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Abject subjects: Negotiating Trans Representation in Contemporary Photography

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Abstract

This thesis examines the political impacts on the visibility and of transgender people in visual media such as photography. Drawing on theories by Julia Kristeva and Edouard Glissant, it analyses the work of Loren Cameron, Ren Hang, and Claude Cahun, alongside reflections on my own practice, to explore themes of safety in representation, privacy and resistance.

Introduction

Trans visibility in the visual medium including photography has long been shaped by the tensions between visibility and safety, affirmation and exposure which risks harm. In current political climates, with the rise of far-right conservatism assuming gender essentialism, transgender people face violence and oppression in all aspects of everyday life. From calls on increased gender surveillance in public spaces, lack of high standards of healthcare, reduced access to work, transgender rights suffer globally at an alarmingly increasing rate.

While historically visibility has functioned as a tool for social justice and empowerment, throughout the years it also invited misinterpretation and minimisation of transgender people. In response, artists and theorists have turned towards alternative ways of safe, yet politically conscious representation. In Chapter 1, I outline the theoretical foundation of research, introducing Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject to explore how transgender bodies disrupt the social order and gender norms, and the mechanics of their social abjection. Edouard Glissant's theory of opacity acts as an anti-thesis to visibility, an argument for the social and political resistance against surveillance and erasure. These frameworks provide a base for discussion of transgender visibility, safety and representation in social media.

In Chapter 2, I apply these theories to the practices of three artists - Loren Cameron, Ren Hang and Claude Cahun. Each of these artists negotiates their visibility differently - through hypervisibility, ambiguity and camouflage. Their work provides a vast historical, geographical and sociopolitical context to cultural pressures, state censorship, and dynamics from within the community.

In Chapter 3, I utilise an autoethnographic approach to examine and dissect my own photographic practice. I reflect on how I negotiate and navigate abjection, visibility and opacity, which relate to my personal experience and influence of modern day politics. In addition, I respond to the theoretical concepts outlined in Chapters 1 and 2 to discuss how they inform my artistic decisions against conformity, embracing ambiguity and obscurity.

By linking theory, case studies and personal practice, my research contributes to broader conversations regarding trans representation, while arguing for a shift away from visibility as a universal goal of all transgender people, towards a complex, nuanced understanding of trans identities and their presence in visual culture.

Throughout this thesis, I use trans to signify transgender, interchangeably with queer, as the word transgender falls under the queer umbrella. I also propose a change to the LGBTQ+ acronym, by using TLGBQ+ to reflect transgender people's need for solidarity and protection in context of current rise of violence and discrimination.

Chapter 1 - Between visibility and obscurity. On transgender representation in modern media.

Abjection and its effects on perception

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the adjective *abject* as 'in a low state, very bad' (Merriam-Webster, 2025). With synonyms such as *degenerate* or *sordid* to name a few, abjection carries exclusively negative connotations, signifying a condition that is disagreeable, gross or indecent.

In her essay *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva introduced the abject as something that disrupts the norm of life - by comparing it to wounds, bodily fluids, but also to the terror that comes with crime. Within Kristeva's writing, this helped to shape the abject into an idea deeply rooted in fear of the unknown, existing between the subject and object, representing taboos that societally are better ignored and cast out. These are intricately tied to humanity - the abject is not of alien origin but

rather a defilement of the human body and nature, a rejection of the morally correct way of living. Abjection, the “casting out”, serves similarly to the Greek catharsis, a “ritual by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element” (Creed, 2000). This contact, which brings abjection into visibility, does not ease its power by purifying the subject, but reinforces stigma by reminding the subject of close proximity of the abject, the “Other” that may possess and replace the subject (Kristeva, 1982, p.10).

Contemporarily, abjection is a concept associated with discrimination against minorities (Tyler, 2013), something that Kristeva failed to anticipate in *Powers of Horror*. Abjection is about defining an edge, a border around “Self” (Kristeva, 1982, p.3) or an entire group of like-minded people, which helps retain a sense of an easily understood and accepted identity. In modern society, majority groups such as the white, the affluent, the cisgendered and heterosexual, adjust the definition of abject to fit a person with qualities opposite to them. This structure of systemic superiority and inferiority reinforces itself on the basis of endlessly creating “subjects shaped to conform to it” (Haslanger, 2022). An example of this is transgender people becoming socially abject when defined by the cisheteronormative society as disruptive to the traditional rules of gender and sex (Phillips, 2014). Conservative groups are able to divide and conquer by producing stereotypical identity markers to reveal, separate and repress trans people from their cis counterparts under the guise of preserving gender legibility. Symbols of transness, such as nudity, chest scarring, become synonymous with the “Other” - the fear of which is at the very root of abjection.

Susan Stryker, a prominent figure in transgender studies and a trans woman herself, in her essay *My Words to Viktor Frankenstein* (1994) embraces abjection in an act of

resistance against oppression. Drawing on the stereotypical portrayal of trans people as Frankenstein's 'monster', she proposes that reclaiming the word would rid it of its harmful power (Stryker, 1994). Where Kristeva describes the abject as "the place where meaning collapses" (1982, p.1), Stryker invites to "risk abjection and flourish as well as have I" (1994, p.241) - she questions gender conformity in the name of regaining control over her own personhood. This tactic of unorthodox acceptance is an important step towards reducing the shame of abjection among transgender people, however, in a current political climate Stryker's proposition may not be safe or effective in combating external transphobic narratives.

Opacity as resistance against abjection

Since Stryker's essay publication, the TLGBQ+ rights globally have grown in number of supporters. With the Equality Act of 2010 introduced, the UK saw an increase in discrimination protections. While lesbian and gay are mostly accepted and safe in their visibility, this is not the case for transgender people in the UK, who now face more discrimination than ever - between 2022 and 2024, the percentage of people opposing the social and legal gender transition increased from 23% to 33% (YouGov, 2025).

When discussing the social abjection of transgender people in the context of modern politics and media narratives, its most used tactic is transmisogynistic hate speech (Serano, 2007). J.K.Rowling, the author of the fantasy bestseller series *Harry Potter* and a trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF), has been vocal in social media since 2020, using language to suggest that trans-inclusive laws will enable male sexual predators to infiltrate women-only spaces under the guise of identifying as

trans (Rowling, 2020). This rhetoric works by associating the uncertainty of the abject transness with the anticipation of violence. Such language cannot be fought against in the same way Stryker suggested - reclaiming the “monster” works in favour of transmisogynists, who purposefully equate the hidden agenda of misogynistic violence to gender passing - when a transgender person is successfully perceived as fitting the gender binary. TERFs, or any conservative community however favour slogans to discourse, offering simple explanations as means of distraction from complex issues (Sardoč and Wodak, 2023). The offensive but simplistic, gender-essentialist qualities of Rowling’s argument made it more popular, which has negatively affected the legal and social status of all trans people. For Women Scotland, which the author donates to, has won a 2025 Supreme Court case redefining “sex” in the Equality 2010 Act to “biological sex”, changing how trans people are allowed to access public spaces (Cochrane, 2025). If implemented, the ruling will further ostracise trans people and deny them the right to safety and dignity.

Globally, transgender women receive more negative visibility, therefore are at a higher risk for violence than transgender men (Devís-Devís, 2022). Where transgender men receive attention in the media, it is often more patronising than violent. Rowling’s online article is testimony to this - she suggests that the access to information on gender affirming care through inadequate online environments is what allures young trans men to “escape” womanhood (Rowling, 2020). Under this narrative, trans men are made to appear unable to self-advocate and self-determine, causing the negative, minimising perception of their identity. Coming out for trans men is already an isolating experience (Rubin, 2003, p.178),

and they become less visible as their transition progresses (p.176). Having their identities legally and socially challenged, some trans men defensively assume hyperbolic masculine behaviours to prove themselves (Rubin, 2003, p.165), others choose to go 'stealth' - to not disclose their gender history entirely (p.177). While stealth may appear as a good protective method, it proves to be a mentally exhausting hiding tactic which does not reduce social stigma but also causes increased levels of stress (Bockting et al., 2013). Both hypervisibility and stealth represent two ends of the spectrum, with another possibility in the middle.

In *Anti-trans Optics: Recognition, Opacity, and the Image of Force*, Eric Stanley discusses a 2008 case of Duanna Johnson, a trans woman violently misgendered by police officers during a prison booking (Stanley, 2017). During this incident, she was brutally grabbed, beaten, and pepper sprayed while she refused to confront or correct the anti-trans violence she was facing. Stanley associates her silent protest with Édouard Glissant's philosophy of opacity, the refusal to be fully known and dominated by oppressive systems of power (Glissant, 1990).

At a systemic level, surveillance is an end result of the demand for transparency - for minorities to be easily understood and categorised, opening up the possibility of control and abjection. Transparency for Glissant means measuring a person by one's own standards to make comparisons and judgements (p.190), and similarly to Kristeva, maintain a coherent sense of identity. Opacity as a direct antithesis to transparency suggests not the evasion of these social processes, but a complete resistance against them. Against Haslanger (2022) mentioned in Chapter 1.1, opacity asks minorities to resist conformity imposed on them by oppressors. This may include total disengaging with anti-trans discourse and its linguistic traps that

require the disclosure of sensitive information, which then gets misconstrued for the oppressor's gain.

