

Gender Hacking

Combining images in a single work of art isn't new in the history of art. Centuries before collage assisted the subversive spatial contrivances of modernism, images were deliberately placed beside one another in early Renaissance altarpieces. Within fabulous ornamental architectonic frameworks, dynamic correspondences between pictures argued the pious poetry of doctrine. Normally, there's a central iconic image of the Virgin who presides majestically; she's attended by saints to the side and by smaller narrative pictures beneath (the predelle) which elaborated the history or significance of the Mother of Christ.

Polixeni Papapetrou is a photographer who has no interest in disrupting pictorial space and pasting up collages. Her picture-making ethos lies closer to the theological art of the fifteenth century than to the modernist belief in the autonomy of images. Yet although she enjoys a close engagement with various popular cults, her art isn't created for the sake of piety but a festive interrogation: her pictorial arguments don't celebrate the constant verities of the universe but the newly perceived fluidity in what was formerly defined as fixed. Her theme is the wilful mutability of gender; and for expressing the new intuitions of voluntary sexuality, her art explores the dialectic potential arising between juxtaposed photographs.

In *Nine Predelle of Gender*, Papapetrou presents a large photograph of a bodybuilder. Beside it, there's an ensemble in a series of gold frames which figuratively speaking, unpacks the icon of muscular presence. It comprises three main images: a male bodybuilder (in fact the very man in the large photograph), a drag queen and a female bodybuilder. As in most old altarpieces, the figures present themselves with self-conscious frontality. Beneath each part of the framed triptych, however, there are three further images in the predella zone, acting as fragmentary expositors of the carnal saints above. The predelle constitute the signifiers of gender according to clothing, pose and parts. In pressing their hands together, the bodybuilders bunch up their tendons, while the drag queen relaxes her lethally painted claws; the female bodybuilder totters in tight shoes while the drag queens flap and plod upon precarious heels which hoist them to unfamiliar altitudes; the bodybuilders brace their crutch while the drag queen holds a thigh forward with tarty polish.

One way or another, old altarpieces refer to transformation. They form a backdrop for certain rights which mimic the transubstantiation of body and blood or the translation of spirit from flesh. Frequently they also feature scenes such as Annunciation or the Transfiguration which show spirit passing into matter and vice versa. *Nine Predelle of Gender* describes the conversion of flesh by will. The male changes his body--not just his clothing--to become the drag queen. He shaves, resists exercise which produces muscle, uses make-up and, of course, conditions the skin with cosmetics. The bodybuilder changes the body by the most strenuous

means and achieves the 'miraculous' transformation which we know from the images of he-men which had such a hypnotic effect on us as children.

The discovery of a parallel between these two is a striking achievement in Papapetrou's *Œuvre*. Drag queens and bodybuilders seem almost contrary archetypes. Not only do the two physical bodies seem instantly opposed but their moral connotations are also antithetical. Through long indoctrination from physical classes, we associate muscle with health and vigour. Meanwhile, our cultural heritage has, for an even longer period, depreciated effeminacy in men, associating it with idleness, degeneracy and turpitude. The idea that there is much more common ground between bodybuilder and drag queen is counter-intuitive. It's more than co-incidence that the dark giant in the large photograph strikes a pose which is graceful and feminine.

The bodybuilder isn't born with muscle. In that sense, the muscle isn't natural but chosen and cultivated. The desired build is attained by strenuous effort and the result is an enhancement of the 'natural' physical condition analogous to the acquisition of striking new clothes. The physiological alteration has a sumptuary meaning. One could almost say that the bodybuilder is a tailor of subcutaneous clothing. And with that impressively carnal apparel, the bodybuilder then addresses a public keen to see the new season's sartorial statements.

