

Diamonds at Night
By Jordan King

**A thesis exhibition, *Chéz Cléo*,
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Abstract

This support paper discusses my process in curating the exhibition *Chez Cléo*, presented at OCAD University's Graduate Gallery from March 7 – 9, 2024 which included five photo essay books, two short films, and a historical study. Each of these works were created between the mid-20th century and early 21st century and focus on trans feminine/femme subjects. I begin the paper by introducing the exhibition themes and scholarly considerations. I then outline my methodology, which details how I developed my curatorial framework and discusses my relationship to the subject matter explored. The literature review section then outlines relevant writing about the topic of the exhibition. The paper also provides a detailed description of the works included in *Chez Cléo* in relation to the exhibition's installation concept and design. The conclusion offers consideration of future potential for curatorial work and writing on this topic.

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Introduction

This paper explores several historically significant films and books created in the latter half of the 20th century that document trans-feminine subjects and lives. It accompanies an exhibition I curated titled *Chez Cléo*, which was presented at OCAD University's Graduate Gallery from March 7 – 9, 2024. Both the exhibition and essay consider a shift in authorship in the works of this period, a movement away from images taken by cis-gendered artists of trans-feminine subjects to the significance of emergent ethnographic works focused on and created by trans-feminine artists that emerged in the 1990s. This paper and exhibition focus on the latter through the presentation and discussion of three important works created by celebrated trans-feminine artists: Mirha-Soleil Ross, Tourmaline, and Viviane Namaste, alongside photography and art books authored by cis-gendered artists to contrast. In this paper, I consider negotiation of information extraction and the connection between artist and subject—specifically their close relationship to and long-term engagement with trans feminine individuals or communities they belong to. I argue in this paper, and seek to demonstrate through my exhibition, that art and writing created by trans feminine artists offer a profoundly relational body of work, created through the engagement of oral history sharing and “kinship beyond bloodlines,” a notion articulated by Judith Butler that refers to kinships based on shared lived experience rather than biological or familial bonds.¹ This is a particularly important relational perspective in communities for which trauma is a component of visibility, as was the case for many trans-feminine individuals in the 20th century. Foregrounding this concept of kinship as a distinctly feminist methodology is essential to understanding the significance of works created by trans-

¹ Judith Butler in Bradway, Tyler, and Elizabeth Freeman, eds. *Queer Kinship: Race, Sex, Belonging, Form*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.

feminine artists, which address the often-traumatic histories experienced by many trans-feminine individuals.

Themes: social and aesthetic context

Troubling 20th-Century Documentation of Trans-Femininity

Issues of subjectivity, the marginalization of trans-feminine individuals, and the shift towards trans-feminine authorship over time are central considerations in my selection and exhibition of works in *Chez Cléo*. More saliently, I delineate an important shift in the representation of trans women through pairing works created by cisgender artists which viewed trans women from an outsider perspective to the emergence of work by trans feminine artists in the 1990s and onwards. These more recent works offer nuanced, multi-faceted portraits of trans femininity created through an intimate connection between artist and subject.

The art and photography books by cis-gendered artists included in the exhibition were Christer Strömholm's *Les Amie des Place Blanche*, an intimate photo essay which documented the lives of a group of Parisian trans women in the early 1960s, first released in 1983 and later reprinted in 2011; Jane Evelyn Atwood's *Pigalle People 1978 to 1979*, a book that recorded the lives of trans women in Paris in the late 1970s, published in 2018; Hans Falk's *Transvestia: Drawings, Gouaches and Collages: The Silver Cocoon. Notes on the Transvestite Scene in New York 1979 – 1985*, an illustrated record of Falk's study of trans women and their milieu in New York City, published in 1985; Chantel Regnault's *Voguing and The House Ballroom Scene of New York 1989 – 1992*, a large format photo book exploring New York City's voguing and ballroom scene, published in 2011; and *Kim*, Bettina Rheim's photo essay of Parisian trans feminine showgirl Kim Harlow published in 1994. Although the conditions and relationship

between artist and subject at the center of each book are individual, in sum they exemplify a particular perspective that dominated at the time.

