phrenological typification of brain areas, catalogue of misogynist tropes) to reshape its misogyny into an affective point. But such illicit assemblage or pairing of information repositories (image, text, genre, clusters of meaning) is what every meme enacts, its function being precisely not "meaning," but staging an *information overload* to trigger an affective response. The function of the meme is not the meaning, but the overload: the joke, the insult, the outrage, the affective surcharge.

Iz Paehr inventively deals with such overload by employing the practice of alt-texting, innovated by disability activists online: Instead of showing images and memes (offensive or otherwise) and thus replicating potentially toxic ef-

[3] "Red hair dye" is itself a distillation of another antifeminist meme, a heavily shared image and video of a Canadian woman* arguing at a demonstration in 2013: Sporting red hair, Chanty Binx was filmed engaging a group of so-called "men's rights activists," and has since become a popular stand-in for the online trope of the "obnoxious feminist," archived under the monicker "Big Red." Cf. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/people/big-red (last access: 12.12.2025)

fects, the article chooses to describe what is seen. Alt-texting circumvents the alt-right logistics of affective overload and transmutes pictorial insult into textual sequence: The surcharge is dispersed in a series of semantic approximations, the visual shock cut down to grammatical size. This technique registers less in the tradition of *Ut pictura poesis* than it spells out a slowing-down strategy that refuses the shock tactics of memetic warfare and undercuts the indeed *reactionary* triggers that an imagery of "Feminism is Cancer" enacts: When memes try to force instant reactions (humor, revulsion, confusion, offense), alt-texting deciphers what is (or is not) reacted to. Alt-texting inserts a literal pause, breaking down the instantaneous (Dawkinsian) jumps from information to image to disabled body to biological pathology to political injury (from Gene to Meme, from Feminism to Cancer).

The author ties their alt-text intervention explicitly to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's critique of "the politics of staring" (2009), and thereby stresses the political undercurrent of both memes that expose disabled bodies (such as cancer patients) for shock value, and the larger logistics of "enfreakment" that govern visibility regimes around such bodies.[4] By cutting into the overload – where medicine, pathologization, dehumanization, freakishness, and political insult are heaped together to constitute a deeply eugenic and warlike meme (Feminism is Cancer) – one particular effect is achieved: The various partaking archives (cancer, feminism, haircutting, protesting, medical treatment) become discernible and the memetic acts of assemblage and circulation are opened to critique. Navigational agency is regained in an environment designed to overwhelm. Critique becomes possible because movement is possible.

The author is cognizant of disability activists' thoughts on accessibility vis-a-vis exclusionary information systems, and what Gracen Brilmyer and Crystal Lee dubbed "crip legibility" – referring both the demand for more legible digital environments (e.g. for blind or neuroatypical users) and to the enforced legibility that information systems often impose on crip bodies.[5] Their article presents a valid and important counterstrategy to memetic overload, its exclusionary and pathologizing mechanics, and also its military-eugenic use value, which defense departments and neofascists so excel at exploiting in order to jam critical movements. "Infectious Ideas" provides a brilliant starting point for further necessary critiques of how information systems operate, are operated by eugenic, military, and fascist agents, and how critical strategies of slowing-down, de-jamming, and making legible should put disability studies at their center.

[4] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How we look*, Oxford University Press 2009.

[5] Brilmyer, Gracen, & Lee, Crystal (2023). "Terms of use: Crip legibility in information systems." *First Monday*, 28 (1) (Original work published January 16, 2023).

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Working Paper Series 2026, Volume 1

Sylvia Sadzinski

Discomfort, Disruption, Disgust. Queer Feminist Curating and the Affective.

With a Commentary by Jenny Tyburczy

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Sylvia Sadzinski
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Discomfort, Disruption, Disgust.

Queer Feminist Curating and the Affective

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Abstract

This article examines how queer feminist curating operates through affect, emphasizing discomfort, disruption, and disgust as politically productive forces. Drawing on affect theory and queer theory, it positions the curatorial as a critical practice that unsettles normative regimes and destabilizes entrenched power relations. Through analysis of the exhibitions *Fat Femme Furious* by Julischka Stengele and *Und ich hab schon wieder Hunger/You make me very hungry* by Lisa Holzer, the article demonstrates how negative affects reveal internalized social norms regarding bodies, gender, care, and visibility. Rather than mitigating dissonance, queer feminist curating can strategically mobilize affective responses to expose hegemonic structures and cultivate spaces for various marginalized communities. Affect thus functions as both a methodological lens and a mode of cultural critique, enabling reflection on representation, spectatorship, and the transformative potential of exhibitions within contemporary social contexts.

Keywords
Queer Feminist Curating; The Curatorial; Queer Feminist Exhibition-Making; Affect Theory; Negative Affects; Queer Affects; Body Politics; Fat Activism; Care

"One thing that we can do in the arts
is to disturb the comforted and
comfort the disturbed."
Alvina Chamberland

"We may never touch queerness,
but we can feel it as the warm illumination
of a horizon imbued with potentiality.
We have never been queer,
yet queerness exists for us as an identity
that can be distilled from the past and
used to imagine a future."
José Esteban Muñoz

Curating & the Curatorial

Over the past twenty years, questions about the role of the curator have gained more and more relevance and publicity within the world of art, culture and beyond. Simultaneously, the notion of curating has widened; nowadays almost everything seems to be curatable — our social media feeds and playlist, our wardrobe and the food we eat. Curating is therefore no longer the preserve of curators and limited to the arts (Tyżlik-Carver 2017). At the same time, curating is understood within the arts as much more than the activity of putting together, selecting, showing or presenting. Within the concept of the curatorial, the curator is no longer seen as an administrator of art, caretaker for collections or invisible organizer, but a person who takes up discourses and, at the same time, shapes and expands them.[1]

Curating and the curatorial have become two different things. While the first one can be described as exhibition-making, the latter is, among many other things, "a more viral presence consisting of signification processes and relationships between objects, people, places, ideas, and so forth, that strives to create friction and push new ideas" (Lind 2012: 20).

The concept of the curatorial can be defined as a practice that goes beyond the mere making of an exhibition and beyond the exhibition itself. It reflects, generates and conveys themes, issues and knowledge, unites and can be found in practices, formats and aesthetics. Thus, the curatorial and the curator are attributed a specific sociopolitical relevance within contemporary society. Maria Lind imagines "this mode of curating to operate like an active catalyst, generating twists, turns, and tensions — owing much to site-specific and context-sensitive practices and even more to various traditions of institutional critique" (Lind 2009: 103). Irit Rogoff claims that the curatorial has the capacity of bringing together "the necessary links between collectivity, infrastructure and contemporaneity [by] working simultaneously in several modalities, kidnapping knowledges and sensibilities and insights and melding them into an instantiation of our contemporary conditions" (Rogoff 2015: 48). Therefore, it becomes clear that the curatorial is political. It has its conditions, procedures and rules and it "cannot be separated from divergence and dissent" so that for Lind it becomes "a set of practices that disturbs existing power relations" (Lind 2009: 103).[2] For her, the curatorial is trying to seriously answer the self-reflective question: "What do we want to add to the world and why?" (Lind 2009: 103).

I began curating regularly in 2012 as part of a curatorial group while also carrying out independent curatorial projects. Since 2017 I have been a full-time curator within institutions as well as an independent curator. Since that time my curatorial practice has had a decidedly queer feminist and emancipatory focus. Because of this, I would answer Lind's question as follows: What I desire to add to the (art) world, among many other things, are exhibitions that make people reflect and feel simultaneously, creating and making space for marginalized positions, thinking critically about the status quo and especially challenging norms. My aim in curating is to actively broaden social discourses by resisting hegemonic narratives and filling gaps in discourse. This means not only naming grievances but actively changing them. I want to make clear that art, society, and politics cannot be considered separately. Curating is also mediating; a mediating between artists and institutions, between art and audience, between theory and practice, between utopia and dystopia.

