

BODY OF/IN WORK: MOVING IMAGES AND THE REPRESENTATION OF TRANS SEX WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

By investigating the visualisation of the lives of trans sex workers, this article seeks to engage with trans responses to the idea of gendered citizenship, in particular through the use of the moving image. Such images, as seen in the work of activist and artist Robert Hamblin, are important for drawing attention to the manner in which cisgender norms operate and leave their traces on trans bodies. Understanding photography and film's capacity for facilitating trans visibility, Hamblin's work is concerned with trans subjects and their negotiation of those normative structures that attempt to transfix their experience of gender. This article demonstrates how forms of visual representation can be used in service of trans subjects as a means to engage with the precariousness of living and labouring as a sex worker in contemporary South Africa.

Keywords: Transgender; trans people; sex work; photography; moving image; Robert Hamblin

INTRODUCTION

To change one's gender, or to be gendered differently, is not an easy process, especially when such changes or transitions run counter to ideas surrounding gendered belonging and classification. By investigating the visualisation of trans lives¹ within contemporary

1 In keeping with the style of some recent texts, the author has opted to spell phrases such as trans sex, trans subject, trans lives, trans workers, trans responses, trans women, or trans people as *two* words, as opposed to *transgender* people (see <https://uknswp.org/um/safety/transgender-sex-workers/>; <https://janetmock.com/2014/01/30/janet-mock-sex-work-experiences/>).

South Africa, this article seeks to engage with trans responses to the idea of gendered citizenship, in particular through the use of the moving image. In this context, I draw on Noël Carroll's (1996, xiii) definition of the moving image as a means to speak about film (amongst a range of other media) that produces sequential images that might (or might not) be representational in nature. However, I also extend this definition by including still images in which the idea or act of movement is referenced; that is, where the trace of a sequential narrative/enactment is left on a physical or digital surface. Such reference to both the act of moving and the product of movement resonates with contemporary visual representations that deliberately subvert and unsettle a transfixed gaze on the body of trans sex workers. In this context, I deliberately use the term "transfix" to speak of forms of representation that *fixate upon* or *try to fix* (resolve, secure or seize) that which potentially moves and transitions, such as trans bodies.

Be it for the everyday functioning of trans subjects within the socio-political arena of South Africa, or specifically for the recognition of trans sex workers, the domain of the visual is vital for drawing attention to the manner in which cisgender norms operate and leave their traces on trans bodies. This scenario resonates with (and is visualised in) the work of local trans artist, Robert Hamblin. Understanding photography and film's capacity for facilitating trans visibility, Hamblin's work is concerned with trans subjects and their negotiation of those normative structures that affirm and/or confront their experience of gender. Be it in images of him *as* a trans subject (more specifically, as a trans man), or in his own work where he collaborates with *other* trans subjects, Hamblin believes the visual to be an empowering medium insofar as it can create awareness about trans lives.²

By drawing on Hamblin's work, this article examines forms of representation that are used by, or in the service of, trans subjects. From this basis, particular attention is paid to forms of gender representation and/or activism that aspire to counter, subvert or terrorise cisgender norms that prevail in the legislative and bureaucratic management of trans lives. These forms of representation are, as this article will demonstrate, often volatile—that is, changing or fleeting—in terms of both their subject matter and material dimensions. In addition, such forms of management are particularly concentrated when dealing with the juncture of sexual economies and trans modes of self-representation, as the very idea of the sexed trans body as a *working* organism (as an earning, labouring entity) runs counter to the normative (and, I would argue, highly moralised) conception and visualisation of gender that the state calls for. As such, modes of photographic and filmic representation are crucial for negotiating the lines of division and connection that mark the lives of trans sex workers.

2 For other local studies on trans identities that explore South African trans lives and experiences, also see Ruth Morgan, C. Marais and J. R. Wellbeloved (2009); Louise Vincent and Bianca Camminga (2009); Tamar Klein (2009); and Amanda Lock Swarr (2012).

