

**From:**

RENATE LORENZ

**Queer Art**

**A Freak Theory**

March 2012, 180 p., 19,80 €, ISBN 978-3-8376-1685-9

A queer theory of visual art – based on extensive readings of art works *Queer Art* traces the question of how strategies of denormalization initiated by visual arts can be continued through writing. In the book's three chapters art theoretical debates are combined with queer theory, post-colonial theory, and (dis-)ability studies, proposing the three terms *radical drag*, *transtemporal drag*, and *abstract drag*.

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## Preface

This book is based in many aspects on two collaborative practices: a conference and my artistic work with Pauline Boudry.

In the summer of 2009, as a project of the Collaborative Research Group SFB Kulturen des Performatives (Freie Universität Berlin) I organized the conference Freaky-Queer Art Conference at Berlin's Ballhaus Naunynstrasse. The conference was aimed at opening up a space to collectively develop and work on queer-theoretical perspectives on contemporary art practice. It was not only the objects at the conference (the artistic works) as well as the methods for analyzing them that were meant to be experimental. We also attempted to generate different and innovative formats in which to approach these works. The lecture hall was thus at the same time a meeting point: the place for meals and drinks as well as an exhibition. The four artistic works shown – by Nao Bustamante, Ines Doujak, Latifa Echakhch, and Rashawn Griffin – in turn became the objects of the lectures in this very space. And the invited guests, art and queer theorists Catherine Lord, Elisabeth Lebovici, Kobena Mercer, and Robert McRuer, each dealt with two of these works. A workshop with input from other artists and art theorists extended these readings. On two evenings, Karin Michalski curated a film program with guests (Werner Hirsch, Zoe Leonard, and Line Skywalker Karlström) that provided further perspectives and additional artistic material for discussion ([www.freak-theory.de](http://www.freak-theory.de)).

Both the conference and the workshop tied in with the observation that images are increasingly appearing in the field of queer art that undermine the established categories of racialized or gender categories, or that show no bodies at all. In order to get closer to this art practice, the adjective “freaky,” and a possibly artificial figure of the “freak,” were brought into discussion. The idea was that such a figure could be in the position to represent a wide variety of difference without producing a category or identity – without defining a norm from which it deviates. It could be incompatible with social and economic demands. It could produce an event – freaking – and furthermore have capabilities that appear peculiar and that do not always contain recognition, but which nonetheless are ascribed with a certain value and that pay off in the end. It would be non-normal, “freaky,” and at the same time would point to the history of constraints, violence, and self-assertion that is already tied to the historical freak shows.

This discussion about the figure of the freak inspired the methodological reflections for this book. In place of possibly personifying the “freak,” which always runs the risk of excluding or devaluing, the question came to the fore of what a “freak theory of contemporary art” might look like. Indeed, a “freaky” theory does not stand outside social power relations. It produces inventions and images that offer alternatives to social power relations that are more than and different from a critique or subversion of social norms. Instead of further working out the term “freak” in relation to social and fictional bodies, I use the term “drag” to designate various artistic practices of embodiment that additionally make it possible to draw relations to the history of queer subculture.

First and foremost, I would like to thank all of those who actively participated in the Freaky conference, especially my colleagues Volker Woltersdorff, Jule Jakob Hesseler, and Paula Alamillo; the speakers; Antke Engel for moderating; the participating artists and filmmakers; Karin Michalski for the collaborative work in the film program and for organizing the film evenings; as well as the participants at the conference and the workshop who contributed greatly in their spirited discussions to honing my initial reflections.

Since 2007, I have been working with Pauline Boudry producing film installations. Our collective research, collective discussions, events, and text production, but also the film installations themselves are the starting point of the reflections published here on a queer analysis of contemporary art. We also view the production of the films themselves, including the many aspects that result from working on the material and with the performers and the camerawoman, as a form of producing knowledge that intervenes in and pushes forward the formation of theory, academic, and cultural knowledge, and hopefully also social relations. For this reason, in the book as well, I work explicitly with three of these collective productions: *N.O. Body* (2008), *Salomania* (2009), and *Contagious!* (2010) ([www.boudry-lorenz.de](http://www.boudry-lorenz.de)).

I would especially like to thank Antke Engel for her support and for discussing every part of this book, as well as Daniel Hendrickson for his great work on the translation and Jess Dorrance for checking and refining the text.

A number of colleagues and friends were very helpful too over the course of the book: Zoe Leonard and Ulrike Müller who presented and discussed their reflections and their own artistic works on the figure of the “freak” at a joint event at the Swiss Institute in New York, as well as Sharon Hayes who with Pauline Boudry took up the topic of “tempo-

ral drag” at the New York New Museum. And finally, Henrik Olesen, who proposed and presented extensively for me the first version of the work *Some Faggy Gestures* (analyzed in chapter 2 of this book) for my exhibition *Normal Love* (2007, Künstlerhaus Bethanien Berlin) ([www.normallove.de](http://www.normallove.de)).