I find that my curatorial practice is defined more by questions than answers, some of which will be addressed in this text: How can curating

[1] For the history of curating see O'Neill, Paul. 2012. *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s).* Cambridge: MIT Press, Obricht; Hans Ulrich. 2018. *A Brief History of Curating.* Geneva: JRP|Editions.

[2] For more definitions of the curatorial see e.g. von Bismarck, Beatrice (eds.). 2012-2019. *Cultures of the Curatorial.* London: Sternberg Press; von Bismarck, Beatrice. 2021. *Das Kuratorische.* Leipzig: Spector Books; Martinon, Jean-Paul. 2013. *The Curatorial. A Philosophy of Curating.* London: Bloomsbury.

be feminist and queer? How are feminist and queer narratives created by curating? What role does the affective play in a queer and feminist understanding of curating? I would like to reflect on my practice and in turn (re-)embed it in theory. My aim is to show specifically how affect and affect theory can inform the articulation of curatorial processes, the experience of an exhibition, the production of knowledge, and to what extent affects serve the curatorial in a queer and feminist way.

Queerating

Within the framework of and with the curatorial turn, curators repeatedly have become important in framing discourses and are often part of an institutional critique. Therefore, the curatorial can or even should create a particular situation; a situation, where the status quo is challenged and potentially even changed with art, through the curatorial and its specific spaces, contexts and questions (Hoffmann & Lind 2011). Jean-Paul Martinon and Irit Rogoff describe the curatorial as "enactment, dramatization and performance" (Martinon & Rogoff 2015: ix). For them, the curatorial becomes "an event of knowledge" exploring everything "that takes place on the stage set-up, both intentionally and unintentionally" (Martinon & Rogoff 2015: ix). With reference to Martinon and Rogoff as well as Lind, researcher and curator Carolina Rito understands the curatorial as an investigative practice "on the surface" (Rito 2020: 51). This surface is not meant to refer to a kind of superficiality or superficial research, but rather a ground for unexpected methods, for articulating ideas and connecting them with images, moving across disciplines and formats. Here, the curatorial "finds new ways of engaging with urgent and current issues and their figurative affects" (Rito 2020: 51). It thus creates knowledge by combining theory and practice, thinking and doing.

Coinciding with this, there has been an increasing debate about forms and methods of feminist and queer curating.[3] In recent years, questions about the 'hows' and the 'whats' of queer curating have become more popular. However, until now, no clear definition has been formulated of what queer curating is or could be. For Jonathan D. Katz and Änne Söll queer curating and queer exhibitions "[...] interrogate the passive position of the viewer and demand active engagement, honest investment, and frank questioning, while also leaving room for unanswered questions, gaps, and fissures" (Katz & Söll 2018: 2). Katz and Söll also refer to participatory or actively challenging exhibitions as queer exhibitions. Artist and museum educator Kerry Downey emphasizes the importance of making messes, of causing chaos and disorder: "Art resides not in the tidy stories of well-placed geniuses who changed the world; art is a practice, it is *how* we resist the stories stuck to us or stolen from us by those who know nothing about me or you. We talk back, make messes, and value each other's acts of creation, no matter small, no matter how weird" (Downey 2019).

Additionally, queer curating can be described as a mode of curating that consciously opposes heteronormative structures in museums and exhibition contexts by, among other things, asking questions about mediation and addressing a queer audience, which is understood as plural and heterogeneous within its queerness (Katz & Söll 2018: 2-3).

In her book *Curatorial Activism. Towards an Ethics of Curating* Maura Reilly defines curating as a potentially activist practice. In doing so, she refers to curatorial strategies that give voice to those who have historically been silenced or ig-

[3] See, for example, Dimitrakaki, Angela & Larry Perry (eds.). 2013. *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press; Krasny, Elke & Sophie Lingg & Lena Fritsch, Birgit Bosold, Vera Hofmann (eds.). 2021. *Radicalizing Care. Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating.* London: Sternberg Press; Molesworth, Helen. 2010. "How To Install Art as a Feminist." In: Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwart (eds.). *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art:* 498-513. New York: Museum of Modern Art; Sullivan, Nikki & Craig Middleton. 2020. *Queering the Museum.* New York: Routledge.

nored as well as to exhibitions that address current political and social issues as curatorial correctives. These curatorial "strategies of resistance" can provoke intelligent debate, disseminate new knowledge, consider a broader range of voices, especially those that have been overlooked (Reilly 2018: 22-23). In a broader sense, curating can therefore be understood not only as political and activist, but also as a form of care or community care and allyship. Curator Binghao Wong proposes the term and concept of 'queerating' as a mode of collective care. For Wong, queer curating or 'queerating' should focus on collaboration and thus strengthen queer communities and kinships as well as collectivity (Wong 2015).

Of all the contemporary engagements within curating and the curatorial, it can be stated that not only should the content of art shows – exhibited the artworks – be of particular interest, but also their mode of display. The important question in processes of queering exhibitions is thus not only what is presented but also how it is presented — and how it is conceived or, more precisely, how it affects people.

Queer Beyond Queer

Feminist scholarship has a long history of dealing with the emotional and the affective.[4] Feminist knowledge offers a way to identify the political in the affective because affect is seen to generate questions about how the world works or, as Sara Ahmed puts it: "[f]eelings might be how structures get under our skin" (Ahmed 2014b). I want to understand affect and emotion in regard to Ahmed as contiguous; "they slide into each other; they stick, and cohere, even when they are separated" (Ahmed 2010: 231).

Feminist engagement with affective politics thus requires attention to the ways in which feelings can (re)produce dominant social and geo-political hierarchies and exclusions. For Ahmed affect is not something personalized that flows between bodies in a generic sense. Rather, some bodies generate different affective responses in a particular context rather than in others. Certain gendered, racialized, sexualized subjects become the objects of others' affective responses. Emotions are a matter of how we come into contact with subjects and objects. Through emotions and affects power is felt and negotiated. Therefore, affects are not seen as something individual or personal, but rather as indicators for social structures and even as possibilities to go beyond the rationally known or assumed; they are a way of feeling and thus experiencing everything which arises from social structures, or the results thereof (Ahmed 2014a: 208).

Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez defines affects as "diffuse and unstructured, immediate bodily (re)actions on energies, sensations and intensities (...)" (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2011) and as "energies that come from encounters that cannot always be grasped in language, but are perceived physically" (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2011). Queer and feminist theory understands emotions and affect as not clearly distinguishable from each other, especially when analyzing forms, structures, and outcomes of discrimination, just as they cannot be separated from materialities and bodies (Dietze/Haschemi Yekani/Michaelis 2012: 193). Positive as well as negative feelings thereby become possibilities of political mobilization (Dietze/Haschemi Yekani/Michaelis 2012: 194).