Papapetrou photographs bodybuilders in the poses which they themselves strike by their own conventions. Their presence is performative: they are self-consciously on display and act out little routines of exposure and demonstration which are more or less prescribed by institutionalized competition. The competitive aspect thus gives their gestures a ritual significance; it presupposes an audience of interested spectators who will witness an outcome. People will be judged and ranked, their gestures calibrated, compared and assessed. The performance of bodybuilders isn't merely histrionic in the quaintly spontaneous sense; it's calculated right down to that 'natural' smile which must be awfully hard to maintain while tensing every fibre for optimum visibility.

The bodybuilder's displays are therefore no less performative than the drag queen's. The main difference is that female impersonators often project their own theatricality for self-parody. For a drag queen, there is little talk of 'nature'. An assumption of volition in changing from male to female is a priori. Dressing up as a woman--however 'right' or natural it feels--is achieved by a wilful performance. And because the performance underlies the very type, of course the theatricality itself often becomes the subject matter of the drag queen's act.

In *Bikini Diptych*, a powerful female bodybuilder in a bikini visually answers a drag queen, also dresses in a bikini beneath a jacket of electric gauze. Both pose with a superficially similar stance, one leg carrying the weight of the body and the other stretched out, the better to reveal the loins. But whereas the bodybuilder clenches her fists above the shoulders to bunch up the forearms, the drag queen touches her hip and knee with the same kind of daintiness manifested in her clothing and hair. In particular, the material of the bikini is fluffy white fake fur. The fleeciness of the hand-made costume has connotations of a 'chick'--as in the dubiously dignified phrase 'chicks with dicks'--and the added volume of the fake fur relative to the flat nylon of an ordinary bikini advertises the male genitals which it ostensibly conceals.

Bikini Diptych seems to make at least two points. First and most sensational, which of these two people is the more the woman? Second, the more powerful the

manipulation of sexual identity, the more remarkable is the performative element. And it stands to reason. The drag queen in *Bikini Diptych* is every bit the artist in creating the 'soft sculpture' which is her outfit. The further a person wilfully departs from his or her identity, the more 'artificial' is the construct of new identity, the more 'made up', the more performative.

What saves Papapetrou from making out a very conservative case here? The performative extravagance of the drag queens and bodybuilders paradoxically heightens the stability of the 'normal' or 'natural', let us say--for argument's sake--the degree zero of performance. Far from celebrating the wilful changing of sexual identity, the images flatter the archetypes of male and female, for these archetypes which lurk in the unconscious background require no performative effort: they enjoy the authority of the non-performative. Although the performance of the drag queens is festive and joyful, it paradoxically condemns the semantic sustainability of altered sexuality.

And Papapetrou's answer? It's to monumentalize those performative elements, to share a belief in their viability through aesthetic joy. As spectators, we aren't conscious of anything precarious in the performance; we aren't made to feel that it's 'far out' or 'wacky' or even 'unnatural'. The female impersonator of *Bikini Diptych* has an impassive face; she doesn't look as though she's performing anything. If anything, it's an introverted look which 'naturally' belongs with the vulnerability of the chicky outfit. It may be a performance but it isn't an act. She isn't acting: she's just behaving the way she wants to. Any self-consciousness is caused by the lens asking her to pose. Any margin of acting seems to relate to the condition of photography rather than the alternative sexuality.

Still, performance is deeply inscribed in the identity of the drag queen and transsexual, to the point that identity itself is paradoxical and multivalent. Papapetrou's diptych *Mirror Marilyn: Original and Copy* is dedicated to this labile construct which--with post-structural licence--we could call sexual (b)identity. The transsexual in the double image adopts the persona of Marilyn Monroe with striking success; but the accuracy of the imitation isn't presented by Papapetrou as simple. By pairing two prints of the single negative (one the right way round and the other back-to-front) a question of authenticity hangs over the famous Hollywood actress. Both, after all, look just like Marilyn; yet neither is Marilyn and both are mirrors. As an archetype of the submissive sex-star, Marilyn has been mirrored countless times, each imitation having no more authority than the others; for the original is not only unattainable--and therefore almost equidistant from all imitations--but there never was a single ingenuous original, for 'she' too was a construct, wilfully based on the archetypes. Right down to her cinematographic formulation, she has been the eternal diva of duplication. Admittedly, she didn't have to change her gender to become Marilyn; but she assuredly did have to perform the persona of Marilyn, in much the same way as her imitators have subsequently done.