THE THWARTED IMAGE: ON PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM

To understand the role that visual modes of self-representation play in trans lives, the junction of both technical and conceptual concerns that lie within the still and moving image needs some contextualisation. When looking at the still image, photography's function as an ethics of seeing and a visual grammar (Sontag 2008, 3) has particular repercussions for the imaging of human subjectivity. As such, the medium is intricately tied to the concept of the human as gendered subject, and it has been marked, ever since its conception, with questions surrounding its ability to recollect this subject "truthfully."³ This idea bears strongly on trans subjects insofar as photography has been used, be it as documentary device or creative medium, to give some sense of the complexity underscoring trans lives—an idea that, as this article demonstrates, is central to the work of Hamblin, as well as those of other trans artists/activists. At the same time, photography has also been acknowledged for the role it has traditionally played (and still plays) as a disciplinary tool for constraining and policing the (gendered) human subject. The potential for identifying a subject and casting him/her within a topology/category was central to the photograph's power of producing a social calculus of discipline, a visual standard of sorts, against which extremities and abnormalities can be judged (Sekula 1993, 346; see also Krauss 1982; Sekula 1984). For example, Joan Schwartz's (2000) writing on photography charts the medium's early development in the nineteenth century where its likeness to the telescope and the microscope was particularly pronounced. This, Schwartz argues, reveals the scopophilic attributes of the sciences—hence their interest in photography—and speaks of the empirical desire to see, understand and categorise. With photography often employed to reinforce the dichotomous structure of public and private, this medium also stands central to the delineation of normalised identities and their "deviant" counterparts. The hierarchic distinction between, inter alia, cis- and transgender identities have a visual history in which photography plays a principal role in discriminating the one from the other—see, for example, Jay Prosser (1998; 2005) on the discursive and visual stigmatisation of trans identities.

Despite (and largely in response to) the employment of visual material to either ostracise trans subjects (by hierarchically comparing them to their cisgender "counterparts"), or erasing them from society (by ignoring their discursive and corporeal existence), the domain of the visual has also been important for bringing the

3 On both a physical and metaphorical level photography has long been invested in the notion of "faithful" recollection (Danziger 2008; Draaisma 2000; Haverty Rugg 1997). Positivist motivations are reflected in the use of photography as documentary evidence (Burton 2005, 7; Richards 1992). Moreover, empiricist aspirations drive use of photographs to allow subjects to "speak through" visual representation (Leslie 2003, 181). While such ideas have repeatedly been questioned in contemporary scholarship, the impact of such traditional ideas surrounding "visual truthfulness" still bears strongly on the modern usage and consumption of the photographic image—an idea that is revisited at the hand of Hamblin's work.

trans subject into knowledge, especially through modes of self-representation. The use of the visual as a creative space for facilitating self-reflexive recollection is increasingly gaining attention in general society and academia alike. For example, the ability of visual media, such as photography and film, to “prove” the existence of trans identities has been used in various ways, particularly from within trans communities themselves. One of the strongest responses from trans subjects to photography and film holds that these media can be seen as important tools for responding to the silence that pervades trans lives within the public arena. For example, Jason Cromwell (1999) argues that the visibility of trans subjects is crucial for self-empowerment and that such visibility supports the construction of socio-political identities, the education of the public on trans matters, and the reclaiming of history. Producing images of trans subjects in the media, Cromwell argues, is necessary to “demythologise” such subjects, and to provide a nuanced account of the diversity that characterises their lives (Cromwell 1999, 142; see also Bolin 1994; Sullivan 1990).

Benjamin Singer (2006) is also of the opinion that diverse visual representations of trans lives are vital, given the role that photography in particular has played in producing a medical model of transgenderism and transsexuality as pathological conditions. Photography’s aura of unmediated reality has lent itself to the medical gaze, particularly as it was used to map the supposed gender “deviance” of nonstandard bodies (Singer 2006, 602–604).⁴ Trans bodies were often framed in photographs to furnish scientific “evidence” of psychological and corporeal abnormality (Meyerowitz 2002), and these images were commonly used in medical texts as tools for tracing and categorising “transsexuality” or “transness” as a pathology. Photography was employed in medical/scientific discourses to promote a perspective on “transsexuality” as a type, and of framing “transsexual bodies” as specimens that can be captured, studied and transformed into public knowledge. Photography thus served the function of reducing such bodies and subjectivities to depictions of Otherness (Singer 2006, 604), be it within scientific discourse, the public imagination or even state-apparatuses.

Contemporary photographs of/by trans subjects often try to displace the regulatory gaze that has long grazed their bodies. Such images have a disruptive function as they call attention to the “profound silence and passivity” (Singer 2006, 608) of medical and administrative photographs of trans subjects, be it in text-books, state records or even government-sanctioned recollective practices, such as identity documents. By implicating the viewer in the act of looking and disrupting the voyeurism that underlies such practices, photographic self-portraits allow trans subjects to “talk back” and “look back” (Singer 2006, 609; see also Halberstam 1998). In addition, they can provide a platform for visualising the social situation of trans lives (Halberstam 1998)—they can show the trans subject in a specific social (and everyday) setting, thus contributing

4 See also Griselda Pollock’s (1998) investigation of Western conventions of representation in which the “mastering eye/I” establishes a hierarchical relationship between itself and the subject that it reproduces on a two-dimensional surface.

to a displacement of the clinical dimension of the medical gaze and the regulatory forces pervading the bureaucratic gaze. According to Singer (2006), such visual forms of representation have a profoundly ethical dimension within a trans context, as they show the viewer how to relate to a trans subject, while also providing a document that substantiates the subject's claim to recognition. Such a desire for looking and talking back marks both the photographic and filmic representations of trans lives, and can thus be traced across both the still and moving image—see, for example, the work of Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2006), Kyle Frackman (2013), Jack Halberstam (2001) and Roshanak Kheshti (2009) for critical readings of trans films and/or the depiction of trans bodies within the moving image.

In addition to such acts of reclamation, visual representations of and by trans subjects can also respond to the sensationalism that characterises the depiction of trans identities in the media. Representations of “transsexual bodies” through sensationalist journalism have had a tremendous impact on the public imagination (Meyerowitz 2002), with sex reassignment surgery specifically exploited as a “spectacle” to demonstrate the power of science and health technologies for “curing” gender deviance (Shelly 2008, 133–134; see also Namaste 2000). With the media often using images of trans subjects for their purportedly “spectacular” nature—to inspire affect and desire, and to entertain or shock (Shelly 2008, 134)—popular representations of trans people frequently remain transfixed upon their Otherness. Here, I would argue that the interplay suggested by the word “transfixed” is of note, for such representations try to render a fixed perspective on that which potentially moves and shifts, and it signifies a means of looking that tries to capture beyond (and despite) the act of moving.

(DIS)ENGAGING THE GAZE: MOVING IMAGES AND THE LIVES OF TRANS SEX WORKERS

Such ideas surrounding the transfixed gaze provide a critical point of departure in Hamblin's own creative work, particularly in a project that he did with Sistaaz Hood, a creative collective of local trans sex workers.⁵ Consisting of self-identified *mtf* (male-to-female) trans subjects, these sex workers were consulted by Hamblin on how they perceive themselves in relation to, and through the media of, photography and film.⁶ As Hamblin explains:

5 One of the outcomes of this project was an exhibition entitled *When you're Feeling like a Lady*, which ran from 14 to 22 May 2013 at the Centre for African Studies Gallery, University of Cape Town.

6 In this regard, Hamblin's work forms part of a larger project of drawing on autobiographical narratives and photographs to negotiate the relationship of certain (erased or marginalised) identities with public discourse. For example, Dean Kotula's compilation of autobiographic essays in *The Phallus Palace* (2002), Morty Diamond's collection of autobiographic essays in *From the Inside Out* (2004), and Jonathan Ames's anthology of transsexual memoirs in *Sexual Metamorphosis* (2005) are but some of the important texts that specifically deal with trans subjects and their accounts of self. While these texts deal predominantly with American or European stories of trans lives, Ruth Morgan, Charl

After getting a group of trans sex workers together, I started with a process of consultation with these participants, and that became the portal, or the lens, through which I approached this project. This lens became a means for bringing together a range of issues; I came to realise that, if you ever want to glean society's reception of trans issues or even gender issues in general, these participants' lives provide a space within which such matters are severely concentrated. It is the space where gender, class and race intersect and leave an indelible mark on the lives and bodies of these participants. (Personal Interview, Cape Town, 12 February 2013)