Trans-feminine subjects regularly served as a source of fascination for photographers, filmmakers, and writers in the mid to late 20th century. Despite major shifts in Western cultural awareness of transgender² identity over the past two decades, perceptible trans femininity carried—and continues to carry—distinctly harsh societal repercussions, including increased risk of violent assault³. In acknowledging this fact, I sought to recognize that serving as artistic inspiration did not carry societal or financial benefits for the subjects of the artworks themselves—a fact recently widely acknowledged by revisiting a series of paintings of trans feminine individuals created by Andy Warhol in the 1970s.⁴

The trans-feminine individuals and communities photographed by those who themselves did not identify as trans-feminine are shown through a similar lens, one of fascination and voyeurism. Further, evidence of the hardships faced by the trans women in these works is clear. From recorded repercussions of involvement in sex work in Christer Strömholm's *Les Amies De Place Blanche* (2011), to visible intravenous drug use in Jane Evelyn Atwood's *Pigalle People* (2018), to the enduring impacts of HIV/AIDS recorded in Bettina Rheims *Kim* (1994), each artist included hardships endured by their subjects in their work.^{5 6 7} In acknowledging this, I do not

² The linguistic delineation here of trans feminine, or trans femme, otherwise often grouped within the umbrella term transgender, is intentional.

³ Viviane Namaste, *Invisible Lives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2000.

⁴ *Ladies and Gentlemen: Meet the people who posed for Andy Warhol's portrait series of trans women and drag queens*. Tate Modern, accessed March 1, 2024. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/andy-warhol-2121/ladies-and-gentlemen>

⁵ Christer Strömholm, *Les Amies De Place Blanche*. Dewi Lewis, 2011.

⁶ Jane Evelyn Atwood, *Pigalle People 1978-1979*. Marseille: Le Bec En L'Air. 2018.

⁷ Bettina Rheims, *Kim*. Munich, Germany: Kehayoff Verlag, 1994.

intend to overlook the simultaneous beauty and camaraderie present in the images, even despite the subject's marginalized circumstances. Traces of intimacy and joy are also present. This represents bias on my part due to my proximity to the subject matter. I inevitably sought balance when viewing these images, an assurance of resilience alongside the somberness. In my study of the photographs, I acknowledged the darker realities while attempting to see alternative vantage points through which to understand the harsh reality for trans women in past decades. The fact remains that photographers and filmmakers discovered these individuals and their lived realities, documented them, and yet maintained social privileges and an ability to remove themselves from the worlds of their trans feminine subjects. Their subjects meanwhile could not so readily escape their marginalized realities.

These books serve as a counterpoint to the two films and one book featured in the exhibition that are created by trans-feminine artists. *C'Etait Du Spectacle! A History of Transsexual Artists in Montreal 1955 – 1985*, a book by Viviane Namaste that thoroughly explored the lived realities of trans women in Montreal in the late 20th century, published in French in 2005; *Journée Internationale De La Transsexualité*, a 1998 intimate documentary short film about an event in Montreal celebrating a member of the trans feminine community directed by Mirha-Soleil Ross; and *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* a film released in 2018 co-directed by Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel, focused on celebrated New York City trans feminine figure Marsha P. Johnson,

Each of these three works takes an intimately relational approach to their subject matter, drawing on oral histories and kinship to exemplify Judith Butler's concept of 'kinship beyond the bloodline,' in which communities identify familial bonds beyond the biological and dominant

conceptions of kinship.⁸ Viewed through this lens, each of these three works can be seen as produced through and by a kinship between author and subject. For instance, although Sasha Wortzel is not a trans feminine person, the production of *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* included Tourmaline's leadership of the project and starred two trans femme actresses, Mya Taylor and Eve Lindley.⁹ Ross and Namaste meanwhile focused on Montréal's trans femme community to which they each also belonged. Given its historical connection to France, a distinctly French-influenced trans-feminine Quebecois community emerged in Montréal in the mid-20th century.¹⁰ In her book, Namaste described this link in a discussion of the trans feminine Parisian showgirl Coccinelle who underwent gender re-assignment surgery in the late 1950s and visited Montreal in the 1965. Coccinelle's fame preceded her and publicity of her trip to Canada inspired a cohort of Montreal trans-feminine individuals to attend her show.¹¹ Many of them soon after pursued medical interventions that were only available at the time through underground networks.

