

# THE BODY YOU WANT

LIZ KOTZ INTERVIEWS JUDITH BUTLER



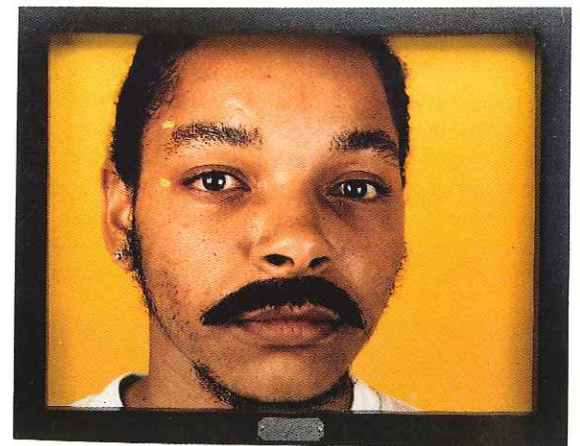
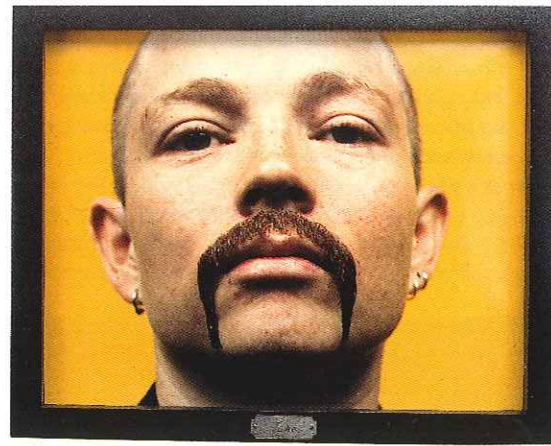
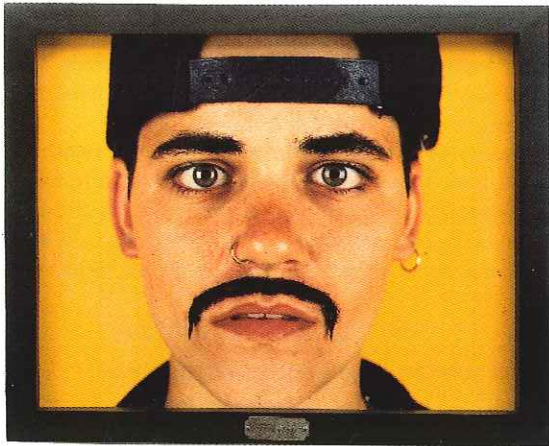
Boys as awkward and glamorous girls, girls as macho and very swishy boys, black boys in whiteface in girls' clothes: "identity bending," a key Modernist trope since at least Marcel Duchamp (and a perennial staple of the cabaret and performance scenes), seems to be enjoying a renaissance of sorts in the gallery world. From Matthew Barney's bride stripped bare to reveal a gym-pumped, decidedly "male" physique, to Chuck Nanney's less-than-vigilant self-transformations (he looks like a Rocky Mountain logger in a shift from Sears), to Lyle Ashton Harris' seductive gender/race drag, to the decidedly fey personas of goatee- and sideburn-sporting demimonde-denizen Ambrose Pierce (also known as Trash), a range of exhilarating instabilities are being mapped in the current proliferation of cross-dressing, transvestism, and cross-gender identifications. Informed by diverse strands of critical theory, political militancy, and pop-cultural investigations, these playful explorations of identity and desire reflect the widespread reinterpretation of the relations between sexuality, power, and identity that has occurred over the past decade.

Key to this broader discussion is the work of Judith Butler. A philosopher by training, Butler is a professor at the Humanities Center of Johns Hopkins University, though if the footnotes she has chalked up in this publication alone are any indication, she is one of those rare academics whose work is making ripples well beyond the confines of the ivory tower. Since the publication of her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, in 1990, Butler's work has become synonymous with a new wave of feminist theory that questions rigid dichotomies of gender, challenging the core assumptions of identity politics, including the very notions of sexual identity upon which gay-liberationist projects have historically been based. Working through texts by a host of major 20th-century figures—Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva—Butler rigorously interrogates the necessity of fixed, immutable gender identities. Examining drag, butch-femme relations, cross-dressing, and transsexuality as practices of parodic repetition and imitation that challenge the hegemonic heterosexual regime, opening it to possible subversion, resistance, and resignification, she at the same time cautions against understanding the realm of fantasy and representation as "a domain of psychic free play," unencumbered by relations of social power.

We asked Liz Kotz, a New York-based writer and regular contributor to *Artforum* with her ear decidedly to the ground where queer cultural practices are concerned, to visit Butler at her home in Baltimore and report back to us. To accompany the text, we assembled images of work by a handful of contemporary artists, not by way of illustration but rather as a visual supplement. In the wide-ranging discussion that follows, Butler addresses a range of issues, including her initial involvement and eventual dissatisfaction with identity-based feminisms caught in the implicit bind of exposing men's oppression of women without challenging essential "masculine" and "feminine" identities. Cautioning against the obliteration of "the ethical distinctions between fantasy, representation, and action," she decries the policing of desire by antiporn feminists like Andrea Dworkin. Considering not only the abuses but the uses of pornography, Butler insists on the political necessity of safeguarding the circulation of fantasy—a position of particular importance in light of recent debates around First Amendment rights, sexually explicit images, and lesbian and gay self-representation.

