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## Video in drag: Trans-sexing the feminine

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# SightLines

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## Video in Drag: Trans-sexing the Feminine

A few weeks ago I was glancing through a Toronto newspaper when a reproduction of the Mona Lisa caught my eye. Her famous Renaissance smile, however, was askew, distorted by a self-portrait of Leonardo da Vinci superimposed over one half of her face. A computer, the accompanying article informed us, had compared both portraits and irrevocably concluded that the enigma of Mona Lisa's smile was not a feminine one but in fact Leonardo's own features painted as a woman. Technology had conspired to transform the painting into the premise of a transsexual<sup>1</sup> self-portrait. The claim that the Mona Lisa is not the quintessential representation of femininity but da Vinci in drag tells us less about Leonardo than about contemporary fetishizations towards technology and sexuality. The Mona Lisa becomes a modernist obsession, not with the mysterious but with the identification/construction of the image and sexuality. "She" provides an odd slip, a strange misnomer in a contemporary world subsumed by gender definitions, where sexual difference is played out to maintain a status quo system of binary oppositions and hierarchical construction. In this consideration of the construction of the feminine as it emerges from the intersection of feminist theory and mass media in video art, the Mona Lisa as drag queen plays a bit part in the text. But, as an aside to the text, beside feminine sexuality, she becomes Eris, the spirit of strife, who, as an uninvited guest at a party, threw an apple of discord to create a fight between the three Greek goddesses.

Like the three goddesses fighting over the golden apple of discord, the debates around gender, sexuality, and representation in feminism have often been a site of conflict and contradiction. But in the last few years, three major positions have emerged, each maintaining a discreet rather than heated distance from the others. Gender-role theory, which frames the construction of women's sexuality within narrative and historical parameters, focuses on the issue of conditioning in the construction of female/male divisions. Primarily an American canon, gender as patriarchal construction is a widely disseminated position, used by advocacy feminists to wring political and legislative concessions from the state. Analysis is rooted in empirical and behaviouralist models, where society, not anatomy, produces sexual difference. Research rather than fiction, experience

rather than abstraction, statistics rather than speculation are privileged. Desire becomes an issue of sexual data to be compiled and classified, while oppression is located in a heterosexual configuration of gender roles and the family. Normative patterns in patriarchy are of a primary concern, with radical feminists calling for a cessation of sexual relations between men and women, while an emphasis on child-sharing practices and state regulation of sexism dominates a populist platform. In comparison, "French feminism" appears like an inverse mirror of "American feminism," where psychological explorations collide with the psychology of gender construction.

Rising from the ashes of master narratives in philosophy, and rebelling against the psychoanalytical mastery of Jacques Lacan, French feminism has emphasized the reconstruction of femininity rather than the dismantling of gender. Theoretical, utopian, and literary, the French feminism identified with the work of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Michèle Montrelay seeks to create an-other language for women, beyond the binary syntax of linguistics and located in the metaphors of feminine sexuality and woman's body. Reacting against the heterosexism of Lacanian theory, which locates sexual difference in the triad of an Oedipal structure, castration, and the child's irrevocable entry into a hierarchical symbolic where language privileges the masculine or phallic term, French feminists have sought to locate a feminine sexuality in a pre-Oedipal stage of development. In this imaginary location, the mother/daughter are fluid, all and not one; the phallus cannot penetrate; and sexuality is polymorphous and liquid. Intertwining this imaginary with the oppression of the symbolic, themes of excess or *jouissance*,<sup>2</sup> the inscription of the body as language, the primacy of touch, masquerade, a fascination with mirrors/doubling, and a privileging of lesbianism and bisexuality emerge in the focus of a revolutionary femininity that will subvert patriarchy.

But, while French feminism seeks to displace feminist representation from the sociological to the utopian, it has also been interpreted as a densely veiled essentialism. This third position within feminist theory takes up the body, and genital difference, as the primary site of sexuality. Anatomy becomes a revolutionary destiny, where a woman's body and the unique qualities flowing from this source are feared by men for their superiority and thus repressed/oppressed by the patriarchy. Rather than an analytical or deconstructive platform, the essentialists invert hierarchy to reclaim the privileged term. Imagery alluding to woman as nature, mother-earth, goddess; formalist explorations of female genitalia; the reification of matriarchy; and womb envy and religious revisionism, particularly pagan, to privilege woman's spirituality, are associated with essentialist represen-

<sup>1</sup>This text was first published in *Parallelogramme* (February/March 1987).

tation. A gloriously unambiguous declaration of women's sexual energy and creativity, essentialism has been strongly criticized as an ontology that does not account for the socio-economic and political oppression of women within patriarchy. By grounding women's sexuality in the biological rather than the social, the flip side of essentialism is a patriarchy that appropriates this specificity to reinforce the oppression of women as a genetic inferior and an idealized Other.