Conservative groups will always pathologise transgender existences and reduce them to harmful stereotypes. Trans people have fought for acceptance through increased visibility since the 1960s. Modern trans representation argues for the inclusion of differences, the right to be different which is a "precondition of visibility politics" (Stanley, 2017, p.618). Allowing the word "transgender" to become synonymous with "different" for the sake of negotiating visibility with transphobes results in further social abjection of trans people. Opacity as a political tool does not reject representation, but challenges societal conventions on how representation should look like.

1.3 Navigating trans visibility in a cis-dominated mainstream

Due to popularised social media, transmasculine celebrities and artists are now more visible than ever, their platforms amassing large numbers of followers - on Instagram, 5,3 million people follow Elliot Page, 1,5 million follow Gottmik, the RuPaul Drag Race star. However, social media algorithms tend to favour conventional beauty ideals - more visibility is given to people who are able-bodied, physically fit and attractive. Modern queer photography is also a victim of these preferences, despite the growing interest in intersectionality of minority groups. Images selected for the British Journal of Photography 2024 *Meet photography's queer new wave* (Fletcher, 2024) article include only one plus-size transmasculine person out of eight people depicted, and features no Black transmasculine artists. It is also worth noting that the article was not trans-specific, but rather included a wider

array of queer identities, reflecting the journal's disinterest in documenting trans art and artists. Since 2021 the number of articles specifically about trans artists has been gradually falling, Fletcher's 2024 article being the last inclusion of any trans or transmasculine artists.

Fletcher's article showed a clear visual preference in selection of images utilising naked skin and chest to signal queer sexuality and transmasculinity. All of these symbols conform to the cisgender understanding of transness - a body changed socially and medically, a different body, eluding the binary genders assigned at birth. An example of how the visual trans representation in the mainstream media rejected social legibility is a GQ article *Gender euphoria: Ten trans Britons on what Pride means to them in 2021*, where author David Levesley saw to include a vast range of people identifying under the transgender umbrella. By inviting trans men to stand both behind the camera and in front of it (Levesley, 2021), they negotiated and dictated their own rules of visibility, not through a sense of discomfort and uncertainty but confidence and empowerment. Utilising fashion as symbolism rather than nudity underpins the opacity theory and its rejection of conforming to pre-existing ways of being seen and understood.

Kristeva's theory of abjection explains the ways in which humanity fears and rejects otherness, whereas Tyler explores the praxis of abjection in context of a wider society, and how minorities may be moved to reclaim their abjection as means of empowerment. This is not always possible for transgender people, who in recent years have become a target of media discourse, forcing transgender people into accepting socio-political surveillance. Glissant's theory of opacity offers an

alternative - the right to resist forced visibility and the vulnerability that comes with it. By applying these theories and their sociopolitical implications, Chapter 2 will analyse three queer artists - Loren Cameron, Ren Hang and Claude Cahun - and explore how they navigate trans visibility in the photographic medium.

Chapter 2 - Case studies of Loren Cameron, Ren Hang and Claude Cahun.

Approaching trans visibility in photography.

This chapter examines how different artists approach queer and transgender visibility in the photographic medium. By analysing the works of Loren Cameron, Ren Hang and Claude Cahun through the theoretical lens of Kristeva's abject theory and Glissant's opacity, I illustrate how the artists' strategies engage with expectations on representation. By including a vast spectrum of works discussing transmasculinity, queerness and gender fluidity, I aim to explore the intricacies of the methods of representation.

2.1 Hypervisibility as response to oppression - a case study of Loren Cameron

Loren Cameron was one of the first openly trans male photographers documenting transgender bodies across the United States, beginning in the 1990s. At that time, trans men had little visibility, often misinterpreted as butch lesbians - a reductive perception that abjected trans men from most spaces previously deemed as safe. As James Green - Cameron's friend, a trans man, and author of *Becoming a Visible Man* (2004) - noted, one particular incident deeply impacted Cameron, prompting

him, a former blue-collar worker, to become a self-taught artist in response to trans erasure.

In 1994 Cameron and Green participated in a photoshoot for the *New Yorker*, directed by Amy Arbus, daughter of well known portrait photographer Diane Arbus. Both men reported feeling objectified (Green, 2004, p.174) by Amy Arbus - mirroring her mother's controversial approach of photographing "people outside social norms" without respecting the social responsibility towards her subjects (Sontag, 1977). This experience reinforced his need for authentic trans representation, leading Cameron to publish *Body Alchemy: Transsexual Portraits* in 1996, a groundbreaking photo book that became foundational for generations of transmasculine artists to come.



Fig. 1 *God's Will*

Body Alchemy is not only a document of trans existence, but also of trans perservarance. Outlined in the book are detailed and revealing self-portraits, images of surgery results, and written testimonies from members of the transmasculine community. Images of scars and genitals, in society understood as potentially repulsive (Kristeva, 1982) are not obscured from the viewer, but portrayed as belonging to natural, human bodies that carry them into everyday life. This portrayal

challenges abjection by showing that what was deemed as abject is not alien, but integral to the body, and society. In spite of this, *Body Alchemy* cannot be fully classified as an opaque body of work, as Cameron is making himself and his subjects hypervisible through the sheer amount of detail included in both visuals and text. Cameron's transparency however is deliberate as his aim is to document his own journey, as well as his community - to quote "I wanted the world to see us, to really see us" (Cameron, 1996).

Cameron's photography is representative of his life, driven by honesty, sense of self-love and pride that aim to leave little room for invalidation of his status or belonging as a trans man. Representational art, which represents reality, is preferred by audiences according to a paper by Igdalova and Chamberlain (2023), however as Swami (2013) suggested, context does not improve the overall understanding of representational art. There is a risk of being stereotyped - as proposed by Stuart Hall, in visual culture, there is no guarantee that an image will be interpreted like the author intended, there is "no guarantee in meaning" (Hall, 1997), therefore to challenge the stereotype, one must engage with it and eradicate it through action. Cameron's photography does this through making trans bodies visible, confronting the shame imposed on the transmasculine community. *Body Alchemy* however does not fully explore the spectrum of transmasculinity, as Cameron tends to portray "strong men" in specific, hypermasculine scenarios - bodybuilders, athletes, and those in traditionally masculine professions such as law enforcement. Although Cameron recognises the importance of nuance in understanding queerness at large (p.12), his portrayals are not diverse enough to include trans men across the

spectrum, leaving out more complex identities or gender presentations, which have existed in his time.