The very grittiness that often pervades the lives of trans sex workers and that also predominates generalised public understandings of the concept of working in the sex industry, has been an issue of great concern within local society.⁷ Being subject to both scorn and sympathy, sex workers occupy a space of vulnerability where their recognition as human beings and their ability to make a living is highly insecure, and this is compounded when dealing with trans subjects. Recent artistic and curatorial endeavours have highlighted the plight of sex workers in South Africa. Lerato Bereng's curated group exhibition entitled "SEX", showcased at the Stevenson gallery in Johannesburg (21 April to 2 June 2016), featured a range of works in which the sex trade was one of the main issues of concern. For example, for Simon Gush's performance installation "Ask a Sex Worker", activist organisations Sonke Gender Justice, Sisonke Sex Workers Movement and SWEAT (Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce) were invited to participate in a public discussion on the topic of sex work as labour. Other examples include the "Talking Heads (Africa)" art project that was introduced at the Infecting the City Public Art Festival in 2008. As a conversational art project, "Talking Heads" featured intimate 20-minute conversations between members of the public and different "experts," which ranged from nuclear physicists to sex workers. Such projects endeavour to bring conversations about sex work into the public domain through the medium of art.

At the same time, such attempts at public exposure and dialogue can also take the form of activism geared *against* existing artistic expressions. The inclusion of artist Zwelethu Mthethwa's work at an exhibition entitled "Our Lady" (which opened on 11 November 2016 as a collaborative project between the South African National Gallery and the New Church Museum) sparked heated debate and outrage, especially from sex worker advocacy groups. Mthethwa is currently on trial for the murder of Nokuphila Kumalo, a 23-year-old sex worker who was allegedly beaten to death by Mthethwa in

Marais and Joy Wellbeloved's book *Trans* (2009) is one of the only texts that present a collection of local autobiographical trans narratives, while Anastacia Tomson's *Always Anastacia* (2016) presents a personal memoir of trans experience. These books share a key concern for creating visual and/or textual awareness of trans-related issues amongst the general public. In this regard, they seem to demonstrate a common goal of trans autobiography or putting trans lives into the public domain (Prosser 1998, 130).

⁷ See the work of Charles van Onselen (2001 and 2007), Henry Trotter (2008), and Chandré Gould (2008) for more information on the legal status of and general precariousness experienced by sex workers in colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

2013. While the exhibition attempted to “interrupt the puritanical and patriarchal visual economy that surrounds imagery of the figurative female form” (The New Church Museum, 2016), the inclusion of Mthethwa’s work was deemed as “not only in bad taste, but deeply offensive” by SWEAT, who staged a public protest outside the gallery premises (Furlong 2016). Following on such demonstrations, as well as public petitions, much of the work that was on show at the exhibition has been withdrawn and removed, with the empty wall space where the work used to hang left as is. Because this decision was highly polemical and heavily debated (be it in the media or social networking sites), the relationship between activism and art, and the effect of the former on the latter have never been more pronounced in the domain of sex work within South Africa.

Speaking directly to this intersection between art and activism, the departure of Hamblin’s work is to highlight the complexity of trans sex workers’ lives. The main concern that arose during his consultation with the participants was their desire to move beyond a typecast victim role and to show their own lives as more nuanced, and perhaps more human than popular stereotypes often allow for. For example, Hamblin’s work refutes the “passivity” (Singer 2006, 608) or “spectacle” (Shelly 2008, 133) of the transfixed gaze that largely pervades popular media and medical representations. Instead, his work potentially creates a space where both he (as photographer and artists) and trans sex workers (as fellow artists, but also as activists) participate in a process of creation. This is primarily a consultative process, meaning that the participating sex workers were asked how they want to be portrayed, what they want to show, and which stories they want to bring to the images. The photographs that were the result of these consultations potentially become a vehicle, Hamblin believes, for “expressing the joy, vulnerability and violence that form part of their everyday and working lives” (Personal Interview, Cape Town, 12 February 2013).