Within contemporary art, with its recurring theme of representation and sexuality, influences emerging from these theories can be identified. In some instances, feminist work clearly owes its allegiance to the enunciation of one particular position; in others, the visual is located as a site where contradiction between theory and practice is played out. Recent video art in Toronto, in evidence at the *New Work Show* in October 1986, proved particularly slippery in its positioning of female sexuality. In proposing a strategy for imaging women's sexuality, video art must account for the cross-pollination of a medium where consumer technology meets high modernism, where feminisms must battle the powerful narratives of mass media. Within the representational empires of the media, feminine sexuality becomes the property of the reproducible image and the subject of narrative repetition. Generic heterosexuality and androgynous clones pose from billboards and wiggle their disco hips in seven-minute intervals of airspace. Narratives tend towards the ideologically sublime. Librarians take off glasses to transfix the unsuspecting hero. Muscle-bound creatures roam the earth with submachine guns. Vacuous teenage stereotypes engage in even more vacuous entanglements with a heterosexual coming of age. Harlequin romances and serial sex murders offer up extremes of masculinity.

Video art, however, with its argued distance from the capitalist infrastructure and its reputation as an alternative/marginal practice, has been seen as a critical and "cool" medium: of the media but not subsumed by its commodification. But it is not as simple as challenging the moronic spores unleashed by a blender concoction of patriarchally mediated sexism. Video art has also to contend with the politburo of the critical canon; for in the climate of 'post'-modernism, sexual imagery has become deluged by the strictures of theoretical zealots. Heralded as the "post" feminist era, historical objectivity is discredited, but subjectivity is consigned to the laundry basket of romantic individualism. Sexual difference becomes fodder for the subscribers to the Book-of-the-Month Club while Lacan, rather than his feminist rebels, is cited as the last word on the construction of the feminine/oppression of the Other. Essentialism becomes perverse idealism, and bad taste to boot. Prescriptions for gender migraines include

banishing images of women altogether. The theoretical terrain of sexual imagery has become a labyrinth.

In negotiating at this bargaining table array of feminisms, postmodernisms, mass media, and formalism, a twist to the proceedings could be observed at the *New Work Show*. In the tapes that took female representation or characterization as their overt subject matter, there was a fascination with the construction of the feminine. Men in drag became exaggerated women. Women occupied a site of cultural disassociations, of masculine stereotypes. Voice-overs displaced the visual signification of sexuality. The positioning of the camera and disjunctures in narrative expectations confused the point of view (traditionally masculine). Characters inhabited melodramatic spaces with disruptive habits. Gender blurred. Slippage from heterosexuality to lesbianism, from sexuality to sensuality, was played out. The feminine became masculine fetishization. The masculine became feminized. Within all of this, it seems that a transsexual strategy emerged as the odd bedfellow of subversion. By positioning the exploration of female sexuality and identity within transsexual constellations, the tapes seemed to seek a construction of the feminine that could sidestep the implication of the hetero-male spectator and sneak past the strait-jacket of sexual difference. The problem of subjectivity being linked to objectification of the Other was tackled by occupying the position of the Other.

The Mona Lisa, wrote Walter Pater in 1895, is "older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave."<sup>3</sup> The transsexual, writes Angela Douglas over a century later, is "free from the chains of menstruation and child-bearing ... transsexual women are obviously far superior to Gennys in many ways. ... Genetic women are becoming obsolete."<sup>4</sup> Woman as Madonna, as Whore, as Witch: idealized, feared, fetishized, raped, and revered, but above all distinct from man. As the stronger sex, the better half, man could oppress woman, imitate her, represent her, but he could not become her, until, in the late twentieth century, medical science and social psychiatry decided that "gender dysphoria" could be cured on an operating table. And, in this meeting of the idealized woman and the constructed female, anatomy is not destiny but a destination in gendered society where the word made flesh by religion becomes flesh made gender by science. Transsexualism becomes a contradictory site where desire and sexuality is conflated. A woman trapped in a man's body completely disrupts the constructions of difference. As a man sleeping with men, "she" is a homosexual but craves heterosexuality. Inversely, she, as a he who desires women, must play out lesbian desire within a heterosexual

economy of binaries. Difference is not signified by the Other but by being caught in a mirror reflection where the Other is the same. This is a no man's land, where desire and gender clash, where desire and technology meet.

