Discuss and Analyse the Ways in Which the Body Has Functioned as a Site of Queer Activism

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Abstract: This essay will critically discuss and analyse how the body functions in queer activism and how artists express their understanding and remodelling of bodies in queer through specific works of art. This essay has revisited some of the work of these three artists through the theories of queer theorists such as Judith Butler. By analyzing the works of artists, We can better demonstrate the interdisciplinary cooperation between theory and art.

1. Introduction

Judith Halberstam points out that the Queer Era may have emerged as a high-profile issue in the gay and lesbian community at the end of the twentieth century, when the AIDS epidemic was widespread.[1]It was at this time that many activists began to use the term 'queer' to integrate people of all gender identities and sexualities. Queer not only means that people are beginning to recognise that there are many ways and patterns among gay men and lesbians, but also that it includes people whose sexual orientation has previously been uninvolved and undefined by the heterosexual/homosexual binary, including bisexuals, sexual deviants, transvestites, transsexuals, and interracial couples, as well as the sexuality of disabled people and abusers/abused people. It emphasises the erotic flow, the gender shuttle and the strange shape of sexual orientation that challenges mainstream gender consciousness and social norms.

Queer theory came into being in the 1990s and inherited the radical political attitude of feminist research and homosexual studies. There are two people who have had a great influence on queer theory: Michel Foucault and Judith Butler. In The History of Sexuality, Foucault discusses the relationship between the body and authority from a sexual and gender perspective, advocating people embrace the 'body pleasure' paradigm, and abandon the 'sex-desire' paradigm.[2] Foucault claimed that people should move away from the sex-desire paradigm and embrace the body pleasure paradigm, because sex-desire is the deployment of sexuality created by authority to discipline the public.[3] Butler inherited Foucault's attention to the body in Gender Trouble and Bodies That Matter, using the body as a foothold to deconstruct sex and gender discourse. Butler took Foucault as a starting point and raised the theory of gender performativity, which is an important part of her queer theory. Through this theory, she revealed the culturally constructed nature of gender, liberating it from naturalised representations and offering the possibility of seeking to subvert and displace naturalised notions of gender that support male hegemony. These theories have laid a solid foundation for in-depth discussion of queer theory and the meaning of the body.

2. The Role of the Body in Queer Cosmism

This essay will focus on the role of the body in queer activism. Under the theoretical perspective of post-structuralism, queer theory deconstructs the concepts of physiological sex, social gender, sexuality and related discourse, and liberates the body and establishes a new gender politics.[4] The body serves as a vehicle for gender discussions. In artistic practice, artists are continuing to explore the concept of queer by showing the body and nudity, sexual hints, sexual organs, transgender bodies, blurring the boundaries of body gender, and directly expressing sexually related desires in different ways, raising the visibility of the queer community.

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Butler claims that:The regulatory norms of 'sex' work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative. ln this sense, what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect.[5]

Butler connects sex with power; that is why queer is inherently radical. Queer causes trouble because it impacts the binary framework of hegemonic thinking and challenges the logical cornerstone of hegemonic norms. Because this hegemonic oppression persists, queer inevitably becomes radical because of its rebellious element. This kind of resistance is manifested through different forms, and in contemporary art, it is concentrated in the display and remodelling of the body.

The next analysis will be of Pierre Molinier's, Del LaGrace Volcano's, and Zanele Muholi's works of art. They take the body as the theme of their work, thus presenting the social regulation of the concept of gender, the complexity and mutability of gender, the body image of transgender people, and the sex and desire of homosexuality in the development of queer activism.

Pierre Molinier's photographs capture an image that is confusing, even bordering on the pornographic. In one photograph, he is wearing black stockings and high heels, posed on a chair in a seductively feminine manner often seen in advertisements, and his lips are extremely dark. The photograph is in black and white, which further emphasises the visual impact of the naked white skin. Garter belts, high heels and corsets are common themes in Molinier's work, and through these photographs Molinier presents an image: a transvestite.

Fig.1 , Pierre Molinier, Self Portrait, 1970.

