

# As in trans art

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**Abstract:** This article engages with trans artistic practices: both trans *in* art as well as trans *as* art. It takes as its point of departure the artistic work of Ro Robertson, Tama Sharman, and Erica Rutherford, each of whom works with trans in different ways. In our analysis, we take a cue from Rosemarie Buikema's attunement to the materiality and medium specificity of artworks, and we discuss how these elements offer new entry points into a consideration of transness.

**Keywords:** trans, art, gender

Our contribution to this volume emerges through our shared interest in trans artistic practices: both trans *in* art as well as trans *as* art. 'As in trans art' is intentionally propositional, not aiming for a categorical delineation of what 'trans art' is, but rather, suggestive of its motions and instantiations. As in, we use trans in this essay as an optic, as a mode of viewing, analysing, and representing.

Writing from our position as colleagues of Rosemarie Buikema, our arguments are informed by her attention to art's capacity to challenge preconceived notions of immutable truths. Buikema's scholarship on the role of art in issues pertaining to justice underscores the potential of the formal qualities of the artwork to disrupt chains of signification, and thereby, disrupt the normative visual logics of oppression, identification, and subjectivity. As she writes: "[I]t is precisely art's dialogicity, materiality and medium specificity that enables artefacts to tentatively perform contested truths and contain intricate complexities, thus functioning as possible constitutors of new and multilayered communities" (Buikema, 2012, 290). We take a cue from Buikema's attunement to the materiality and medium specificity of artworks, and we discuss how these elements offer new entry points into a consideration of transness.

Turning to the aesthetic practices of Ro Robertson, Tama Sharman, and Erica Rutherford, each of which takes up trans in different ways, we offer textured readings of artworks to explore how their visual grammar can open up complexities

pertaining to gender, sexuality, indigeneity, and postcoloniality. Entering the negative space around Robertson's sculpture (2021), we find a terrain for considering trans masculinities. Meanwhile, Sharman's multimedia works (2017; 2020) negotiate trans as a method to think through not only gender but also materiality and memory. Finally, through Rutherford's (1996) oil paintings we might understand how gender is a message, 'an assignment', that unconscious sexuality compromises.

### Sensing stone-ness

[A]rt exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. (Shklovsky, 1965, 26)

Basking in the sun, the sculpture's shape is bodily, almost fleshy, but does not exactly mimic a body. Lines meander across the plaster in a wavy pattern, creating an impression of movement that is offset by the static and immobile presence of the sculpture. The plaster material is not stone, but stoney, attuning us to a sensation of stone rather than the thing-ness of stone.

*Stone (Butch)* (2021) is a sculpture made by Ro Roberston, consisting of a large shape moulded out of plaster, resting on a structure of semi-oval steel plates. Robertson is a contemporary artist based on the edge of the United Kingdom, where the water of the Atlantic meets the rugged coastline of West Cornwall. *Stone (Butch)* currently inhabits the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, but was made on the coast, where Roberston applied plaster to the surface of the rocks that make the coastline. The plaster materializes the negative space of the coast, and the rocks, with their protrusions and cracks, leave their impression on the plaster. The textured imprint captures a piece of the coast that is imperceptibly changing over time, exposed to the continuous force of the sea. Rugged, but also vulnerable.

Stones: solid, immobile, hard brute matter that requires outside forces to mould it and make it move through the world. These qualities make stones readily available for traversing into metaphors and idioms: for someone 'to turn into stone', for things 'to be set in stone'. Despite, or perhaps precisely through, these associations, stones have been a fertile ground for articulations of 'not-male' masculinities. The heavy material, presumably devoid of feeling and sensation functions as an animating force for queer attractions and attachments. Mel Chen (2012) notes how stones occupy an interesting position within animacy hierarchies, presumably at the bottom tier



*Stone (Butch)* by Ro Robertson (2021). Plaster 220 x 130 x 156. © Arlo Lawton.

and at the opposite end of the human, the pinnacle of agency and liveliness. Yet, stones move and disrupt. As Chen writes:

Within butch or femme lesbian culture, being ‘stone’ or ‘stone butch’ is a particular erotic and sexual formation. It does not suggest an outright lack of agency or power – as an animate hierarchy might predict – but a particular sexual economy of affect in which the butch’s sexual pleasure can emerge from the touch instigated by her, whereas she prefers not to be touched by her lover. The stoneness of butch can also refer to the masculinities of expressive life for butches: feelings held in, the appearance of unfeeling (2012, 216).