In feminist theory, of woman born, the transsexual brings not masculinity but femininity into question. For the essentialists, the transsexed female would discredit their celebration of biological difference, forcing them into the shady terrain of genetic configurations. Thus, desire is discounted for the sake of science, and she remains forever a he. French feminism, with its continental upbringing, leaves biology to the Americans, but their emphasis on pre-Oedipal bonding would bar the transsexual latecomer from a feminine *jouissance*, locating "her" desire as the ultimate castration. And for feminists who locate oppression in gender construction transsexualism becomes a transgression of women. In the case of Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*,<sup>5</sup> political outrage is vented against transsexual heterosexuals for their adoption of a conservative stereotypical femininity, while her moral outrage is saved for those transsexuals who claim a feminist-lesbian position and thus are able to infiltrate women's communities with the body of a woman and the conditioning of a man. Thus to identify within artists' video a transsexualist strategy is to identify a strategy where the issues of sexual difference become an issue of sexual politics, where the question of desire plays tricks on representation. And transsexualism, not as a medical disorder, but as the site of feminine desires, suggests a space outside gender but within culture, where theory and practice meet. As a point of reference, a signification, it offers the promise of a space where men can presume to construct the feminine from the desire for the other, rather than of the Other.

The most obvious *representations* of transsexualism occur in drag. Drag, as exemplified in Shakespearian theatre, developed into a comic device popular in music hall and vaudeville productions. This burlesque use of drag, where sexuality becomes second fiddle to gags, is employed by Sky Gilbert in *Marie Antoinette* (1983) by Byron Ayanoglu and Ric Amis. In this tape, disguised gender does not comment upon contemporary sexuality but is used to create a one-liner comic effect: Marie Antoinette acting even sillier and more self-centred as a drag queen than one could imagine her as a woman framed by historical context. In comparison, both Shalhevet Goldhar's and David MacLean's tapes make use of David MacLean's characterization of women replete with wigs and stereotypical mannerisms to comment on modern perceptions of sexuality and gender. In Goldhar's *Bleachables* (1986), MacLean portrays identical blond-haired sisters who switch roles, exchanging security as a well cared for housewife

for the sexually "liberated" life of the single, working woman and vice versa. The punch-line comes when the audience discovers that the housewife was murdered during the switch-over by a dubious lover, and her sister decides to continue the charade indefinitely. In a speech which crosses Hamlet with a David Letterman talk show, she informs the audience that women's "lib" is a sham, with its precarious economics and unstable lovers. She prefers the "other" life, where one can revel in the secure boredom and faithful attention of a husband in the suburbs.

With MacLean's portraiture of the sisters assuming spectacularly camp proportions, the tape piles fantasies upon caricature as it examines the flip sides of modern woman's stereotyping. But, in presenting the "myths" of the sexual revolution and Prince Charming through the device of transsexual drag, any sense of a feminist dismantling of stereotypes dissipates. Women are, in effect, absent from the tape, and, in their stead, a male imitation/connotation of their representation and gender roles remains as residue. Both sisters, played by a man in drag, are male-identified. Disrobe the parody, and the identity of women vanishes. Instead, superficiality becomes a parody of itself, and desire flattens to a comic book lie of the feminine in the guise of a Bramalea housewife drag queen.

In David MacLean's own tape *Bon Voyage My Love* (1986), transvestism plays itself out as a critique rather than a parody of gender strait-jacketing. Becoming his own alter-ego, MacLean portrays a black-haired, sultry melo-dame waiting for her sailor-lover. But she is really a he (also MacLean) who cruises the backways of Union Station, wanting to fuck the pretty boy in the sailor blue. Here, he as a she uses drag to call into question the narratives available to gay men in a gender-defined culture. Homosexuals, the tape implies, take up a media-constructed position of the feminine in order to live out a fantasy denied them as media-constructed men. But, in representing transsexualism as a stereotyped feminine, neither video is able to construct an alternative to a dominant definition of difference which designates "woman" as the Other and homosexuality as deviance. Mass media gender roles assume the significance of a master narrative, where sexual identity becomes trapped in a revolving door; where drag is not a signification of feminine construction but an outfit one wears to a fancy dress ball where no one can tell the difference; and where homosexual and feminine narratives are subsumed by, rather than dissent from, a dominant culture.