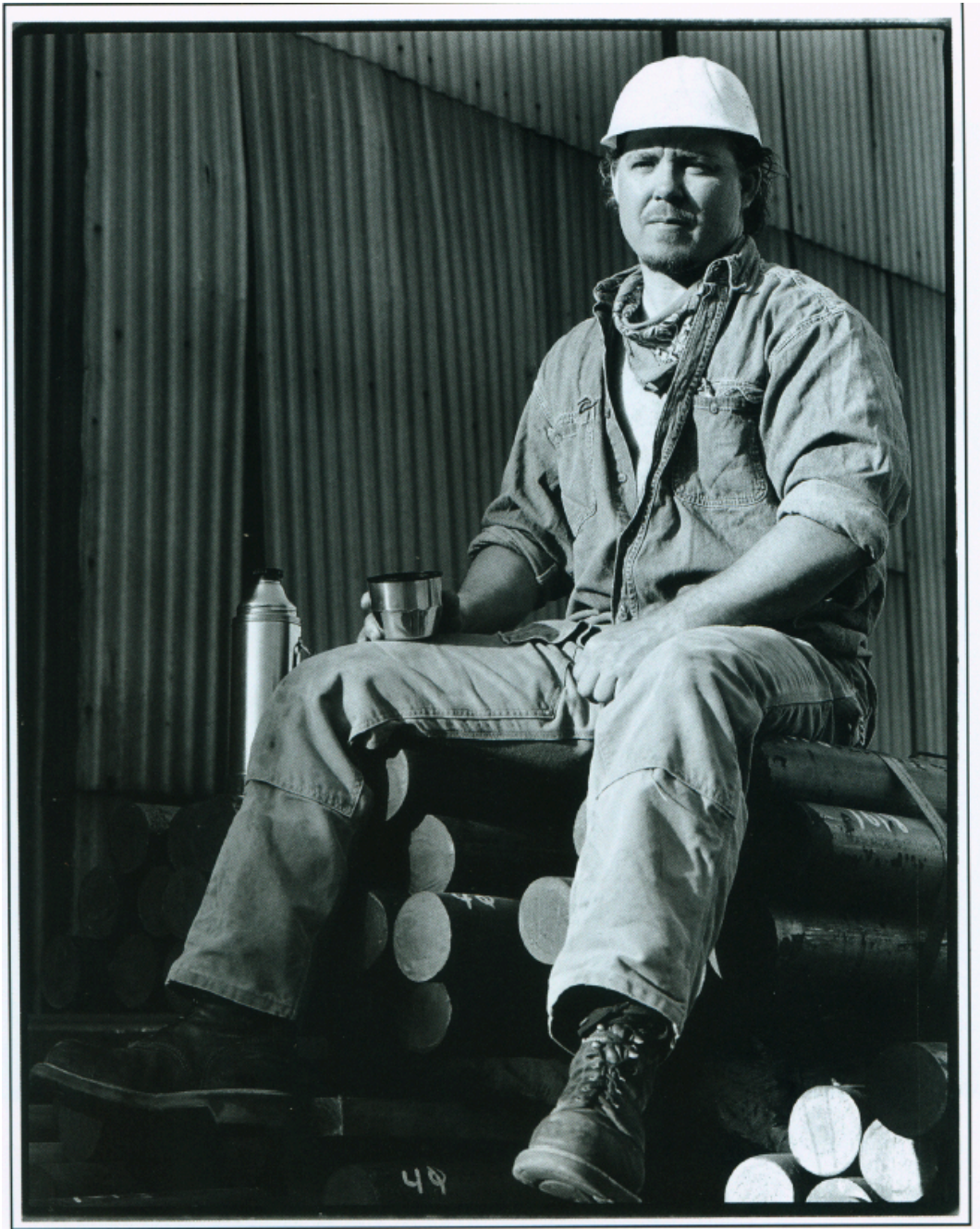


Fig. 2 *Chris*

Body Alchemy is a useful document in learning of trans existence, of existence as means of resistance against social oppression, but today, it is not enough to guarantee respect or security for trans men. Being seen does not equate to being

understood, and many people on the conservative end of the political compass choose to twist queer existence into the monstrous (Stryker, 1994). Cameron's works heavily rely on pride, honesty and perseverance as ways of self-establishment, however in the context of politics, a subject constantly influencing art, hypervisibility as an artistic practice leaves its subjects open to harm.

2.2 Navigating representation through coded meaning - a case study of Ren Hang

While Western artists favoured open representation in the context of developing social justice, those creating self-expressive art under restrictive political climates were forced to find alternative ways of representation.

Ren Hang (family name Ren) was a Chinese photographer whose work was frequently censored in China due to its revealing depictions of TLGBQ+ bodies. As a queer, self-taught artist, he began his photographic journey in 2007, capturing nude portraits of his friends and family, often outdoors. His work challenged the rigid constraints of Chinese cultural conservatism, where legislation like the Article 363 of the Criminal Law of People's Republic of China (1997) strictly prohibits display of nudity, both in physical and online spaces, with the exception of medical and artistic depiction (Article 367 thereof). Despite this exception, Ren was arrested multiple times on charges of alleged promotion of nudity and sexual activity, yet remained committed to his artistic practice, continuing to create despite state surveillance and interference.

Unlike Cameron who favoured openness, Ren's practice was deliberately ambiguous. A quote from Ren reads:

I don't try to get a message across, I don't give my works names, I don't date them. I don't want to instill them with any vocabulary. I don't like to explain my photos or work as a whole.

(Public House of Art, 2017)



Fig. 3 untitled



Fig. 4 untitled

Upon first viewing, Ren's work engages with the sexual, the unsettling, vulgar and ugly. Across his body of work, it is common to see erect penises, fully exposed bodies contorted into bizarre, abstract forms. The genitals, in Kristeva (1982) associated with the abject, may be shown in "beautiful" settings of nature, but the body itself is never beautified or made palatable to the viewer. This duality of the subject matter, where the queer body appears to engage in the sexual, therefore becoming appealing, while carrying an unsettling quality with itself directly challenges abjection. The act of making the abject desirable instills confusion and forces the viewer to reassess their understanding of their own morality - "perversion is integral to the thing it threatens" (Fischer-Hornung, 2007). The interest in the tainting "perverse" shifts abjection from the subject to the viewer of Ren's photography, whose responsibility is now to compartmentalise these feelings. In this

sense, Ren's photography reclaims the abject similarly to Stryker's proposal as discussed in Chapter 1, which is through unconditional acceptance of the uncanny and its effects on the social perception of queer and trans bodies.

Viewing and understanding Ren's representation of gender is crucial to understand how he destabilised the systemic order, resisting abjection through obscurity. In an interview with VICE, Ren stated that he did not have a gender preference for his models (Ren, 2013) and viewed bodies as equal. His work speaks on opacity through symbols of uniformity - red lipstick and red nail varnish are consistent visual themes in his photography regardless of gender of the subject - which at times, may not be clearly identified. This communicates opacity by refusing to adhere to fixed expectations of how gender should be presented or performed, and denies the viewer the access to information on the subject's identity. Ren's work blurs the boundaries of gender, sex and sexuality, purposely making identifiable traits ambiguous.

Due to the state censorship, Ren was forced into adapting alternative narratives for his work, but also his life. His aversion to transparency in his statements is one form of resistance against oppression and the very principle of opacity - the refusal to be known or legible. Ren's life as a gay man in China and the existence of his photography despite state interference is resistance against erasure, an act of activism in and of itself. Despite not being created with transgender people in mind, his practice provides helpful insight into methods of representation under consistent political pressures, which concerns all queer people across the world.

2.3 “Behind this mask, another”. Performance and gender identity - a case study of Claude Cahun

While Cameron and Ren created queer photography in different theoretical and political contexts, they both dealt with ways of representing queer and trans identities. However, Claude Cahun approached identity from another angle - by dissolving it entirely.