The process of negotiation between the participants and Hamblin came to focus on their desire to express their own femininity. The participants drew attention to the fact that they wanted this project to be about their experience of a female self, while they also strongly felt that these images should be reflective of their identity as sex workers. In addition, the participants decided to deliberately and strategically use their nudity as a reference to the sexual act. As Hamblin explains, the participants wanted to show their bodies entirely to demonstrate that their consciousness of *being trans* is not about denying their male bodies (in their own words), but that it is about their expression and interpretation of femininity. This is important, Hamblin explains, as they deliberately wanted to show that, despite still having male bodies, their expression of being female (be it towards the camera, the viewer or even a client) is believable. Here, the believability of their expression of femininity is of the utmost importance—seeing that most of these sex workers do not have the economic means to undergo sex reassignment surgery (should they wish to), nor access to proper medical resources (other than the support offered by SWEAT), they simply cannot afford any other option. Here, Hamblin also explains his own position in relation to these trans participants by

stating that his work is unavoidably but also deliberately reflective of his position as a white, educated man (albeit trans man)—a position that affords him certain privileges that the participating trans sex workers simply do not have.

The visual interpretation and display of trans femininity by the trans participants take a particular form in Hamblin's work. By using specific techniques—such as movement and blurring, as well as scale and format—Hamblin's work aims to facilitate an intimate relationship between the trans participants' experience of their own femininity and the viewer's reading and interpretation thereof. This relationship is seen in *Lily 2* (see Figure 1)—an image that forms part of a series of small works in which the depicted subject barely measures more than a few centimetres. Framed by open, white space, Lily (one of the participants in Hamblin's project) is shown from above, with the gaze of the camera assuming a position that is at once reminiscent of a god's eye view⁸ and the microscopic lens. Looking down at this small figure, the viewer is placed in a position that is at once intimate and removed, as one is not exactly sure whether one is looking at a figure from a distance, or confronted by something so small that it almost evades our gaze. At the same time, our gaze is also unsettled as the image is not sharp enough to afford us the detail needed to make any final judgement. While some parts of the subject's body are caught in a blur, others are strategically hidden from view. In all, this minute image instils a sense of femininity while not trying to show precisely where such gendered traces are found on the human body. In this sense, allowing the body to move in front of the camera (to play itself out, so to speak) facilitates an experience and reading of trans femininity.

8 I am using the term "god's eye view" as it is used in film and media studies where it refers to a viewpoint that captures a subject from above by placing the camera at an overhead angle. This position is often used to give viewers a feeling of omnipresence when gazing down on a given situation/subject.

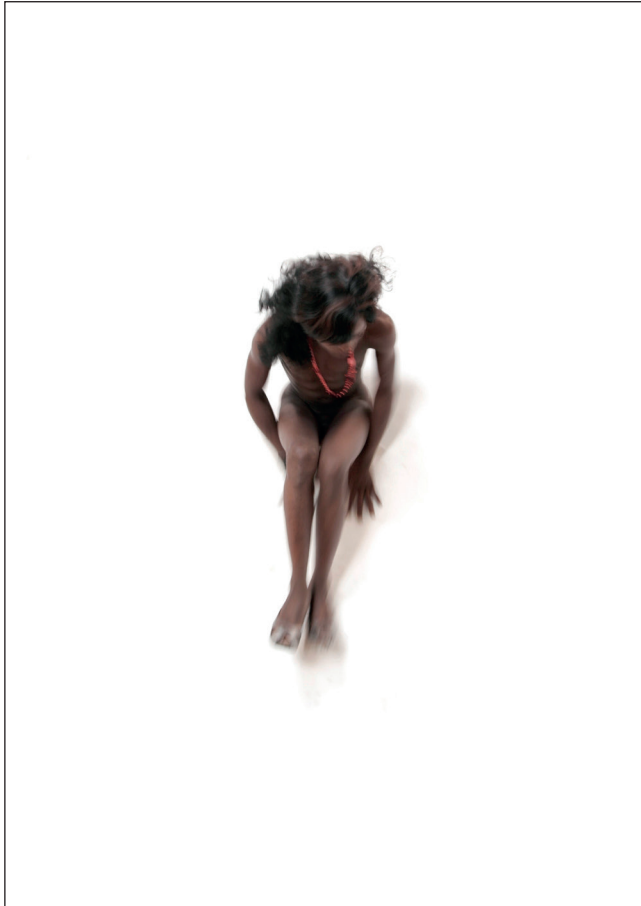


Figure 1: Robert Hamblin. *Lily 2*, 2013. Photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