—Jack Bankowsky with Liz Kotz

Liz Kotz's articles will appear in the forthcoming anthologies *Queer Looks*, *Sisters*, *Sexperts*, *Queers*, and *Just Looking? Feminists & Pornography*.



**Liz Kotz:** Your work is enormously popular among younger feminists, lesbians and gay people, and people involved with various kinds of gender activism. It seems to offer a theoretical articulation for a lot of practices—cultural, artistic, sexual—that have emerged since the early '80s.

**Judith Butler:** I started writing *Gender Trouble* as an interrogation of the deep heterosexism of most feminist theory. I initially thought the book was for straight feminists, as a kind of admonition and challenge. At the same time, it was not supposed to be an extension of lesbian feminism—and it's not I think, finally, because it offers a critique of lesbian feminism, and in particular a critique of the ways lesbian feminist communities became so invested in patrolling themselves on the question of identity. To me this rigorous policing seemed like a kind of evacuation of politics.

I think my position was a little confusing to people. If I'd just been a radical lesbian who started yelling at all the straight women on the issue of compulsory heterosexuality, they would have known where to put me, but the problem is that I've tried to turn the critique of identity against certain notions of gay and lesbian identity as well.

One of the things that ACT UP and Queer Nation have tried to do, in very different ways, is to make the question of identity less central. Both of those movements also have engaged theatrical venues for politicization,

so that you get die-ins in the street, or kiss-ins in malls. It's a certain theatricalization, and a certain performative production of identity, that is utterly strategic, and nobody's going to ask for your identity card when you go to an ACT UP meeting.

**LK** I'm not so sure about that . . . I think there are

**I'm a little tired of being queer. Somebody called me the other day and asked me to go to a conference, and I said, "Well, I'm not queer anymore," and of course I am totally queer, as it were, and have been since I was 16, but I want to deconstitute myself as queer. I mean, it's hard being queer 100 percent of the time, and I do like Hegel.**

similar problems with that notion of theatricality, with the kinds of conformity it can enforce.

**JB** At least the notion of "queer" was supposed to be one in which it didn't matter what you did, or how you did it, or how you felt about what you did; if you were

willing to affiliate, that was politically viable. I still think there's something important in that notion of "queer." I actually felt a kind of happiness about that for a while, although I now see that it can't function as the umbrella term that it sought to be. And clearly organizing around AIDS has to go beyond the strategies of theatricality, and it has. What's crucial to read here, though, is how younger people seemed to be drawn to the possibility of theatrical militancy.

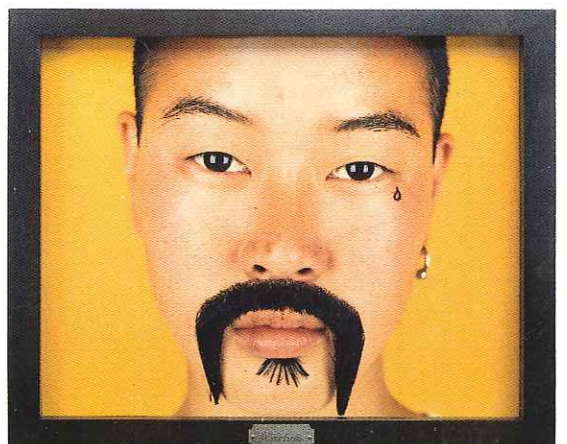
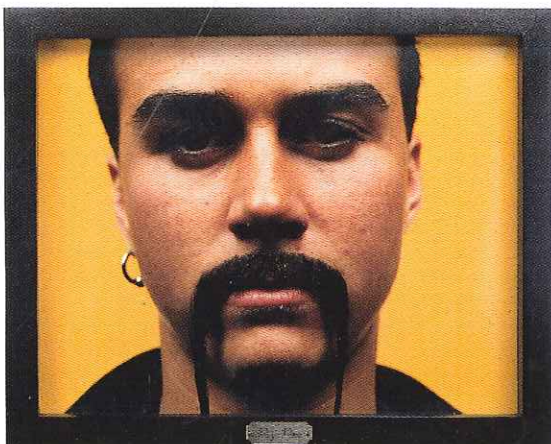
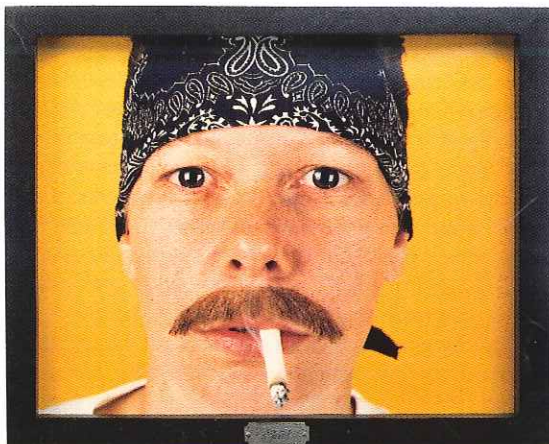
**LK** I wonder now how *Gender Trouble* is being read by younger people who don't necessarily have any lived experience with, or memory of, the identity-based models of feminism you interrogate.

**JB** Well, there is a bad reading, which unfortunately is the most popular one. The bad reading goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender, stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism.

**LK** And also as a totally volitional act. . . .

**JB** . . . on the part of a subject who treats gender quite

Opposite page: Lyle Ashton Harris, *Kym, Lyle and Crinoline*, 1987/88, black and white photograph. This page: Catherine Opie, works from the "Being and Having" series, 1991, type c-prints, each 17 x 22". Top, left to right: *Whitey, Jake, J*. Bottom, left to right: *Chief, Pig Pen, Chicken*.



deliberately, as if it's an object out there, when my whole point was that the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons, *presupposes* gender in a certain way—that gender is not to be chosen and that “performativity” is not radical choice and it's not voluntarism. I just finished writing another manuscript in which I spend page after page trying to refute the reduction of gender performance to something like style. Performativity has to do with repetition, very often with the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms to

force them to resignify. This is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in. **LK** It's troubling when certain categories you've articulated, like “gender imitation” or “subversive parody,” get used in completely free-floating ways. Anything can be seen as subversive parody, because it's “ironic.” **JB** What's not often enough read in my work is the emphasis on power and the intense normativity that governs gender. I was trying to interrogate the *painful* ironies of being implicated in the very forms of power that one ex-

PLICITLY OPPOSES, and trying to understand what kinds of agency might be derived from that situation. I think that it's inevitable that there's no position outside power, and in that way I'm linked with Foucault; but I don't think that means one is determined by power relations.

**LK** How do we talk about parodic repetition or reinscription as a viable politics—as a cultural project? How do you determine what constitutes *subversive* repetition?

**JB** First of all, it seems to me that there is no easy way to know whether something is subversive. Subversive-

**... I took the feminist critique of pornography very seriously in the early '80s, but then became very fully persuaded that it was absolutely wrong. . . . people like Andrea Dworkin . . . actually believe that pictures have the power to form psyches and desires, and to produce actions in an almost behavioristic way. . . . she wants to police not only representations but the ways people think, desire, and fantasize; she wants to obliterate the ethical distinctions between fantasy, representation, and action.**

ness is not something that can be gauged or calculated. In fact, what I mean by subversion are those effects that are incalculable. I do think that for a copy to be subversive of heterosexual hegemony it has to both mime and displace its conventions. And not all miming is displacing.

I think, for instance, that this is painfully true of the material in Jennie Livingston's film *Paris Is Burning*—that a lot of the miming actually reinvests the gender ideals; it reidealizes them—reconsolidates their hegemonic status. And yet the subversive part of what she documents, for me, is in the “house” structure, where there are “mothers” and “children,” and new kinship systems, which *do* mime older nuclear-family kinship arrangements but also displace them, and radically recontextualize them in a way that constitutes a rethinking of kinship, or that turns kinship into a notion of extended community—one whose future forms can't be fully predicted. What is a “house”? A “house” is the people you “walk” with. I love it that that's a house. I think that's a great subversive rearticulation of houseness. And that's actually what I find affirmative in that film, and less the drag scenes. I think that I may have made a mistake by using drag as the example of performativity, because many people have now understood that to be the *paradigm* for performativity, and that's not the case. I don't think it's *the* exemplary example. At the same time, I do think that the film produces an exhilaration over denaturalizing gender, especially when boys “do”



girl better than the girls.

**LK Yet the idea of denaturalization can be reduced to a very banal level—to the notion that all gender is drag.**

**JB** Yet I accept the idea that gender is an impersonation, that becoming gendered involves impersonating an ideal that nobody actually inhabits, and that's where I have a certain sympathy with Lacanian discourse. Because symbolic positions—"man," "woman"—are never inhabited by anyone, and that's what defines them as symbolic: they're radically uninhabitable. And yet they have *enormous* force. And I think that if I were to teach the Lacanian symbolic to undergraduates, I would probably show them *Paris Is Burning*. If you want to know what the radically uninhabitable ideal is, well, there it is. But I think it's important to take this a step further. It's not enough to expose an ideal as uninhabitable. Ideals have to be altered and dissolved and rearticulated; there has to be a thorough rethinking of the violence of the gender ideal. That's where I depart from the Lacanian position, because those symbolic positions tend to be very fixed for Lacan.

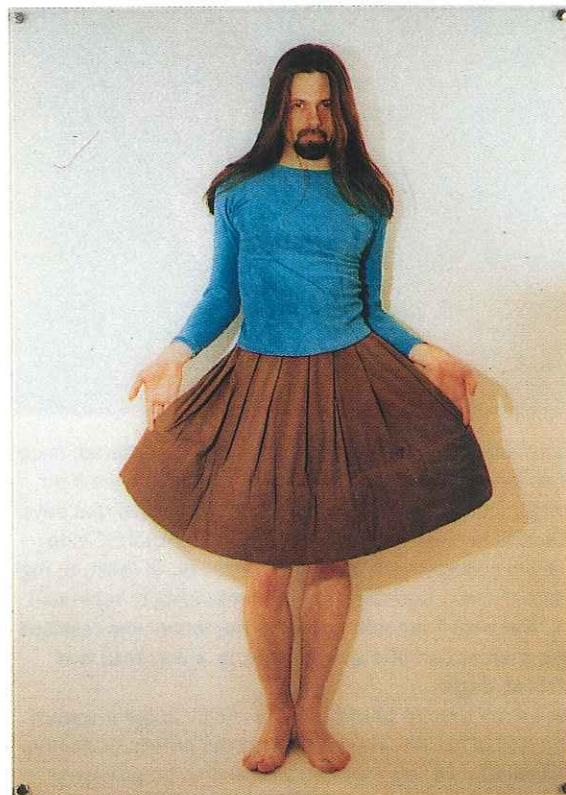
**LK . . . And for a more traditional psychoanalytic feminism that by the early '80s had gotten enormously stuck around the whole question of sexual difference.**

**JB** Well, that was precisely what was wrong with that model. You know: "You try to defy the Law of the father, and the Law slays you and subordinates you again. You can't resist, or you can resist but you'll finally be defeated because the Symbolic will reassert itself." That more structural psychoanalytic model initially came as a really important counter to certain liberationist forms of thinking, which depended on the belief that you could just overthrow all kinship laws and happily transcend gender. On the other hand, the *fixity* of the Law produces a kind of heterosexual pathos: "I would *like* to be able to desire another woman but the Symbolic Law stops me," that kind of thing.