Chen’s description of the stoneness of butch masculinity within queer economies of desire rearticulates the qualities that appear as ‘lacking’ as being in fact particular stylizations of embodiment and desire.

However, the queer economy of desire revolving around butch-femme dynamics is arguably waning in contemporary Western sexual cultures, and one can wonder what changes happen to formations of masculinity and femininity alongside this shift. There is often an expressed concern articulated in the question, “Are butches disappearing?” – a question which lacks its counterpart, further entrenching a lack of space for femme and femininity as queer positions. Masculinity, in the

meantime, has found its predominant expressions in non-binary white ‘androgyny’, a terrain we have yet to fully explore in terms of its implicit consolidation of racial and gendered norms despite its attempt at subverting them.

How does *Stone (Butch)* enable us to approach the messiness of queer and/or trans masculinities today? The and/or here is intentional: our aim is not to conflate queerness and transness, but rather to think of the multiple entry points into masculinities, as a plurality rather than identity. It might be helpful here to take cue from the title of the sculpture, which explicitly references Leslie Feinberg’s semi-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), in which the main character, Jess Goldberg, simultaneously develops a working-class as well as a butch and trans consciousness. The novel resonates with Robertson’s interest in turning to landscape as a modality of gender and sexual transformations: “Nature held me close and seemed to find no fault with me” (Feinberg, 1993, 18). And while we are generally wary of the demand for self-representation in coherent categories of identity, one of the things we continue to appreciate about Leslie Feinberg’s legacy is the elaborate way zie described hirself. As any work referencing Feinberg will repeat, zie identified as many things: an anti-racist white, working-class, secular Jewish, transgender, butch lesbian, female, revolutionary communist. In particular, the sequence of ‘transgender, butch lesbian, female’ might seem inconsistent in contemporary lexicons of identity, where an intelligible claim of ‘transgender’ almost necessitates a disavowal of gendered and sexual positions one supposedly ‘moves away’ from.

To return to the medium-specific qualities of the sculpture and how they offer a meditation on masculinity, we are particularly struck by the use of abstraction and negative space as an artistic strategy. As critics have pointed out, abstract forms are a rich site for challenging a representational economy in which the body carries the burden of signifying gendered, sexual, or racial difference (Getsy and Simmons, 2015; Amin et al., 2017; Lancaster, 2022). But the abstract form presented to us in *Stone (Butch)* brings forth not just its own bodily shape, but perhaps more importantly, the friction between surface and space. Robertson’s creative use of negative space multiplies the forms at work in the piece: triangulating between the coastal rock, its impression in the plaster sculpture, and the negative space the plaster materialized but also reiterates for the current viewer put into relation to the work. This chain of transformations and reversals of the rocky coastal surface and the negative space around it put pressure on clear-cut binaries of interior and exterior, outside and inside. While dominant models of transgender subjectivity are imagined as the contrast of incongruence between an inner truth and an outside world that misrecognises the true subject, this rearticulation of masculinity through abstraction and negative space creates an opening: preferring a sensation of masculinity rather than the thing-ness of masculinity.

## Found objects

Tama Sharman (1975) is an award-winning artist, filmmaker, and printmaker born in Otepoti/Dunedin, Aotearoa/New Zealand and living in Naarm/Melbourne, Australia. Much of Sharman's work beautifully depicts 'trans' in all its forms: transgender, transculturation, transnational, translation. As Clark describes, "To speak to trans is always to perform a translation, to take part in a field of cross-cultural contact" (Clark, 2017, 77). Instantiating the relationality of 'trans-', which as Stryker, Currah and Moore (2008) remind us "remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix" (11), Sharman's work is shaped by a trans and queer lens and mode of perception that is interested in interlinkages between gender, indigeneity, oral culture, ecology, curation, creation, masculinity, and hybridity. Often autobiographical in his explorations of transness and queerness in a First Nations and Pacific context, Sharman's body of work enacts negotiations in living between cultural identities and between genders.

While Buikema focuses on the South African context in her body of work, there are some interesting overlaps with Sharman, particularly in their respective emphasis on the capacity for storytelling to offer other pasts, presents, and futures in the wake of settler colonialism and state violence. Their respective work also poses similar questions: what is the role of storytelling in art and cultural production? How does settler colonialism impact aesthetic practices? How does art give us a new mode for understanding the devastating impacts of settler colonialism while simultaneously creating new futures? How might artistic practices offer new languages for the unsaid? To uncover some of these connections, we want to turn to two works/exhibitions by Sharman, one of which deals explicitly with trans identity and embodiment while the other offers imagination as a survival strategy in a (post)colonial context.