Claude Cahun, a French surrealist photographer identifying as gender fluid (Cahun, 2007), has been active as an artist and activist since the 1920s. They worked through the spread of fascism across Europe, under an immense fear of being exterminated by the Nazis for their Jewish heritage. Despite this, they vehemently resisted German occupation during World War II through activism in collaboration with their partner, Marcel Moore, as they would dress up and infiltrate German troops, placing anti-war propaganda fliers in the soldiers' belongings (Jackson, 2020). Cahun's activism allows a glimpse into their beliefs on the utility of gender performance.

According to Judith Butler, gender is “performative” - it has to be constantly maintained through gender-coded clothing, manner of speech, posture (Butler, 1999). The repetition of acts (p.179) reveals a certain instability of the socially constructed concept of gender. By refusing to stay congruent in this performance, Cahun was able to utilise gender identifiers in order to create narratives. In their self-portraits, Cahun often acts as an unreadable subject (Jones, 2006), blurring the lines between feminine and masculine, often taking on an androgynous appearance.

Cahun questioned the stereotype of gender performance, hence resisting abjection through categorisation. By assuming the gender to be a performance, one of many “masks” (Cahun, 2007), their work becomes the most radical form of opacity - enacted camouflage on the artist’s own terms. The photographer becomes an “object in order to be a subject” (Owens, 1994), challenging the role of gaze on reading and understanding the order of photography.