**LK That was especially true of the British reading, one that came out of a certain intellectual and social context that was really all about playing with the edges of heterosexuality but never actually leaving that regime.**

**JB** But what Juliet Mitchell was saying, in *Psychoanalysis & Feminism*, was very key: you're not going to be able to change the structure of sexuality or of the psyche simply by changing kinship arrangements. There are constraints that are unconscious; the traces of older kinship arrangements persist in the psyche. And I think that's right. A lot of people have thrown over the structures of their lives, only to discover that they remain their own worst enemy—that the oppressor lives within as a mechanism of constant psychic subjection. And whereas psychoanalysis offered a cautionary antidote to address this, the structures of the unconscious became problematically reified. So I actually see myself as taking stock of that critique of a naïve liberationist view, but unwilling to stay with the pathos and defeatism of the Lacanian position.

**LK Do you think *Gender Trouble* will ever be read by the straight psychoanalytic feminists whose work it draws on?**



**JB** Oh, they're reading it. I think that a number of straight psychoanalytic feminists who want to keep the place of sexual difference as the center of all theory fear that if I say that there is a heterosexist presumption in the psychoanalytic formulation of sexual difference, then that will mean that gay studies ought to take over where feminist studies once was. So there are a number of people, and I think that Jane Gallop<sup>1</sup> has put this in print, who have "anxiety"—that was the word she used—that gay or queer studies is displacing feminism. **LK Wasn't that the sort of anxiety occasioned by "men in feminism"? That we have this small place now, in the academy, and if men do it too we will lose it.**

**JB** Well, one might theorize that fear of loss, and the anxiety that fuels the drive to territorialize: conventional feminism might have to give up its insistence on a gender-based subject position. But my own purpose has been to work *between* feminism and "queer studies," and actually to move out into questions of race, and to continue to work those connections. I am not at all interested in defending "queer theory" or having it be something which is in opposition to feminism. I would actually like to see feminism rearticulated in light of some of those challenges, just as it has been forced to do in light of the challenges that women of color put to it in the '80s.

**LK Yet even that challenge has become codified around the kind of analysis that Kobena Mercer termed the "mantra" of "race, class, gender."<sup>2</sup> Much of this discourse of "multiple identities" has become quite stuck within a surprisingly traditional kind of identity politics.**

**JB** Well I think in some areas that's true, where people

just stand up and make a list of oppressions, and think that if they have a list they're being representative. But I think there are other people—Kobena Mercer, Paul Gilroy, Patricia J. Williams, Hortense J. Spillers, and Kimberle Crenshaw, for example—who are trying to think race and sexuality together, and asking some pretty interesting questions about what it might mean to have one's sexuality formed through race—to understand one's sexuality as racialized. That questioning is very different from getting up and making a politically correct list, without actually thinking the relationship between the various identities that are enumerated. I don't believe that gender, race, or sexuality have to be identities, I think that they're vectors of power.

**LK How do you deal with your own relationship to academic institutions?**

**JB** I never wanted to have a purely academic life; it was always important to me to be part of other communities. It's been very odd that with the success of *Gender Trouble*, my life has become more academic, and I actually have to go to some extremes to cut myself off from the academic circuit.

I worry about the academic domestication of both feminist and gay cultural practices. There's a great deal that academics can learn from performance and theater and painting, but when those practices become academic artifacts they very often become domesticated by academic norms of respectability. It's very hard when you try to do something disturbing within an academic context only to have the disturbing element in your work become commodified as an academic value. So in some ways I'm dismayed by my academic respectability. I never sought to be respectable. I did however always oppose what I took to be overt and nascent antiintellectualism in the other cultural communities in which I lived, and I really hate antiintellectualism in the name of politics. A lot of people who are politically active have been angry with me because my work is dense or difficult to read or theoretically rarified.

**LK There is that sense of, "Well, why do you need to go back to Hegel?"**

**JB** Well I don't *need* to go back to Hegel to contribute to the life of those political communities, but I personally have been reading philosophy since I was 14 and would love to sit down with Spinoza's *Ethics* and write commentaries that no one would ever read. And I don't want to have to justify that to anybody. I do think it is important to pursue intellectual questions that cannot be readily justified through a direct or predictable relation to politics. I don't want to think always in reference to that standard, and I worry about the effects on thinking that such a rigid notion of political accountability might have.

I think a lot of people find themselves in very paradoxical positions. I'm a little tired of being queer. Somebody called me the other day and asked me to go to a conference, and I said, "Well, I'm not queer anymore," and of course I am totally queer, as it were, and have been since I was 16, but I want to deconstitute myself as queer. I mean, it's hard being queer 100 percent of the time, and I *do* like Hegel. It's painful for me that I wrote a whole book calling into question identity

Opposite: Mark Tansey, *The Enunciation*, 1992, oil on canvas, 84 x 64". This page: Chuck Nanney, *Untitled*, 1992, Cibachrome print, ca. 31½ x 23¾".