I am also very grateful to Jack Smith as a “friend from the past” who might or might not be happy with the friendship, but whose work, which I discuss in chapters 1 and 2, contributed greatly to the reflections in this book. Furthermore, I draw inspiration for the title, *Queer Art*, from the title of Stefan Brecht’s book *Queer Theatre* (published in 1978), which does not, for instance, provide an overview of the history of queer theater but instead denormalizes the genre of writing such a history in the first place.

I would also like to formally thank the Collaborative Research Center “Kulturen des Performativen” at the Freie Universität Berlin for making this project possible and for having supported it – not least financially – throughout its entire course.

Ah, freak out / Le freak, c'est chic / Freak out / Ah, freak out / Le freak  
c'est chic / Freak out.

All that pressure got you down / Has your head spinning all around .

Ah, freak out / Le freak, c'est chic / Freak out / Now freak / I said freak  
Now freak.

(Chic, Le Freak, 1978)



## AN INTRODUCTION

### **N.O.Body, nobody**

*The gaze follows the camera slowly from above, across rows of dark wooden benches up to a door at the end of a lecture hall, through which somebody is entering the room. Or is it nobody, as the title of the film N.O.Body<sup>1</sup> would suggest? N.O.Body is wearing a long, light blue dress with puffy sleeves and a tightly belted bodice, which emphasizes the breasts. S\_he has a long black beard, you can see hair on her\_his chest and arms, and long black hair reaching down to the knees. The performer in this film installation bears the name Werner Hirsch. Slowly, Werner Hirsch/N.O.Body strides down the stairs, where a little later – after s\_he has prepared the blackboard for the professorial presentation – s\_he gets up on the large wooden table of the 19th-century lecture hall, where usually the objects of study are presented to the interested or bored students. The slide lecture, which might serve as a certain kind of evidence for the presentation, begins with an image showing an obviously early photograph from the 19th century that seems to resemble her\_him. It is, as we can read in a brochure, the photograph of the bearded lady Annie Jones, who appeared in freak shows at the end of the 19th century and who the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld cited in 1933 as an example of gender deviance (fig. 728, Hirschfeld 1933). With tender*

or desiring gestures, the performer gauges the outline of the figure in the photograph.

The performance, generally theorized as “unmediated” and “anchored in the here and now” (Phelan 1993: 146; critical: Adorf 2007), in fact produces a series of temporal references (cf. Danbolt 2011: 1985). The lecture hall with its aged wooden benches is reminiscent of the time of its construction, but also invokes the succession of various formats of knowledge production, which since then have become common – including Hirschfeld’s slide show, a practice of legitimizing topics through visualization, which he introduced into sexology – and which raises the question of how the lecture hall is used today. The performer’s clothing plays off the Victorian dress of the historical photograph, but a series of other objects seem to come from the present or the recent past: a remote-control device, a black SM rubber mask, and a yellow plastic cube radio, which not only plays a laugh track, but also a contemporary pop song. Nonetheless, the performance is not necessarily an example of a contemporary usage. It appears – in the dimly lit hall – as an “uncanny” work, a work that perhaps takes place at night, and possibly for a long time already. Something is updated that otherwise merely adheres to the empty lecture room as a trace, as a memory, or as one possibility of usage against the grain. It is not any kind of practice that can be achieved with a single sequence. The film, a loop, shows this performance over and over again.

In this setting, the possible positions of knowledge production are arranged spatially: the central position of the “professor,” the large, heavy table that exhibits the object of interest, and the blackboard, on which the findings can be recorded and on which s\_he projects a whole series of other photographs. In Hirschfeld’s books, these pictures are classified and identified: the woman in men’s clothing, who ran a bar in Hamburg during the 1920s and was found dead one morning in front of her bar; the uniform fetishist blowing a hunting horn; the tutu fetishist in white tulle; the leader of the Chinese women’s movement; the birds on which intersexual characteristics were discovered; the patrons of a lesbian bar in the 1920s; the inhabitants of a Japanese province with tattooed moustaches; the giant; the intersex butterflies.

