Generative Negatives
Del LaGrace Volcano’s Herm Body Photographs

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Abstract The most recent exhibited work of photographer Del LaGrace Volcano is a triptych from the series Herm Body (2011–), which presents Volcano’s front and back torso conspicuously pared down, headless, and nude. Whereas in conventional film photography, negatives are used in the darkroom to make positive images (photographic prints), in the outmoded medium Polaroid 665, which Volcano employs, the positive image is used to make a (unique) negative. The generativity of the Polaroid 665 negative in Volcano’s hands is not purely photographic; it is also affective. My essay explores the questions, what are the stakes and what are the consequences in a (photographic) negative generating and reflecting the artist’s self-image? I attend to the vulnerabilities of the technical process as well as the strong formal and conceptual references to intersex bodies in medical photography and to aging bodies in images from John Coplans. In short, I propose that the Herm Body series shows how negative affect is productive and political, even when it appears to suspend agency.

Keywords negative affect, self-portrait, Del LaGrace Volcano, intersex, Polaroid photography

In fall 2012, the Leslie and Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York City exhibited a midcareer retrospective of Del LaGrace Volcano, the American-born and Sweden-based artist. The show spanned Volcano’s photographic practice from 1988 to 2011 and consisted primarily of portraits, both of community members and of the artist. Cumulatively, Volcano’s images offer a catalogue of gender variant incarnations: leather lesbian, hermaphrodyke, drag personae, and transgender. These divergent photographic versions of the artist share an arresting gaze, a high or low camera angle, and a mixture of masculine and feminine costume (see fig. 1). The most recent work shown, however, is quite different. The first exhibited triptych from the series Herm Body (2011–ongoing) is conspicuously pared down, headless, and nude (see fig. 2).

These images are suffused with Volcano’s anxiety about returning to the camera after becoming immersed in coparenting and having a body greatly changed by hormones, age, and weight (interview, August 17, 2012). The Herm Body triptych fittingly reflects on Volcano’s midlife embodiment in the context of the
midcareer retrospective. The title draws attention to the materiality of its subject, insisting that we receive the artist’s body as *herm*—a word Volcano uses to name intersecting history and claim trans embodiment. As I will show, Volcano’s choice of medium for the midcareer *herm* self-portraits is also significant: these works turn to the increasingly rare and outmoded medium of Polaroid film (type 665).

For Volcano, it was the unique parameters of this particular film that spoke directly to the content. Not only does Polaroid 665 film produce a characteristically rich black and white image, it also has a photochemical process that makes it unlike both traditional photographic film and other Polaroid processes. In conventional film photography, light exposure produces a negative image on transparent film. In the darkroom, light is then shown through this negative to produce its inversion—a positive image—on photosensitive paper. Polaroid 665 film, however, is unique in that it produces both a positive image and a negative image. In the days before digital photography, this allowed photographers to see an image immediately after they took it while still producing a negative that could be used to make positive prints in the future; that is, like a conventional Polaroid,
the 665 produces an instant positive image, but unlike all other photographic processes (both traditional and Polaroid), this positive image is concurrently exposed to produce an original negative. As Volcano states, “Oddly enough the positive is largely irrelevant because in order to produce a strong negative the film must be overexposed, rendering the highlights in the positive image to be blown out” (pers. comm., August 10, 2013). In other words, whereas in conventional film photography, negatives are used in the darkroom to make positive images (photographic prints), in Polaroid 665 the positive image is used to make a (unique) negative. While the original positive image is, as Volcano states, “largely irrelevant,” the unique negative can then become generative. It can be taken to the darkroom to produce multiple positive photographic prints. That generativity, however, is produced through the inversion (and obsolescence) of that instant initial positive.

The generativity of the Polaroid 665 negative in Volcano’s hands is not purely photographic; it is also affective. The artist appreciates the symbolic dimension of the unusual process and exploits it, explaining, “I used Polaroid negative/positive film to mirror my feelings about my embodiment” (Volcano 2012). What are the stakes and what are the consequences in a (photographic) negative generating and reflecting the artist’s self-image?

This essay follows herm’s transference through analogy of the photographic negative to affective negativity. I attend to how the materiality of the Polaroid 665 film stock and its processing may accurately express the complexity of feelings regarding the artist’s body. On a technical level the *Herm Body* triptych asks a political question: Is there a way that the (photographic) negative does not simply convert into the mere opposite of the positive? What if the negative—as with Polaroid 665 film—exceeds the positive that it inverts in order to become generative? In other words, what can be learned from a photography-studies approach about the relationship of the negative to the positive image that analogously complicates theorizing about affective negativity in queer and trans-gender studies? Given the widely negative cultural connotations attached to corpulence, to aging, and to gender variance, the *Herm Body* series expands beyond Volcano’s autobiographical embedding to more broadly investigate the politics of negative feelings regarding mortality.

This essay advances through two main considerations of how photographic negatives can illuminate affective negativity. First, I explore the technical process of the *Herm Body* series to establish how the negative generates a self-image. The process offers an ontological understanding of the image that challenges simplistic notions of photographic indexicality or reference to a true self. Second, I attend to the formal citations of medical “freak” photography that bring into public view affective aftermaths of herm embodiment. Through recycling these past
traumatizing aesthetics, the images in the triptych seize control of the photographic practice of visualizing “abnormality,” while reframing the meaning.

Throughout, I attend to the content of these images. They contain strong formal and conceptual references to images made by British artist and critic John Coplans, who began to photograph his body at the age of 64 and continued to do so for twenty years. Volcano’s dialogue with Coplans’s works directs the viewer to consider *Herm Body* in relation to a masculinity problematized in part through aging and mortality. The question of aging is approached to consider those who live on in the face of death. I argue that Volcano revalues the persistence of the aging body and brings attention to the liveliness potentially drawn from negativity. In short, I propose that the series shows how negative affect is productive and political, even when it appears to suspend agency.

**Risking Wear and Tear**

I will begin with Volcano’s decision to use Polaroid 665 film stock. People using the common Polaroid SX-70 technology need only load the film, release the shutter, and wait for the image to surface; the negative film print instantly registers the image without a darkroom process (Buse 2010: 217). In contrast, the Polaroid 665 requires its user to embark on a highly fraught registration of an image. Once the positive is peeled away from the negative, the negative needs to be cleared in water or with sodium sulfite. This step introduces a certain precariousness into the process: too much washing can actually erase the image, and watermark stains need to be avoided. Moreover, Volcano risks solarizing herm’s pictures, overexposing the negative to a close-up flash of light in order to create a thick black line visible around the brighter body (see figs. 1–3).

An additional element of risk and randomness, which Volcano welcomes, stems from the fact that the Polaroid 665 film stock was discontinued in 2006. All recent 665 photographs are made from rare old film; each expensive online purchase may be inert or expired. The processes’ precariousness is amplified by the fact that this dated film can get stuck in herm’s medium-format mechanical Mamiya RB67 camera (the Polaroid sheets are loaded in the back, and then have to be ripped out carefully).

Each photograph’s unique trace of herm’s body is created through labor-intensive work on the photographic negative. At every stage, the negative is vulnerable to being destroyed. Although Volcano uses digital processes to make this unique image generative of multiple positive prints (rather than a darkroom), the initial analog processes leave unpredictable material traces that speak to the multistage coming-into-being of the final prints. Photo historian Peter Buse has argued that Polaroid images contain the trace of their own impending obsolescence in their mixture of ephemerality and irreplaceability. In his account, the
 uniqueness of the popular Polaroid print makes it an appropriate aesthetic metaphor for being “doomed not to last” (2008: 224). Interestingly, while Polaroid 665 stock can generate multiple prints, the connotation of obsolescence clings to the medium and is part of Volcano’s process. Not only inherent in the destruction of the initial positive, ephemerality and obsolescence also hover over herm’s use of outdated stock and partial solarization of the negatives. Volcano’s prints emphasize the uniqueness of the photographic negative as inseparable from the randomness of tear and the accumulation of time.

Volcano’s (2012) statement that the Herm Body images “conflate, confuse, and decimate any simple truth of the artist’s body” calls upon the Polaroid photographic negative to do critical, destructive work. In terms of the dominant modes of transsexual visual representation, the Herm Body series refuses to document the trans body or give a certificate of presence. Jay Prosser (1998), one of the first to consider representations of trans embodiment through photography studies, claims that the photograph “functions as an incarnation,” arguing that “the photograph appears co-natural with the body, and may even begin as more referential to the self than the body. Inasmuch as the immediate purpose of transsexuality is to make real the subject’s true gender on the body, the visual media are highly valued, for they promise (like transition itself) to make visible that which begins as imperceptible—there but underexposed, we might say” (2012: 211). Taking on the realist position from Roland Barthes’s Camera Lucida, Prosser argues that the referentiality of photography can expose that which was “underexposed” in real life (the not-there-yet). Almost like the chemical changes from hormone treatments, the chemical washes of photographs bring to bear an evidential power to substantiate a true, visible body/self. Nevertheless, Prosser wonders, “What does transsexuality in fact look like?” if not inhering in the indeterminacy or the limit of recognizability (226).

Clearly, such a limit on self-recognizability poses problems for portraiture, especially images that try to establish the temporal continuity of (a) gender. Photographic self-portraits can either serve as evidence for the proof of self—as in, “I was (already) there” in those earlier photographs—or as a disavowal of the self that claims “that was never (the real) me.” However, Volcano’s self-portraits seem to move beyond the positive affirmation or the negative denouncement of a pre-/post-transition self, with its essentialist tendency. The claim of likeness might be evidentiary of another experience of temporality that assumes the continuity of identity along a life trajectory more akin to “that still is.”

Volcano’s extending of the photographic process and the inclusion of the material traces of its stages serve to stress the importance of the material accumulation of experience—or, more broadly, of the effects of aging. Instead of presuming the artist’s body as it simply is, the images assess the accumulated
midlife of an artist. The material processes of these photographs, in other words, serve to call attention to the transitions of aging and ask us to reflect upon the body in the photographs as having a past, having had a life. This relates to how Anca Cristovăci (2009: 26) has argued that images of the aging exhibit a complex simultaneity of different age-selves. The survival of divergent age-selves in the series recalls Volcano’s own back catalog of self-portraits staging the artist’s body. As a different image of aging, it seems preposterous to define Volcano in this triptych being either pre- or post-, whether that refers to a gender, a transition, or a career. Performing the herm body, the images grasp the “problem of reading the transsexual,” and, I might add, the problem of identifying “the” intersex body, as a temporally intermediate embodiment, infinitely caught in medias res (Prosser 1998: 226).

**Photographing Herm Vulnerability**

Beyond gathering different age-selves of Volcano, these photographs also condense other episodes in the history of photography. In the two front-facing *Herm Body* photographs, the frame’s insistent focus on bare breasts and hair growth suggests a re-enactment of early medical photography. Most tellingly, a horizontal, faintly numbered grid is visible in the lower register of the photographs behind and beneath the figure’s body and in front of a plain studio backdrop. Such a reference to measuring and cataloguing was typical of the clinical and scientific photography used to record gendered, sexualized, and racialized “aberrations” in the human body for medical research. Both formally and thematically, then, the trappings of clinical photography in the *Herm Body* images stage what Renate Lorenz (2012: 94) calls “trans-temporal drag”—an embodied intervention into time and temporality. Volcano’s physical performance for the camera references the nineteenth-century medical photography of intersex individuals and asserts herm’s kinship with them and their vulnerability.