For example, discomfort is a moment that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as queer. Starting from the statement 'shame on you', Sedgwick develops the concept of a queer performativity by first describing the affect of shame as a disruptive moment of identity-constituting communication. Here, Sedgwick determines queer performativity as a strategy "for the production of meaning

and being, in relation to the affect shame [...] and related fact of stigma" (Sedgwick 1993: 11). She thus identifies a dynamic relationship between identity processes and shame, one that is

[4] With reference to Sara Ahmed, I understand the terms emotions, affects, and feelings to be synonymous describing visceral and relational intensity or sensation.

simultaneously constructive and deconstructive (Sedgwick 1993: 2). This also illustrates something else: while the term 'queer' is commonly used synonymously for LGBTIAQ+ individuals, the theoretical understanding of queer is much wider and more fluid. Thinkers like Antke Engel, Lee Edelman, Fatima El-Tayeb and Jack Halberstam, among others, put the understanding of queer beyond identity politics. They do not only understand queer as a condition or synonym for sexual identities, but also as a term intervening in dichotomies, questioning power structures and referring to marginalized and non-standard positions. Thus, it is a theoretical concept questioning, breaking through and crossing social orders (Hashemi Yekani & Michaelis 2005: 9). There is no clear genealogy or definition that distinguishes or describes queer, but rather its potential multidimensionality and processuality (Hashemi Yekani & Michaelis 2005: 14). Queer can serve as a perspective on hegemonic power structures, power-asymmetrical binaries, and norming processes, from which questions about political, social, economic relations as well as aesthetic representations, can be posed. Accordingly, desire and gender are not the sole focus of the localization of queer. Rather, a queer perspective also points to the gaps within dichotomous notions that play a thoroughly constitutive role not only for discourse on sexuality, but also for further categorizations of identity (El-Tayeb 2003: 137). One of its potentials is thus the deconstruction and destabilization of categories in general. Queer can be located as a potential, an analytical tool, attitude of reception as well as a political and visual practice and a possible critique of norms that does not reproduce the balance of power but questions it.

Accordingly, a queer feminist approach looks critically not only at gender and forms of desire, but also at the entanglements of various power and identity categorizations and their destabilizations. Gender and sexuality and their organization are simultaneously understood as origins and products of power processes, which in turn produce norms and hierarchies (Engel 2001: 348). Because of their critique of identity and politics of exclusion, queer approaches are suited to problematize an intersecting complexity of power structures (Engel/Schulz/Wedl 2005: 10). Queer strategies question ideas of fixed identities and attempt to destabilize dualisms such as the powerful and the oppressed, 'normal' and 'other', and hegemonic and marginal, thus breaking through social norms and power relations. In doing so, they primarily question the concept of normality.

According to Engel, criticism is effective when, first, the premises of given relations are undermined; second, power relations regarding representations and relations to the audience are changed; and third, the understanding of what is seen and understood as political changes (Engel 2010: 75). Queer representations purposefully produce difficulties of acceptance that seek to break down, thematize, and problematize habits of viewing or abandon them altogether. Queer critique does not see itself as universally valid, nor does it not want to be hegemonic or authorized or even adopted by the so-called mainstream. Ideas, discourses and practices are developed and created sub-culturally and are primarily aimed at the queer communities themselves.

As claimed by Jack Halberstam, not even bodies need to be in the focus for a queer-theoretical endeavor. Halberstam rather suggests relieving bodies as preferred representatives of queer politics, to allow other forms of articulation for queer thinking (Halberstam 2005: xx). Accordingly, using queer as a concept might help to address questions around curating and the curatorial.

Fat Femme Furious *and* You make me very hungry*: Discomfort, Disruption, Disgust*

In the beginning of 2019, I curated a show with Vienna-based performance artist Julischka Stengele. Her first institutional solo exhibition called *Fat Femme Furious* was on view in the public and municipal gallery of Berlin's Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg district, the Galerie im Turm.

In installations as well as sculptural, performative, auditory and photographic works, the dynamics of the social gaze, body politics and beauty standards, femininity and femmeness were investigated. For *Fat Femme Furious* the artists and I decided together to use a particular image for press materials and social media. Stengele's photographic work that we chose was *Pig-Up* from 2009*,* representing the artist herself. It was also displayed as a large-scale photographic print on one of the exhibition walls, not directly visible upon entry. It shows a nude white body in a grey surrounding with a plastic pig mask on all fours. The mask is pink and pulled over the whole head. The body stands sideways to us, with its head aligned to the left. The person rests on their fists. Different shades of rose, pink and red on the skin of the body, small veins and hair, dimples and cellulite on the legs can be spotted. The viewer might identify the body as female due to the breasts one can detect and the body might also be described as plus-size or curvy or, in a self-empowering sense, fat.[5] The pig head with an open muzzle is looking in the direction of the viewer who seems to stand a bit above the person with the mask indicated by a slight bird's-eye view. The work's title *Pig-Up* clearly refers to pin-up, which *Cambridge Dictionary* defines as "a picture of an attractive, usually famous person, suitable for hanging on a wall, or a person shown in such a picture".[6] The work mocks this original meaning. By providing a fat naked body with a pig's head, the common designation — you fat pig — something, that fat people often hear from others, is self-empoweringly appropriated by the artist. The person becomes the animal, while remaining a human being. This picture saw a wide reaction and seemed to emotionally affect a lot of people. I received two e-mails from women who wanted to sue me because they felt offended as well as discriminated against. Other negative reactions to this image appeared, prior to the exhibition opening, in the comment sections of social media channels, varying mostly between a vomiting or nauseated emoji. These two most popular emojis used in order to comment on the photograph or the opening itself were expressing disgust. As a curator, I took note of these reactions, moderated or deleted the emoticons in the institutions's social media channels and explained the artist's self-positioning and her activist and self-empowering claim in personal messages and e-mails.

In her book *Ugly Feelings* (2005) Sianne Ngai refers to disgust as "the ugliest of ugly feelings" (Ngai 2005: 335). She explores disgust as the opposite of desire and attraction, as an ugly feeling that "block[s] sympathetic identification" (Ngai 2005: 340). For Ngai then, disgust functions to police societal borders more broadly so that she refers to disgust as the most political of the "minor negative affects." But how can this affective reaction help us define what queer or queer feminist curating might be?

Affect arises through the evaluation of things. In her blog post "Making Strangers" from August 4, 2014, Sara Ahmed investigates how and why some bodies are "judged as suspicious, or as dangerous, as objects to be feared, a judgment that can have lethal consequences" (Ahmed 2014c). Even though Ahmed's main focal point is the white gaze and its related feelings that make a black man become a stranger, some of Ahmed's thoughts are also transferable to supposedly non-normative bodies. For Ahmed, it is the feeling that makes a body and a subject a stranger. Through these feelings that become affective judgements, strangers and bodies become objects, objects that are managed. Therefore, we cannot identify with someone we perceive as disgusting, but neither can we identify with someone we perceive as (a) strange(r). According to Ahmed, certain bodies, e.g. racialized bodies, are already understood as dangerous long before we see them. And so, it is not only the moment of encounter, the mo-

[5] I am deliberately using the term *fat*, which has been appropriated and reinterpreted by and within the fat empowerment and fat acceptance movement since the 1960s. Similar to *queer*, this term is and has been used as a swear word and is supposed to loose its discriminating power through self-appropriation.

[6] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/pin-up, 31.03.2021.

ment of visibility, that creates or triggers the affect. Affects are inscribed in our bodies much earlier through societal assumptions, histories and stereotypes "that come before subjects" and that then, in turn, elicit bodily responses when we encounter the respective other body. She emphasizes by describing the immediacy of bodily reactions as pedagogy: "we learn about ideas by learning how they become quick and unthinking. Somewhat ironically, perhaps, there is nothing more mediated than immediacy" (Ahmed 2014c). Affects as something quick and suddenly appearing can be disturbances or disruptions in our daily life.