Both Ross and Namaste came in direct contact with the survivors of a generation of trans-feminine elders in Montréal, and each sought to honor them in their work. I use the term survivors here as a descriptor to acknowledge that in previous decades multiple risk factors shortened the lives of many trans women. Ross's film is a poignant record; conceivably few if any of the trans women interviewed in her film, except for Namaste herself who appears briefly, are still alive today. At the time, that some of the women were in their 60s was in itself

⁸ Judith Butler in Bradway, Tyler, and Elizabeth Freeman, eds. *Queer Kinship: Race, Sex, Belonging, Form*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.

⁹ Alex Fialho, "Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel talk about their film *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*," ArtForum, Mar. 20, 2018, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/tourmaline-and-sasha-wortzel-talk-about-their-film-happy-birthday-marsha-238414/>.

¹⁰ Viviane Namaste, *"C'Etait Du Spectacle!"*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2005.

¹¹ Namaste. *"C'Etait Du Spectacle!"*.

remarkable, a testament to their self-determination to affirm their subject identity. In the recorded interviews, the trans women mentioned struggles they endured and a desire to not be treated as “disposable by society”, as stated by performer Brigitte Martel, while they prepared to present an annual celebration which honoured a member of their community.¹² The documentation is a rare look at a nightclub which served as a hub for the Francophone trans-feminine community in Montréal for over twenty years named Café Cléopâtre. Café Cléopâtre still stands as of this writing (April 2024), one of the last remaining physical examples of Montréal’s now dramatically gentrified red-light district.¹³ In a 2005 publication of Namaste’s book *Sex Change Social Change* Ross described this as a space where trans women, particularly sex workers, “hang out, socialize, live.”¹⁴ To imagine a physical space, steeped in a particular history and with a decades long connection to its surroundings, now represents a relic of a lost time.

Namaste’s book *C’Etait Du Spectacle* reflects the author’s undertaking of a deeper research of the same community, which creates a profound a record of trans feminine performers in Montreal from 1955 to 1985. The structure of the book is both testimonial and analytical, weaving through broader societal implications trans women experienced by drawing on archival research as well as oral history interviews. The interviews that Namaste conducts with her subjects are anonymized to protect the trans women, who openly discussed involvement in sex work, illegal activities in cabarets and nightclubs, and interactions with police. The care given to the participants by anonymizing their contributions, along with the deeply researched archival

¹² Mirha Soleil-Ross, *Journée Internationale De La Transsexualité*. VTape, 1998.

¹³ Rhianne Fiolka, Zack Marshall, and Anna Kramer, *Banishment through Branding: From Montréal’s Red-Light District to Quartier des Spectacles* Social Sciences 11, no. 9: 420, 2022.

¹⁴ Namaste, *Sex Change, Social Change*.

photographs and press from the period, is unique to a book of this genre focused on such a specific milieu.

Collectively, these three works – *C’Etait Du Spectacle! A History of Transsexual Artists in Montreal 1955 – 1985*, *Journée Internationale De La Transsexualité*, and *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* – offer visitors to the exhibition an opportunity to hear directly from trans-feminine subjects. Through documentation of performances, detailed ethnographic interviews and sound, the trans-feminine individuals in these three works are neither silenced, nor exoticized, nor are their bodies central to their work. And yet, attention to aesthetic quality and a desire for glamour is undeniable. Trans femininity in these documents includes attention to ornate self-presentation. For instance, the cover of *C’Etait Du Spectacle!* features a Quebecois showgirl named Kim Wood mid-striptease; the gowns and costumes in *Journée Internationale de la Transsexualité* are exquisite and ornate; *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* includes both archival footage of Marsha P Johnson in her regalia as well as the actress portraying her, Mya Taylor, in a dazzling stage costume. It is the combination of all these elements and the direct link between author and community that create the important distinction, a marked difference between these works and those created by non-trans artists.

