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Boystory: gender fluidity in the time of the non heteronormative real.

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Boystory is an exhibition focusing on the fluidity of the human becoming. Magnus Arrevad captures this becoming through photos of drag queens, go go boys, strippers and porn actors whilst they are getting ready. By putting on the mask in fact, the performers unmask themselves as if the performance became life and life became performance.

Judith Butler, for instance, wrote about this connection both in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). In her analysis, everyday life is the result of constant mediations with the power strategies that shape society. Judith Butler has been particularly interested in the way through which subjects are being created by the experience of gender distinctions perceived as natural and inevitable. In her analysis subjects don't only internalise positions imposed by society (like the cultural norms linked to ideas of femininity and masculinity); but they also live in a constant state of struggle at an unconscious level. These contradictions are part of the processes of subjectification commonly shared and are made visible by the performers captured in the exhibition's photos; the subjects portrayed present just some examples of refusal of a heteronormative system through irony or even just through the contamination of exclusively binary definitions of being male and female.

Magnus Arrevad's photos reflect in a way this train of thought, opening the cages of the *politically correct* subject's shadows. Achromatic visions of dark basements are the landscapes for those performers whilst getting ready. Powder and dust, natural and artificial light get mixed, opening up to the performing subjects a world where society is suspended, unstable. The gender, class and race regimes are enveloped and unmade by those liberated shadows.

This sort of parallel universe (though still deeply woven in between society's layers) is populated by subjects that question an ideal of political, social and biological stability through the modification of their appearance and the

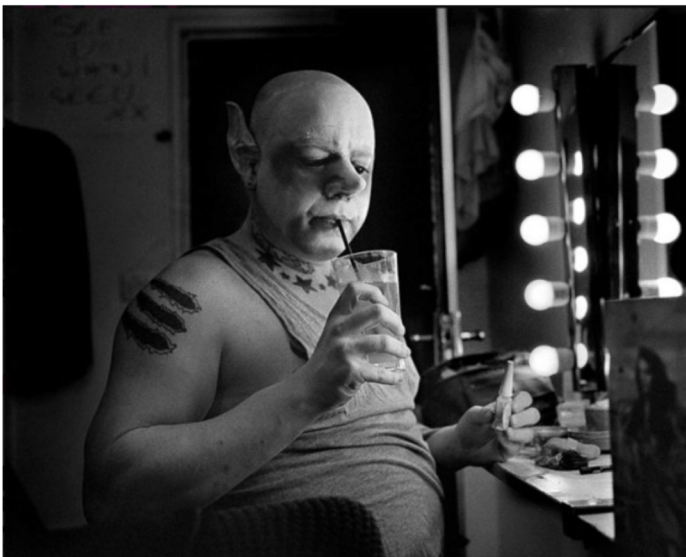


performance. Before jumping to rushed conclusions, It is important to keep in mind how the idea that a specific anatomical sex should allow or need only some specific rights or roles within society is solely cultural; the concept of gender serves mainly the purpose to deconstruct this ideas in order to recognise a distinction between cultural and biological, aspects of the being human connected but not absolutely determining each other. Two examples of hybrid attitudes of the contemporary that question fixed and pre established hierarchies are *gender fluidity* and *gender hacking*. The term *gender fluid* defines a type of gender identity that can change throughout time for a person. This means that a subject can at times identify himself as, male, female, other non binary identities or some sort of combination of identities all together. Another example of managing identity by refusing an idea of gender strictly fixed and binary, in favour instead of a more open and variable vision, is *gender hacking*. Beatrix/Paul Preciado defines *gender hackers* in his/her *Testo Junkie* (2013) as those “users who consider sex hormones free and open biocodes, whose use shouldn’t be regulated by the state or commandeered by pharmaceutical companies” (55).

Boystory reflects similar kinds of potential; it argues with an idea of being fixed and stable, in favour instead of a constantly moving becoming. Photographing the process of transformation of the subjects embodies this idea of mutation; particularly, the mobility within this process is represented by two recurring elements in the pictures: the mirror and the fetish.

On the one hand the reflected image is functional to the practical coming to life of the performer, to the application of the make up, to the creation of the mask. On the other hand, the mirror represents the Other as something that is both same and alien to the Self. In both cases anyway the object embodies the liberating process of the putting on a mask to unmask oneself; as for Alice, and for the subjects portrayed, the mirror is not an empty and meaningless surface, but represents instead the liminal threshold through which a person needs to go in order to bring the Self to light. This idea of liminal threshold can be found, for instance, in Victor Turner’s *ritual* (1967). Borrowing the concept of liminal space from Arnold Van Gennep, Victor Turner in fact identifies the liminality present in the ritual (like, for example, an initiation one) as a fundamental attribute for the subversion and reconstruction of social norms. It is the suspension of norms and structures socially shared that allows the successful outcome of a ritual. During the liminal stage of a ritual, in fact, differences and hierarchies commonly accepted disappear in order to be eventually reconfirmed afterwards; it is this subversive potential that is reflected by Magnus Arrevad’s mirrors, being confirmed again by the performance though.

The world of social sciences can help comprehending the other key element of Boystory too: the fetish. The term fetish identifies an inanimate object charged of particular meaning or function; in the case of aboriginal tribes or religions in general, for instance, it usually conveys a sense of sacred by embodying the god/s. The development of sciences interested in sexuality between twentieth and twenty first century then made it possible for this term to be used to identify inanimate objects charged with particular meanings for the stimulation of the Libido. For the subjects portrayed in Boystory, the various fetishises (shoes, wigs and S&M related ones in particular) are not considered



as punishable deviations, but as instruments for the production of new subjects and new meanings; the different fetishes represent the other liberating aspect of the *gender mixed* performance, internalising the Other through the intrinsic stimulation of desire and libido.

To summarise the trajectory of those movements with the words of the photographer: “I was fascinated by the processes and preparations through which the performers visibly liberated themselves from the roles they observed through the daylight hours. They had invented a world in their own image, with their own gods and their own ceremonies. It wasn’t just about sexuality, though of course this was a large part. It was about being. The application of makeup each night was one in which a mask was taken off, not put on. I wanted to document this process of liberation”.

The representation of individuation processes through the modification of bodies presented by this exhibition reflects some of the new directions developing within social and cultural processes.

Boystory shows the revolutionary potential of the manipulation of the body through the performance. It makes visible in particular how a performance developed through the materiality of a body can shatter the old and rebuild a new collectively shared order between what is considered Other and what Normal, between what is considered real and what is real for a person.

Boystory (<http://www.boystory.org>) will stay open until the end of January at Gallery 5 Willoughby Street, London (WC1A 1JD).

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