

Faking It: Notes on Interpretation

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John Tagg argues that "for most people, photography is primarily a means of obtaining pictures of faces they know" (35). This activity makes photography "a middle brow art" in Pierre Bourdieu's analysis: a democratic image making process which affirms social stereotypes. Photography becomes an active agent "in the collective fantasy of family cohesion" (Krauss 19), and so the study of photography becomes a kind of sociology of identity and all the misconnaissance that this entails. According to Bourdieu, photography "is most frequently nothing but the reproduction of the image that a group produces of its own integration" (qtd. in Krauss 19).

Although Polixeni Papapetrou's queer family transgresses the patriarchal, heterosexual unit in some respects, it is also circumscribed by ideas of cohesion and integration. The structural analysis of the body, as an inscribed surface upon which discourses of power collide, and the agency of both photographer and subject, as they write their own desires on the body, converge in these photographs.

The transsexuals and transgenderists pictured here are simultaneously transgressive and affirmative of social codes. The desire to 'pass' as the other gender does not, in itself, transgress conventional binary codes. As many feminists have pointed out, the transsexual tends to celebrate patriarchal stereotypes of femininity. To 'become woman' involves a kind of vanishing, a disappearance of the subject. To "become woman" is to become passive, accommodating, silent (Garber 94). As Sandy Stone argues in "The Empire Strikes Back", it is not the 'passing' as woman which transgresses social codes, rather it is the failure to 'pass' which produces a radical insertion and wounds the symbolic structure (297-298).

Papapetrou plays with binary oppositions in these photographs. Masculine/feminine, original/copy are problematized for the viewer in an effort to deconstruct essentialist definitions of gender identity. To achieve this, the artist focuses on the theatricalisation of gender signification: the performative pose, and relies on a desiring process which is precipitated by the presence of the camera. The subjects perform for the Other. In the eye of the lens they hope to produce the spectacle of their own desire by turning themselves into images.

The camera has always been a desiring machine. Its mechanical means of reproduction, its authoritative point of view, and its chemical processes underline the particular ways of seeing and knowing. The photographic activity is inscriptive. In the service of institutions, the policing of the body is foregrounded but the activity also tells us much about subjectivity and desire, especially as these

concepts have been interpreted in the twentieth century. The life/death metaphor, which has been used to interpret the photographic image, is equally applicable to desire itself, as it manifests in the subject. The click of the shutter symbolically castrates the image's existence in time: it freezes the moment, so that the image captured is always a dead image - a mortification (*petite mort*), an absence, a lack.

Photographs of people who know they are being photographed and self-consciously pose for the camera are performances of desire aimed at the Other. There is a reciprocal relationship between photographer and subject which is enmeshed in a complex web of desire; a desire which is always the Other's desire. Lacan says:

The subject exhausts himself in pursuing the desire of the other, which he will never be able to grasp as his own desire, because his own desire is the desire of the other. It is himself whom he pursues (Freud's Papers 221).

The camera inscribes a particular scopic space; as a surveillance device it prescribes a regime of power.¹ Although the subjects of the photographs may pose in an effort to produce themselves as their own desired image, networks of desire undermine any authorial agency on the part of the subjects. Desire is always on an Other's desire. The same is true for the artist/photographer in terms of producing desire, however, the mechanism of the camera establishes that the 'eye of power' becomes the 'I' of the photographer in many respects. The structuring of the gaze makes it difficult to resist the phantasm.

As spectators we are drawn into this nexus of power and desire as Papapetrou presents her queer archive for appraisal. Transsexuals and transgenderists, attempting to 'pass' (as other), are picked over by the gaze of the artist. The "punctum" to use Roland Barthes' terminology, appears to be found in flaws where the performance fails (47-60). Tiny chest hairs, unrounded hips, six o'clock shadows are clues which rupture the stereotype, rendering the performance a fake - making gender trouble in representation.

The presence of the performative norm is a double-edged sword. On one hand it points to the performative 'nature' of all sexualities; on the other it dilutes the potential transgression of the transsexual by drawing equivalents. However, without the inclusion of the 'norm', Papapetrou could be accused, like Diane Arbus, of being a "supertourist, an extension of the anthropologist, visiting natives and bringing back news of their exotic doings and strange gear" (Sontag 42).

There is definitely a predatory aspect to Papapetrou's photography as she goes in search of the Other. She is not part of the subcultures that she represents but she uses these performances of gender to formulate a thesis which critiques essentialist notions of sexual identity. The framing of the transsexual as protagonist is fundamental to this pursuit because she blurs the distinction between sex and gender, pushing the concept of "male subjectivity" to the vanishing point (Garber 94), while "confusing the performative character of gender with the physical 'fact' of sex" (Stone 282).

Papapetrou extrapolates from this position, transcribing the scene through various oppositions and juxtapositions which create a camp pastiche. The 'real' woman and the 'fake' woman become the same; both disappear and the artist concludes with Lacan that The Woman does not exist ("God and Jouissance" 137-148). The

Woman constructed and upheld by the architectural spaces of classicism and its ideological infrastructure is the sub-text of this exhibition. The Woman may not exist but she is perpetually desired and laboriously inscribed by patriarchal values. The 'straight' photographic technique, the presence of the eye/I of power and the quest for identity itself foreclose on any hysteric or psychotic desire which would unleash monsters into polite society. 2 The radical future has yet to be inscribed; in the meantime Papapetrou's queers mark time within the limits of discourse.

Notes

1 For a lucid analysis see Martin Jay. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" in *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique*. New York and London: Routledge, 1993: 114-133.

2 At the end of her essays "The Empire Strikes Back" Sandy Stone pays homage to Donna Haraway saying: "The disruptions of the old patterns of desire that the multiple dissonances of the transsexual body imply produce not an irreducible alterity but a myriad of alterities, whose unanticipated juxtapositions hold what Donna Haraway has called the promise of monsters - physicalities of constantly shifting figure and ground that exceed the frame of any possible representation. See Donna Haraway. "The Promise of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics of Inappropriate/d Others". *Cultural Studies*. Eds. P. Treichler, C. Nelson and L. Grossberg. New York: Routledge, 1991.

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