Drag, however, does not need to be gender specific, although traditionally it has been considered either a male dressing as a woman (rarely seen in mainstream narrative) or a woman dressed as a man (appropriated

by mainstream narrative to signify male expectations of a lesbian). Tanya Mars in *Pure Virtue* (1985) is definitely a first-class drag act. As a woman playing the Queen, in this case Elizabeth I, drag becomes a means to contextualize sexuality historically and politically rather than to exploit the inane antics of an in-bred royalty. She constructs a feminine that is neither dependent on a binary masculine, nor an essentialist vision of women's superiority. Rather, she has street smarts, a transsexual not of gender but of power relations. Her Lords are literally cardboard figures, and her lover must, unfortunately, lose his head. Gender roles are clearly a construction. Nevertheless, she will not relinquish her desire as a woman but rather warns of its narratives and its pitfalls. If virginity is an accompaniment to femininity, then, the Queen advises, avail yourself of remedies to disguise its absence, to construct a false identity. And, she warns, in between a juggling act and barbell exercises, that "freedom in a woman breeds not love but suspicion." The feminine, nevertheless, is not to be discarded but reconstructed to account for the differences of history, the inequities of power, the oppression of sex.

*Hygiene* (1985), by Andy Paterson/Jorge Lozano, and *No Voice Over* (1986), by Colin Campbell, on the other hand, propose a transsexualism in the convention of the narrative rather than image. In *Hygiene*, a melodramatic story unfolds around the life and loves of a character named Rachel. But rather than present a "straight" alternative, where melodrama becomes a formal device to frame a dissenting narrative, the characters occupy a space between gender reversal and gendered parodies. Rachel's unrequited love is projected onto a villainous pastiche of masculinity, asserting his virility by eating crackers, and meeting a messy death more in keeping with the suffering heroine than the calculating womanizer. As the jilted woman, Rachel shifts between hysteric femininity, roaming her apartment in despair, and drunken masculinity, drowning his sorrows at the bar. The handsome man who rescues our ailing heroine from a self-destructive disintegration is not a man but a lesbian. However, a lesbian love affair is not a possibility, since all around her the plot unfolds in a mock-up fashion where heterosexuality is not only an assumption but also a melodramatic construction. Reading *Of Woman Born* by Adrienne Rich on the beach, Rachel is interrupted by the obligatory male who walks into the frame. He usurps the narrative by being a "nice" guy who makes Rachel "happy" but very restless, and probably bored. The climax comes, not in orgasm, but after sex. Turning on the television news, she hears that the lesbian who had befriended her was killed in a fire-bombing of the Women's Book Store. Rushing, not to the scene of the accident, but to a women's bar, she stands outside while a drunk rhapsodizes a religious

apocalypse, and she realizes that true love, of course, comes too late.

By using filmic conventions to reconstruct the feminine as active, and by mixing up gender and convention, Paterson and Lozano create the possibility for a transsexual position in the spectator. The conventions of melodrama call for a point of view that will project the identity of the viewer as male. However, the blurring of feminine/masculine roles, where Rachel constructs the plot, but not her "femininity," disrupts the assumption of the narrative and the expectations of the viewer. Slipping in and out of a binary representation of heterosexuality, the video demands that the viewer, through narrative disjunctions, reconstruct another story than sexual difference. Confronted with males who are wimps, a together lesbian who declines to offer the viewer a voyeur construction of the Other, and a heroine whose Prince Charming is a convenience—a clear convention—the spectator's position falls to pieces. If men want to identify rather than objectify, then they must desire to become the women in the narrative. Conversely, women, in a position where transference to a male character is no longer demanded, can participate in the construction of the feminine.

In comparison to *Hygiene*, which plays dismantled sexual difference through the perversion of heterosexual convention, Colin Campbell chooses to construct the feminine by banishing the masculine. *No Voice Over* intertwines the stories of three M&M women: Mocha, Miranda, and Marcella. A patron, Dix-Ten, is the absent father and, in effect, the voice-over. The women, whose postcards and tapes to each other tell their stories, construct a feminine where adventure, intrigue, glamour, art careers, and mother/daughter relations figure. Close friendship, desire, premonitions, and speculation create a narrative of bonding to which Dix-Ten has no access. His links are economic and benevolent; he coordinates their movements, he admires their feminism, but he is outside their construction of the feminine. Dix-Ten, as the interventionist who fails to colonize, in some way represents the desire to become the feminine. He becomes the closet transsexual, a woman trapped in a man's body, speaking from a male position. He becomes, in effect, a stand-in for the video medium, which is trapped by conventions of narrative and media signification that construct the feminine as the property of a masculine point of view. And, in the search for an alternative language within the video medium, there emerges the desire to trans-sex the feminine: to explore the representation of desire as it is constructed between women and outside of sexual difference.