When looking at this image, as well as other similar images that also form part of this series, the very idea of “a body of work” takes on multiple meanings, for not only do such photographs constitute a corpus of work (a collection that speaks, in its totality, of a sense of community), but they also deal with bodies that are, in effect, caught in the process of working. By focusing on the corporeal movement of trans sex workers, the idea of *the body working* has resonance in these images. Yet, for a spectator fixated upon finding some form of evidence, of discovering a clear photographic profile, such images might be frustrating. They are never crisp enough, neither are the subjects revealed in enough detail for the spectator to ever assume that these images trade in statements of “fact” and “precision.” This is not the camera as a positivist instrument or a documentary vehicle, intent on laying a body bare for close inspection. Instead of focusing and freezing the lens, the camera rather seems to provide a suggestion of presence and movement. In this regard, these images almost take the shape of blurred

film stills, or drawings even, as they intimate a gestural understanding of the body. These images seem to propose rather than reveal; instead of providing verification of “the life” or “the body” of “the trans sex worker”, they rather insinuate that such lives are more complex than a camera can necessarily give it credit for.

Here, Hamblin’s images resonate with, but also depart from, queer South African photographer Zanele Muholi’s work. Well-recognised locally and abroad, Muholi’s work has become synonymous with the photographic representation of black lesbian and, to a lesser degree, trans subjectivities. As a self-proclaimed visual “archivist” and “activist,” Muholi (n.d.)⁹ strategically focuses the photographic lens on black lesbian and trans subjects as a means to create a body of knowledge around their everyday lives. While Hamblin’s work has the same impetus for creating a visual register of previously undocumented subjects, his images also draw attention to the fact that the photographic gaze is unavoidably complex and difficult. For, while Muholi’s photographic gaze shows her in relation to subjects who are largely similar to her, Hamblin’s work rather shows how the lens of the camera cannot refute certain distances. Hamblin shares the experience of being trans with his photographed subjects/participants, yet his work draws overt attention to the fact that his life is significantly different because of race. While transness is the incentive for creation and the photographic occasion that he shares with the participating trans sex workers, Hamblin’s work is also an honest reflection on the fact that race inevitably complicates the relationship between himself and the participants. As Hamblin’s work suggests, even the shared experience of being trans is not enough to assume that his photographs can somehow mitigate or overcome racial and economic differences.

Hamblin’s images thus trouble an understanding of photography as a vehicle for easy reconciliation. His investigation of the raced, sexed and labouring trans body is extended in a more recent project where photographs serve as a basis for filmic modes of representation. As an experiment and work-in-progress, Hamblin created a film in which he appears alongside Leigh (Davids),¹⁰ a trans sex worker and activist who forms part of the Sistaaz Hood collective. Entitled *interseXion* (see Figure 2) this body of work references Hamblin’s complex relationship with Leigh, and the various gender, racial, cultural and religious discourses that impact and leave their trace on trans bodies. As such, this film is supposed to represent the intersection between Hamblin as an artist (and as a white, male, trans subject) and Leigh, a self-identified “coloured” *mtf* trans sex worker. As Hamblin explains: “Leigh grew up as the first-born boy in a Muslim family,

9 As Muholi argues: “[U]sing my own works of photography, I explore how visual activism can be employed by socially, culturally and economically marginalized women as a site of resistance to not only return the gaze of our colonizers, but to develop what bell hooks has called a ‘critical gaze’ into heteropatriarchal constructions of black women’s bodies and their sexualities” (Muholi n.d.). More recent work also features trans subjects who are included in the “critical gaze” or visual redress of Muholi’s photography—also see Thomas (2010).

10 For the purpose of this article I refer to Leigh Davids as “Leigh”, given that this is the way that she is named and identified in Hamblin’s work.

so to transition meant that she had to give up enormous privileges in order to live out her identity as a trans person. At the age of 14, she ran away from home and started doing sex work to support herself” (Personal Interview, 26 September 2016, Stellenbosch).