Molinier's fetishism is evident in these photographs, and he subscribes to the fetishistic function of photography, which is to allow people to construct an ideal image of themselves and to be satisfied by it.[6] We can see that the elements of black silk stockings, high heels and corsets recur in the photographs. The heels and soles of the shoes, as well as the interior of the shoes, can be interpreted as surrogates for the vagina.[7] Wayne Baurwaldt mentioned that these objects became necessary for his staged transformation into an androgynous hermaphrodite, adding precision to the future idealised image of an intersex person.[7] When viewing these photographs, we can feel a two-way gaze. Molinier constructs a fantasy of the self as other, and the transformation of the body is his coordinate axis.

In her article 'Thinking Sex', Gayle Rubin lists a series of sex hierarchies, the most 'bad' of which is the sex phase-so-called sexual perversions-including deviations from the normal sexual phases such as transvestism, fetishism, sadism, etc.[8] According to Foucault's 'body pleasure' paradigm, these deviant sexualities should all find their meaning of existence in bodily pleasure independent of regulatory power. In addition, the most queer physical acts and costumes also find theoretical support in Foucault's 'body pleasure' paradigm. The queers who love camp and costume are uninhibited in their display of unpredictable bodies, flaunting not sexuality or gender, but the

ungendered, sometimes male, sometimes female body and its subversive power, which cannot be defined by the discourse of gender and sexuality.

Transvestism is a realistic representation of Foucault's 'body pleasure' paradigm, but Butler argues that it 'reveals both a sense of frustration and a sense of rebellion'.[9] On the other hand, many cross-dressing behaviours are capable of resetting the meaning of gender norms in different contexts.[10] According to Butler, gender identity is formed by the repetitive construction of a series of typified behaviours, a 'discourse performed under the combined oppression of social constraints and taboos'.[11] Already at this point, she has linked gender identity to the physical posture and appearance of the human body through action theory, stating that 'the body can only be understood through a gendered representation'.[12] In reality, the body can only acquire gender through a series of actions that are constantly renewed, changed and transformed over time.

Foucault's celebration of body pleasure is actually a celebration of act/performance, which, like the pleasure that overflows the body, transcends identity by virtue of its fluidity. Queer theory, under the influence of Foucault's 'body pleasure' paradigm, uses the body as a fulcrum and thus completes the deconstruction of identity politics.

Therefore, the fluid body presented by the artist disintegrates ideological and interpretive norms. The meaning produced by the viewer with the body as a vehicle transcends discourse, which is both a key mechanism for the shift towards performance and the core demand of queer theory, and can therefore be seen as a common denominator and basis for collaboration between the two. The body of the spectator moves between self and role, between male and female. The viewer in the position of 'witness' and 'normative' produces bodily sensations and meanings that cannot be put into words, and the self is transformed accordingly. The viewer crosses the thresholds of photograph and role, life and art, body and mind, male and female-this is the transformative power of the artwork's combination of the body and queer theory.

If Molinier is about fetishism and gender fluidity through transvestitism, Del LaGrace Volcano is about supporting and facilitating the transformative reinvention of bodies, identities and politics through the representation of transgender and intersex bodies. Dominic Johnson argues that this practice of documenting transgender bodies in 'transition' fills a gap in art history that some transgender people have been neglected in, and implies a critique of art history and the way it reads visual cultural artefacts.[13]

Having identified as female at birth, Volcano grew up exploring his identity, as evidenced by the name changes. From Dabbie to Della; from Della to Del; from Wood to Grace, to LaGrace to Volcano, matching and emphasising the changes in the artist's body, reflecting multiple and fluid identities.[14] In his work Teddy Boy, he showed us the body of a boy who has just started taking medication. David Schneider is kneeling on the right side of the frame, his body divided by belts, his nipples exposed and his large, beautiful eyes looking directly at the viewer. His hands are gripping the whip and the patterned cloth behind him is printed with stars, a smiling sun and a sleeping moon. Three stuffed animals can be seen on the left-a lion, a rabbit and a teddy bear-and the belt has a round buckle at his hip, suggesting a provocative absence. He does not look different from other men, and like other men, his masculinity is real. Yet, at the same time, it pulls back the rug of 'manly' authenticity, toppling the precarious edifice of masculinity.[15]

Fig.2 , Del Lagrace Volcano, Teddy Boy, 1998, Berlin.