As a trans feminine individual and curator myself, I engage in what the scholar Gayatri Gopinath terms “queer curation as a mode of intersubjective and interrelational obligation,” (2018, 4) the enactment of kinship in the curatorial process in which the curator has a profound and lived connection to the work being exhibited.¹⁵ I draw upon this methodology to foreground work which represents both important shifts in authorship and uniquely trans-feminine

¹⁵ Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*. Duke University Press, 2018. P. 4.

perspectives, created by trans-feminine artists, to counter the predominantly voyeuristic outsider lens which dominated documentation of many trans-feminine lives in the 20th century.

In my curatorial process I sought to present a timeline; despite each of the works representation of trans women in different decades of the 20th century, recurring themes are present throughout: marginalization, exoticization, ostracization. In attempting to counter these recurring themes, I experienced an affirmation of my curatorial process in discovering the prescient words of Ross, posted to her personal website last active in 2006. She indicated an intention through her work in the 1990s to create a distinctly transsexual visual culture.¹⁶ I felt powerful resonance with Ross' words and saw the potential that my curatorial intervention could perhaps offer a continuation of the work she undertook in the 1990s which sought to highlight distinctly trans feminine perspectives and voices through artistic intervention.

¹⁶ Mirha Soleil-Ross, bio. Accessed Mar. 10, 2024. <https://mirhasoleil.wordpress.com/bio/>

Methodology

For my curatorial process and contextualization of the exhibition, the clarification of terminology is important for the discussion and understanding of gender variance. Presently, the umbrella term transgender is most often used as the common vernacular when discussing a difference between an individual's gender identity or gender presentation differing and their assigned gender at birth. Almost as soon as this term emerged through being used primarily in academic circles in the mid 1990s, there was opposition from trans feminine writers and activists who preferred the term 'transsexual'.¹⁷ At the time, 'transsexual' was generally used by individuals who had undergone surgical procedure(s) and was the preferred term for many trans-feminine or trans femme identifying individuals.¹⁸ By contrast, the term 'transgender' was viewed by some trans-feminine or trans femme identifying individuals as too ambiguous, as it encompassed a range of gender non-conformity, with or without medical intervention, and included a range of gender expressions: masculine, feminine, and gender non-binary. For the sake of clarity and in respect of the subjects of the works in this exhibition, I rely on the terms trans feminine, trans femme, and trans women for this writing, while recognizing the difference in terms self-applied by the artist or artists in published interviews from past decades.

My introduction to this topic began over twenty years ago with the discovery of photo books focused on trans-feminine individuals and communities, which occurred in tandem with my own social and medical transition that began in the year 2000. Between 2002 and 2004 I

¹⁷ Susan Stryker, "Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity." *Radical History Review*. 100, no. 100, 144–57, 2008.

¹⁸ Namaste, *Sex Change, Social Change*.

worked at a well-known LGBTQ2S+ bookstore in Vancouver's gay village called Little Sister's. This became an important period of informal learning about gender and queer culture during a highly influential phase of my early adulthood. In reflecting on the process of discovering and studying portraits of trans-femininity at that time I now see the importance of viewing the imagery with fascination for the portrayal of the subjects, while maintaining a critical lens of the circumstances in which the photographs were created.

The books I encountered during this time include photographer Nan Goldin's *The Other Side* (1993)¹⁹ and one of the same titles I curated in this exhibition, *Kim* (1994). Describing the experience of discovering these works at that time remains complex, although it will be understood by readers who lived a period of their life without seeing their identity reflected in media or visual culture. This was much more common in the time before social media and the prevalence of the internet, after which point images and individuals who shared details of their transition became much more readily searchable online. In 2001, the few visible examples of trans feminine individuals I encountered aside from in photography books were on daytime talk shows, infrequently in after-hours nightclubs, or advertising sexual services in the back pages of free culture and entertainment newspapers printed in Vancouver at the time such as *The Georgia Strait* or *Xtra West*. Although these photographic essays were rare, I was fortunate to be in a situation—employed at Little Sister's bookstore—where I had access to these books.