Beatrice Miersch refers to moments of curatorial disruption as a strategy of queer curating. She claims that exhibitions do not only take place in the exhibition space itself, but rather already begin outside and before the actual exhibition space — through their media dissemination in the form of flyers, posters, other images as well as reporting (Miersch 2019: 209). For Miersch, queer curatorial strategies, such as disruption, can sustainably change practices of normalization, marginalization and discrimination in the exhibition context (Miersch 2019: 203). Apparently, *Pig-Up* was disruptive and read as provocative. Nevertheless, on the one hand, this reaction programmatically makes certain aspects of the exhibition visible and tangible: the judgmental gaze of others on non-normalized bodies as well as the power of the subjects affected by discrimination to accept and reverse this devaluation and to hold the gaze of other by consciously returning it, projecting back (self-)images and narratives of one's own. Furthermore, on the other hand, and following Linda Åhäll, the reactions towards the image could be described as "the affective-discursive in-between as shared meanings" (Åhäll 2018: 50). Åhäll's methodological approach, which she articulates in her paper *Affect as Methodology* (2018), helps to see how representational gaps can be identified through a moment of affective dissonance. For her, moments of affective dissonance can spark feminist curiosity about gender, agency and political violence (Åhäll 2018: 47). She explains the extent to which this dissonance can be used in a clearly feminist way to highlight norms and their resulting grievances and injustices. Affective dissonance makes societal grievances palpable. For Åhäll, "there is no feminism without affect" (Åhäll 2018.: 38), meaning that the affects we have or experience will demonstrate and indicate how the structures and the world that surrounds us works and functions. The emotional reaction towards the image used as the event picture for Julischka Stengele's *Fat Femme Furious* demonstrates a disruptive moment with regards to bodily and gendered social norms. Culturally and socially shared ideas about what (female) bodies should or should not do or look like are the objects (using Sara Ahmed's term) that affectively moved the audience. What we can see here is a feeling of structure, meaning that societal norms, ideas, and power structures are felt and become perceptible and clear through the affective. We can feel them. Though, depending on our own cultural baggage, we will encounter and feel those structures differently. By using affective dissonance as a methodological tool it is possible to unpack those feelings of structure as political.

In *Fat Femme Furious* we see a fat, potentially female body. In this case, a fat body becomes a queer body through the affective. The affective reaction moves beyond this single individual picture. The nude portrait is simultaneously a presentation, a representation and an exposition. Painfully, the image (and the exhibition) brings the audience face to face with their own internalized fat phobia. *Pig-Up* shows how fat bodies are seen, labeled, and evaluated in our society. Often, they are loaded with stereotypes, shamed and demonized, perceived solely as fat bodies, and sometimes even no longer seen as human bodies.[7] This is what Stengele is playing with, and the affective reactions again prove just that. And as the portrayed artist takes a look back, with and in the mask, confronting the au-

[7] For an introduction into the intersections of fatphobia, misogyny, racism and ableism see Harjunen, Hanele. 2020. 'Neoliberal Bodies and the Gendered Fat Body'. London: Routledge, *Fat Studies Journal*, London: Taylor & Francis.

dience with their feelings, these grievances are revealed.

In tackling regimes of the gaze, the tension between looking and being looked at is brought to the fore. It is the powerful gaze of others that attempts to define and classify us, forming identities and dictating their agency. Judging from the reactions, fat femininity seems to be insulting, threatening and therefore dangerous. Seeing fat naked women's bodies in the media is still a rarity and not a norm – it is strange. The reactions refer to this queer moment. They clarify what does not conform to the norm. They make it clear what a queer moment, a queer aesthetic and the practice of queering with art and curating can mean and be. Not because of the representation, but because of the reactions to that very representation, the body is defined as queer in its real sense.

The press photo for the exhibition, which in the sense of Beatrice Miersch can already be understood as part of the exhibition, is questioning power structures and referring to marginalized and non-standard positions. It opens up a space where discursive and normative preconceptions of desire, beauty, health and gender are made manifest, leading to societal processes of inclusion and exclusion. It is not the pure representation of the body, but the reactions that show, what can be seen and understood as queer. The affective dissonances clearly open up a discursive field of body and beauty norms, of the representation of fat bodies within Western culture, referring to fat activism and fat empowerment. Stengele's solo exhibition *Fat Femme Furious* becomes a queer exhibition not only through the affective reaction of disgust, but also through the irritation and discomfort of the public and the visitors. The pictured body is judged as disgusting and therefore also as dangerous. And while part of the audience might be uncomfortable and feel like throwing up, Stengele is and remains furious through her artworks, when staging herself as a pig-up, handing out pieces of cake with her naked buttocks printed on it to a large number of visitors at the opening of the exhibition, who made it one of the most visited of the year, and with an installation of 32 knives on the pillars of the gallery. Of course, she thereby plays willingly into the hands of the pejorative stereotype of the angry feminist. At the same time, the exhibition was one of the most visited exhibitions of the year at the gallery and created a self-empowering space for queer and feminist communities through the opening night performance and the supporting program, which included film screenings such as *Riot Not Diet* (2018) by Julia Fuhr Mann. Many activists became guests in the gallery who were not otherwise part of the regular audience. The exhibition thus also became a queer exhibition in the sense of Binghao Wong, as it offered queer communities a space for exchange, visibility and care, and thus strengthened communities.

Another exhibition I want to discuss is a solo show by photographer Lisa Holzer called *Und ich hab schon wieder Hunger/You make me very hungry*, which took place at the same gallery in September 2018. Here, it is not disgust, but the moments of discomfort and disruption I want to focus on. For Sara Ahmed a queer potential lies in the feeling of discomfort. She describes discomfort as a moment of disorientation, a feeling of strangeness and tension through experiences of exclusion, isolation and sanction for queer people. For her, discomfort is full of uncertainty, hence productive (Ahmed 2014a: 155). Additionally, Ahmed defines discomfort as an important feminist concept, since feeling uncomfortable and actively expressing discomfort in moments of injustice is one of the motivations and starting points for feminist work, politics and activism which she further elaborates on in her conceptual figure of the feminist killjoy (Ahmed 2017). Bodily and sensory disease indicates that things should or ought to be different. The feminist killjoy does not laugh at or look past sexist as well as racist jokes or behavior. Rather, she points it out and sometimes spoils the mood by causing discomfort after sensing "that something is wrong" (Ahmed 2017: 22). Dwelling on the meanings of discomfort for research and analytic work and with reference to Donna Haraway, Rachelle Chadwick argues, that staying with discomfort "make[s]

you question the world, yourself, and all your cosy and familiar truths" (Chadwick 2021b). In her understanding, discomfort lies in "moments of dislocation and dizzy disorientation" and is not at all enjoyable (Chadwick 2021a: 5), but is, among other things, an "embodied point of rupture" (Chadwick 2021a: 7) that can lead to new ways in the production of knowledge. For Chadwick the politics of discomfort become "integral to the development of inclusive, emancipatory and alternative feminist knowledges" (Chadwick 2021a: 11).

In *Und ich hab schon wieder Hunger/You make me very hungry* Lisa Holzer also creates discomfort — through the press text she wrote herself and through the choice of motifs in her images as well as through the installation, placement and hanging of the photographs, which can be understood as an artistic decision that arose in dialogue with the curator.

The press text mentioned above, which can be understood, with regard to Beatrice Miersch, as part of the exhibition, breaks with common norms of press releases and exhibition announcement texts:

"Photographs of food that was loosely hand-moulded (in an infantile way?). Vanilla and strawberry ice cream, rice pudding with more or less cinnamon (Gautama Buddha's final meal before his enlightenment was a large bowl of rice pudding), richly-tossed butterhead lettuce in pale sepia colours, somehow heaped into figures. To this, add one picture of slightly droopy chrysanthemums, from which the colour green --calming-- is filtered out. The photographs are accompanied by text posters. Green is avoided (negated?) or altered digitally. Green is calming, or at least said to be. Now and then, the rice pudding blushes. Rice and ice cream and butterhead (for the adults?). I bring the flowers.
The funny in the figure of the mother.
Side dishes and desserts – no main course; no middle.
And death or flowers of death, devoid of green.
Bodies are absent. I am not there. I am hungry for your absence. Photography is passive-aggressive, as you might perceive.
It is interesting what comes out of pictures. I like time loops. As a rather loving, motherly, performative gesture, I will reproduce the moulded vanilla ice cream from the pictures at the opening, for the public's pleasure.
_ Lisa Holzer, Berlin and Sikås, summer 2018"[8]