Transsexualism and feminism may appear as strange bedfellows, but their meeting suggests the possibility within contemporary video to offer

the viewer an-other means by which to conceptualize gender, sexuality, and desire. Using difference as a rigid barometer of masculine/feminine construction not only leaves the video artist tied to dominant narratives of sexuality, but also enforces the masculine position of the spectator. The difficulties of exploring the boundaries of feminine constructions from this model of sexual difference are amplified in Rodney Werden's tape *Money Talks, Bullshit Walks* (1986). In this tape, Werden hires prostitutes off the street in order to interview them about their work and the ways in which men relate to them as objects of exchange. Werden, like Dix-Ten, is absent from the camera: a voice-over who pries information from his subjects from an observer's position. But, unlike Dix-Ten, Werden gives the women no possibility of expressing their own sexuality.

The camera functions as a voyeur, the women are framed by a map of the world, and the questions they are asked pertain to a male's curiosity about women rather than a desire to be a woman. As the "john" who must hire prostitutes to talk rather than fuck, Werden becomes the signification of failed masculinity. As the "pimp" who controls the position of the camera and the direction of the questions, he becomes the privileged term, the phallus, in a sexual hierarchy. Women are visible, naked icons of sexuality, but they are absent as a construction outside the male point of view. Thus, as a viewer, also taking up a position of looking from behind the camera, the audience must either accept a hierarchical model of sexual difference or conclude that raw documentary is, in this case, the fiction of male fantasy.

In many ways, *Hygiene* and *No Voice Over* are also the fictions of male fantasy, but, in their constructions of narrative, there is a possibility for the imagination of what it means to be a woman rather than a man looking at women. It is in this possibility, where transsexualism rather than difference becomes a site of sexual politics, that boundaries between the masculine/feminine begin to break down. Transsexualism may be for many an uncomfortable strategy, for it calls into question not only masculine stereotypes but also the security of feminist analyses. However, in so doing, it offers a conceptual position from which to challenge hierarchy, morality, and dominant media constructions in sexuality. Sexual difference, Julia Kristeva suggests, will only cease to be an oppressive site of gender when it is reconceived as a metaphysical rather than socio-political signification.<sup>6</sup> Strategies of transsexualism in imagery, narrative, and spectator position begin to question the site of sexual difference as an absolute site of sexual construction. And by posing questions, rather than providing answers, these strategies are beginning a long and convoluted process towards a metaphysics of sexuality. Transsexualism offers a frame-

work that challenges the claims of transgression. Popularized by male artists in the 1970s, transgression framed sexuality in exploitative extremes, where the feminine disappeared under the turgid weight of the voyeur's insistent look. Better the confusion and questions raised by transsexualism than the adherence to a model that believes an extreme framing of exploitation will explode domination, or the belief in the safety of an essentialism that precludes contradictions. To be a man trapped in a woman's body and a woman trapped in a man's world makes the construction of the feminine through images and narratives a paradoxical desire; but it is preferable to explore the parameters of this paradox than to resolve confusion through posing the video camera as the pimp, and the feminine as its prostitute.

## Notes

1. Transsexualism refers to the medical process of anatomical sex conversion which reached public awareness in the documentation of the Christine Jorgensen case in 1953. With the establishment of the Johns Hopkins Gender Identity Clinic in 1967, it became a select but established medical procedure to "cure" gender dysfunctions. The process begins with hormone treatments and progresses to intense gender therapy focusing upon the establishment of "normative" gender characteristics. Patients must live as the opposite sex for two years before going through operations that medically reconstruct gender. For the purposes of this article, I am referring to male-to-female transsexuals although there is also a smaller percentage of female-to-male transsexuals. And in the context of this article, transsexualism is being considered for its conceptual, political, and social ramifications as a sexual practice rather than as a strictly medical phenomenon.
2. *Jouissance* literally translates as orgasm. Total sexual ecstasy is its most common connotation, but, in contemporary French philosophical, psychoanalytic, and political usage, it does not stop there. It is a word with simultaneously sexual, political, and economic overtones. Total access, total participation, as well as total ecstasy are implied. Transsexualism and feminism may make strange bedfellows, but their potential to explore difference without hierarchy is a preferable alternative to straight pimping.
3. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: MacMillan and Company, 1910), 125.
4. Angela Douglas, as quoted in Janice G. Raymond *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 117.
5. Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*.
6. Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 13-35.