¹⁹ Nan Goldin, *The Other Side*. Scalo Publishers, 1993.

Exhibition Review

Several recent exhibitions have offered gallery-going audiences' visual representation of trans femininity. In November 2023 photographer Bettina Rheims re-launched her work on Kim Harlow at Institut pour la Photographie in Lille, France for a brief exhibition which coincided with a new book of the same photographs.²⁰ Rheims is quoted on the exhibition's web page, "Thanks to Kim, I've never stopped working on the question of gender."²¹ Indeed, Rheims has created and shown work focused on gender variance since her encounter with Kim, a great deal of which was displayed in an expansive show at Paris's Maison Européenne de la Photographie in 2016.²² While Rheims collaboration with Kim Harlow includes Kim's contribution and documented participation, a difference in lived experience between photographer and her trans feminine or gender variant subject(s) inevitably remains.

The Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) presented an exhibition, on view from Dec 23, 2023, to April 14, 2024, dedicated to a body of amateur photographs which are known as the "Casa Susanna" collection. This collection is of significance historically and as uniquely robust visual documentation of a distinct group, men and occasionally their wives, who travelled to a private resort in upstate New York throughout the 1950s and 60s to gather and engage in cross dressing. The term cross dressing referred to wearing clothing or presenting, as described by legal scholar Kate Redburn, in a way that did not match one's assigned gender or legal identification and was illegal in New York State at the time.²³ As a result, visitors to Casa Susanna sought out a space to do so privately, while forming a network which eventually included visitors from California

²⁰ *Kim Harlow, Récits*. Institut pour la Photographie. Accessed Mar 10, 2022, <https://www.institut-photo.com/event/bettina-rheims-6/>

²¹ *Kim Harlow, Récits*. Institut pour la Photographie.

²² Maison Européenne de la Photographie. *Bettina Rheims*. <https://www.mep-fr.org/event/bettina-rheims/>

²³ Kate Redburn. "Before Equal Protection: The Fall of Cross-Dressing Bans and the Transgender Legal Movement, 1963–86." *Law and history review* 40, no. 4 (2022): 679–723.

and Canada.²⁴ It would be incorrect to conflate the experiences of Casa Susanna's visitors with the trans feminine individuals I have presented in the exhibition *Chez Cléo*. However, concerns of privacy, discussion of embodiment of femininity, and differentiating the term trans feminine within the transgender umbrella, which I have articulated above, are important to mention as parallels and points of dialogue.

The photographs displayed in the Casa Susanna exhibition were gathered from multiple sources including a collection held by renowned American photographer Cindy Sherman, The AGO's collection, and the descendant of one of the visitors to Casa Susanna. At an in-person panel conversation held at the AGO on January 13, 2024, the topic of privacy was discussed.²⁵ The photographs displayed at The AGO were taken in a private setting, and conceivably, the subjects of the photographs could not have envisioned their photographs one day displayed in a prominent art gallery. How then, was privacy of the subjects addressed with this exhibition? One of the panelists named Diana Merry-Shapiro visited Casa Susanna in the 1960s. She and the other panelists (AGO curator Sophie Hackett, external co-curator Isabelle Bonnet, and Betsy Wollheim whose father regularly visited Casa Susanna) shared that a significant component of the communication among this network was exchanging their photographs with one another by mail, as well as submitting them for publication in a magazine created by one of the Casa Susanna visitors named *Transvestia*.²⁶

The result therefore in considering privacy for the exhibition was that many of the subject's photographs would have been previously published and many, if not all, of the Casa

²⁴ Sophie Hackett, Isabelle Bonnet, and Betsy Wollheim, speakers. *Casa Susanna: Panel Conversation*. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, ON. Jan. 12, 2024.