From the beginning of photography’s technical capabilities, doctors put it to use to capture the defining embodied differences of gender nonnormative people: hermaphrodites (Nadar, née Gaspard Félix Tournachon, in 1860s Paris); hysteric (Bourneville Charot in 1870s France); and inverted (Magnus Hirschfeld in 1920s Germany). Doctors and surgeons made such images to document the morphologies and symptoms they investigated and the results of treatment. They were attracted to photography’s graphic accuracy and the promise it held of a purely objective record of the body, a promise reinforced through the common practice of stripping down clothes, props, and background to isolate the anatomy (Creighton et al. 2002; Moeschen 2005: paras. 13–14). Many scholars and activists have discussed the ethical issues raised by medical photography, and many agree that its visual conventions established and reflect an unbalanced power
relationship between the object and the subject of representation (cf. Guidotto 2007; Preciado 2005; Singer 2006). Blocking the nude sitter’s gaze is among the visual conventions that has lasted the longest and earned the most stringent criticism. Though doctors have long claimed that cropping out or covering over the subject’s face protects patient privacy, many people see such cropping as a visible trace of medicine’s reification and dehumanization of nonnormative bodies. Intersex activist Cheryl Chase specifically attacks the assumption that covering the eyes lends privacy to the subject of the photograph, asserting that “the only thing the black band over the eyes accomplishes is saving the viewer from having the subject stare back” (qtd. in Dreger 2000: 161). Her claim is supported by a survey of intersex patients about their experience of medical photography; they found the psychological impact of the lack of subjectivity to be highly traumatizing (Creighton et al. 2002: 68–70).

Among the earliest medical photographs are nine plates made in 1860 that depict a single young hermaphrodite, faceless and naked. These pictures were recently celebrated by a team of German urologists as “an important milestone in the history of sexual medicine” (Schultheiss, Herrmann, and Jonas 2006: 358). Perhaps what they mark is a shift toward the visual regime of gender and sexual pathology. Beatriz Preciado (2005: 155) explains, “Nineteenth century emerging medical photography invents also the new codes of realistic representation, in continuity with the pictorial tradition of the portrait, but displacing the representation of the ‘truth’ of the subject from the face to the sexual organs.”

This history’s ongoing relevance may be part of the reason that so many of Volcano’s earlier works depict their queer subjects staring back at the camera. Yet in the Herm Body series both the face and the sexual organs are withheld from view. Volcano locates the “truth” of the herm subject not only in the risk-filled labor of the photographic process but also in the negative affect that attends the history of photographing intersex people.

Volcano’s self-representation in the Herm Body series appropriates the medical and photographic technologies through which such bodies have been produced as visible—that is, as visible disruptions of dimorphic assumptions about the human species that, as its “errors,” are brought into representation to reinforce the mythology of binary sexual difference. Herm Body is filled with references to the not-quite-past-enough medical depiction of gender variance as morphological anomaly. Volcano recycles all the most painful visual conventions of medical pathologization, including blocking the sitter’s gaze, fragmenting and overexposing body parts, and framing and labeling pieces rather than persons. Viewing these images, I felt overwhelmed by the aftermath of the dark historiography of photographic portraiture of herm bodies. Gone was the colorful, celebratory genderblending, the safe and loving references to contemporary
trans*, intersex, and queer communities that characterized herm's earlier work. In their place the Herm Body images offer visual and affective traces of the medical-cultural processes of depersonalization.

Yet Volcano’s Herm Body images diverge sharply from early medical photographs of intersex people in one crucial aspect: herm does not document herm’s genitalia. Rather, herm’s images feature the artist’s hands as a site of subjectivity. Volcano’s hands do not cover the eyes but instead make contact with herm’s body, specifically with the secondary sexual characteristic of the chest. Looking closely at the left and right photographs in figure 2, these expressive hands tell a different story from the probing hands of a medical practitioner. The left image shows Volcano’s hands softly cupping herm’s chest to frame breasts. The right image is more extreme in ambivalence by showing fingers forcefully gripping the fleshy chest, making the nipples pop out in a gesture that seems to combine eroticism, aggression, and display. In his study of male homosexuality in pornographic images, Thomas Waugh (1996) notes how the visual regime of medical photography shares common representation techniques with exposing the body in “pin up” pictures. Here, though herm’s breasts seem displayed in a sexual manner, the visual echo of a doctor’s hand holding up the enticing deviant detail competes with a reading of its simple erotic citation.

These two framing frontal shots recall and displace medical photography, which does not allow for the model to touch themselves in a sexual manner, leaving the doctors to negotiate the pornographic codes of exposure. In modeling herm’s own body, the images are closer to the parallel emerging genre of the freak photograph in which the sitter seeks to draw attention to their trait marking a “deviant” body (cf. Garland-Thompson 1996; Moeschen 2005). Though the hands focalize the viewer’s gaze on the chest, they also pull them up and toward the part of the face that is included in the cropped shot: the chin, displaying herm’s dark facial hair. The excess of secondary sexual characteristics, breasts and beard, places herm as a herm, anchoring identity in a far-from-simple truth of the artist’s body.

One could compare herm’s project to Robert Mapplethorpe’s, who Richard Meyer (1993: 364) has argued intervenes in the stigma attached to his sexuality by standing in as both agent and object of homoeroticism and homophobia in his self-portraits. Similarly, Volcano’s reworking and decoding of deviance in the Herm Body photographs works to distort the overlaying of visual regimes that produce intersex as a nineteenth-century anatomical category and, in so doing, erase intersex individuals as political subjects. In addition to investigating how photography coercively assigns sexuality and gender to the body, this series similarly tackles age normativity in queer community and its deviances. An important predecessor in this regard is the Gender Optional—Mutating Self-Portraits series (2000). Specifically the Daddy Del self-portrait captures an aged,
t errifically bald and washed out version of the artist, a transformative effect achieved by make-up and lighting (see fig. 3). The small patch of facial hair also lends continuity between the series (compare fig. 2 and fig. 3); Volcano seems to have come to embody a mutated (and testosterone grown) version of this former Daddy self. Though this series may appear less obviously concerned with highlighting hermaphroditic traces, the body is shot against a taxonomical grid, which serves as a remainder and reminder of the medical gaze set on the marks of mortality. Thus the medical gaze is one that the viewer is invited to consider using him or herself, for measuring out changes and differences in terms of age and its deviances.

Challenging youth culture by placing pressure on the normativity around age is also achieved in John Coplans’s unsparing documentation of his aging male body, starting from the age of sixty-four in 1984 until his death at eighty-three (cf. Leffingwell 2004; Smee 2014). The image at the center of Volcano’s Herm Body triptych that shows herm’s hands grasping herm’s back (fig. 2) refers directly to Coplan’s body of work in that it stages a reenactment of the 1984 Coplan photograph Back with Arms Above (fig. 4).

Coplans called all the images of his body parts “self-portraits,” yet the prints rarely show his face and are cropped from medium to extreme...
close-ups to render the body/self unfamiliar. The titles also inform the viewer what part they are looking at, offering an answer to the riddle of the strange perspective on a body. Like Volcano for the Herm Body series, Coplans uses Polaroid 665 film (Leffingwell 2004: 100), evoking a technical inversion that thematically resonates with how his images deviate from youth culture and the normative male body. He also uses the negative to print the image on a much larger scale, bringing out the abject in fine details of hair follicles, blotches, and callouses.

Whereas Coplans's dramatically lit back hunches over to hide the head, making the fists with dark shadows beneath appear like alien antennae, Volcano's back stands tall and strong with the hands thrust up and over in a tight embrace of the shoulders. As reviewer Sebastian Smee notes in his discussion of John Coplans's recent show "Hands 1988–2000," these human hands, emblematic tools of communication, seem to be trying, "like distant semaphores, to tell us something" (2014). Guiding the viewer toward meaning, Volcano's hands feeling the body seem to seek assurance, to ask and to answer in pressing the flesh, "I am still here." These pressing, gripping, cupping gestures hold the image tightly. Working from the outside in, first from the highlighted fraying at the outer frame, to the dark lines framing the torso created through solarization, the hands repeat the visual gesture of holding it together. They persist in seeking to reframe the body, to do the handiwork of conceptually reframing the meaning of herm negativity that presses in determinedly from the large black wooden frame. In the context of the photograph's critical approach to aging, the insistence of the hands' touch liveliness also recuperates power from the negativity of death.

Judith Butler's Frames of War (2010) engages the work of interpretation integral to uncovering the visible as well as invisible frames that narrate images of war; much of her analysis is pertinent to the framing of photography in general. In Butler's (2010: 74) account, all photographs mobilize multiple framings of the image through norms that are invisibly framing the frame. She distinguishes between visual and conceptual frames: visual frames show, whereas conceptual frames give meaning to forms of life within general conditions of historically articulated and enforced recognizability (xxix). Specifically, the affective relation of grief in relation to war photography's framing of death indicates what the viewer is able to recognize as "a life" worth grieving. Thus photographic regimes can be said to wage war through affect: grief marks the boundaries of the necropolitical-biopolitical split of death from life.

Butler's analysis can be extended to highlight the ways in which medical photography incites particular affects, framing some bodies as unrecognizable lives through the visual strategies of desubjectification. Within the Herm Body series the negative conceptual framing of a herm life as no life at all seems to be made manifest in its citation of biomedical histories of photography. Volcano
embody negativity in this citation and blends it with the meditation on age signaled by the Coplans reference. In this way, the *Herm Body* photographs make negativity generative—as with the Polaroid process herm uses. The photographs subsume and reconfigure the private and public, the personal and medical; that is, the negative affects surrounding the medical photography of intersex bodies and (f)ailing bodies mobilized by the *Herm Body* series are not only Volcano’s but have a sociocultural dimension that queer theorists have argued is inherently political (Cvetkovich 2007: 461).

In “Critically Queer,” Butler (1993) argues that, despite the limitations of reverse discourse, difficult histories must be reworked and the past is never past enough. Heather Love (2007: 18) has expanded on this to argue that in this way Butler “retains a faith in the possibility of transforming the base materials of social abjection into the gold of political agency.” The desire for reclamation and pride taken in a reassertion of an injurious term, however, makes it harder to see the persistence of the damaging past in the celebrated present. In Love’s study of disqualified queer identities, she admits the difficulties in locating a workable political praxis from studying “negative” texts on self-hatred and bitterness but points to their descriptive and diagnostic value (4). Volcano’s photographic rendering of herm feeling can be understood as a visual representation of “what it is like to bear a ‘disqualified’ identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury—not fixing it” (Love 2007: 4).

Feelings regarding gender ambiguity, aging, corpulence, and so on are not wholly personal to Volcano; rather the series inventories the corporeal and psychic costs of bad or even ugly feelings through the visual traits of cumulative wear and tear. Hence while the photographic series returns with an artistic difference to the long history of medical studies of the body, the images might also be considered as social documentary, cataloging the experience of living-on with injury. Refusing to wait until death to grieve, the photographs offer a technical, material, and aesthetic response to how one might productively siphon off the power of negativity. Finally, the *Herm Body* photographs transform those injurious feelings into feelings generative of fascination with the aging, corpulent, changing self that still is.

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Notes
1. Besides work appearing in numerous publications, Volcano has published five monographs to date: *Love Bites* (1991), *The Drag King Book* (1999), *Sublime Mutations* (2000), *SEX WORKS* (2005), and *Femmes of Power: Exploding Queer Femininities* (2009). This new title substitutes *inter* for *hersm* and *me* for *body*, which personalizes and politicizes the images. *Inter*, like *trans*, uses the asterisk to designate the widest possible variance, in this case of intersex and intergender. It is becoming used more widely in the social movement and activist context, popularized by groups like *transinter*Queer (TRIQ) in Berlin, Germany. As this change was made while the article was going to press, I have retained the earlier working title and my analysis related to it. I stand by this decision because this title was the basis of the interview and online discussions I held with the artist and best reflected herm’s thought process at the time.

3. Rather than the gender-designating pronouns he or she (him/her), Volcano regularly uses *herm* to signal a body and identity of a hermaphrodite by design. See, for instance, Volcano 2010. I will follow herm’s requested designation throughout this article.

References