With David's body, Volcano presents a questioning of an immanent gender ethos. Butler suggests that, as a survival strategy within a system of coercion, gender is a performance with obvious punitive consequences.[16] Because 'actions and gestures, as well as the desire to express and perform time, created the illusion of an intrinsic, co-ordinated social gender kernel ... in order to manage sexuality within a heteronormative, reproduction-centred framework of coercion'.[17] Clearly, gender is not a biologically prescribed natural good, but an imitation without an 'original', and therefore, 'homosexuality is not a copy of heterosexuality versus the real, but a copy of homosexuality'.[18] In this way, the body is transformed into a flexible, fluid field. The anatomical rigidities of gender, gender identity and gender performance cease to exist and are transformed into different dimensions, styles or gestures in the course of theatrical interpretation. Volcano's work directly shows the transgender body and the photographs are full of subversive metaphors for gender temperament, dismantling and displacing heterosexual hegemony. It is a recognition of the queerness or becoming-queer of the body, and is not only about the innumerable micro-sexualities that exist in every human body, but also about the 'becoming other' in the real world. It shows that all bodies can perform in their own way, which frees up the body as it becomes a central site of contestation for power and discourse. The initiative, the resistance to power, starts with the body and creates a more active and richer 'body art'. More importantly, it shows the diversity of what it means to be a body.

The photographs of South African photographer and visual activist Zanele Muholi present a new dimension to the role of the body in queer activism. Her work not only includes issues of gender and sexual orientation, but also sensitive political and controversial elements. Her photographs of black queer, bisexual and transgender people involve questioning colonial, heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies. For these people, being photographed is in itself an act of political repair.[19] Andrew van der Vlies claims that Muholi's work, in particular, reflects thinking about the body politic and the biopolitics of blackness, and that she raises important questions about the politics of visibility and gaze.[20]

The photograph Aftermath presents a sentimental close-up of the body, a black and white image of a woman's lower body, thighs and knees. The trademark 'Jockey' is evident on the panties, an American brand that may signify the wearer's place in commercial culture and is also reminiscent of the Jockey Club, whose members are notorious for their sexual preference for women of the lower classes. The logo may also symbolise lesbianism.[21] The scars visible on the middle thighs are symbolic of the sexual violence suffered by lesbians and, indeed, of the fact that the subject was a victim of sexual assault. Muholi's photography visually shows this area of the body and at the same time fills it with metaphors. Natasha Bissonauth comments that Muholi is not simply asking the audience to acknowledge the horrific atrocities that have been committed against her, but also to have an empathetic experience that will put the viewer at the centre of the story, bringing the survivor and the aftermath of the attack into a common scene.[22]