Sharman's recent multimedia work *Oh my how things change rua / ll - (phalloplasty for poor c#\*ts)* (2017) puts trans embodiment centre stage in an exploration of gender-affirmation surgery. Alongside a collection of photos and prints on paper depicting abstract images and drawings, Sharman includes his experiments with phalloplasty techniques for constructing a penis using a flap of skin, in this case, the skin of tattooed oranges. The playful tone is also clear in the artist statement accompanying the work: "During this practice he has also explored, observed and exploited the orange through photography, printmaking and micro-surgery, finding parallels, despair and euphoria. The artist would like to retrain as a urologist and reconstructive surgeon to become proficient enough to perform the surgical procedure on himself. Plan b is the wishing well".

Behind Sharman's humorous take on the materiality of the exhibition is a quite profound engagement with the ways that sex and gender are made and remade in curious ways as well as how the non-human can become a vehicle for trans people

to access gender affirmation (see also Hayward, 2011). The use of the orange skin also creates a curious kinship between the human and the non-human, reminding us of the proximity between plant and animal and “what ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ might look like apart from the anthropocentric forms with which we have become perhaps too familiar” (Luciano and Chen, 2015, 189). It also effectively illustrates Luciano and Chen’s point about “an increasing tendency to question our automatic recourse to the human as both the center of our analysis and the ground of any epistemology” (ibid.).

Sharman’s more recent exhibition *Dark Sepia* (2020) explores the new worlds created by working with recycled and found materials. First presented at Midsumma, a three-week-long queer arts festival in Melbourne, *Dark Sepia* is comprised of pencil drawings, sculptures, papier-mâché, puppets, printmaking, projection, and animation, much of which is created out of found objects. Reminiscent of what Buikema (2012) refers to as “the poetics of scrap”, the experimental exhibition references the “aesthetic and political power” of reuse and recycling: making art with old and recycled objects “creat[es] the new by means of rebending the old” (288). Sharman elaborates: “My material inspiration comes from walking around and observing waste on the street such as rubbish, and recycling them into art objects. I see art and creation in that. I’m lucky because some of these materials are spirits to me” (cited in Sigglekow, 2020, n.p.).

This approach is informed by deep listening, remembering, and self-reflection (Morgan, 2020). Inspired by traditional Māori puppetry called *karetao*, Sharman refers to his contemporary take on traditional forms of storytelling as a way of making things into his own. These generative tensions between tradition and modernity also “communicate difficult, complex narratives”, even as they open up new modes of communication (cited in Morgan, 2020). Referring to one of the primary shadow puppets that he works with in the exhibition, Sharman articulates: “I think that [shadow puppet] Ariki in the future will be a way to bring to light the less communicated stories” (ibid.). Sharman’s constant play with light and shadow throughout the exhibition instantiates Buikema’s (2016) point that “shadows serve as the preserved traces of the erasure” (267). Indeed, Sharman’s body of work creatively and experimentally exemplifies this complex relationship to erasure and to remembering/forgetting in postcolonial and settler colonial contexts.

## She Want

What is offered in the *Infant Offering* is a naïve pastel landscape in the darkening of day to night – a binary light. The land flat with muddled brushstrokes. Crescent moon sickles as it falls from the sky. Queer characters populate the foreground. Queer, because, not exactly human nor animal. Ungainly. Admixtures. In the middle, a pale scrotal-faced figure is naked. Its flaccid penis is both central and



*The Infant Offering* by Erica Rutherford (1996). 56" x 60" oil on canvas. © Firehouse Studios (Estate of Erica Rutherford).

inconsequential. It offers up an already offering infant. The infant's hands are outstretched in a strangely phylogenetic gesture of offering-to-be-offered to a bird-like figure. An angel? Thanatos or the Greek goddess Eris? Roosted on a boulder, another pale bird-headed figure is naked, its breasts bared and its genitals a mauve groove. From the head down, the anatomical difference between these pink-white figures is superficial. Is this a comedy of errors? A gathering of queers? Or, how it reads to me, just a dull, if peculiar, white family merrily offering up their child? Offered to the masked, clothed, and tooled characters – assignments of a social world, a symbolic order – that frame the scene. The offering is witnessed by birds and dogs – both wild and domestic natures. They are complicit, if not exactly participants. A leafless tree on the right side of the painting. Is it dead or hibernating? A family tree? But there on the horizon, a twilight figure, lavenderd by the failing light, protests. Hailing from the edge of the elements: land and sky. What does this marked and unmarked figure – the color of those genitals – *want*?

