

## WHO IS "I"?

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I remember once naively believing that photography, on its own, without text, could reveal something of the person photographed, that I could actually know something of a stranger's life by looking closely and carefully at her/his image. This fiction of photographic truth, born in the 19th century and anachronistically still existing today, is what has made the medium so powerful. I was initially quite disappointed to finally realize the only one I would ever learn anything about through photographs was myself. This doesn't mitigate in any way the knowledge that can be gained through looking at photographs, but rather it is to underscore the greater potential for self knowledge.

The narcissism of the viewer in this endeavor, particularly in relation to the work of Loren Cameron, should not be trivialized. The mirror which Loren's work becomes for a non-transsexual audience is as important as the self-affirming mirror it is for a transsexual audience. In this sense the work has an ecumenical aspect that is very inclusive. Although the effect is significantly different for these two groups, the work's viability in regard to self knowledge is profound. Where a transsexual might find affirmation in his or her self-constructed gender identity, the non-transsexual will very likely be confronted with the fact that gender is indeed an extremely unstable proposition. As Judith Shapiro has written:

"The way in which transsexuals go about establishing their gender in social interactions reminds us that the basis on which we are assigned a gender in the first place (that is, anatomical sex) is not what creates the reality of gender in ongoing social life."..."Transsexualism makes explicit for us the usually tacit processes of gender attribution. ...the transsexual reveals the extent to which the normally sexed person is a "contingent practical accomplishment." In other words, they make us realize that we are all passing." (p.257 Body Guards)

Artists are assimilationists, appropriators, synthesizers, thieves. I say this not as a judgment but as an observation as both an artist and a teacher. We - not just artists but everyone - learn through imitation; we assimilate and appropriate, sometimes we even steal, but ultimately, if we are creative, we synthesize the information we've gathered

and transform it into something not exactly unique, but somehow new, at least new to us if not our audience.

To speak of this theft is simply to acknowledge a process in which we as humans are all engaged. Loren's work exists for that appropriation. He and his collaborators offer freely what they are and what they know. There is undoubtedly great risk in doing this, but it's the risk all artists take in the making public of an idea. Anyone willing to look and assimilate what he offers will come away profoundly changed.

I am not transsexual, but who am I? The sophomoric question every adolescent asks - "who am I?" - follows each of us in some form or another throughout our lives. And if we think we've found the answer, it may be that we've asked the wrong question.

Perhaps the question is: WHO IS "I"? Who is the "I" that writes, that speaks, that makes art, that moves in public space? Who is the "I" that fucks, that fantasizes, that wants to be something s/he's not? Who is the "I" I work to establish, but that defies any attempt at concrete identification, remaining petulant and elusive; the "I" that both embraces and rejects certain aspects of femaleness and femininity while doing the same with maleness and masculinity.

Who am I? Is my biological femaleness the marker by which I know myself or only that by which others know me? Since Susan and Loren entered my life, the sureness with which I was once able to answer any of these questions has diminished considerably. Their lives and identities call mine into question. Was it by choice or chance that I arrived at this destination at this point in time? Have I constructed myself as deliberately as they have? Are they as deliberately constructed as I am assuming? How strongly internalized is the binarism of gender, so that even when we do make deliberate choices, is it still within the narrow parameters of the basic duality?

I am often the subject of my own photographs and videos, that is, whether I use myself or someone else as subject, my life and experience becomes the matter from which I work. But who am I as *subject* here, in this context? Loren's photographs destabilize my own notions of subjectivity which is why I am so insatiably drawn to them. I look at them trying to find myself, trying to understand the locus of masculinity, of femininity, of my own ambiguous placement along that long and winding continuum. I look at them

trying to find a way of understanding how we all come to be men or women, and how the poverty of those two social choices has effected us all in some way or another.

I have always been uncomfortable with my own subjectivity. I've never been able to occupy the position my unrecognizable ethnicity is supposed to allow me, when it is always the dominant position to be able to do so. On a social level, at least on the surface, I have no problems. I am "white," I teach at a prestigious art school, my resume is 10 edited pages of very small type, which, if not monetarily, at least socially gives me the credentials to locate myself as solidly middle class and upwardly mobile. But I grew up working class and the residue of that indoctrination has traveled the bumpy road to middle class and academic neurosis with me. Gender, then, functions secondarily in regard to the dis-ease of class distinctions. The imposter syndrome is something with which I'm very familiar.