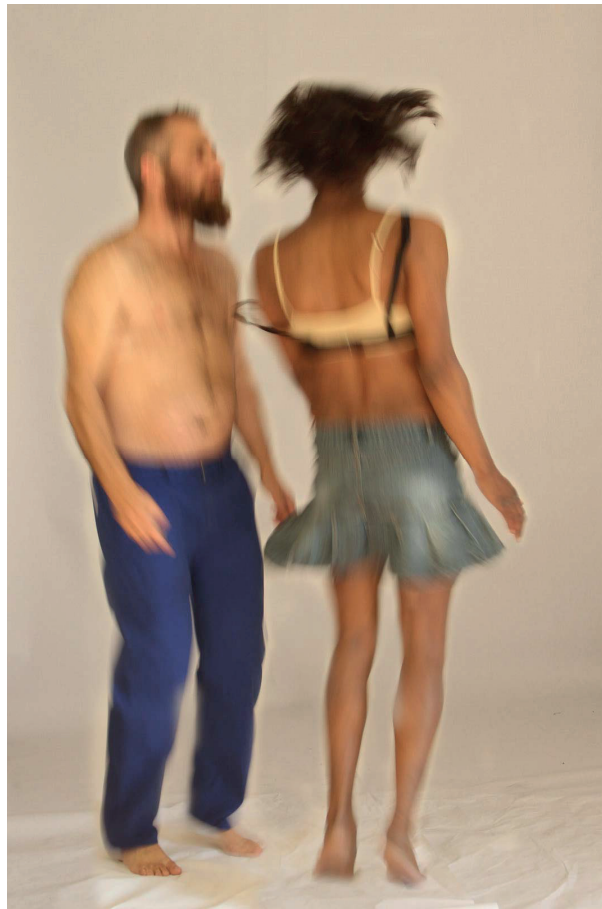


Figure 2: Robert Hamblin. *interseXion*, 2016. Still from film. Courtesy of the artist.

The precariousness that underlies Leigh’s life and working experience is highlighted in her own interpretation of what it means to be a trans sex worker. In a highly emotive talk that she presented under the title “Trans Violent Exclusion” at the recent Trans Health, Advocacy and Research Conference (Davids 2017),¹¹ Leigh presents her own definition of what it means to be a trans sex worker:

11 Leigh’s entire talk was filmed and is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbjABrwY0CU>.

[Being a] transgender sex worker means [that] men started fucking you when you were a child and you thought it was cool because they could see you were a girl. It was the only way for you to have that femininity—by being abused. It means your parents did not come looking for you because you were too much of a problem at home, a problem they did not know how to deal with. It means social services turned a blind eye to all of this because you cannot place a child in foster care or a shelter who has gender identity issues.

It means the police turn a blind eye to the paedophiles who give you drugs and fuck you since you were a teenager because social services don't know what to do with you and you can't arrest a child. It means you will experience rape, see murder and death before you are 18. It means the day you hit 18 you will suddenly face the law and you will now find another place ready to acknowledge your gender identity ... prison.

It is against the backdrop of such vulnerability that Hamblin's work charts a complex relationship between being empowered and defenceless, shielded and exposed. When thinking about his own relationship with Leigh, Hamblin emphasises his position as a "privileged" trans-masculine person, as someone who had the opportunity to change his gender and to be an artist (Personal Interview, 11 April 2017, Cape Town). The film speaks to this complex relationship in which reference is made to both the differences between the two dancers/performers, as well as the fact of their coming together. In this sequential narrative, the viewer sees these two bodies spinning as if on separate axes, with each occasionally facing the other, sometimes facing away, but each similar insofar as they are endlessly spiralling next to each other. By referring to the act of dancing, Hamblin suggests that, in moving with, away from and towards each other, a ritual is enacted that somehow shows the differences between the two dancers, while the act of movement also blurs the bodily traces of the participants—sometimes making them barely discernible save for the basic suggestion of moving flesh and clothes. At the same time, this dance also echoes the gendered, patriarchal and even religious forces that are always at play when thinking about human relations, especially in those instances where sex and sexuality are at work. The symbolic nature of this moving relationship is thus of the utmost importance, be it as reference to the sexual act, a form of negotiation, or broader commentary on human relations.