In her autobiography *Nine Lives* (1993), Erica Rutherford talks about her broken relationships, artistic anguishes, and constant worries about money. Everything is a struggle. Marked by her own racial anxiety, she describes her efforts to support justice movements in South Africa, and her role as the producer of that country's first all-black cast film *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* (1949). Amidst the turmoil, she chronicles the excruciating demand that is gender for transsexuals. Unlike most autobiographies of this kind, transsexuality offers Rutherford no happy ending. She writes, "I cannot say that 'now I know who I am – now the way is clear' (...) I have arrived at it [life] from tortured doubts and regard the results as imperfect sketches" (xi). Transsexuality is de-idealized; it offers no solution and remains an imperfect state. She concludes her autobiography with, "It [transsexuality] is so drastic and devastating that I could not recommend it" (225). And yet, why does she *want* what is so difficult?

In shallow deposits of oil on canvas, *Infant Offering* (Rutherford, 1996) creates a geometric scene – scales and volumes arranged with child-like attention to perspective and compositional dynamics. And yet, something urgent follows the brushwork, something poignant in the relationships of this gathering. A cartoon of a white family offering up a child to social assignment – to gender, to industry, to institutions – but from the visual perspective of that child. Assignment, here, is not just an order such as 'assigned male at birth'. It is to be assigned work (*home-work*) that requires doing. The psychoanalytic theorist Jean Laplanche (2007) outlines assignment as: firstly, an assignment from the other (such as the caregiver, but including the family unit); secondly, the assignment is not solely determinative of a signifier. It is, instead, "a complex set of acts that extends into the meaningful languages and behaviors of the environment" (213); and lastly, it is an ongoing assignment in a prescriptive form. In summary, gender is an enigmatic assignment from the other(s) (not simply an assignment for the self – not autopoiesis; and not assigned by a singular Other) to be done.

And what the naked figures represent is that the assignment of gender by an adult demands an answer from the child in the form of sex, of anatomical difference. Gender precedes sex. But – and this we might interpret in the empurpled figure at the edge of the horizon – this assignment, *home-work* to be done, is compromised by, what Laplanche (2007) calls, parental 'noise'. The infant awakens sexuality in the adult, infantile sexuality. In so doing, the adult's unconscious sexuality penetrates the work of caretaking and assigning with enigmatic messages that the infant is incapable of understanding. These messages are sensory in character – residues – with no content or meaning. These residues are the rudimentary form of the unconscious for the developing child and works as an internal entity that the ego (with its gender assignment, its *home-work*) will try to translate. Gender assignment with its (later) anatomical answer, then, is never without the presence of sexuality.

If gender is an egoic assignment, conscious *home-work* given to the infant, *but compromised by communication of unconscious adult sexuality*, then might gender



trouble, confusion, transition be an effect of this residue? Asked differently, is transsexuality an answer to infantile sexuality provoked in the adult by the child? The hailing of a twilight figure at the edge of a world? Which is to say by way of questioning, the transsexual is not autonomous; transsexuality is not self-affirming. If so – and this pushes Laplanche's (2007) ideas further than he intended – might there also be something of infantile sexuality awakened in transition? What if conflict and difficulty, even pain, the kind Rutherford (1996) writes about, is the presence of sexuality *within* gender (but not *as* gender)? Not to be confused with desiring conflict or pain, but the pain of staying with desire. That Rutherford wants to be a woman – a gender position that she describes as “devasting and drastic” (225) – is less about her offering herself to gender (none of us have a choice) than about her remaining *susceptible* to sexuality. Not a desire she can achieve – that she *is* a woman has very little to do with her desire – but a straying toward the extreme that is sexuality. We mean this in two ways: (1) that she wants gender reveals the structure of want (susceptibility) within assignments; (2) her want reactivates (in her and others) the residue of unconsciousness sexuality that infantile gender assignments always carry.

## Conclusion

Taken together, the aesthetic practices of Robertson, Sharman, and Rutherford offer encounters whose dialogic abundance exceeds clean containment in a category of ‘trans art’. Rather, these works enable paths of inquiry that demonstrate how trans emerges as a complex desire shaping and/or shaped by masculinity, settler colonialism, and sexuality. Robertson's plaster imprint of the slowly transforming Cornwall coast invites us to inhabit the negative space *around* masculinity, creating a sensation of trans that holds off its ontological capture. Sharman's peeling orange skins create a non-human translation of gender affirmation into new bodily forms. And Rutherford's painting draws us into the social scene of gender assignment where the work of gender evokes the presence of sexuality. Trans in art and trans as art, these works leave us with the difficult wanting that is gender.

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