Fig. 5 *I am in training, don't kiss me*

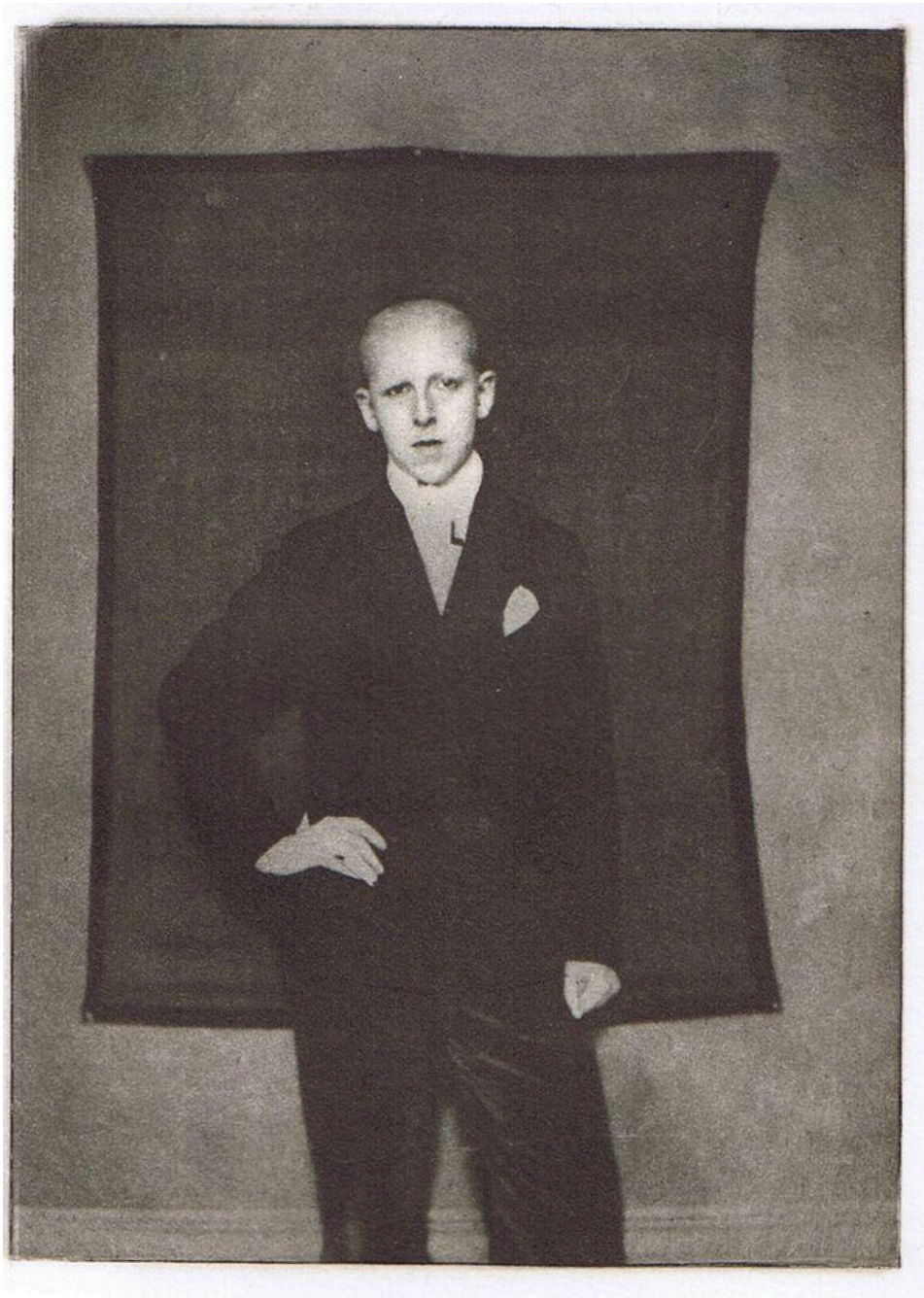


Fig.6 *Self-portrait*

The “us versus them” fascist ideology of Nazi Germany was a tactic to polarise society by assigning the abject quality to a minority group, overshadowing identity and individuality. It is documented that Nazi Germany targeted members of the TLGBQ+ community under the use of Paragraph 175 (Pieper, 2019) and were

propagating the beliefs that queerness is a bodily disease (Whisnant, 2016), similarly to how Kristeva portrays the abject as a poisonous force, corrupting the Self and its coherent boundaries (Kristeva, 1982). The pressures under which Cahun existed are not dissimilar to the modern rise of anti-trans rhetorics and hostility, which are deeply set in the far-right ideology. Their work, despite dating a century back, is paradoxically the most applicable to the current situation of trans people, as the parallels are now very clear - linking back to the trans-exclusionary radical feminist rhetoric of transgender people being a danger to society as discussed in Chapter 1. On a surface level, Cahun's work may appear to be exactly what Rowling postulates against, which is the seemingly insidious disguise tactic of "trans predators". However, Cahun's disguise is a method of self-liberation and self-establishment, a critique of the rigidity of gender norms rather than an excuse for crime. To Cahun, self-identity is a site of discovery and creativity, and an expression of freedom.

Cameron, Ren and Cahun each navigate trans and queer representation differently, through hypervisibility, ambiguity and disguise. While visibility is a tool of empowerment, it also leaves its subjects open to harm, where opacity as the right to privacy can be a necessary act of resistance against discriminatory violence. These approaches not only reflect the sociopolitical tensions in a historical context, but also inform the ways in which I negotiate representation in my own practice.

Chapter 3 - Negotiating visibility and privacy in personal art practice. An autoethnographic reflection on the impacts of the sociopolitical climate on trans representation.

This chapter serves as a reflection on artistic visibility practices, navigating the tensions between abjection and opacity shaped by personal identity and rising political pressures. In an attempt at self-preservation and resistance, I respond to the growing pressures myself and my community face in everyday life.

Impacts of sociopolitical climates on transgender existence and art.

My lived experience as a transgender man is heavily influenced by the increasingly more popular anti-trans rhetoric, fostering fear and anxiety affecting personal life and artistic practice. Throughout my journey I have avoided discussing and negotiating my visibility as a transmasculine person, opting not for stealth, but for complete avoidance and withdrawal from public discourse for the sake of my own safety.

Current political affairs are moving extremely quickly in disfavour of transgender people - on 16th of April 2025 the UK Supreme Court defined women as “biological women” only, which has a direct impact on the safety of transgender women existing in public, as well as transgender men. Not even an entire month later, in the first week of May 2025, an NC21 amendment to The Data Bill was proposed, which would forcefully revert any formal confirmation of a trans person’s legal change of name or gender marker under the guise of “inaccurate information” (Hansford, 2025). This was an attempt to quietly regress what little rights and protections trans people have in the UK, opening up a new level of legally justified humiliation practices.

While the NC21 was not passed, the fact that it made very little headlines signifies the disproportionate power balance of conservative, gender-radical communities and systems over a trans minority that effectively makes up for approximately 0,5% of population in England and Wales (ONS, 2023). The threat of systemic violence is a profound one, and it pushes transgender people like myself further into disengagement from forms of public and social life. We are not only abjected from society through external means, but also on our own accord, in extreme cases choosing the ultimate solution of suicide (Jackson, 2023). External transphobia affects mental health adversely (Scandurra et.al 2018), producing internalised transphobia. With this in consideration, it is no surprise that under such tensions, pushing many transgender people into depression, art is no longer as much of a priority as survival. This is the precise point of anti-trans rhetoricians, who wish to “mandate [transgender people] out of existence” (Raymond, 1994, p.178).

Modern sociopolitics have an effect on personal safety. Due to the widespread use of the internet and social media, transgender people on social media can not only be more visible than ever, but also more open to harm, as social media platforms such as Meta do little to moderate transphobic violence online (GLAAD, 2024). Trans people who cannot afford the same levels of security and disconnect from public life as their celebrity counterparts - such as ordinary employment versus social media presence as full time employment, public schooling versus private education - are consequently at a higher risk of hostility and discriminatory violence.