Through *Mirror Marilyn*, Papapetrou's discourse broadens beyond the subcultures of mobile gender. The Marilyn who acted in all the films has a quintessentially heterosexual persona. Although a constructed persona, Marilyn is an icon of essentialist sexuality. Her imitations of stereotypically feminine behaviour certainly lie outside the 'transgressive' adoption of the dominant Other with which female impersonators are usually concerned. Play acting of gender-types is common to gay and straight. While female impersonators by definition are concerned with replicating a condition not entirely given to them--and therefore seem somehow essentially defined by imitation--, simulations of gender are equally observable in

heterosexuals. Marriage, for example, is one of the revered paradigms of gender, an ideal on which children are brought up by education and the self-evident example of their parents. It could be argued that married status is one of the most widely imitated gender roles in the world.

In Papapetrou's iconic diptych *Do you take this man?* A large image of a senior gay couple replicates the sacrosanct union of a man and wife; this image is answered by an image of equal scale showing a straight marriage. It's almost as though the august gay couple are parents who've come to the marriage of their children. The older couple commands all of our attention. The formality of their institutional bond is emphatic: like a genial vice-regal pair, they stand with friendly authority, beaming at all who enjoy the spectacle of their majesty. The suited husband wears a silken sash and the formidable wife wears a costume of formidable extravagance. As often happens with couples, their combined confidence is greater than the sum of their halves.

Meanwhile image of conventional marriage (male and female) implies that the staging of a private partnership in a social arena is no more or less farcical among drag couples than it is among straight couples. Both are self-conscious and touched with smug pride; but the comparison rather favours the dignity of the drag couple. While both are somehow vainglorious, the drag couple is the less pompous, for the exaggerated magnificence is spiked with irony. The straight couple engineer their marriage with historicist scrupulosity. One imagines them fussing over the right sort of vintage cars to take them to and from the ceremony at Church. They sit rather uncomfortably in the dark, assessing their joint commitment to movie-land arch³/₄ology. They seem to take their ideal so seriously. Meanwhile, the drag couple seem light on their heels, graceful and socially adroit, on top of their fiction rather than oppressed by it.

However, Papapetrou will not insinuate that some inherent authority of copyright on such play acting abides with one kind of sexuality or another. The sexuality of the play actors may well condition and motivate the performance; but there isn't any single sexuality to which performance per se belongs. For example, the art of bodybuilding has been taken up decades now by women. Female bodybuilders may be straight or lesbian; it isn't necessarily the point of bodybuilding to send out messages one way or another. Undoubtedly female bodybuilders manipulate their bodies toward the masculine and, to that extent; they have an interest in enlarging the sexual inscriptions available to women. Sure, you can see that female bodybuilders aren't confined by traditional stereotypes of femininity, but that doesn't mean that you can judge their sexuality.

The overwhelming message projected by female bodybuilders is shared by drag queens: it's the festivity of being able to change the body. To celebrate the leaping of corporal thresholds, parades and ceremony are arranged: the competitions mentioned before are charged with the distribution of trophies to the most excellent; and an awesome Pindaric mythology attends the names of the winners.

In *Typology of Tiaras and Trophies*, Papapetrou draws attention to the institutional vocabulary and social ornaments shared by female bodybuilders and drag queens. The typology of the title is an art-historical term which refers to the pictorial system which Old Testament narratives were encoded with Christian counterparts. The Sistine Ceiling, for example, reads as the story of Genesis; when read in reverse however, it represents the redemptive efficacy of Christ. In Papapetrou's work, the term is used ironically, as is the very form of the polyptych which equates the drag queen with the bodybuilder in two images, each flanked by

predelle featuring the opposite type.