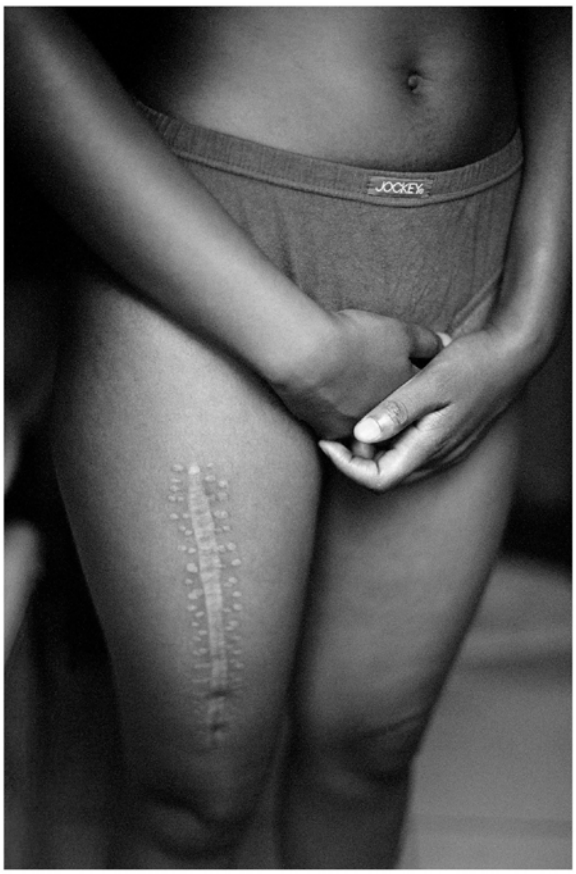

Fig.3 Zanele Muholi, Aftermath, 2004, Courtesy of the Artist and Stevenson, Cape Town/Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson, New York

Zanele Muholi's visual activism through body photography aims to make the black queer community-a doubly neglected group of people-more visible. Violence occurs when certain lives are denied. This is not physical, nakedly visible violence, but 'normative violence', which Butler also calls the violence of derealisation.[23] This form of normative violence emerges when a person is perceived as a human being and generally operates in two forms: one at the level of discourse,[24] and the other through erasure. The 'erasure' is a covert method which produces a field that is neither thought about nor named, so oppression develops.

Butler suggests that 'normative violence' manifests itself in normative definitions of who is culturally visible and who is invisible. She had already begun to think about this in Gender Trouble, and states that the effort to integrate the culture of the 'other' into the logocentric economy of a global community as an introduction to its diversity is an act of despotism. It risks repeating the self-inflating behaviour of the central logic of the economy, colonising differences that could otherwise be used to question the very notion of uniformity under the sign of the same.[25] In Bodies That Matter, she criticises the phenomenon of 'social death' and moves towards what she calls ‘the politics of human life’. It is a political necessity to rethink the possibility of a society in which those expelled by the violence of regulation can be brought back to life. The recognition of life allows the survival of non-normatively violent bodies. For those who are sexually external to the marital bond and the related kinship, the reorganisation of non-violent gender norms is the freeing of social and cultural acceptance.[26] The question of the subversion of gender norms should be understood as how to maximise the possibility of a worthwhile life and how to minimise social or cultural death. Butler pushes her thinking about gender into a broader reflection on 'normative violence', touching on its role in the framework of race and ethics.

Rethinking possibilities leads Butler to apply the forces of normative violence that she has uncovered in gender to the analysis of other issues, finding that thinking about gender and homosexuality is not enough and moving on to think about the 'human dimension'. She began to consider the meaning of people, the meaning of life and why life is so miserable.[27] It is worth noting that Butler's thinking on femininity is not confined to gender issues alone, and that such an approach to her theory would blind us to the influence of ethical, racial and racial factors in gender issues. She states that 'The normative force of “rejection” is not confined to gender alone', but also relates to 'all types of beings who are not regarded as ‘alive’, and that 'materiality was not considered important for the body'.[28] In her reflections on normative violence, Butler touches on the question of recognition. How should those lives expelled by normative violence be recognised in order to avoid the death of social and cultural meanings?

By photographing black LGBTQ people, her artistic practice aims to explicitly establish and maintain the visibility of black queer and transgender people.[29] The photographs are asking their viewers to see them, and the very act of seeing the photographs being taken is a movement in the direction of political recovery.[29] The body is the most visible site of expression.

3. Conclusion

Pierre Molinier's cross-dressing of his own body reveals the fluidity of physical gender and bold sexual innuendos that blur the boundaries of gender and fetishistic desires. By photographing transgender bodies, Del LaGrace Volcano shows the ambiguity of gender transition, leading people to rethink bodily diversity and dismantling binary gender politics in rearranged scenarios. Zanele Muholi focuses on the doubly neglected black queers and uses the photographing of their bodies to evoke their social and cultural visibility.

From an analysis of the work of these three artists, we can see that the body is an important vehicle for the work of queer activism. The essence of queer theory is to expose the mechanisms by which discourse regulates the body and to explore the potential of the body to break out of discursive norms. The body's perspective can contribute to the visualist presentation of queer theory and to the interdisciplinary collaboration of queer: theory and art.

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