The audience, facing this scene on rising seats, is obviously missing from the film. They are replaced by an empty auditorium (in which only the shining eye of a slide projector can be seen in the reverse shot) and by those of us who are watching the film, who are thus intended as a part of the film but who are not visualized in it. The “object of knowledge” is appropriated by the position of the producer of knowledge. But this produ-

*cer, while watching the slide, begins not to speak or to lecture, but instead to laugh softly. Soon Werner Hirsch/N.O.Body is laughing more and more. There are pauses, but the laughing goes on. The laughing seems to be designed. It is following a score that remains invisible.*

### **contagion**

What occurs between the performer and the historical photograph, as well as between the film and the film's viewer – relations of desire or contagion, rather than the “imitation” of a historical figure – will be the topic of this book. Unlike representation and reception, the mode of contagion seeks to entangle the viewer as a participant in denormalizing practices. But how exactly does this occur, and what elements or practices allow for an artistic work to carry out or initiate denormalizing practices – that is, to be able to trace a queer politics? This book will seek to examine this question with thorough, descriptive readings of artistic practice, not so much interpreting in the classical sense as possibly *infecting*.

How can queer art be taken up in a way that does not classify, level, and understand, but continues, by other means, the denormalization that it incites, the desire for being-other, being-elsewhere, and change? Current political discourses do not, as Rosi Braidotti has noted (2006: 1), necessarily exclude change, but they do tend to overemphasize the risk that could be associated with it. In this way, conservative politics and hierarchical economies are privileged. In contrast, a radical queer politics requires us not only to propose images and living strategies for alternative sexualities and genders, but also to promote all kinds of economic, political, epistemological, and cultural experiments that seek to produce difference and equality at the same time. At the very least, according to Claire Colebrook (2009: 20), this means going back into the past and bringing up problem spots again that might seem to have already been resolved.

Is then the decisive element of the film *N.O.Body* looking into the past and reposing the question of how knowledge about bodies is produced? Or is it the dignifying presentation of a body that so far has been considered non-intelligible (Schaffer 2009)? Why should viewers feel addressed by such an updating, and why should they want to join in with it? Could it possibly be a quick gaze into the camera or an inconspicuous gesture (one that does not belong to the repertoire of gender stereotypes) that engages us for the performance, the body presented, and the event? Is it perhaps the laughter's joy or uncontrollability that takes the place

of speech? Is it the material of the mask – black rubber cut into thin stripes, simultaneously veiling and presenting? Or is it the view onto an old lecture hall, which seems old and serious but also shabby and worn out, perhaps ripe for a new use, a kind of squatting? Elements such as these transform, as Elspeth Probyn suggests (1996: 9), *specificities* (knowledge, a lecture hall, a bearded lady) into *singularities*. They allow or prohibit intensity and transport desire that brings objects, people, practices, and ideas into contact with one another. According to Probyn, it makes no sense to read these singularities in a relation of signifier and signified (ibid: 59) or to assign them an inherent (queer) meaning. They shift meaning or postpone it; they undermine, as Nicole Brossard writes, “the solid matter of our ideas without our knowledge” (quoted in Probyn 1996: 59). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari illustrate this in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987: 9) using the example of the pianist Glenn Gould: “When Glen Gould speeds up the performance of a piece, he is not just displaying virtuosity, he is transforming the musical points into lines, he is making the whole piece proliferate.” As Probyn claims (1996: 59), the “lines of flight” are also responsible for initiating changed and different relations within a matrix of class, race, and ethnicity, as well as sexuality. But how does this happen?

### **a deferral and a gap**

Considering the processes of subjectification and the possibility of understanding them not as determined but as open to change, I have argued that photographs (or other cultural products) can also work as interpellations, thus interfering in processes of subjectification (Lorenz 2009a: 113ff.). If I now characterize the queer-artistic practice that interests me here, I would like to take up a contrary perspective, even if both viewpoints possibly complement each other. My thesis is that these artistic works are precisely in the position to break off interpellations, producing a temporal and spatial distance – a deferral and a gap – between an experience and any possible effect on the process of subjectification. These works thematize embodied categories such as gender, tracing their history and making them non-self-evident, but they do not offer them up to identification. Instead, they make material beyond gender available for reflection and experimentation. In this book, I would like to consider how exactly the deferrals and gaps come into being in queer-artistic works.

Rosi Braidotti describes the subject as a “spatio-temporal compound which frames the boundaries of processes of becoming” (2006: 2). She

proposes an ethics that is concerned with the capacity of being affected and of affecting, with the capacity for a “desire to become” (ibid), but also with the boundaries of this capacity. For the desire for change has boundaries or thresholds (which Michel Foucault would most likely have analyzed as power relations). These boundaries, which constitute the subjects, simultaneously restrict their possibilities and determine “how intensely they run [...] how far they can go [...] how much bodies are capable of” (ibid: 4). Braidotti thus examines what exactly these boundaries look like and how they are fixed.

I would like to argue that the queer-artistic practices that I will be considering here break off or shift these boundaries. That they organize a distance to the subject and its compounds, a distance to heteronormativity, to being-white, to being-able, and moreover, that they facilitate the possibility of abandoning the confinements of subjectivity (the boundaries that set the norms that engender us).