Through the title, there is a kind of exegetical promise: the meaning of the drag queen must be read in the context of the female bodybuilder and vice versa. The promise is satisfied by all iconographic correspondences. Both are 'decorated' in the ancient--almost military--sense with tiaras and trophies. The triumphant female bodybuilders pose by their trophies while the drag queens arrange their shoulders imperiously with the coronets of state presiding over a noble brow. The difference is, of course, that the trophies gained by the female bodybuilders have been awarded by someone else's authority, whereas the tiaras worn by their imperial ladyships are aggregated by their self-same ladyships from a deep fund of irony.

Performance may be serious or funny; it might be thorough or carnivalesque, professional or grotesque (as with the drag queen with hairy chest who features in the bottom predella on the right hand side of *Typologies*). Similarly, not all performances are purely play-acting or iron-pumping: they may actually involve decisions to alter the body irreversibly. In *Subject Changes*, the two classical women posed by the architectonic vase of white flowers upon a plinth of transsexuals, that is, their formerly male bodies have been reconstructed surgically as female bodies. In their tight-fitting waists and perfect make up, they seem extraordinarily self possessed and conscious of their sexual prowess. They frame a male bodybuilder who, in spite of mighty muscle, achieves the most feminine stance. He slips into the *figura serpentinata* beloved of the High Renaissance and Mannerism.

The idea of changing the subject is more than a pun. In polite conversation, one 'changes the subject' when it seems embarrassing to persist with the topic in hand. But Papapetrou doesn't mean 'the subject' in that sense. It isn't the topic of conversation which gets changed; nor, for these dignified subjects, is anything embarrassing. The subject is the person who looks, not the person who is looked at or talked about. The subjects, in this case, change themselves and their bodies and, by dint of the wilful alteration to their corporal identity, emphasize their status as subjects, that is, subjects who gaze rather than objects of the gaze.

The nature and gendering of the gaze has been a topic in art history for decades, during most of which a strenuous dichotomy has prevailed insisting on the male gaze (understood as active and 'objectifying' whatever it alights upon) and a socially constructed female gaze (understood as passive and conducive to the woman's subjection). In more recent times, the rigidity of these poles has become more tractable. One notes that there is pleasure on the female side of the equation, a pleasure which certainly doesn't vouch for the equality of the female but which nevertheless cannot be dismissed; for that would risk condemning female subjectivity. For example, the pleasure of the female gaze could be described as narcissistic--and therefore accorded less prestige than the predatory pleasure of the powerful male gaze--but the negative connotations given to the female are, through that very judgement, predicated on a phallogentric paradigm of power which is destined always to support the superiority of the male.

Greater difficulties still attend the discrimination against the female gaze when it's projected by a female who was lately a male. The subject has literally changed; he has become her. Whatever privileges belong to the male gaze have been given up in favour of the attractions of the female gaze; clearly, therefore, the pleasures esteemed as proper to the female form a desired subjectivity.

The special value in this change in subject is that it doesn't deny the difference

between male and female. We aren't talking about an androgenous merging of characteristics in one individual which simply makes the distinction between male and female fuzzy. It isn't as though the transgendered figures considered that certain qualities--maybe like the narcissistic gaze--no longer serve to distinguish the sexes. On the contrary, the poles of gender are emphatically recognized as distinct, to the point of the stereotype. The male has taken the decision to be female: when he was male, he didn't think that male merged sufficiently into female; it was necessary to change from male to become female. Through the gender re-assignment, the complementary qualities identified with the respective genders are, paradoxically, confirmed.

In the polyptych *Lessons in Glamour*, the image of a brilliant drag queen beguilingly engages our attention. The young figure is handsome, gorgeously dressed and confident, with just a touch of the demure and the self-possessed to deepen the frolicsome smirk of the performance. The confident and glamorous figure is answered by an older drag queen who similarly looks out with a somewhat asymmetrical mouth. But while the young drag queen raises one corner of the mouth with a beckoning wink, the older drag queen lets one corner of the mouth drop, as if a formerly spontaneous smile were broken with knowingness.

There's a melancholy implication in this. You infer that the older drag queen once enjoyed the buoyancy of the younger, once looked just as brilliant and commanded other people's eyes with the expectation of being admired. Equally, though, it's implied that the younger drag queen will turn into a figure rather like the older. What separates the two is nothing but time. The younger may have all the sparkle which has faded in the older; but assuredly she won't retain it forever. This is the Biblical topos of *vanitas*. Everything mortal perishes, even the records of our deeds.

To acknowledge the debt to this tradition, Papapetrou has included among her photographic predelle a reproduction of Bernardo Strozzi's haunting *Allegory of Vanity*, in which a refined old woman is attended at her toilette by young and beautiful servants. The point of the jewellery and make up which they proffer is undoubtedly to lessen the manifest signs of her age. The labour is vain, a material vanity in turn represented by the psychological vanity of looking into a mirror. But Strozzi's sympathetic genius is to have represented this futile resistance ageing as dignified and memorable: one senses nobility in the way she seeks to hold onto the optimism of youth which she is all too soon to forsake for death. Such vanity is all too human; and whoever condemns it is unsympathetic. Strozzi makes us wish that her moments might last.

Papapetrou's quotation of the picture occurs amid a splash of colourful vignettes depicting the 'vanities' of the drag queens. All figures seem not only to be fastidiously made up but clad with sophisticated ostentation. Their collective enthusiasm is glamour which, in Biblical terms, would surely translate as vanity. The fact that their glamour is appropriated from the opposite sex means perhaps that its acquisition involves greater effort than it would among women; hence the vanity is advertised all the more strongly. Like Strozzi, however, Papapetrou admires this fondness for youth, even while looking at the pathos of vanity squarely in the face.

The pathos in *Lessons in Glamour* isn't purely sentimental. It produces a cycle of messages dealing with the vanity and maturity of sexuality. The older figure is made up with no less skill than the younger; indeed, so successful is she that any of the younger drag queens would easily be able to recognize in her the archetype

of somebody's Mum. She is the mature maternal figure, a sober but receptive and 'listening' person, perhaps even the archetype of grandmotherhood who is abstracted from the lactating biological archetype which has preoccupied the history of Christian art in the figure of the Virgin Mary.

But we know that mother-as-the nurturer-of-babies is only a small part of the history of motherhood. In fact, for the young men who cross-dress or change gender, it's the least interesting part. First, the traditional biological archetype of the mother belongs to a reproductive economy from which drag queens may well feel alienated. Second, the lactating mother doesn't recognize her infant as gay; the relationship with the mother sought by the young man qua gay is with a mature mother; for it is she who will recognize him with the gender preferences which he himself has matured into; it is she who must handle the fact of his aspirations to femininity and the simultaneous choice to direct libidinous interest away from her sex.

The old drag queen in *Lessons in Glamour* gazes at us with just the expression of cautious benignity which we'd expect from a sympathetic mother attending her offspring's drag night. We'd imagine that she'd rather her son has been 'normal' but of course she's far too tactful to express any disappointment. Her smile is weak but genuine. She wishes everyone well and has dressed up for the occasion. The paradox that this older figure is in fact a masquerading mother--a person of contrary sex and sexuality--completes the lesson in vanitas. There is no scandal in things or people passing. Against all melancholy, the festive rituals go on and the process of redefining the acceptable sexual bodies matures by degrees.

The only vanity, Papapetrou implies, it is the conceit of fixed connotations of the gendered body; and the present works and analytical and argumentative synthesis of the new consciousness of gender at will which characterizes our age.

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