²⁵ Sophie Hackett, Isabelle Bonnet, and Betsy Wollheim, speakers. *Casa Susanna: Panel Conversation*.

²⁶ Kirsten Butler, *There Was an Underground Magazine for Transgender Women in the 1960s*. June 22, 2023. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/casa-susanna-underground-magazine-transgender-women/>

Susanna visitors participated in this exchange of photographs. Although they would have faced major legal and societal repercussions had they been discovered to engage in cross-dressing at that time, it was noted that to afford the trip to Casa Susanna, visitors would have had to be financially stable and of comfortable socio-economic status, in addition have possessed financial means to compartmentalize or hide their cross-dressing interest.

The works included in *Chez Cléo* differed markedly, first and foremost in representing trans feminine as an identity very distinct from that of a person or people engaged in cross-dressing. Further, I was aware that in the works I curated for *Chez Cléo*, even despite the difference in lived experience between author and subject, there was clearly communication that the images and writing had been published and were not solely for private or personal viewing. I do not intend to critique the AGO or curators of the Casa Susanna exhibition for including photographs which at the time of creation were considered private. As the panelist Merry-Shapiro remarked, “When does history become... history?”²⁷ The Casa Susanna photographs are now approximately 60 years old, and laws attempting to criminalize cross dressing are no longer in place.

I first navigated considerations of privacy relating to curation myself in presenting an exhibition titled *Onstage/Offstage*, displayed at The ArQuives, Canada’s LGBTQ2S+ archive in September 2023.²⁸ The materials I selected were the result of an extensive research residency period over the summer of 2023. Video and archival photographs held in the collection of The ArQuives were central to the presentation, with the specific focus of the exhibition on documentation of a small selection of stage performers across various gender expressions in

²⁷ Sophie Hackette, Isabelle Bonnet, and Betsy Wollheim, speakers. *Casa Susanna: Panel Conversation*

²⁸ Jordan King. *Onstage/Offstage, Sept 21 - Oct 14, 2023*. Published Oct 15, 2023.
<https://jordankingarchive.com/curation/onstageoffstage>

Toronto and Montreal in the late 20th century. I chose to display photographs taken backstage at an after-hours club called The Manatee in 1973, shot by Canadian photographer Raphael Bendahan, which are held in the collection of The ArQuives. I acknowledged that the performer's legal name was not recorded, and the location the photos were taken afforded them a certain amount of privacy (as a backstage setting, many of the performers were captured mid costume change and the venue catered to a queer crowd). However, the individuals photographed would have understood they were moments away from stepping onstage to perform for an audience, therefore, to be highly visible. The ArQuives is a community led initiative, primarily visited by members of the LGBTQ2S+ community, as opposed to a highly visible public gallery or institution. Although permission could not be granted by the subjects of the photographs, with both The ArQuives and Raphael Bendahan's consent, I was able to include two of Bendahan's photographs from the 1973 series shot at The Manatee in the exhibition.

It was during the research residency period at The ArQuives that I discovered an obsolete video format, called beta cam, master copy of Mirha-Soleil Ross's *Journée Internationale de la Transsexualité* (1998) held in the collection there. Ross donated her archive to be held by The ArQuives, and while I had previously viewed the film via the distributor of her work, Toronto film and video distributor VTape, discovery of the beta cam master copy was a wonderful coincidence. The master copy was then re-digitized by VTape, a process which dramatically improved the clarity and resolution. I saw this process as deepening my understanding of the work and envisioned it's discovery by new audiences.

