LIFE OBSERVED:
CONTEMPORARY ARTMAKING FROM A TRANS PERSPECTIVE

A Thesis

Presented to the faculty of the Department of Art
California State University, Sacramento

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
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MASTER OF ARTS

in

Studio Art

by

Chelsea Thompto

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Department of Art
Abstract

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Chelsea Thompto

My artistic practice is centered on my lived experience as a transwoman. I draw upon witnessing shifts in my gendered privilege and the level of acceptance I experience within society, which mirror my shift between gender identities. It is the occupying of this space between normative genders that both makes me an outsider and allows me to see the dynamics of gender in a wholly different way. My art practice includes sculptural and installation pieces primarily using wood, cement, wax and paint, and a binary codification system. As with my art practice, my thesis will seek -- through the use of text, photos, and formatting -- to reenvision the space between normative gender roles as a place of power and perspective.

_____________________, Committee Chair
Rachel Clarke

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The formatting required for this thesis is as follows:

- All text must be printed single-sided on 20 lb. or 24 lb. (50% or 100% cotton) (prefer 24 lb. cotton) white, 8½'' x 11'' paper.

- The font must be Times New Roman sizes 10-12, different typefaces within the content of the thesis/project/dissertations may be used only to show differences in captions and special text (e.g., italics).

- To be printed on laser or inkjet printers, Theses/Projects/Dissertations will not be accepted if erasures have been made or opaque correction fluid used.

- Text must be double spaced except when using quotes (follow departmental style). Right and bottom margins must be one inch from edge of paper, and left and top margins must be one and one-half inches from edge of paper.

I list these requirements and the format they create to illustrate the structure of these documents and the type of experience that they create. As you will have noticed at this point this paper, while following the above requirements, is also minimalistic. This act forces you, the reader of this document to interact with it in a radically different way than the aforementioned format hopes to impose.
This gesture illustrates my relationship to preordained structures. I take issue with, and manipulate structures of identity, gender, art, and thought throughout my life and artistic practice. By mirroring this paper, I force your reading to occur outside the confines normally associated with academic prose. I do this because in order for my thesis to speak to the nature of my artistic inquiry, the very format and experience of this document must be challenged.

My work engages the audience with an ongoing conversation, a conversation that exists between transfolk and society. This exposes its mutuality, entanglement, and opacity; challenging the viewer in the process of decoding and understanding and generating a new conversation from a revised position.
Trans Effigy, 2015.

My artistic practice is centered around my lived experience as a transwoman. I draw upon witnessed shifts in my gender-based privilege, which coincides with my shift between gender identities. It is the occupying of this space between nonconventional genders that both makes me an outsider and allows me to see the dynamics of gender in a different way. Through my artistic practice, I am reenvisioning the space between.
normative gender roles as a place of power and perspective, rather than weakness and inferiority.

My practice includes works in sculpture, drawing, installation, sound, and text. It is at times autobiographical and uses documentation, repetition, manufacture, systems, and material specificity as the main modes of generating form.

Power Word (Trans), March 2016, Materials: redwood bark and knee high stockings.
Much of my work incorporates a (false) binary system of my own design. This system uses dashes to create runelike forms which are used in place of the English alphabet. The code has roots in binary computer language. Instead of using zeroes and ones, the code uses dashes to create a binary system that resists being read as a summation of two clearly distinct choices. This challenges the reading of its structure as purely binary.

Code Key, September 2015, wall mounted print.
This system also slows the reading of the work down, requiring the viewer to process and decod in a more visual and meticulous way than a traditionally textual piece might. This directly links to the challenge of communicating a non-binary experience using terms and language that uphold false binary relations throughout vocabulary and terms. Through the use of these elements I create experiential works which convey my lived trans experience and my perspective on systematized or pathologized structures of sex, gender, and desire in western culture.
Heteronormative and gender normative culture excludes the voices of divergent identities and experiences through the denial of their existence and legitimacy. This privileges the narratives and perspectives of the normative majority leaving little space for works of art and theory that exist outside of their paradigm. In this way, my practice can be seen as an opposition to inadequate and reductive definitions of sex, gender and desire. I see the viewing of my work by non-transfolk to be a moment of intersection between diverse perspectives that has the potential to expose privileged methods of thought and challenge our systems of sex, gender and desire.

The level of engagement with the code changes the viewer’s relationship with and perception of the work. The work is purposefully arduous to decode and demanding to understand in a visual and intellectual sense. In this way, the work meets the viewer at their level, provoking a confrontation of readings and associations commensurate with the viewer’s engagement.

My practice is engaged with the current and problematic relationship between transfolk and society, and also society’s relationship with sex, gender and desire. However, through the end goal is not to prescribe answers but instead raise new questions.
This is accomplished largely through my lived experience with difference during the making of my work. Influences for this type of work and approach include Mary Kelly and Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

I am influenced by Mark Kelly's use of autobiographical artifacts and documentation as well as her cool formal decisions being made during a time period when many of her contemporaries were exploring the opposite, through the use of performative works based directly on the female form. This can be seen in her piece Post-Partum Document, from 1974. In the mid-1970s a number of women used their own bodies or images to raise questions about gender, but it was not that effective in part because they were what women in art were expected to do.

With Felix Gonzalez-Torres' work I am influenced by his ability to create systems wherein the work changes and evolves while also being able to be "reset," his balance between "hot" and "cool" in his approach and his ability to give the viewer just enough information without becoming didactic are influence to me. One such series that embodies the aforementioned ideas are his candy piles. As Andrea Rosen writes, "Disappearance was not Felix's final goal. Absence became a way of confronting the essence of longevity. It is extremely clear that Felix focused on creating projects to address these questions, but I am not sure exactly how these projects would function in their present form."

insure that the works did not disappear permanently; the candies always have the possibility of being replaced endlessly.”

Morning Ritual, March 2015, Self-portrait photography.
The forming of ideas into and about systems occurs throughout the process of making the work. This includes my own observations regarding the systems we use to order people in gendered ways and other systems of social control and organization. Additionally, my impulse to order things systematically within my mind and throughout my sketchbooks plays a large role in the generation of forms and structures within my work. The act of metacognition is a key element to the development of my work.
Often a work starts at the meeting point between a conceived system and a
generation of my personal memories or experiences. These more narrative elements are
generally conceived before the start of a work and are processed throughout the making
of the work. The processes employed to build forms start with an examination of and
experimention with materials. Repetitious acts such as bundling, branding, splitting,
and tearing are used to arrange materials into distinct and structured forms while also
allowing the material to retain its own characteristics. It is during the repetitious actions
that I am able to reflect on identity and memory, This is an integral part of my marking
and thinking process as I move through a piece, the piece changes in response to these
reflections as does my conception of works to come.

As a work progresses, a dialogue forms between the predefined system and
material choice, and my execution of that system and the form created thereof. The end
result is a work that is formed by a particular system, articulated through material
experimention and is receiving form both physically and conceptually through my phsyical and
mental process at the meeting of system and material.
At this point if you are still reading you have found a method with which to read this document. This act of you manipulating your perspective in order to enter into this inquiry is important. Your interaction with this system informs experience of this document. Our structures of thinking structure our thoughts and challenging those structures challenges our thoughts.

The gender binary paradigm is a method of coercion. Deconstruction engenders deeper understanding and compassion. Acceptance of transgender attitudes opposes the binary. Transitioning as a process is generative not destructive. I identify not illness, definitions the transgender experience.
Bibliography:
