

Short lecture by Dr. Eliza Steinbock
Delivered January 18, 2013, at IHLIA
On the occasion of the opening of the exhibition "Gender as a Performance" -
Chris Rijksen

Bananas are bananas because people say they are. Gender is constructed the same way. One is a woman or a man because people say one is. Therefore, gender is no more than a performative act, in no way related to any biological aspect.

- Chris Rijksen

"Generations of Bananas"

Good evening everyone, men, women, and the rest of us. I'm delighted to have the opportunity to address you on this very special occasion of Chris Rijksen's exhibition opening at the international lesbian and gay archive. Prins Chris, you are now a canonized queer artist! This is great news, also for all of us, as I wish to explain in my short talk today. I'm calling it "Generations of Bananas."

The exhibition "Gender as a Performance" has a title that is commonplace nowadays. Who among us has heard this slogan before? Yes? Anyone? And where does it come from? Butler! Right. The series being exhibited stages the complications that arise when performing everyday gender: to quote Rijksen "One is a woman or a man because people say one is." But, who gets to speak, to name, or define one's gender – yourself, your parent, doctor, or the stranger in the street?

Butler, and many generations of feminists before and after her, tell us that we must pay attention to who has the authority to make these gender declarations true. Basically, we should be wary of so-called "gender experts" and the truth claims they make about us.

In the 80s and 90s transgender liberation movements were fueled by attacks from "gender specialists" and exclusions from feminist, lesbian and leftist spaces. Since the millennium, these grassroots networks have successfully developed into professional international advocacy organizations. And yet, gender policing continues to pose a problem within our feminist and LGB communities. Some of the most virulent transphobia is sadly coming from feminists who dismiss claims to be a woman or man, or neither, or something else altogether, at least claims that aren't based on "biological" evidence.

Perhaps some of you are aware of the media frenzy that went on this week in the British press and blogosphere. The short version is that a horrific rant was published in the left-

wing, and supposedly progressive, Observer by Julie Burchill. She was writing in defense of her friend Suzanne Moore, who a few days before had inserted a transphobic comment into her news column on women's anger. When a reader politely called Moore on it, she went bonkers on Twitter. But, compared to Burchill, Moore's clear disdain and disregard for transgender lives appears tame. Burchill's commentary was filled to the brim with the most odious, and the most typical of transphobic slurs, including those that usually accompany violent, murderous, and humiliating attacks on trans people. For this reason I won't repeat them here.

However, each accuses, in one way or another, trans people of making false claims to their gender, that they aren't "real" or "true" men and women, or therefore even human. They assume that trans people live essentially inauthentic lives. And, as Roz Kaveney points out in her retort published in the Guardian, the idea that some lives are true and others fake has a worrying history in many sorts of religious life and totalitarian philosophy. The kind of feminism spewed by Burchill, and her cohort Moore, relies on exactly this philosophy: we decide what gender you are, we decide who IS and who IS NOT a man or a woman.

Though the slogan of Rijkse's photography series may be recycled from the early 90s, Butler recycled it from Simone de Beauvoir in the 1940s. Every generation needs to cry it again! Gender is like a banana! Gender is a performance!

Actually, the exhibition's images are a bit more careful and subtle than that: "gender as a performance" suggests that we consider the implications of understanding gender in this way, as a performance. That is, gender is not simply or only a performative act. But what if it were, in part, a performative speech act? What if no one can once and for all define what gender we are, but each naming calls into being a new gender?

This is a serious "what if" question. It is at the heart of social and cultural debates surrounding gender self-determination. Despite the ugliness exposed by Burchill and Moore, or in the Netherlands in response to journalist Maxim Februari's announcement of his gender transition, we are making some headway. Recent events suggest we are winning over feminist, medical and legal authority figures – often self-appointed – who doubt the sincerity of trans claims to gender identity. In May of 2012 Argentina put into action the first self-determined gender identity laws, including free access to medical treatment. Sweden's law forcing sterilization of transsexuals has just been repealed this

week; and in the coming months the Netherlands will debate major changes to improving the social and medical transition procedures including ending forced sterilization.

The text accompanying the exhibition, which tells us that people determine who is a man or a woman, goes to the heart of these political debates. Chris, who is the model in these photographs, meets our gaze, looking into our eyes, asking us a question: what gender is being performed here? How can you tell? The devil is in the details. We are invited to go hunting for clues. There are very few overt gender markers given. These are subtle images, quite unlike the overt wildness of color and gender markers in Catherine Opie, Del LaGrace Volcano or other canonized queer photographers who make it easy for us to “spot the difference.”

Now, I bet that most of us, whether we like it or not, are gender experts. We have very likely been trained from an early age to read those around us, to say Mr or Mrs or he or she correctly, to check who comes into the toilet, or other sex segregated spaces. We are disciplined all the time to look for sexual differences. So, it should be no problem that Chris is dressed in mostly non-descript clothes, certainly nothing out of the ordinary. We should be able to handle guessing the gender presented here; it is not unlike the range of gender performances we see everyday.

Yet in each image we might see the same gender, since it is after all the same person, or we might see a wide variety of gender, since the clothing subtly suggests masculine or feminine dress in the shoes, color, and cut of clothing. But in the repetition, styling, and minute details we easily get lost. It becomes harder and harder to distinguish the gender of the model. These photographs, I wish to suggest, show the potential of queerness in the ordinary, rather than the extraordinary. Stepping away from the use of loud colors, or a bold stance, the images in this series play with the viewer’s gender reading skills; on the one hand, we are invited to notice quiet clues much as we would find in everyday gender performances, and, on the other hand, we are confused by the ability of the model to easily adopt a variety of everyday genders.

I want to commend Chris for using yourself as the material; not only here but also in works like *Personae Vitae* (September 2012) you explore self construction and exploit your ability to embody multiple genders. These selves are not merely man or woman, but pluralize masculinities and femininities. There are of course limits to this chameleon-quality; you embody a variety of white and young selves. There should also

be room for the all too often invisible non-western, people of color, and the aging in our queer and trans image archives.

But today, we celebrate your entrance into the archive. In closing, I want to return to why the canonization of work like yours is important not only for you personally, but for what Kate Bornstein called "the rest of us". It suggests that the borders erected to exclude "inauthentic" transgendered images from LGB and feminist community spaces are shifting and changing. That is, gender diversity in its everyday variety, and not only as the spectacular, has a newfound place in the canon. I must thus also applaud IHLIA for hosting your exhibition. This series ensures that the thought experiment "gender is like a banana" offers a fresh take on gender performativity to today's queer and feminist generation.

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