**I think I may have some uncritical modernist notion of what can happen in esthetic space, where the play of identification can be interrogated with accountability suspended, and that kind of work excites me.**

politics, only then to be constituted as a token of lesbian identity. Either people didn't really read the book, or the commodification of identity politics is so strong that whatever you write, even when it's explicitly opposed to that politics, gets taken up by that machinery. **LK And it's interesting how the gay studies community both challenges and partakes of this kind of identity politics.**

**JB** Yes, it does, and there are huge differences among so-called "queer theorists" on that issue. I find it interesting that the San Francisco lesbian and gay studies conference (planned for 1993) apparently couldn't resolve the question of how transsexuals and transgendered people could be included. Evidently there were a number of male-to-female transsexuals, or pre-ops, who wanted to go to the women's caucus. And the question was, well, "What's a woman?" The Michigan Women's Music Festival line is, you have to be born one, which of course de Beauvoir said nobody ever was. I found it extremely interesting that the radical feminist position was irreconcilable with the transgendered one, and I actually see myself as right in the middle of that, as trying to negotiate those kinds of strifes. I actually think that the whole question of "What is a woman?" ought to be kept open as a question. It would be a great mistake for feminists to embrace a "biological" or "natural" definition, if only because that leads to a reduction of women to their reproductive function—a position with intensely homophobic consequences. To the extent that gender is a kind of psychic norm and cultural practice, it will always elude a fixed definition.

Some of the difficulties emerging from identity politics can be traced to the prevailing fiction that how you desire determines who you are, and I actually think that Foucault's refusal to come out or to do the confessional thing was a refusal to accept that equation. He really wanted the domain of desire and sexuality to be separable from the question of identity; he wanted to call into question why it was being pervasively domesticated and normalized through discourses of identity. And I think there's something right about that. I kind of go for the notion that public affiliation can be very, very separate from questions of sexual practice. I'm not sure that anybody knows how to account for their sexual practices, and if they were able to account for their sexual practices, they probably wouldn't be interested in them anymore. Someone like Leo Bersani has argued that eroti-

cism only emerges once the subject is decentered, once it no longer knows how to account for itself, once it no longer knows its position, so to have a politics that says it wants to base itself on "positions of sexuality" is to have a politics which is willing to deny or, at least, to regulate the very sexuality that it's pretending to represent.

**LK But with Foucault, you have someone who resisted the assumption of a gay identity, in a way that was almost tragic.**

**JB** I think that he talked more explicitly about it toward the end of his life. He understood the pitfalls of embracing identity. He also wanted sexuality to be precisely that which always put identity into question. I think he had an almost utopian faith in the destabilizing power of sexuality, so that if you base an identity *in* sexuality you would actually be evacuating sexuality of everything that was exciting about it. I don't see him as homophobic, as some people do, and the turn in his work toward the

question of self-care strikes me as honestly instructive for HIV+ people who are trying to understand what it might mean to actually care for oneself, and to understand that as a queer practice.

**LK It really surprises me that after a good ten years of rigorously questioning relations of gender, sexuality, and identity, I now see a resurgence of what seems like a very '70s-style feminism around sexuality, with the return to a very binary way of talking about gender and the power relations of gender.**

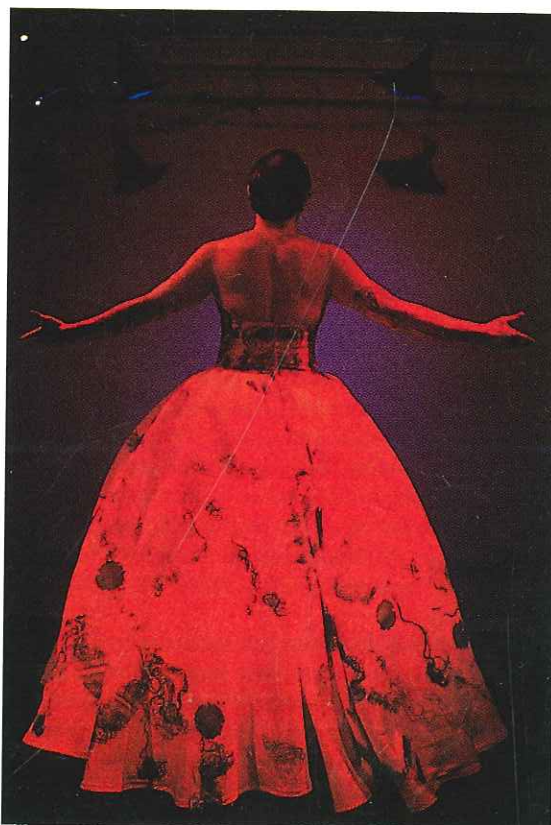
**JB** That worries me, if we're following the same phenomenon. I think that the Anita Hill hearings have unfortunately elevated Catharine MacKinnon to be the popular exemplar of feminism, and that strikes me as a real problem. It's as if *Pleasure and Danger* never happened, as if the sex debates never happened; it's as if the incredible insurgence of women of color in the '80s didn't happen either—everything that happened in the '80s, and gay stuff too.<sup>3</sup>

**LK MacKinnon was even on the cover of the Sunday Times Magazine.**

**JB** And she was ABC's person of the week. It's very scary to me because it makes feminism into a position which asserts the systematic domination of women by men, distills both those categories into very fixed places of power, sees women as always in positions of relative powerlessness, as victims who then only get to claim power through recourse to the state—a very frightening prospect. The attack on the First Amendment is horrible for anyone who cares about the rise of censorship on the right, for anybody who cares about sodomy laws; it just strikes me as a very reactionary position. And this kind of procensorship feminism is implicitly based on a very antipsychoanalytic understanding of sexuality and subjectivity as well.