Queer politics is often concerned with the body – the individual or the social body – since this is where regulations or exclusions have been applied. The materiality of the body seems to restrict the possibilities of experimentation in a particular way. Foucault wrote very impressively about how the body functions as a “pitiless place” that prohibits movement, if only because one cannot move without it (2006: 229): “I can go to the other end of the world; I can hide in the morning under the covers, make myself as small as possible. I can even let myself melt under the sun at the beach – it will always be there. Where I am.” For Foucault, the prison of the body is so depressing that it immediately seems to suggest the unreachable utopia of a “bodiless body”: “Still, every morning: same presence, same wounds. In front of my eyes the same unavoidable images are drawn, imposed by the mirror: thin face, slouching shoulders, myopic gaze, no more hair – not handsome at all. And it is in this ugly shell of my head, in this cage I do not like, that I will have to reveal myself and walk around; through this grill I must speak, look and be looked at; under this skin I will have to rot.” (ibid)

If artistic practice does indeed thematize the body in its inevitability, at the same time facilitating a deferral and a gap in relation to the body as a restriction for fantasy and experiment, then it would produce what Foucault, in the course of his text, sees as a “utopian body”: a body that is always elsewhere, that “small utopian kernel from which I dream, I speak, I proceed, I imagine, I perceive things in their place, and I negate them also by the indefinite power of the utopias I imagine” (ibid: 223). But isn’t such a model of queer art paradoxical, since on the

one hand it affects or infects, that is, it also approaches unbidden, and on the other hand it allows a distance to be created? Or is this paradox of distance and proximity precisely one of the characteristics of queer art?

Recently, in an exhibition about London subculture and political art in the 1970s, I saw a photograph that documented a gay-lesbian housing project from the time. It shows five people, all positioned frontally in relation to the camera. Three of them are looking more or less defiantly directly into the camera. Two of them are looking at each other, although their gaze hardly expresses tenderness or belonging. Instead, one of them is raising her eyebrow appraisingly, while the other looks back in challenge. All the figures are wearing various kinds of neckties, as well as vests, jackets (some leather, others not), and trousers. What caused me to look twice, and more carefully, at this image was not (or not only) the fact that it seems to be about a household of lesbians in the 1970s. Instead, I was drawn to the particular quality of the gazes; the casual but still somehow unfashionable way that this or that necktie is tied; the low-contrast, black-and-white photo paper; and that this group presents themselves less as housemates than as a band. While here it is less lesbian identity than singularities that “infect” and that infect in a way that partially evades my knowledge, at the same time it is these singularities that facilitate the openness to this form of housing and living, the readiness to see them as attractive, and perhaps a feeling of connectedness or the wish to be there. Such an image does not *govern*, for instance by providing norms or guides to action to which I am subjected: it does not compel me to immediately move into such a housing project, putting a tie on, and critically checking myself out in the mirror to see if the popular 1970s hairstyle known as the “mullet” suits me (even if all of this isn’t ruled out). Instead, everyone participating in artistic practices gets their own possibilities of agency, precisely because a space – a deferral and a gap – is opened up to experiment with what this wish for belonging might mean for *their* lives, and what material and discursive conditions in their lives must be changed in order to accomplish this. “What a subject can take” and “how far a subject can run” gets enlarged. Various embodiments and fantasies can be experimented with that are neither restricted by norms nor do they become imprinted into the body as new norms. Connections can be created or entered into that initiate processes of self-transformation and self-fashioning. Even those elements and processes that are not intelligible, that do not promise any recognition can become contagious.

Contagion thus takes the place of recognition, which is a central element of normalization, by making norms and regulations acceptable for subjects. Contagion instead of recognition then also allows for speaking when one is not authorized to speak, for instance when one is not taken as someone who would have something to say about concepts of gender or as someone who even has a voice in society at all. Queer-artistic practice in this way also speaks without authorization, even when it speaks publicly and to others.

I would like to use the term “drag” to name the methods of queer-artistic works that makes such distance possible: radical drag, transtemporal drag, and abstract drag.

### **drag – radical, transtemporal, abstract**

How can artworks pick out bodies, gender, and sexuality as their topics without providing a body for identification, disidentification, or counter-identification? How can a body be “there” if distance from the body is simultaneously suggested? How can the boundaries of what seems conceivable in terms of change – for instance with respect to knowledge about bodies and possible bodily practices – be extended?