Even if I don't have a gendered "dysphoria," I have an analog experience in another register - that of class. Here in the space of this (conference), in the context of transsexuality, I once again find myself in yet another position I can't occupy.

Grappling with this inability, I struggle with what it means to be gendered. From my present perspective, whatever new understanding of gender I now have, has come from trying to understand transsexuality. Transsexuality becomes the primary site for the embodiment of all issues of gender that get played out through transsexual bodies, making gender comprehensible for all other bodies. The transsexual body articulates the complexities of gender that are overlooked by non-transsexuals. Transsexuals hold up a mirror. What gets reflected is everybody, and the reflection calls every other identity into question. It's not that a non-transsexual sees herself, but she sees how she herself has been constructed artificially, by the always already there.

What I see in Loren's photographs, what I take back to my own life is an attention to how people do gender - how we learn to dress, to gesture, to walk, to articulate maleness or femaleness. I think I've learned more from watching Loren embody masculinity than I ever learned from a biological male. What I now understand about my own femininity is the process through which I construct the particularities of the positions I take up - not choose, but take up. Hearing him talk about transition, that time when one starts living as a man or a woman, testing the water, actually assuming the role which was previously so illusive, is to recall how all of us learn to function as social beings, through simulation, replication,

and adaptation. As he has said, it's one thing to think about being a man, or to identify with masculinity, and another thing to go out and do it. The doing of the position is the being of it. The implications of that simple statement are so destabilizing to hegemonic notions, particularly of normative masculinity, as to be insurrectionary.

For about three years I taught classes and workshops on sexuality and gender in which I ask students to participate in a visualization. Until I started writing this piece, it hadn't occurred to me that I was actually asking my students to engage in a phantasmatic transsexual experience. Let me briefly explain. After about 10 minutes of relaxation and warm-up visualizations with closed eyes, I direct my students to place themselves in an imaginary room in which they feel particularly comfortable. They are told to (mentally) undress themselves and look down at their bodies. Then I tell them to transform their body into the body of the other sex and look at themselves in a mirror. When the transformation is complete, I give them about five minutes to explore their new package. This directive is left wide open. They are then instructed to go to the closet and get dressed. When they are ready, the final step is to go outside and interact with people. The results are always astonishing and oddly enough, quite similar in many ways. Many men have talked about their center of gravity changing when they suddenly have breasts. A feeling of incredible vulnerability was also reported by some of the men who choose a dress or a skirt to wear. One man in particular had a graphic vision of his skirt blowing up with a strong gust of wind to reveal his underwear. All the men who spoke about their experience seemed genuinely moved by it.

The women as men, on the other hand, wanted to either fuck everyone in sight or use their new penises to urinate. Many of them masturbated before they went outside, and once outside, their experience was very sexualized. These are of course quite stereotypical responses, a very small group, but revealing nonetheless.

I lay no claims on this exercise being equivalent to actual transsexuality by any stretch of the imagination; this is fantasizing not embodiment. But I will say that these students come away from the experience with an altered consciousness of sexuality and gender, a consciousness that will undoubtedly lead to further questioning, not only of their own gendered constructedness, but of the pleasure found in transgender identification.

In regard to my own subjectivity and transgender identification, the transsexual body, particularly FTM, provides a site of further questioning for women like myself who have

gone through menopause. As women age, estrogen levels decrease; hair thins, facial hair increases, some have hysterectomies, some mastectomies. Are they no longer women? How can I still be a woman if I have those two operations to combat disease if an FTM has the same operations to become a man? Are we both now men. Are we both still women? Can one be a man without a penis? Where are femininity and masculinity located? In the mind, in the hormones, in the flesh, in the organs, in the embodiment or materialization of coded gestures of gender? All of the above? Some of the above? None of the above?

Instead of seeing these questions as somehow an affront to my femaleness and sense of self, I find them amazingly rich in their possibilities for transgender transformation, cyborg identification, and ever more aggressive destabilizing of gender norms. This culture's obsessive need to preserve the integrity of the self (as if there were actually something that could be identified in concrete term as "a self") as well as the hegemony of the binary poles of masculinity and femininity (like christianity, such a fragile concept to maintain without constant buttressing) may finally take its dying breath at the feet of the Transsexual Nation.