**LK Very much about the belief that fixed gender positions work.**

**JB** And there's no way to think about one's own investment in those power differentials: the entire domain of the psyche is erased, or women's psyches are nothing but scenes of violation. On the other hand, though gender norms do produce their own instabilities, this doesn't result in a domain of psychic free play, as some critics of the antiporn movement suggest. It's not enough to make these clear-cut distinctions—between fantasy and the real—since it's clear that fantasy is not free from relations of social power. However, what fantasy



can do, in its various rehearsals of the scenes of social power, is to expose the tenuousness, moments of inversion, and the emotional valence—*anxiety, fear, desire*—that get occluded in the description of “structures.” How to think the problem of the ways in which fantasy orchestrates and shatters relations of power seems crucial to me.

**LK** I'm curious how formative those early-'80s debates around pornography and sexual representation were in terms of your own work.

**JB** Very much so. I'm trying to think how to account for that. I think I took the feminist critique of pornography very seriously in the early '80s, but then became very fully persuaded that it was absolutely wrong. One of the aspects of it that alarmed me was the way in which psyches and fantasy life are described by people like Andrea Dworkin. She actually believes that pictures have the power to form psyches and desires, and to produce actions in an almost behavioristic way. It struck me that she wants to police not only representations but the ways people think, desire, and fantasize; she wants to obliterate the ethical distinctions between fantasy, representation, and action.

I actually came to think that feminism did as much to produce guilt around sexuality and sexual fantasy as mainstream culture did, and I found that my own lesbian life in some ways was very much opposed to what feminism was prescribing at the time. The emergence of sex radicalism—thinking through relations of power and sexuality, as well as the complexity of the butch/femme exchange—was very important to me, although I came to be a bit critical of that movement as well. Only because I don't think that sexuality is this utterly neutral domain or that it's implicitly liberatory or impeccably honest, and I don't think it ought to be the sole focus of political thinking in the way that it has become for some people. On the other hand, the sex-radical analysis has been taken up in very important ways by AIDS education advocates, in the work of Cindy Patton for instance, and in repealing antisodomy laws, as well as in defending gay and lesbian artists against the NEA.<sup>4</sup>

**LK** Your piece on Mapplethorpe in *differences* looks at the Helms Amendment and right-wing efforts to regulate the phantasmatic and the circulation of fantasy, in effect to regulate the unconscious.<sup>5</sup> This is really the only place where you explicitly address porn, and yet it seems to be in the background of *Gender Trouble* in a lot of ways.

**JB** Really? Where do you see that?

**LK** Well, that sense of the possible destabilization and proliferation of gender identities and gender identifications seems to derive from the relation of gay viewers to different kinds of heterosexual representations, including pornography—or the relation of lesbian readers to gay male porn, for that matter. Say, as opposed to

from that kind of liberal feminist reading of pornography where what you need is to make representations somehow more “accountable.” I think there's a very gay reading of pornography that sees that the woman or the man can be anywhere, and that these are positions that anyone can inhabit and it doesn't depend upon a certain body type or particular anatomy.

**JB** I think I would go so far as to say that it's really hard for pornography to be erotic unless accountability is suspended. What I do address in *Gender Trouble* is that when homophobic culture looks at butch femme identities as “bad copies” of straight coupledness, I think that that's a failure to read the signifier. Butch and femme identities are not just mimetic or representational in some simple sense; they can be replayed or redeployed precisely to produce a set of meanings that the struc-

precisely for the way in which it *fails* to correspond to “social positions.”

**LK** Not only have you argued quite compellingly that there's an enormous amount of instability, you've also interrogated gay identity politics by questioning precisely what it means to be gay, and suggesting the extent to which gayness itself is inextricably implicated within heterosexuality—arguing against the “specificity,” “autonomy,” or “authenticity” of a certain kind of lesbian subjectivity or female sexuality.

**JB** A number of people feel caught between categories or outside of them in some ways. This worries me because such people are an enormous political resource that has been lost through the insistence on coherent identity.

There are still many people (Simon Watney in particular) who think that political activism depends on a very



tures they appear to be copying would preclude.

I guess I would say that representation functions the same way in pornography: there's no way of fixing its meaning. I don't think you can draw lines from a representation to a set of social situations in any kind of stable way. What's interesting to me is how those lines can perpetually be redrawn. There can be representations of sexual domination, which do really interesting things with that scene, and I just think we need more and more representations of scenes of domination to see what can be worked from them. Pornography *replays* relations of social power, but this replaying is phantasmatic and *not* mimetic. In some ways, pornography “represents” uninhabitable positions, hyperbolic ideals, and sometimes offers the occasion for a viewing that compensates for a lived sense of sexual failure. Pornography is crucial to read, then,

coherent notion of the gay subject. I think he bases his concept of activism in a strong notion of an ethical subject—that he believes the production of a unified, collective subject is necessary for political effectiveness. I'm not at all sure that activism requires a unified queer subject. There are going to be people with extremely complex and fluid sexual practices at work, and I think this has to be affirmed. And the transgender community challenge is also one that people are going to have to think about, even though some gay people and feminists are quite opposed to the discourse of transgender and see it as very reactionary.