Literature Review

Scholarly research and writing which inform my curatorial perspectives and my MFA thesis exhibition range across multiple disciplines. A crucial text for the development of my curatorial work was *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (2017). Numerous influential trans feminine, trans masculine and transgender scholars (to return now to the contemporary, broadly applicable term which addresses a range of gender expressions) contributed essays to *Trap Door*, which explored racial differences among trans experience, trans histories, trans archives, and the rapid evolution of trans visibility throughout the 2010s.²⁹

In entering exploration of queer archives and queer curation, specifically redressing gaps and revisiting traumatic histories, I was informed by the writing of Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* (2003) and Gayatri Gopinath's *Unruly Visions* (2018). Namaste's comprehensive scholarly work in *Sex Change, Social Change* (2011), *C'Etait Du Spectacle!* (2005) and *Invisible Lives* (2000) was transformative in exploding my conceptualization of the legal and societal implications of trans femininity. Namaste's commentary on the recurring exclusion of trans feminine perspectives in academic discourse, including by trans scholars, was especially resonant.³⁰ Saidiya Hartman's work, *Venus in Two Acts* (2008) spurred consideration of alternative vantage points through which to understand and redress traumatic histories.

To address an overview of the writing which attempts to disentangle, question, or trouble definitions of woman, and the perspectives of trans exclusionary feminism, was not feasible in an exhibition or text of this size. In this respect, I focused on Judith Butler's contribution to troubling gender, Butler's writing in *Queer Kinship: Race, Sex, Belonging, Form* (2022) was

²⁹ Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds. *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017.

³⁰ Namaste, *Sex Change, Social Change*.

significant in my consideration of trans feminine lineages. Susan Stryker’s commentary on the linguistic evolution of terminology also was important for the clarification of language around transgender and transsexual.³¹ Lastly the writing of Eliza Steinbock which considered “trans cinema”³², trans cinematic image, and representation of trans identity in motion picture, was transformative to this text. Through this broad range of research which explored the works of writers and scholars across disciplines, the theoretical framework of the exhibition crystallized.

³¹ Susan Stryker, “Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity.” *Radical History Review*. 100, no. 100, 144–57, 2008.

³² Eliza Steinbock. *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

Installation Concept/Design

The exhibition spaces were divided into two components, the Reading Room which featured two chairs with books displayed on shelving at waist height. The rear half of the gallery was dedicated to the two projected videos and a selection of seating which included a two-person upholstered bench and approximately six individual chairs. Audible sound in the gallery was Soleil-Ross' film, while the sound for *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* was made available through two sets of headphones. The Reading Room was intended to offer space for contemplation and time with the published works. I delineated an area with a rug, comfortable chairs, and lower levels of light from overhead LED track lighting.

On the farthest wall opposite the entrance of the gallery, I constructed two frames to support four curtain panels. These were an effort to transform the space for visitors. By covering the windows on that wall, the space became darker, and the visible textures (burgundy velvet, gold trim) each added to the tactile, experiential elements. These softened and enhanced the mood, while contributing to a late-night ambiance, which aligned with the projected films, both of which were set in nightclubs.

In both form and scale within the gallery, I sought to elevate the films of Ross and Tourmaline by displaying them prominently. Additionally, the voices of the film's subjects – which includes the many trans women interviewed by Ross and the voice of Marsha P. Johnson herself, are audible in the archival footage within *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* -- shaped the exhibition for visitors.

The inclusion of the two sets of curtains as a curatorial intervention was thoughtfully considered. Nightclubs as a space of congregation and culture creation, specifically for communities of trans women, was evoked through this intervention. The curtains were more than

simply a backdrop, rather they evoked sensations of tactile memory. My intention was to transport visitors to an experience and setting which has all but disappeared: a dingy yet magical underground cabaret evocative of the aforementioned Café Cléopâtre.



Figure 1: Interior of gallery, projection of Mirha Soleil-Ross Journée Internationale De La Transsexualité