It is written from the artist's first-person perspective and can cause the reader some irritation, as it has several layers, linguistically moving between being descriptive and being associative. In the exhibition space, Lisa Holzer displayed oversized, designed photographs of rice pudding, ice cream and lettuce. These photographs of loosely hand-moulded food, partly in pastel colors, partly in pale sepia, exist alongside remains of vanilla ice cream, fingerprints and candle soot which can be spotted on the glass of the not always fully varnished frames. Some photographs remain without frames, becoming posters attached to the walls with paste. They are put in the strangest corners of the space, hanging crooked or over the walls and corners and sticking out from edges. Another aspect of the exhibition was that all framed photographs are not displayed at eye-level, but depart from the conventions of hanging art works at 1.5 meters from the ground. They are instead arranged to the sight lines of smaller people, e.g. children. Together with the installation work *The Lap of the Gallery/Mother (small site-specificity)* and the text *The Fun in the Figure of the Mother*, these works reflect upon and refer to the mother's role as carer as well as to the invisibility and low social recognition of care work and reproductive labor in general. With the figure of the mother, the figure of the child is in the space too. The role of mother constantly resonates with the role of the child — suggesting that it is the child, ultimately, who creates the mother in the first place. Linguistically and performatively, mother and child cannot be separated from each other, they are mutually dependent. Every mother has a child, every child has a mother. The photographs and the hanging system allow the supposedly infantile and the playful to double-back on one another, simultaneously allowing for a visual immersion of taller adults, too, as they

[8] Exhibition announcement for Lisa Holzer: Und ich hab schon wieder Hunger/You make me very hungry, Galerie im Turm 2018. https://galerie-im-turm.net /you-make-me-very-hungry/, 30.04.2022.

have to bend down to look at the artwork. Without being overtly visible, several bodies are present and palpable in the exhibition space despite their absence: the mother, the caretaker, the child. In particular the hanging of the work, but also the potential banality of the photographs displayed, might create irritation and discomfort. Discomfort refers to the feeling of disorientation when "one's body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled" (Ahmed 2014a: 148). While most of the time we subconsciously feel comfortable or at ease within our surroundings, it is discomfort that can provide information about social norms and rules and reveal itself to be a cipher of codified culture (Ahmed 2014a: 148). Discomfort is therefore a social affect and not only an individual one. In *Und ich hab schon wieder Hunger/You make me very hungry* discomfort refers, on the one hand, to culturally shared ideas about what an exhibition should or should not do, what it should or should not look like. Lisa Holzer's way of presenting and installing her works becomes a practice that disturbs existing power relations as Maria Lind defines them. Within *Und ich hab schon wieder Hunger/You make me very hungry* "curating is not so much the product of curators as it is the fruit of the labor of a network of agents" (Lind 2009: 103) – the artist and the curator together. The display and the motifs point not just towards the conventional 'caring mother' – but broaden this image by dealing with forms of care work. Holzer's mother figure (which is not necessarily female) is humorous, funny, playful and cheerful. However, she may also be prone to and ok with perceived flaws, uncleanliness, and thus may not always conform to a perfect image or ideal.

Conclusion

In this paper, I wanted to explore how curating can be queer and feminist and, particularly, which role the affective plays in a queer and feminist understanding of curating and the curatorial. I have claimed that so-called negative affects can be seen as crucial when describing an exhibition as queer. Queer has been defined as anti-normative, as a term that resist all kind of norms, not only heteronormativity. Rather, the understanding of queer in this paper goes beyond queer. My aim was to clarify that all norms are regulative, and that we can feel those norms or, to be more precise, that the deviation from norms affects us. Deviations move us, disrupt us, make us feel uncomfortable, sometimes maybe even disgusted, make us react repulsively, can cause us to rebel or revolt against them. We can learn or re-learn from negative affects. They point towards what can be understood as non-normative and therefore as queer. This paper further demonstrates that what we might understand and define as queer today, might not be queer tomorrow.[9] What we understand as queer is always bound to time, temporality and space – and in this discussed case of an exhibition also to the audience. Furthermore, *Fat Femme Furious* can also be described as a queer exhibition in the sense how it created a space for feminist and so-called fat activist communities. It created a space and place for queer and feminist communities within the art world by actively questioning societal norms. Taking up the opening quote from artist, writer and activist Alvina Chamberland as well as by academic José Esteban Muñoz, I hope that it has become clear that one thing that we can do through curating is to disturb the comforted and comfort the disturbed and thus, hopefully, make a contribution to pointing out social structures that cause grievances and to changing them at least for a short little warm and illuminated moment.

[9] This concluding sentence was inspired by the title of an exhibition named *What is Queer Today is not Queer Tomorrow*, taking place in the non-commercial Berlin art space nGbK neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst in summer 2014. https://archiv.ngbk.de/projekte/what-is-queer-today-is-not-queer-tomorrow/, 02.03.2021.

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The Queerness of Curation.

A Commentary on the Article by Sylvia Sadzinski

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At the time that I introduced the term "queer curatorship" in an article of the same name in 2013 and then further elaborated the concept in my 2016 book *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display*, the conversation on curating queerly in the museum and other display spaces was only just beginning. Sylvia Sadzinski's article, "Discomfort, Disruption, Disgust. Queer Feminist Curating and the Affective," is now situated within an exciting and varied global engagement with the theory and praxis of queer curatorship. Some of these studies build on the foundational history of exhibiting LGBTQ identity and experience in museums, while others draw from the ongoing search for queer traces in the archives. Sadzinski's article is an important contribution to the growing body of work on queer curatorship, what the author refers to, citing curator Binghao Wong, as "queerating." These display practices extend beyond LGBTQ identity to incorporate a multiplicity of queer bodies and cultures. Following in the footsteps of queer scholars who approach queer as a doing, as a mode of worldmaking, the author's article shows how curating queerly, in both form and content, provides a political, activist, and collective tool for subverting normative exhibitionary logics both inside and outside the walls of the gallery or museum.

Sadzinski's article encapsulates both the potentials and the risks when curating queerly. Based in a long tradition of feminist and queer disruptions in the public sphere, the article outlines the continental discussion on queer curatorship to foreground how affect plays an indispensable role in the creation and reception of museum display. Written from the perspective of a museum curator, Sadzinski offers us the compelling example of her collaboratively curated exhibition *Fat Femme Furious* to analyze how the reception of an exhibition, and particularly the negative affects directed at certain works displayed therein, can determine which bodies "can be seen and understood as queer," to cite the author. For this Berlin-based exhibit, it was the white fat female body as represented in the 2009 photograph *Pig-Up* by Vienna-based performance artist Julischka Stengele that became the main target of disgust for some reactionary museum audiences. Monumentalized as a large-scale photographic print at the exhibition, the curators and artist also decided to use this image to publicize the show. The backlash that ensued highlights how museum displays become controversial often through decontextualized affective responses that stigmatize certain works or exhibitions even before the disgusted viewer enters the space of display. As the author so aptly puts it, "*Fat Femme Furious* becomes a queer exhibition not only through the affective reaction of disgust, but also through the irritation and discomfort of the public and the visitors."

Inspired by *Fat Femme Furious,* curators dedicated to the representation of queer and trans cultures in public spaces would do well to cri-

tique the incorporation of "queer" and "LGBTQ" into mainstream museums and the gentrification of the grittiness of queer and trans experience so as to render it comfortable and palatable to audiences assumed to be straight and phobic. Museums can play a role in countering sex panics and pathologization, the national and foreign policies that help to mobilize them, and their attempts to harmonize diverse sexual cultures into a vanilla and uniform world. Sadzinski's article and exhibition demonstrate how playing with, rather than pushing away, what the author calls "affective dissonance" offers curators a tactic for actively confronting certain publics who deploy affect to surveil and banish queerness from the space of the museum.