I am bringing in the term “drag” here to try to get at what queer-artistic works (at least the ones discussed here) produce. In the context of a queer art theory, drag may refer to the productive connections of natural and artificial, animate and inanimate, to clothes, radios, hair, legs, all that which tends more to produce *connections* to others and other things than to represent them. What becomes visible in this drag is not people, individuals, subjects, or identities, but rather assemblages; indeed those that do not work at any “doing gender/sexuality/race,” but instead at an “undoing.” If “I,” as Judith Butler has written (2004: 15), am always constituted through norms that I myself have not produced, then drag is a way to understand how this constitution occurs, and to reconstruct it on one’s own body. But at the same time, drag is a way to organize a set of effective, laborious, partially friendly, and partially aggressive methods to produce distance to these norms, for instance to the two-gender system, to being-white, to being-able, and to heteronormativity. In so (un)doing, drag proposes images in which the future can be lived.<sup>2</sup>

Drag, then, is fabricated by sets of bodily characteristics and actions. While it may indeed take on and thematize norms, it is nonetheless not restricted by them. The combination of fiction and documentary, of lies and claims, of reenactments and inventive experiments, and of conspicuously different bodily characteristics and artistic parts produces

bodies that do not match up any dichotomies between “true” or “false” and “normal” and “other.” I would like to understand drag as an artistic work that, as Kathrin Sieg writes (2002: 2), “denounces that which dominant ideology presents as natural, normal, and inescapable, without always offering another truth.” The work of taking up distance is thus also a kind of sexual labor<sup>3</sup> of desubjectification – a process that I see as central to practices of denormalization, and thus to queer politics.

The elements of drag also make it possible to go back into the history of a production of knowledge about bodies and their emotions, affects, and desires – to pursue traces of history and to work out alternatives at the same time – precisely because drag means retracing processes of construction on one’s own body. Costumes, wigs, makeup, props, posed photographs and film scenes, stagings, and (possibly) fraudulent narrations connected to “appearances” take up expectations, evidence, stereotypes, and violent histories without facilitating their repetition.

The relations produced also encompass those of the viewers. In the film *N.O.Body*, there is a brief moment in which the performer looks at the camera, making it clear that the body that s\_he presents in the film – and that is similar to the one in the historical photograph shown in the film – is part of a communication. The connection with the material from the past occurs in order to produce and sustain another connection: that with the viewers as participants in the artistic process. The cinematic depiction does not provide access to the body of another (of the one depicted by the photograph or of the performer). Instead, an exchange takes place – a negotiation about the depiction, about seeing and “reading” bodies (including the body of the viewer). The name “drag” is meant to address the fact that the photographs, films, and installations being discussed here do not represent “deviant bodies,” but instead they show or refer to bodies that are always “other” (not “other than normal” but “beyond”) – in “another time” and “elsewhere.” Drag, then, is a set of queer-artistic methods and practices and, at the same time, a mode of making public and of negotiation.

In this sense, I draw not only on performance but also on various artistic formats, even if the term drag originates in the context of (subcultural) performance. I am concerned here with a (queer) theory of (queer) contemporary art. Drag, nevertheless, facilitates the production of a particular reference to the practices of shows, of freak shows, of male and female impersonators, of cakewalks, of epileptic dances, as well as crossdressing (to name only a few formats that drive and have driven gender, sexual, and anti-racist activism and which have tested out and

reproduced practices of estrangement and practices of distantiating from norms and normality).

Analytically, I distinguish three modes of drag in this book, modes that do not mutually exclude one another, and which can appear together. The first is “radical drag,” a term that has been introduced in recent years to characterize drag appearances that do more or do something different than staging a transformation from “man” to “woman” or “woman” to “man”; that, for instance, work with contradictory gender markers or bring elements into embodiment that disrupt any interpretation within the two-gender system. I use this term for certain visualizations of bodies that may indeed thematize the dichotomies of man/woman or able/non-able, as well as other categorizations, but at the same time do not endorse these dichotomies and instead propose corporal images that cannot be made addressable, accessible, or intelligible within these criteria. “Transtemporal drag,” the second mode, designates embodiments with a focus on chronopolitics, which represent an intervention in existing concepts of time and establish temporalities that counter, interrupt, or shift an advanced economic or scientific development or a heteronormative course of life. Finally, I use the term “abstract drag” for visualizations of bodies that show no human body at all and which instead use objects, situations, or traces to refer to bodies.

### **freak theory**

If I call the theory to be developed here “freak theory,” it is not my interest in identifying, for instance, the protagonist of the film *N.O.Body* or her photographic model as a “freak.” Rather, I would like to reinforce the possibilities for agency that are built upon the knowledge of the dual history of the historical freak shows and of being-freak: on the one hand, of the violent history of staring at and exhibiting people, which produces an ethical challenge, and on the other, the practices already mentioned of “being other” and “acting differently,” which cannot be captured within the logic of norm and deviation. Freak theory should not (only) be concerned with the history “of the freaks,” but should “be” freaky – acting and analyzing freakily. Freaky would thus need to change the status of knowledge and negotiation. This practice, if we let ourselves get infected by *N.O.Body*, would mean to laugh instead of argue, so to speak. But we mustn’t forget that it remains unclear who in the film is laughing about whom. Who is this *N.O.Body*? And is it s\_he who is laughing about us the viewers, who s\_he seems to examine over and over again? Or does s\_he think that those appearing in the project-

ed slides are ridiculous? Is s\_he laughing about the historical process of producing knowledge, in which they become objects of knowledge, or about her\_himself? Is she delighted about all of this, amused to the point of falling over? Does laughing take the place of explanatory or enlightening speech?