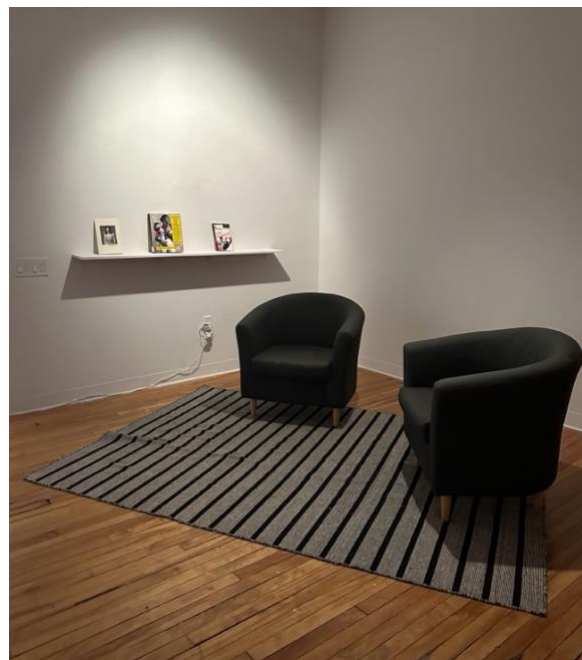


Figure 2: Interior of gallery, reading room with books place on shelf nearby

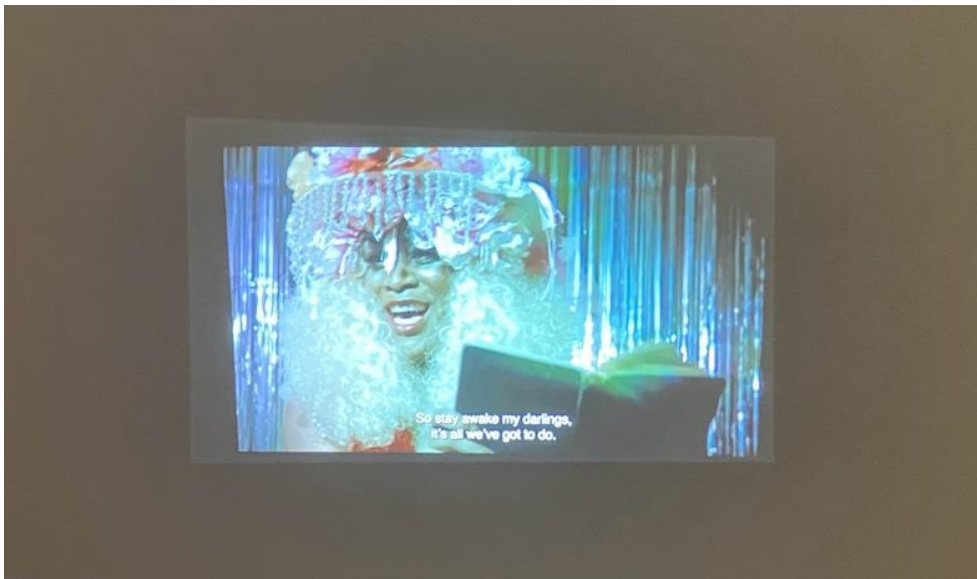


Figure 3: Projected image of film Happy Birthday, Marsha!



Figure 4: Exhibition wall text and books placed on shelf

Conclusion

In this exhibition and writing I have sought to give visibility to the ways in which trans feminine subjects served as a source of inspiration for artists in the mid to late 20th century. I have suggested a timeline which highlights a demarcation in authorship and subsequently a shift in the approach of works focused on trans feminine subjects. The three works featured in the exhibition by trans feminine artists, Ross, Namaste, and Tourmaline offer alternatives to the repeatedly voyeuristic treatment trans feminine subjects received in the 20th century. Through the linguistic delineation I have engaged in concerning trans feminine, trans femme, and trans women, I have sought to highlight and nuance the variance within transgender identity and experience.

In this text I have clarified my considerations around the ethics considered in presenting these works, method of engagement by artist and subject, and discussed the impact of marginalization on trans feminine individuals. I have addressed the ways in which authorship by an individual or individuals with a deep connection to that community has the potential to produce multi-layered, multi-dimensional, nuanced work. By implementing these considerations and questioning authorship, whether in future work of this nature is handled exclusively by trans feminine writers, artists, and filmmakers or not, I urge questioning the ways such work might accurately or wholly reflect those within the community whose lives have been repeatedly mined for artistic inspiration.

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