The spectator is placed at an intimate distance, as they see something that is quite personal, but they are still kept at a distance. Here, movement is crucial for facilitating this experience, as the viewer is made aware of the fact that they are witnessing moving images, and subjects already moving within these sequentially orchestrated images—in all, the spectator is confronted with an intimation of bodies that are constantly moving and changing. As a result, the viewer is left with a trace that is, in fact, quite volatile, insofar as movement is used to suggest precariousness, change and instability as the determining factors that inform both the production and experience of the image. Not only are the moving subjects blurred in the images (with Hamblin strategically choosing a low shutter speed when taking these photographs in order to give reference to the act of dancing), but the individual shots also transform into one another when seen

sequentially. Movement is thus that which is captured within each image, but also in the relationship between the images—it is the basic component that allows for interplay between a photographic and filmic understanding of this body of work.¹² At the same time, such movement disturbs a transfixed gaze insofar as it denies the eye to settle. The viewer is never allowed the opportunity to engage with a static, submissive trans body—hence, the moving image becomes both a political act and a technological intervention.

In addition, movement becomes a means of escape, a political strategy and potential space for slipping away and imagining a sense of fluidity. Modes of visibility stand central to this endeavour for release, as the very place to escape a normative imagining of the gendered, labouring body seems to lie there where it becomes least traceable. Hamblin's work speaks of a desire to understand such bodies and the complex gender negotiations they underscore. But then the twist—for if this body of work is a means to “capture” transness in action (as it is *lived* and *worked*), it is a severely unsettled one. Instead of static images that can provide us with the clear outline of a topology—photographs with a crisp, petrified outline of “the trans subject” and “the sex worker”—these images are hazy, blurred and somewhat incomprehensible. The subjects they are meant to “contain” somehow escape our sight—they move instead of lying still, and they ultimately evade us. In all, these moving images show us how difficult it is *to know*, or *to transfix*, even when looking closely at the subject in front of us.

CONCLUSION

When writing on the relationship between photography and film, Laura Mulvey argues that “the technological drive towards photography and film had always been animated by the aspiration to preserve the fleeting instability of reality and the passing of time in a fixed image” (Mulvey 2007, 18). In Hamblin's work, this aspiration to preserve complicates an easy understanding of a “fixed” or transfixed image, insofar as his work tries to blur, and depart from, the very idea of immovability and permanence. While his representation of trans sex workers suggests, and plays with, the form of the human body, its scopical caress is never meant to settle or finalise. In fact, it aims to create a space for escape and withdrawal, a place where the body does not need to stay put.

Such depictions by Hamblin resonate with other forms of visual activism that address the body of the trans sex workers, specifically within the South African context where such bodies are increasingly referenced to draw attention to the rights of sex workers and/or trans subjects. In this regard, the domains of art and activism intersect and the visual becomes a tool demonstrating *the fact* of existence, the act and routine of living as a trans sex worker. To some degree, Hamblin's work acts as documents

12 The relationship between film and photography is a much-explored area of research, with the complexities pervading both media highlighted by a range of authors. See, for example, the writings of Roland Barthes (1986), Stephen Heath (1976), Laura Mulvey (1975; 2007), Gilberto Perez (1998), Garret Stewart (1999) and Maria Walsh (2006).

that demonstrate the fact of existence while—at the same time—not allowing the camera to become a purely documentary vehicle. Here, the interplay between film and photography has been highlighted as a technical and conceptual means that facilitates a form of representation that is suggestive rather than penetrative. Within a visual culture where trans sex workers are often prone to stigmatisation and sensationalism, Singer’s (2006, 609) call for forms of trans representation that allow for subjects to “talk back” and “look back” is echoed in Hamblin’s own work. And it is specifically in the domain of the moving image where such an act of looking and talking back takes place—of seeing oneself reflected as a moving, living entity.

This act of looking back is not a simple one. The moving image might facilitate some sense of slipping away, but it also speaks of a deliberate attempt *to turn against* and to show that area where the body cannot yield anymore. In the words of Leigh (Davids 2017):

We are women with courage and strength and resilience and an impossible tolerance for daily violence. Not just from men who fuck us. Not just from medical places who turn us away. Not just from families who desert us. Not just from schools who hit and bully and cut us. Not just from all that violence, but also from the exclusion, and when I say exclusion, the terrible exclusion that we have to fight against every, every single fucking day. Violence, violence and just so much more violence wherever we go.

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