In and through this example, Sadzinski's exhibition and article implicitly raise important questions about what kinds of disruptions queer curatorship could perform next. What are the contents and discontents between feminist curating and queerating? How does trans studies, and what we might tentatively call trans curating, disrupt normative viewer assumptions on gender binaries and discomfort certain feminist assumptions on gender liberation? How do we form connections between transnational queer curators to collectively disrupt the nation-state to focus instead on the subnational and the regional? How can we apply the pivotal work of institutional critique artists of color, such as Fred Wilson, Isaac Julien, and Adrian Piper, to forge queer of color curation that upends heterosexism as a core facet of white supremacist display practices? Riffing on the scholarship of Sara Ahmed and José Esteban Muñoz, Sadzinski's article shows how the affective valences of queerness describe potentials, not promises, for the politics and performance of display. What is certain is that queerating, queer curatorship, and queer feminist curating can certainly transit in their own brand of norm-making; and yet, these display practices retain the possibility to discomfort and disrupt by reveling in the negative affects, in the sexiness and the messiness of queerness despite those who would destroy it. An urgent project at any time, no doubt, but one with particular importance as museums once again become 21st-century battlegrounds for the public display of social and cultural difference. We need the discomfort and the disruption of queerating more than ever, and articles such as Sadzinski's serve as potent reminders of what's at stake when we do (and don't) curate queerly.

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(Ren Loren Britton and Iz Paehr)

Archiving the Unstable.

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Archiving the Unstable

MELT 2022
MELT (Ren Loren Britton and Iz Paehr)[1]
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Archiving the Unstable is a video work and image series that experiments with the difficulties of digital volumetric scanning softwares to capture phase transitions between ice, water, and vapor. Water's transformations are formational in times of climate chaos as it freezes, melts, vaporizes, condensates, sublimates, and makes depositions within a temperature range of zero to one hundred degrees Celsius. Properties such as transparency and flow, however, "confuse" 3D scanning apps and photogrammetry software such as 3DF Zephyr and Scandy, resulting in glitch-like images and unfamiliar textures.

Photogrammetry is a digital capturing technique in which one takes a series of photographs of an object from multiple angles which a software then analyzes to compile a 3D model. Because the technology requires stable outlines in order to determine photographically captured positions within 3D space, objects that shift their outlines, such as melting ice blocks, trouble these seemingly simple translations between virtual-real spaces. Instead, the software scanned what was visible through the transparent ice cube such as the cloth that the ice blocks were sitting on. Our experiments left us with distorted 3D landscapes of white-ish irregular structures that only remotely resembled ice.

Working with and in the Vilém Flusser Archive at UDK Berlin during the Vilém Flusser residency 2021, we developed a series of experiments in the space with which we researched the limits of capturability. The images presented here figure instability through the scanning, projection, and remixing of H2O in various states of matter within the archive. Working with the archive as an unstable entity itself which has traveled and exists in various mirrorings, editions, and digital folds, we followed keywords and pathways into Flusser's published, unpublished, and correspondence work. Our experiments resulted in a video work and image series in which filmed footage from the archive meets 3D artifacts as well as poetical text snippets developed in conversation with the texts we were surrounded by in the archive.

Archiving the Unstable puts forward questions around the assumed stability and visibility of objects. What kinds of visual aesthetics can account for the disappearing, the transitional, the ongoing, that which expands categories, that which is not vocal or perceivable by human senses, that which cannot be recorded in a single human life? In present day conditions of hyper surveillance, what can we learn from the ways melting structures evade capture by staying in between categories, thereby enfolding queer potential?

To see stills from the video *Archiving the Unstable*, please visit
https://meltionary.com/meltionary/u.html

Fig. 1: Archiving the Unstable. Image description: On a crumpled dark green background an ice block floats in the middle of the image. Closed captions read: Melting processes fall out of - slide out of - fragment and glitch - traditional images.

Fig. 2: Archiving the Unstable. Image description: Cloudy smoke passes in front of layers of fabric. Closed captions read: transforms polygons into smoke bleeds.

Fig. 3: Archiving the Unstable. Image description: Uneven edges converge upon rectangular hard edges in the middle of the image, smoke shifts the edge of a bulbous projection.

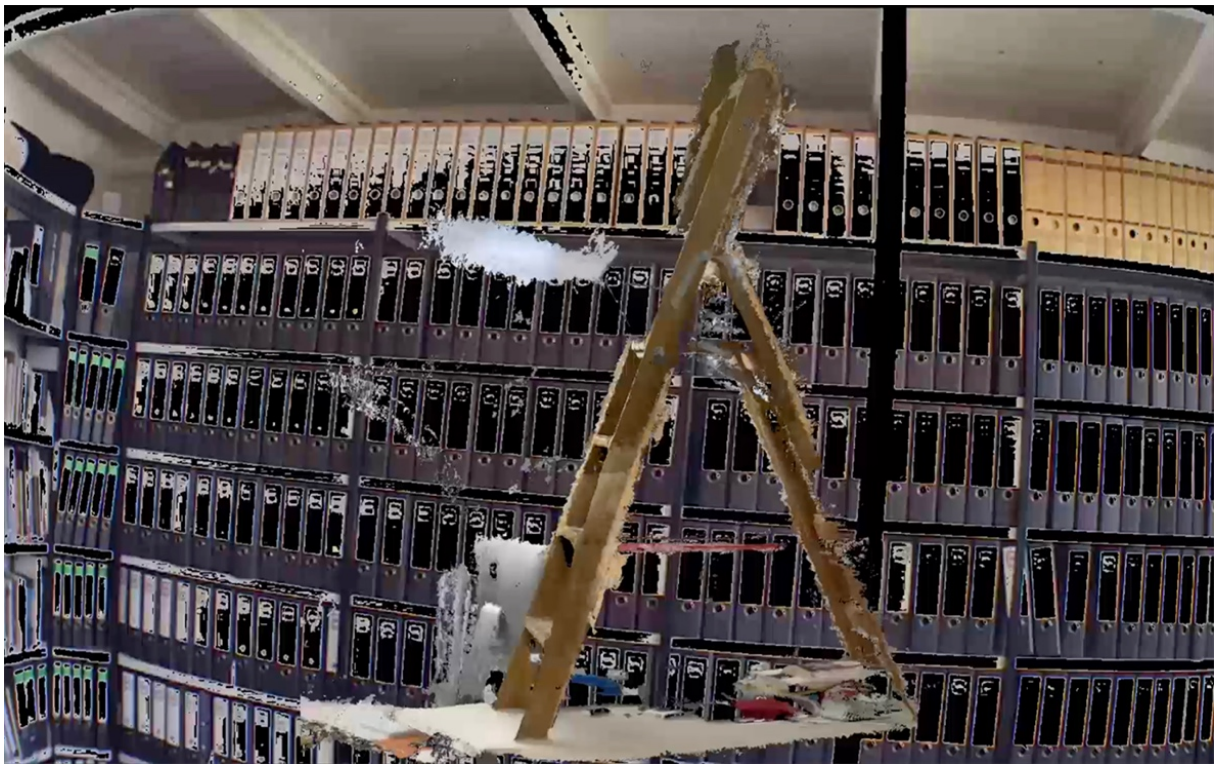

Fig. 4: Archiving the Unstable. Image description: A cut-out ladder hovers in front of a wall full of binders in the archive.