There are conventions that regulate laughing and make it comprehensible. The laughter in *N.O.Body*, in fact, follows a score – that is, a series of signs that are reproducible. Nonetheless, we as viewers are confronted with the inability to translate the scene of seeing, understanding, and acting before us into knowledge. The scene gives us no indication as to how we might act in ways that are more appropriate, or less exclusionary or derogatory in view of the photographs. The relation of the historical materials to the performers or that of the performer to the film’s viewers is not so much one of understanding or learning as it is one of “contagion,” one that gets altered by the practices that it repeats or combines with other practices.

In this way, what is conveyed is not a different kind of knowing, but instead the scene of producing knowledge is opened up. Who produces knowledge in it and who this knowledge is about (perhaps the viewers here are unwittingly the objects of knowledge?) remains unclear – a freaky theory and art will upset the relations between author, reader, and object, or at the very least destabilize it. What seems certain is that active connections are produced here between the protagonist, the slides, the spatial situation, and the viewers, and that affects or feelings are part of the production of knowledge: shame, joy, happiness, and fear turn up as affective moments that create connections or cut them short. They focus on an object or another person, bringing it closer or holding it at a distance. In this way, the distinction between serious and non-serious, sense and nonsense, which scholarship has more or less depended on since the Enlightenment and which gave it its status of objectivity, here becomes obsolete.

How can a theory be freaky and still produce awareness or possibilities for action? What are the political gains of this? And how can it treat its object, in this case works from the field of the visual arts, in a way that makes them “usable” and accessible? In examining this question, theoretical and artistic practice should not be put on the same level. Nonetheless, they do go “hand in hand,” so to speak. While artistic methods can be based on theoretical ones, theoretical figures arise – even unexpectedly – from artistic work and can or must in turn be made accessible through reflection. A theory that is closely tied to artistic methods owes

its distance from objectivity, from linear narration, from generalization, and from unambiguousness to visual and literary works. A freak theory produces meanings that cannot initially be distinguished through “exactness” but that need the “work” of the recipients; that are fictional as well as documenting; and that refer to other theories as much as they do to activism or aesthetic operations. So all the parts of this book are meant to be a dialogue between theoretical reflections and the intervention of artistic works (the work of artists that I discuss in this book, as well as my own work in film and installations – I am referring here to the three film installations, *N.O.Body*, *Salomania* and *Contagious!*, that I made in collaboration with Pauline Boudry), which hook up to these reflections, continue them, and incite further reflection.

### **freak histories**

The protagonist of *N.O.Body* aspires to adjust him\_herself to a historic photograph showing the “bearded lady” Annie Jones. Jones lived in the US between 1865 and 1902, and was one of the most famous bearded ladies of her time. When she was only nine months old, her face was already covered in hair, as they said. She was later contracted by the Barnum Circus and initially presented as a “freak” in a museum. For her family and, when she grew up, for herself, this exhibition was associated with a not insubstantial income – which was in no way the case for all freak performers (Bogdan 1996: 35). Jones toured with the Barnum Circus and later also with her own show in the US and throughout Europe.

Freak shows had their high point in the 19th century, specifically in the period between 1840 and 1940. In the US, P. T. Barnum was one of their most prominent agents and profiteers. Along with the famous Barnum Circus, he also ran the American Museum in New York. Freak shows put people on display, specifically those who in some particularly distinctive way did not correspond to what was considered “normal.” These human exhibits were referred to as “human wonders” or “monstrosities.” Exhibiting and staring at people in the restricted spaces and times of the freak show ran parallel not only to the racist segregation and persecution of African Americans in nearly all public institutions and modes of transportation, but also to the so-called “ugly laws.” These laws prohibited people whose appearance was perceived as “different” from appearing in public and also, for instance, from making a living by begging. Many of these laws remained on the books until the 1970s, for one in Chicago: “No person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated or in any way deformed so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object or

improper person to be allowed in or on the public ways or other public places in this city, or shall therein or thereon expose himself to public view, under a penalty of not less than one dollar nor more than fifty dollars for each offense" (*Chicago Municipal Code*, sec. 36034; repealed 1974; cf. also Schweik 2009). In using the figure of the "freak" as the foundation for a theory, I do so in reference to these violent histories of exclusion, exposure, staring, and differentiating.