**LK** How do you address that in your own work? *Gender Trouble* seemed to embrace that challenge. Yet the most recent article in *differences*, “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary,” perhaps seemed to step back from that a little.

Opposite, above: **Richard Prince**, *Untitled (Richard Prince & Cindy Sherman)*, 1980, set of two Ektacolor prints, each 20 x 24".

Edition of ten. Opposite, below: **Hunter Reynolds** as *Patina Du Prey* in Hunter Reynolds and Chrysanthe Stathacos, *The Banquet*, 1992. Performance view, May 1992. This page: **Ambrose Pierce**, 1992. Photo: F. Ryder Lopez.



**JB** Really? I thought that was my *most* transsexual piece. The point there was that in order to identify as a “woman,” it is necessary to background or refuse masculine identifications, but that that refusal is itself still a way of being *tied to* that masculine identification, the tie of loss. This also means that cross-identification is there as a presupposition of *all* sexed identity, not only in its ostensibly aberrant instances.

**LK** Yet, since you so emphasize the potential for the phantasmatic transformation of the body, the phantasmatic construction of the body, one could perhaps make an argument that the decision to actually go through medical procedures of transsexuality would rest on a “naïve” idea of the body as ground, as core gender identity in some naturalized way—of the body as causative of desire. I’m not sure it’s really such a big jump to go from, say, working out at the gym for two hours a day to actually taking hormone pills or undergoing surgical intervention.

**JB** I think that there are two points here: one is the question of surgical operations, which often rest upon an understanding of essential core gender identities—that’s a difficult terrain—and I have some trouble with the very conservative gender norms that get reproduced uncritically in some medical discourses and practices governing transsexuality. But what strikes me as extremely interesting is that there’s a very *mundane* sense of transsexuality that most people who theorize on gender and sexuality haven’t yet taken into account, and it has to do with the possibility of cross-gender identification. It’s also the failure to take this into consideration that I think has plagued feminist film theory, because they presume that women who watch Marilyn Monroe are identifying with her, and that’s just not true. Or that they are alienating themselves through identify-

ing with “the male gaze.” That’s a heterosexist assumption.

**LK** That desire and identification are mutually exclusive.

**JB** That’s a big problem that has been promulgated by orthodox forms of psychoanalysis. I think that what happens in cross-gendered identification is extremely interesting and could be understood on a continuum with transsexuality, and that would make transsexuality into something less aberrant and other. If it is always refused by the practices of coherent gender, it is always there. **LK** In *Gender Trouble* you delve into the kinds of disjunctures between pleasures and bodily parts that transsexuals may experience, and then insist that this is not limited to clear-cut cases of “gender dysphoria” or any sort of medical categories, but is part of many people’s everyday lives. You use that as a jumping-off point for this idea that the actual morphology of the body is always phantasmatic and always imaginary. I’ve appreciated your willingness to question the idea that there is something called “the female body,” that two lesbians have the “same” body.

**JB** I think for a woman to identify as a woman *is* a culturally enforced effect. I don’t think that it’s given that on the basis of a given anatomy, an identification will follow. I think that “coherent identification” has to be cultivated, policed, and enforced; and the violation of that has to be punished, usually through shame. I think I may have some uncritical modernist notion of what can happen in esthetic space, where the play of identification can be interrogated with accountability suspended, and that kind of work excites me. The

destabilization of those identificatory patterns seems quite crucial to me, and they may ultimately make possible new lines of political solidarity.

**LK** I sometimes find your work in sympathy with Kaja Silverman’s, both in terms of her argument for the female identification with masculinity—the understanding that women’s relation to femininity or masochism may need to be mediated through male representations—in *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, and her work on male masochism and feminized masculinity in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. What is your relation to her work?

**JB** I’m interested in it. She’s certainly more traditionally psychoanalytic than I am. I think that what she does with the notion of the phantasmatic, trying to think through the relationship of psychoanalysis to ideology, is some of the best work on that question that I’ve seen. She tends to think, however, that subject positions are more fixed within the psyche than I do, and I would question whether the strategies of male masochism and “feminization” that she terms “phallic divestiture” couldn’t also be construed as a subtle strategy of the phallus, a ruse of power—that’s to say that “divestiture” could be a strategy of phallic self-aggrandizement. But I don’t think there’s any way to answer that question abstractly. It has to be culturally situated.

**LK** She’s much more involved in a reading of gayness as a reversal or undoing of heterosexuality, one that doesn’t really engage the work gay theorists have done around the historical development of gay identi-



ties as **regulatory categories**.

**JB** I think she would want to insist that psychoanalytic classification is not always regulatory or pathologizing, and I think that she does a good job using those categories to affirm gay practices, but that perhaps she makes the notion of femininity include too much; a number of gay men would be opposed to this because they've worked very hard to make a distinction between sexual practice and gender identity—e.g., between gay practices and effeminacy.

**LK** I'm curious that the examples you use in your own work, whether it's Tennessee Williams, John Waters, or Aretha Franklin for that matter, often come more from gay male culture.

**JB** I wonder if that's true. I like the histrionic. I have these two faggot cousins, one of whom thinks he's Olivia de Havilland. They were important to me growing up, in Cleveland, Ohio. And I had a gender-troubled uncle who was incarcerated at an early age, and it took us years to figure out that story. So probably a lot of my gay identification got formed through these men, and a lot of lesbian culture—women's music, women's culture—always seemed extremely foreign to me. I also found, among gay men, a certain focus on pleasure and sexuality that wasn't always available in women's communities highly mediated by feminism, though it became increasingly available in the '80s.