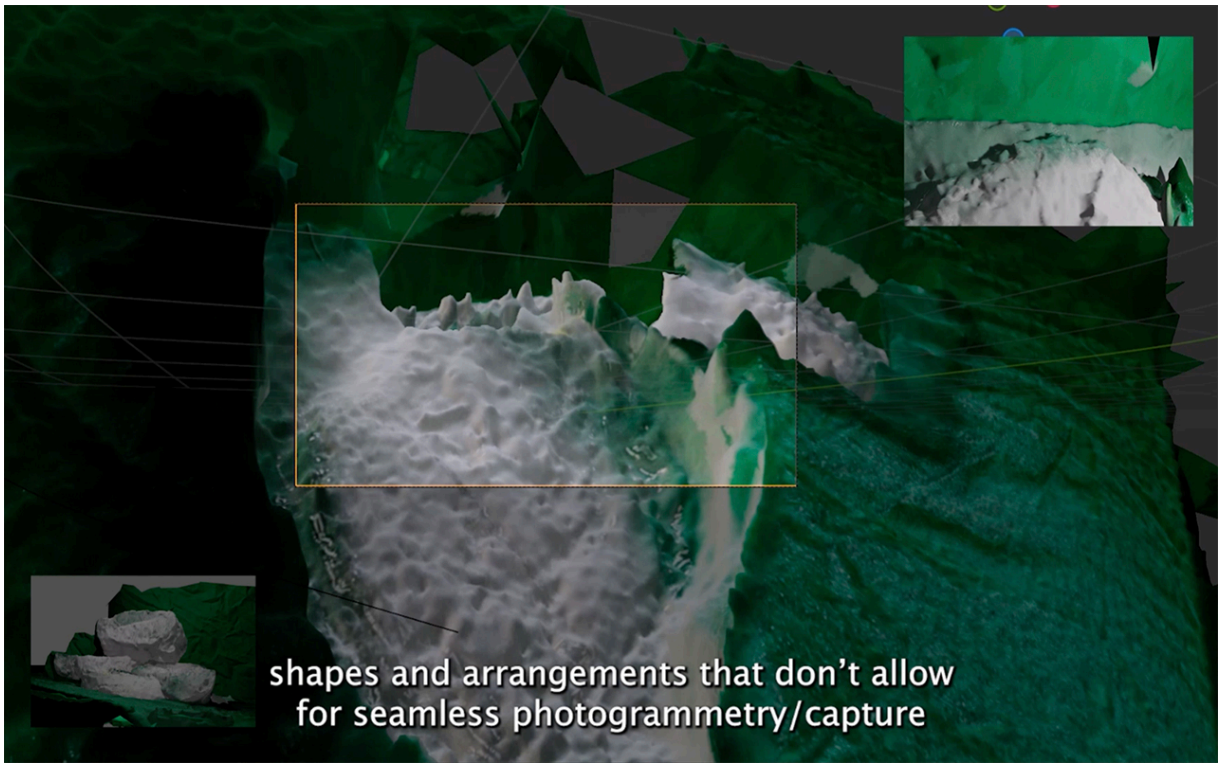

Fig. 5: Archiving the Unstable. Image description: A digitally processed image shows green rolling waves of a green screen with melting ice blocks sitting on it. In the middle a rectangle is drawn over one melting block, resembling a mountain range. Closed captions read: shapes and arrangements that don't allow for seamless photogrammetry/capture.

Fig. 6: Archiving the Unstable. Image description: A digitally composed image of white clay is smushed into forms that evade clear edges. Closed captions read: the bendy-ness of this more sculptural plastic material (clay).

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Sarah Held and Sylvia Sadzinski

Porn as Queer(ing) Feminist Utopia.
Pornotopia Revised.

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Porn as Queer(ing) Feminist Utopia

pornotopia revised

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Abstract

Shown from 31 March to 4 May 2022, the exhibition *pornotopia revised* at Kunsthalle Exnergasse in Vienna explored the interstice of art and post-porn in its visual and material culture. The exhibition showed contemporary works that deal with desire, sexuality, and their representations and demonstrate the grey area between porn and art. Therefore, *pornotopia revised* was not limited to audiovisual explorations: contemporary sculptures, paintings, and video works in the so-called *Porno Plüsch Platzerl [Porn Plush Place]* reflected on narratives and representations of bodies and desire. The overall focus was not primarily on voyeurism or provocation through nudity or sexual acts, but on resistance and emancipation. The artistic works took up moments from porn, queered them or used them, for example, to debate the categorization, sexualization, and objectification of bodies and to question norms around sexuality and gender binary. The exhibition deliberately played with readings and aesthetics between so-called high and low culture, between trash, kitsch, and minimalism, between analogue craft and digital expression.

Keywords
Queer Feminist Curating; Queer Feminist Exhibition-Making; Sexuality; Post-Porn; Bodies; Desire; Emancipation

Porn as Queer(ing) Feminist Utopia. pornotopia revised

Unlike mainstream pornography, which addresses and imagines the heterosexual cis man, the majority of the exhibition space of *pornotopia revised* was taken up by women* and non-binary artists – not an easy task, since a gay male* gaze tends to dominate this thematic area within contemporary arts, too. Playful, humorous, figurative, or abstract, yet always emancipatory – the works on display referred to the pornographic moment through material and form. They resisted above all female* stereotyping, reflected on questions of society and taboo as

well as intimacy and subversion, and thus challenged the genre of pornography itself. The works became a tool of defense against the male* gaze and its apparent inescapability. Thus, *pornotopia revised* proved to be an actual utopia of resistance in the sense of Paul B. Preciado, where normative codes and conventions of gender, sexuality, and bodily practices were changed and new perspectives emerged, staging and enabling feminist empowerment and the appropriation of porn and art in equal measure.

Melanie Bonajo's video work *Night Soil – Economy of Love* (2015), for example, follows a central idea of the exhibition. It is part of the *Night Soil* trilogy, in which Bonajo documents activist movements that oppose capitalist and patriarchal structures. *Economy of Love* portrays a group of sex workers in Brooklyn who see their work as a way of reclaiming power in a male*-dominated field and reordering conventions and notions of intimacy. In a world where even orgasms are still unfairly distributed between men* and women*, sex is used as a tool for political and social change in relation to sex work, gender roles, and a mutual respectful understanding. Across from Bonajo's work, on the other side of the room, a textile work by Berlin-based artist Jonny Star was installed. The wall hanging and the first work from the series *Free Your Soul* looks like a pin-up tapestry. Images from gay magazines of the 1970s and 1980s are enlarged, framed by colorful floral fabrics and embroidered with Swarovski jewels. This female* gaze on gay sexuality shows how closely kitsch and porn can be interwoven.

The supporting program consisted, among other works, of the film series and lecture performance *Pimmel Porn Protest* [*Plonker Porn Protest*]. The aim of the lecture, which we have shown (inter-)nationally since 2016, is to make clear that pornography can be more than a mere tool for masturbation: a form of politics, critique, and protest. As an activist and subcultural practice and as an artistic strategy, porn can challenge social norms around sexuality and the body beyond the mainstream. Here, films were presented that negate the classic triad of flat-out erection, wild penetration close-ups, and cum shots. Films that represent a diversity of bodies and sex practices, yet without being misogynist, but pleasurable for all parties involved. Films that reflect on gender stereotypes and traditional ideas of sexuality and break with them. After screening the films together on stage, we always initiate semiotic research with a critical reading of the narration of sexuality, gender, and desire within the film; at the same time, the emancipatory character of pornography is discussed. We see ourselves as porn critics who analyze what is shown like a literary duet. For us, pornography is a cultural product that is not destined to vegetate in a filthy corner. With *Pimmel Porn Protest*, alternative forms of pornography are presented to a broader audience to enable a general confrontation with the medium as well as to free it from taboos. We want to show how versatile an artistic and alternative approach to the genre of pornography can be and whet the appetite for a self-determined as well as playful examination of sexuality and its cinematic visualization. Viewing and discussing explicit films together is an emancipatory act in itself – against shame and stigma.

Fig. 1: Installation View, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.

Fig. 2: Sophia Süßmilch, f.l.t.r. Selbst ist die Frau, Broiler, It's a cosmic joke we got that for, 2017, oil and acrylic on canvas, 24 × 18 cm, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.