In order to develop an alternative discourse of difference, it seems necessary to me to claim the historical treatment of difference as the starting point for reworking it today, rather than understanding the histories of exclusion and violence as past and overwriting them with images of happy self-empowerment or with discourses of integration, tolerance, and "gay pride." It is a matter of taking up moments of queer practice which, according to Douglas Crimp (2002), counter current movements of homogenizing, normalizing, and desexualizing. This reference to a history of exposure is nonetheless a risky kind of politics, for it means summoning up this history once again and giving it a new presence. At the same time, such a politics demands viewing this history from another perspective, proposing it as "other" in a way that seems to make possible a utopian approach to difference: one that tackles the problem of perhaps *not* being able to come to terms with the experience of violence and exclusion made historically in the context of the freak show.

The historical freak show and the exhibition of people in a show might initially not seem so useful as a model that could contain potential for change. From the side of disability studies, it has also been formulated as such: that an appropriation of the term "freak" as a self-description or positive attribution from outside might not be all that empowering, since historically the associated practices of devaluation, disempowerment, and confinement are too violent. Eli Clare (1999: 70), in his book *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*, claimed this for instance.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore important to maintain that the recourse to the freak show and its methods that I will propose in the appendix in no way pursues the goal of suggesting "freak" as a term of identification – as an attribution by others or the self. Instead, the goal is to propose "queering" that also rewrites the past, as Verena Andermatt Conley formulates for the history of sexuality (2009: 28): "One has to go back through a deeper and broader history of homosexuality to give it back all the otherness it contains and of which it had been stripped. This cannot be found in an unconscious elaborated by repressive, official

psychoanalysis but only through the progression of a sexual becoming that is always to come.”

The fact that the staged photograph of the bearded lady Annie Jones was transported from the context of the show-business “freak show” into another discourse of difference – turning up again in 1933 in a book by the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld as “objective,” that is, visually comprehensible evidence of gender deviation – draws our attention to the fact that the discourses of difference are indeed historically transformable. But this transformation can in no way be tied to any narrative of progress, since the historically later operation of categorizing and pathologizing in the medical context can hardly be considered less exclusionary or violent. Any recourse to the past thus also makes it possible to reconstruct the various institutions, discourses, and material foundations of difference and to counter a narrative of progress that would declare the present time in the West as practically “liberated.”

Despite the recognition that there are historically transformable cultural practices and logics that subdivide bodily variation and embodied practices into “normal” and “deviant,” and in no way are natural qualities of bodies and subjects, we all continue to be confronted everyday with interpellations having to do with tolerable appearance and conduct. Disregarding them has (voluntary or compulsory) consequences, ranging from the loss of friendships, desires, recognition, jobs – or the fear that this could happen – up to violence, which affects the body in various forms (cf. Butler 2004: 214). This includes the violent medical and psychic interventions that are still practiced to adjust infants and children that have been categorized as “intersex” (Klöppel 2010).

What interests me in the term *freak*, however, are not only the echoes of the history of degradation and revilement that we hear in it – which are often not associated with the term “*queer*” (anymore) – but that it has also gone through a history of coolness, anti-racist self-empowerment, refusal of efficiency, and finally disco. Examples can be found not only in the hippie movement, where “*freak*” became a self-designation, but also, for instance, in a song by the band Chic, which was on everybody’s lips which ran: “*Le freak, c’est chic.*” Rumor has it that the song was produced shortly after the band members were denied entry to the famous disco Studio 54 due to racist door policies.

The term “*freak*” thus historically refers not only to bodies, but also to denormalizing social practices: loafers, being productive but differently, being *queer/left/feminist* – various practices that for whatever reason did not really lend themselves to any kind of integration into a

neoliberal capitalist economy that completely cherished difference (Engel 2009: 13). I am redeploying this term to emphasize difference and at the same time to speak from the non-position of difference. “Freak” does not mark any *position* in the aside, but instead marks a *movement* of distantiating, of keeping distance from ideals of being-white, being-heterosexual, being-normal, being-efficient. Freak theory is then to be understood as “work,” as working on the history of attributions and exclusions, and as an approach to difference that refuses to abandon differentiation.