**LK** You came out during the '70s, then?

**JB** I did, but without any community at all. When I entered a lesbian-feminist community, I felt alienation because they were dancing around to women's music and I really couldn't stand it. But I think there are some recent lesbian performers who are quite good, like Holly Hughes and Dominique Dibell. The writings of people like Cherrie Moraga and Amber Hollibaugh, Gayle Rubin, Joan Nestle, have been really important to me. Dorothy Allison was extremely formative—they gave me courage. I feel that I've been pretty intensely steeped in those writings.

**LK** What was the formation of your own critical project, in terms of the shift you've made from philosophy to psychoanalysis? I imagine that in the late '70s or early '80s your project—of interrogating the German philosophical canon—was not necessarily supported in feminist contexts.

**JB** I was at Yale for two years as an undergraduate, and then again as a graduate student from 1979 to 1983, and actually my life was very split; it wasn't an evolution in a sense. I was always interested in philosophy and got

very interested in Hegel and Marx and German Idealism and went to Germany on a Fulbright to study Hegel and hermeneutics, at the same time that I was active as a feminist, part of lesbian communities, and teaching courses on feminism and philosophy. I knew that I couldn't write a feminist dissertation, but I don't think I wanted to. It's not as if I was utterly constrained to write on Hegel, I wanted to. And what I wrote on in Hegel was desire, and the relationship between desire and recognition, and whether desire was in some sense always a desire for recognition. And I think I'm still writing about that.

**LK** There's a whole shift toward psychoanalysis and the notion of repetition in your work, via the readings of Freud and Lacan. Where is that going now?

**JB** I think that, in *Gender Trouble*, the chapters on Freud and Lacan did not get brought forward into the final chap-



ters, and many people go to the final chapters and look at performativity and drag and don't look at everything else. That's why people think the book promotes free play. In the work on Freud and Lacan, however, there's melancholy, and then there's the suicide in Herculeine Barbin, it's not exactly a free and happy "What do I want to be today?" project. The problem is that I didn't bring forward the psychoanalytic material into the discussion of performativity well enough. The next book is an effort to think performativity through psychoanalysis and also to show where I think the limits of psychoanalysis are.

The book I'm about to send in next week, which is tentatively entitled *Bodies That Matter*, also takes up questions of materiality, because many people said "Well, if sex is gender—if all sexual difference is culturally constructed—then what happens to the materiality of the body, Judy?" There's always a "Judy" there at the end. "You can't really believe that there's no bodily materiality, can you?" So I try to make some arguments about the status of materiality, and I try to clarify the notion of performativity. I don't actually talk about parody

or drag very much; I talk about citationality. There are forms of citing and resignifying oppressive norms which are not necessarily theatrical; and though citation appears as an act of deference, it can be very aggressive and disconcerting. I think Brecht understood this.

**LK** What kinds of work are you interested in now? What are you reading?

**JB** Nella Larsen's *Passing*. I've been trying to think about passing, crossing, and miming. I'm teaching some courses on what it means for black slaves to have passed as white, on how one thinks about crossing genders, and about various forms of miming dominant cultures. And I'm also thinking about miming as a kind of postcolonial trope as well, as in Homi Bhabha's piece on mimicry.<sup>6</sup> I've also been reading Slavoj Žižek, especially *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

**LK** There's something shared in your work and Bhabha's that revolves around this reassessment of the de-based status of mimicry and, from a postcolonial context, looking at repetition and imitation as at least potentially deeply destabilizing.

**JB** I feel a certain sympathy with his work. I think he probably would understand colonization not as a purely negative process but as one that is also inadvertently enabling, and I think something similar about living in a culture of compulsory heterosexuality: as painful as it is, it can't be fully opposed as an alien object because it constitutes me, and I'm radically implicated in it—and by it. And the question is how to *work* the ways in which I'm implicated. And miming has everything to do with that. Passing and not passing, occupying zones of legitimacy only to dismantle them, or to exploit them as sites of intervention. And that's a very different model of power

than the simple one of opposing a dominant culture considered radically other than you. It assumes that there's no pure ethical standpoint opposed to dominant forms of power (after all, that would be a form of humanism). It is important to realize that your own critical position may be an effect of the very power regime that you seek to criticize, without being fully coopted by it. □

Opposite, top: **G. B. Jones**, *The Mean Maid #2*, 1991, pencil on paper, 12 1/4 x 9". Opposite, bottom: **Vito Acconci**, *Conversions III*, 1971, black and white photographs and chalk on board, 30 x 40". Photo: Larry Lane. This page: **Nicole Eisenman**, *Model Slut*, 1992, oil on paper, 30 x 38".

1. Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982, and Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.
2. Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices, Seattle: Bay Press, 1991.
3. Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.
4. Cindy Patton, "Safe Sex and the Pornographic Vernacular," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*.
5. Judith Butler, "The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe and Discursive Excess," *differences* 2 no. 2, 1990.
6. *Passing*, in *An Imitation of Things Distant: The Collected Fiction of Nella Larsen*, New York: Anchor Books, 1992. Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in James Donald and Stuart Hall, eds., *Politics and Ideology: A Reader*, Philadelphia: Milton Keynes and the Open University Press, 1985, and "Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism," in Frank Gloversmith, ed., *The Theory of Reading*, Brighton: Harvester, 1984.