Fig. 3: Urara Tsuchiya, Daisy chain with a chimpanzee, 2020, glazed ceramic, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.

Fig. 4: Installation View, front: Zoë Claire Miller, The genitals must be deterritorialized, 2022, glazed ceramic, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.

Fig. 5: Installation View, Porno-Plüsch-Platzerl, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.

Fig. 6: Installation View, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.

Fig. 7: Installation View, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.

Fig. 8: Installation View, f.l.t.r. Pauline Canavesio, Memory Bust, 2020, silicone, wax, nylon, textile; Pauline Canavesio, Fire left on my skin is named after you, 2020, silicone, ceramic, textile, hair, lacquer, porcelain; Jonny Star, Free Your Soul 1, 2014, pigment print on fabric, fabric, Swarovski beads, fur; Zoë Claire Miller, The genitals must be deterritorialized, 2022, glazed ceramic; Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.

Fig. 9: Installation View, f.l.t.r Anna Ehrenstein, Laika Tamara, 2020, sublimation print on polyester, burnt PVC fabric, metal; Melissa Steckbauer, Untitled, 2021, inkjet print on coloured paper, cut; Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.

Fig. 10: Jonny Star, Free Your Soul 1, 2014, pigment print on fabric, fabric, Swarovski beads, fur; Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.

Fig. 11: Installation View, f.l.t.r. Juli Schmidt, I always say one thing at a time, 2022, inkjet print; Christa Joo Hyun D'Angelo, It's complicated, 2019, 3-phase flashing neon; Antigoni Tsagkaropoulou, Clara, 2018, Plush, lacquer; Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.

Fig. 12: Installation View, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.

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William J. Simmons

Getting the Opie We Deserve.

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Getting the Opie We Deserve

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Abstract

This essay jumps off from two canonical texts in its reading of recent work by the queer-feminist contemporary photographer Catherine Opie: "Wide Open Spaces" by the American country band The Chicks and "Getting the Warhol We Deserve: Cultural Studies and Queer Culture" by Douglas Crimp. Part experimental nonfiction, part art history, part queer theory, "Getting the Opie We Deserve" invites projection and over-reading. It is as much about Opie's work as it is about the queer project of hysterical investment and juxtaposition. Following the example of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, José Esteban Muñoz, Maggie Nelson, and Anne Carson, the present work is another pole in the ongoing project of decentering established modes of critique.

Keywords
Catherine Opie; contemporary art; queer formalism; Andy Warhol; Charlotte Brontë

Many precede and many will follow
A young girl's dreams no longer hollow
It takes the shape of a place out west
But what it holds for her, she hasn't yet guessed

The Chicks, "Wide Open Spaces" (1998)

It is true that Catherine Opie is a queer artist, or an artist who is queer, or an artist who has been interpolated into a queer/feminist art history in response to a paucity of representation. So, when she presents to us with photographs that do not contain queer bodies or discernable markers of queer subcultures, the impulse must be to "queer" the already queer genres of landscape, the road trip, modernist architecture, leaving home and becoming someone else who is free of life's everyday traumas, getting everything you ever wanted and not having it be enough because you must, at times, walk beside blue streams alone, etc. To fail to queer Opie's genres outside of portraiture, we worry, might mean that we are allowing a queer artist or ourselves to engage in universalism, which by nature is not oppositional, political, deconstruc-

tive, or progressive. Above all, universality is kitsch. It is a problematic relic of erasure that forms the core of activism for moderate liberals, or even the golden desolation of Joan Didion's account of the West (for to allow women to speak universally would be too great a post-modern sin). How could we reconcile Opie's sublime windows and mirrors and mirror-like bodies of water as being akin to the masculine, Romantic grandiosity of, say, Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) or the quintessentially English nostalgia of John Constable's *The Hay Wain* (1821)? How can we argue sincerely for such a comparison when the prevailing tendency is still to equate queer artists with straight ones so that queerness might have art historical, formalist import outside of a set of erotic practices? Equally, kitsch is the notion that things need to be queered, since we know that everything is already queer (admittedly its own appeal to universality). Opie's later work, awash in archetypally wide-open spaces, offers us a look at freedom, which is certainly a political category, but it is also an emotional arrangement outside and within the specificity of otherness or so-called subcultures. It is the stuff of a country song or a novel. It is a need for a sense of humanity that perhaps only exists in Romantic reverie, or a daydream undertaken while a cool breeze alights on your skin.

In an essay about Andy Warhol, but more squarely about destructive in-fighting on the Left, the late Douglas Crimp (Opie's photographic subject and collaborator) wrote in 1999: "Perhaps a lasting Warhol effect has been to make possible expansive approaches to contemporary art more generally, or at least to those contemporary art practices that insist upon their articulation with broader social practices" (Crimp 1999: 50). The same could be said of Opie, her expansion of contemporary art itself a landscape. Still, when Crimp was writing this essay and into the present moment, social engagement has been made to oscillate between hyper-individual over-identification with otherness and a pervasive sentiment that the visual culture of otherness is insufficient, requiring us to compare the work of queer artists to canonical non-queer artists.

Art historian Hal Foster, cited in Crimp's essay, argues spitefully against a political/social/sympathetic Warhol, the sad and gay Warhol so desperately needed by many of us (Foster 1996: 130). Foster concludes that "this reading of Warhol as empathetic, even engagé, is a projection" (ibid.). Art, however, and not just queer art, is *only* a projection. In Opie's photography, windows, mirrors, horizon lines, gleaming abstractions, and horses (we should never neglect horse girls in art historical discourse) are the ultimate sites of projection because they remind us melodramatically that there is something further, farther, out there to which we can look forward. And we deserve that because we deserve to want life. Optimism might be the ur-projection, but without it, there is only death and no gloaming or swans, no finding ourselves, our queer and non-queer selves, in a chemical emulsion upon paper.

In the same period as our male Romanticists Friedrich and Constable, Emily Brontë wrote a poem called "Stars," which the late Ingrid Sischy lovingly quoted in reference to Opie's work:

> *Thought followed thought—star followed star,*
> *Through boundless regions on;*
> *While one sweet influence, near and far,*
> *Thrilled through, and proved us one!*
> *(Brontë 2018: 538)*

Yes, there are binary colonial metaphors of nearness and farness here that are also endemic to photography (and Didion and country music). But, for Opie, movement is always a moving-with and not moving-to. That oneness – that image of beautiful, crying teens proclaiming their distanced love under the light of the same star – is Opie's medium. For wandering, following in search of something beyond and in addition to subcultural specificity is our mandate, and it cannot be a reluctant one. It is not a matter of queering everything, for who is to say if Opie's use of a certain medium or genre is

queerer than any other deployment thereof, since queer bodies and the queer identity of the artist cannot be, forensically, the only signs of queerness.

For example, one might recall that the widely influential queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's dissertation and first book, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, was on Gothic literature (including the Brontës) and only became "about" the ghosts of the AIDS crisis in the revised 1986 version. Sedgwick and Opie are and have been queer all along, but it is also important to maintain that our icons need only be queer when they want to be, just as throwing open the dusty curtains of your ghost-filled mansion might reveal a storm or sunshine. We might see a girl who remains patriarchally confined or that same girl riding through the moors into a new life. Sedgwick calls revisiting her past work an instance of the "palpableness of individual and of institutional…representation" (Sedgwick 1986: v.), and if Opie's recent work is maybe a recent, edited retrospective of a certain modality outside of what is expected from her, we could say the same of her photography. Opie feels the tissue between and among one and many, an empathetic gesture, and in so doing asks us to touch and feel where we, as queer people, may wish to appeal to the sometimes cold and hard flesh of universality. For a mirror reflects everything before it, be it one or a multitude, and so, too, does the camera.

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