### **the practice of differentiation**

The title of the film *N.O.Body* is a citation from the title of the first intersex biography: *Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren* (or, *Memoirs of a Man’s Maiden Years*) by N.O.Body (1907), in which an intersex person presents how he initially grew up and was raised as a girl and then changed his sex. In the biography, we can see how such a sex change was already possible at the beginning of the 20th century. At the same time, the book treats the constraints and the misaligned possibilities for living such a life. The sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld wrote an epilogue to the book in which he advocates – an improbable task even today – for the idea that each person should be free to choose his or her own gender, and also that these people should be treated as such by the law. While the social practice of sex change, and Hirschfeld’s demand for it, is still based on and promulgates the identities of “man” and “woman,” even if it does not impose them, the pseudonym N.O.Body produces an artistic strategy that I would like to call “queer,” precisely because it maintains the tension between the histories of identitarian attributions and the possibility of organizing distance from them. N.O.Body represents an address: two first names – which because they are only initials do not disclose any gender though they refer to the question of gender – as well as a last name that refers to a “body.” But at the same time, “nobody” is brought up, and any address, any body that would be defined in terms of gender and identity, is thus refused. Perhaps a person is addressed who does not even achieve the status of person, to whom any legitimation for speaking is refused, but who nonetheless manages to transform the “non-addressed” into an address. Does this mean that it speaks to a history of exclusion, in which the status “somebody” is not permitted, since this body does not meet the demands of the two-gender system? Or has this body already eluded such categories? Is it not a clever strategy of presenting oneself, of claiming the space to act “differently,” and at the

same time of depriving the powerful gaze by contriving an attractive name that is presented to others?

While Deleuze and Guattari use the term “becoming imperceptible” to refer to the possibility of finding strategies that let life pass one by without intervening (1987: 320; Braidotti 2006; cf. also Papadopoulos et al. 2008: 71ff.), David Halperin uses the obviously related term of “becoming impersonal” to speak of the paradoxical strategy of being a person while at the same time removing oneself from this status (quoted in Munoz 1999: 178). He writes, “[to] cultivate that part of oneself that leads beyond oneself, that transcends oneself: it is to elaborate the strategic possibilities of what is the most impersonal dimension of personal life – namely the capacity to “realize oneself” by becoming other than what one is” (ibid). Drag can represent such a possibility of becoming (im)personal, of visualizing and fictionalizing bodies in a way that on the one hand refers to people, gender, abilities, and appearance while at the same time makes it clear that this is not a matter of a “person,” but rather of visualizing the possibilities of “becoming other than what one is,” as Halperin noted. Figures like Donna Haraway’s cyborg (1991) – a non-gendered mixture of human, machine, object, and animal – which in her words represent a “useful fiction” and in no way a social fact, or Gloria Anzaldúa’s figure of the “mestiza” (1999), represent a similar fictionalization and visualization of bodies that do indeed refer to *possible* bodies, but at the same time cannot be fixed to particular *social* bodies. These terms are not descriptive in a way that would stave off their usage for knowledges about particular social beings. The figure of the mestiza is a multiple one, a figure between two cultures, through which the irresolvable conjunction of different voices creates an ambivalence and leads to a psychic restlessness (Anzaldúa 1999: 100). The mestiza has to do with incompatible references that collide with one another. She would have to remain flexible; she would have to work through contradictions, refusing rigidity and clearly defined borders. This is why the future belongs to the mestiza (ibid: 102). What can be characterized as forming the violence here is not necessarily (only) a fixation, but also the compulsion to remain in motion and to simultaneously cope with multiple demands. In another text, I have characterized this as “laborious crossing,” as a new *dispositif* of power (Lorenz 2009a). Speaking of an “irresolvable conjunction” or of interfaces in the texts of Anzaldúa and other representatives of “radical black women” does, however, point to the fact that the practice of differentiating is at the same time a practice of connecting – one

that not only produces new meanings, but also new materializations and embodiments.

1 A: Get out of town! Film installation by Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz (15 min., 2008). The installation includes 47 photographs. Performer: Werner Hirsch. Camera: Bernadette Paassen. [www.boudry-lorenz.de](http://www.boudry-lorenz.de)

2 For a proposal on “queer futurity,” cf. Muñoz 2009.

3 The term “sexual labor” brings concepts of a performative, repeated production of gender and sexuality together with post-Marxist and sociological concepts of work and precarity. Sexual labor is “doubly productive,” as it produces embodied, engendered, and sexual subjectivity and products at the same time (Boudry, Kuster, and Lorenz 1999). Since the formulation of a doubled productivity cannot sufficiently address the arbitrariness of the subject and technologies of the self, I have been less concerned in my later work with the products of sexual labor than with the performative process of their production. I have thus shifted the focus of my attention away from the production of engendered and sexual products/subjects and toward the continual effort that is associated with sexual labor (Lorenz 2009a).

4 This argument was proposed by Robert McRuer in his lecture “Enfreakment; or, Aliens of Extraordinary Disability” at the conference “freaky – queer art conference,” which I organized in Berlin in August 2009 (for more about the conference, see [www.freaktheory.de](http://www.freaktheory.de)).