The mechanics of privacy in personal artistic practice

In responding to current issues, art can transcend the bounds of aesthetics and become a political tool or critique and resistance (Mantasha and Tulshyan, 2023). I have developed a body of work as a response to the violent abjection that transgender people face as a community, and my personal rejection of erasure.



Fig 7. *Kataphraktos*



Fig 8. *Kataphraktos*

The abject, previously discussed as repulsive, vulgar and macabre, in the context of my practice takes on a liminal meaning. Transgender body, a body shaped by gender-affirming care, is ever-changing, hence disrupting the assumed stability of gender and sex as “given” identities - an unsettling body. In the context of conservative politics, which already assign us as “monsters” (Stryker, 1994), my

practice resists abjection through a complete refusal to assign the abject to my personal qualities. By obscuring my face and body, I choose to represent myself through objects and themes, which can take on any designed meaning, offering the safe space required to produce language which cannot be easily taken out of context. I opt to adapt Glissant's theory of opacity as a safer method of representation, as the fundamental belief behind his theory is the return of power and decision making to the marginalised.

The tactic of face covering in context of conflict and protest is also reflected in other artists' practice, namely Jamima Wyman, who utilises hand-sewn balaclavas in order to advocate for feminist emancipation. Wyman's protest against surveillance sees obscurity "not as theatrics, but in terms of life or death" (Tumbas, 2016). Masking as a form of opacity reflects the resistance against oppression is a helpful tactic of not only self-negotiation of privacy, but also shifting this negotiation outside of the body and onto the viewer. By denying the viewer the right to legible and identifiable characteristic, images prompt the search of meaning - the pressure on the artist to act as a moralist and educator lessens if this responsibility is shared with the viewer, destabilising the value of transparency. Emphasis on the form and materials as representation can be an added method of protection, akin to "armour" (Drmay, 2016). Throughout my practice, I employ handmade forms of face covering chainmail armour to further illustrate the resistance against transparency and opacity's protective qualities.



Fig 9. *Combat Drag*

In my work, I choose to show the eyes as the only obvious trait. This links back to Stryker's views on radical methods of reclamation of the abject Self (1994). In Western culture, aversion of eye contact can be considered as impolite or suspicious (Kathane, 2004), while staring can be seen as aggressive. By averting gaze, I refuse to acknowledge the Other that abjects me, hence lessening the impact of the harm that comes with abjection. I do not conform with the societal pressure which calls on my disappearance, whether from public life or from in front of the camera - my refusal to validate or accept abjection stands firm in line with opacity.

The future of representation

As my practice evolves, I continue to explore what it means to represent without sacrificing privacy, to create socially conscious art which rejects overexplanation and transparency. Having explored Kristeva's abject theory, I seek the spaces where language and identity break down, and find room for creativity and resistance not to conform to societal marginalisation, but to oppose it. Moving forward, I am interested in experimenting with techniques that disrupt societal norms of representation by covering identity markers to resist surveillance - looking at "gender camouflage" of Claude Cahun's self-portraiture and their techniques of borrowing and blending femininity and masculinity to create "masks" as political gestures, abolishing the restrictive gender stereotypes. While my work continues to be informed by Loren Cameron, Ren Hang and Claude Cahun, I recognise the vast spectrum of representation which diverges from methods utilised by these artists, and the importance of continued research and experimentation.

I want to remain sensitive to the context of my methods, and recognise when opacity is necessary for safety, or when visibility might be useful as a tool for political assertion in light of the systemic erasure of trans identities. The choice of visibility is personal and affects individuals differently based on circumstances, which may evolve with time. By fostering political awareness, I continue to inform my artistic decisions and direction which I take to remain flexible without sacrificing personal beliefs, which are the very motivation for this practice.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored how trans representation in photography is shaped by the tension between visibility and opacity. Drawing on Kristeva's concept of the abject and Glissant's theory of opacity, I argued that full legibility can place trans bodies at risk politically, socially, and personally - and that opacity offers a necessary and ethical mode of resistance.

Through case studies of artists working under different sociopolitical conditions, I examined how visibility has been both claimed and refused, with strategies ranging from direct representation to ambiguity and abstraction. These approaches complicate the idea that being seen is always empowering.

In reflecting on my own practice, I considered how photographic choices - what to show, obscure, or withhold - are shaped by identity and context. Rather than striving for clarity, I embrace complexity, fragmentation, and refusal as vital strategies.

Ultimately, I argue for a rethinking of visibility as a political goal. Opacity is not a retreat from representation but a way to reclaim autonomy in how trans lives are seen, or not seen, on our own terms.

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