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Abstract: ‘The Invisible Within: Dispersing Masculinity in Art’

Visual culture—art, film, entertainment, advertising—are saturated with images of normative heterosexual masculinity. They form visual narratives that project a largely coherent kind of masculinity where heterosexual men are shown to be creative and powerful; they initiate heroic action, take the moral high ground and preserve traditional roles and the status quo. This widely extensive visual field, peopled with normative images of masculinity, also affects and infiltrates the domain of art exemplified by Jackson Pollock and abstract expressionism which, to the present day, continues to project masculinity as the originator and pioneer of aesthetic value.

This essay reviews feminist and queer artists’ image making that appropriates the myth of homogeneous masculinity turning it into a medium for a variety of creative and hybrid explorations. I argue that Deleuzoguattarian concepts such as becoming-woman and becoming-imperceptible help us to understand this molecularisation of masculinity. And importantly in the other direction, these feminist and queer image makers allow us to understand and explore more fully these concepts.
The Invisible Within: Dispersing Masculinity in Art
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Article Submission

Patriarchal systems of power are organised around tacit understandings of masculinity as a natural and superior possession of heterosexual males, to the exclusion of non-heterosexuals and those falling short of socially legible “maleness”. Such understandings are buttressed by cultures of advertising that depend on the habitual recognition and acceptance of binarised gender and sexual identities. This recognition, in turn, moulds expectations and primes visual literacy with systems of reward or opprobrium. How do queer, feminist and transgender images disrupt such habits and expectations?

The artworks I analyse in this essay provide critical perspectives on the bodily tropes found throughout commercial visual culture. In particular, these artworks’ visual ambiguity, camouflage and defamiliarising strategies are structured in ways that encourage atypical ways of understanding representation and identity. Artists like Shigeko Kubota, Keith Boadwee, Yasumasa Morimura, Andy Warhol and Keith Haring question ‘ready to wear’ identity categories, while their exhibition in physical spaces like galleries can oust or blank out patriarchal images. It is in this sense we can apply Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of deterritorialization to the spatial dynamisms of counter-identitarian and queer images. Put simply, the provisional premise of this article is that queer, trans- or feminist image making encroaches upon public spaces that have been territorialized by patriarchal images. I would like to suggest that normative public images of masculinity can be dispersed into different contexts, flows and relationships suggested by feminist and queer artists’ works, and that Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of ‘becoming-woman’ and ‘becoming-imperceptible’ are useful for understanding the politics of such dispersals. Developed in staggered movements throughout A Thousand Plateaus, the concept of becoming-imperceptible requires a radical change in what one sees and expects to see. Feminist and queer image making practices often try to question gender and sexuality although, as Deleuze and Guattari observe, some transgressions too easily substitute an aesthetic of rebellion for genuinely exploratory artistic assemblages. Responding to these concerns, this essay will consider how the hypermasculinity associated with Jackson Pollock’s abstract expressionism established a normative model of “radical” creativity in art and aesthetics. It then examines the antagonistic and confrontational appropriating strategies of Shigeko
Kubota, Keith Boadwee, Yasumasa Morimura and others who hybridise masculinity in art, while the final part turns to the artistic practices of queer artists Andy Warhol and Keith Haring, whose artworks engage similar political problematics to those explored through “becoming-imperceptible” in A Thousand Plateaus.

**Becoming-Woman and Becoming-Imperceptible**

Deleuze and Guattari’s becoming-woman suggests a continuous experimentation with states of being, whereby anyone might imagine or identify with aspects of being a woman in positive and affirming ways, while redefining what it means to be a woman. Thus whether one is a man, woman or transgender, the point is not to settle into unthinking habits where an identity is merely assumed and from where one’s values are supposed to flow. Rather than being a collection of negative characteristics of men, repeating the dualism that fixes relations and subject positions, becoming-woman suggests avoiding categorisation under fixed signs and rational constructs, instead adopting asignifying, unsettled and unanticipated processes of transformation and exploration. Becoming-woman is a leap into the dark, an improvisation in and for itself, reassembling particles molecularised from the solidified masses of man-woman and masculinity-femininity. The lines of flight of these particles must be loosened between these dual masses disassembling them, causing a flux of unforeseen events, sensations, actions. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, “Knowing how to love does not mean remaining a man or a woman; it means extracting from one’s sex the particles, the speeds and slownesses, the flows, the n sexes.” Becoming-woman is thus not what woman was, or is, but what it is possible for many different kinds to become. Becoming-woman is an affirmation of qualities and possibilities without appeal to man and masculine values that create woman as an other, as an inferior pole in the dualism man woman. As Claire Colebrook explains:

> When the ‘subject’ emerges in modern thought this is, as both Deleuze and Nietzsche insist, no shift or terrain at all; there has always been a subject function in philosophy: the location of thought within a speaker. And it is this structure – that there is always a subject, ground, or presence that precedes predication – that both Deleuze and Nietzsche try to overcome through a project of becoming...In so doing their main target becomes clear: man...One strategy of becoming would be to think woman. For it is woman that blocks or jams the conceptual machinery that grounds man.

Thus ‘becoming-woman’ is an undoing of rational humanism in the guise of man or a subject traditionally defined, and it is a challenge to rethink what it means to be human within the intricate structures of power and social relations in the world. Of course, these notions have
been criticised and supported from many different quarters. For some, such as Luce Irigaray, among others, ‘becoming-woman’ suggested an erasure of female subjectivity. Particularly for Irigaray, whose philosophy rests on exploring the feminine imaginary as difference, becoming-woman and becoming-imperceptible might have meant erasing women’s struggle against patriarchy, rather than challenging the fundamental assumptions of humanism and identity. However, feminist philosophers Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Grosz deploy Deleuzoguattrian concepts, particularly for sexual politics, by rethinking ‘difference in itself’ in terms of escaping rational categories and reactive and entrenched identifications of gender for more experimental and creative redefinitions of such identities through alliances across spectrums of sexual difference.

‘Becoming-woman’ is introduced as the first ‘becoming’ of *A Thousand Plateaus*. Having passed through many others – becoming-black, becoming-animal, becoming-molecular, and so on – the last is ‘becoming-imperceptible’. This latter concept urges individuals to develop different kinds of alliances and relationships with others to create possibilities beyond what is normally understood as a singular social “identity”. It is a continual process of destabilisation and questioning of hardened categories; one result may be to become-imperceptible even to oneself. Becoming-imperceptible works not only for the dissolution of the phenomenological first person, the ego, but it diffuses common-sense perceptions of objects and people. This is similar to Irigaray’s ‘sensible transcendental’ which urges the feminine to go through transformation and openness to what is normally imperceptible. If we understand masculinity as premised on common-sense perceptibility, becoming-imperceptible is a way of destabilising default molar categories and relations. For Deleuze and Guattari, this process is ‘molecular’ because it sidesteps the ‘obviously’ visible, the recognition of molar objects and stereotypes saturating the visible world, and instead, emphasises that such objects can be made into aggregates of particles of new creations and selves flowing into a rather more unsettled, criss-crossing series of events, relationships and affects between bodies.

While some artists have challenged subjectification, and masculinity has been appropriated and differentiated by these artists, becoming-imperceptible seeks a more radical dispersal of masculinity and femininity by dissolving subject positions entirely for the sake of pure experimentation. Braidotti writes:

I think the becoming-imperceptible is the point of fusion between the self and his/her habitat, the cosmos as a whole. It marks the point of evanescence of the self
and its replacement by a living nexus of multiple inter-connections that empower not the self, but the collective. Nevertheless, the question is not necessarily about whether one should choose identity politics or non-identity politics, but rather one how one might develop a politics adjacent to, or without dependencies on, received social identities. The tension, of course, is that resistance to identity itself can engender “identitarian” oppositional investments; becoming-imperceptible requires some wariness around the Oedipal trapping of resisting too much, without adequately affirming something in the place of identity. One of the ways of doing this is to create artistic, literary, critical, philosophical, musical and imaginative works, and creative, open and experimental relationships with others, rather than simply repeating oneself or gathering around oneself only those who reflect one’s own point of view. It is very easy to reduce complexity to simplicity by insisting on what one knows, but more difficult to delay this in favour of experiencing the texture and density of exploration. Lucas Cassidy Crawford is also interested in the possibilities of becoming-imperceptible for trans-identifying people, in the sense of avoiding definitions of “trans” as a fixed category of social membership. An alternative approach is prompted by A Thousand Plateaus:

Deleuze and Guattari offer a version of imperceptible trans life...trans people might find reassuring or galvanizing: that continually navigating one’s imperceptibility, rather than seeking out places where one feels readable or acknowledged as transgender...I also understand the slippage between the terms “transgender,” “transsexual,” “gender-fucking,” and even “queer” as an indication of [a] molecular, affective, unsettled and non-identity-politics. As with becoming-imperceptible, transgender could be thought of ultimately as ‘becoming-trans...’ to the nth power, not as a fixed set of properties defined medically or by what makes an identity in traditional disciplines but as a challenge to the rational categorization of identity itself. Instead, the open ended trans- or trans*, or as I suggest, ‘becoming-trans’, implies a molecularisation of characteristics that can be owned, brought into alignment, acted out or relationally positioned for a time and place, and for however long this lasts as it is needed or required for the task at hand.

The following recontextualises these ideas from a historical perspective, tracing key moments in the articulation of Jackson Pollock’s “masculinist” abstract expressionism, then exploring more supple gender performances developed in the afterlife of the abstract expressionist paradigm.
The artist Jackson Pollock is claimed by traditional art history as an American masculine cultural hero, maverick and tortured soul, killing himself in car crash while drunk in 1956. Many representations of this artist in *Time* magazine mythologise his ‘cowboy’ upbringing in Cody, Wyoming. One of Pollock’s biographers, B. H. Friedman, writes of Pollock as ‘a hard-riding, hard-drinking cowboy from the Wild West who came roaring, maybe even shooting, his way into New York where he took the art galleries by storm’. And art critic, Harold Rosenberg, spoke of Pollock as representing the existential drama of ‘mankind’. Rosenberg attempted to recast the image of the artist as a bourgeois intellectual aesthete into a more masculine, toiling, working-class hero of few words, a tortured existentialist. This image was a product of Cold War America. That Pollock certainly had homosexual relationships was certainly an awkward fact that never met the public eye in the careful manipulation of Pollock’s masculine image by *Life* magazine, and even much later in *Pollock* (2000), the Hollywood film that reproduces in reviewers and audiences the hypermasculine rhetoric of Pollock as tortured genius and lonesome cowboy. The emphasis was on muscular action and Rosenberg coined the phrase, ‘action painting’ based on the equation of physical strength and mental struggle directed outwards through the bold and sweeping gestures of the limbs upon the grand stage of the abstract expressionist canvas. This is contrast to traditional, patriarchal characterisations of feminine traits where women are supposed to use limbs and movements directed inwards with self-protecting gestures limiting action. This kind of painting is exemplified in the work of Georgia O’Keeffe, Lee Krasner and Agnes Martin.

In addition to this characterisation of Pollock as a tough man of action painting hero, Clement Greenberg, perhaps the most influential art critic of the 1950s and 1960s, waxed lyrical about Pollock’s work on formalistic grounds denigrating ‘feminine’ aspects associated with handicraft and housework. Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings, for example, were singled out as having a ‘lapidarian patience’; ‘trimming’ and ‘polishing’ her paintings for the ‘embellishments of private fetishes,’ phrases denoting laboured movements associated with arts and crafts activities and domesticity.

Complementing the promotion of Pollock as the masculine action hero was the fact that it suited Cold War rhetoric to dramatise the rise of American painting over European art as a struggle for the freedom of expression against the restraints of the Soviet Union with its official sanctioning of figurative Socialist Realism. From here, it was one short step to conflate communism and femininity with homosexuality, a three-pronged attack on the unbounded exercise of masculine virility. One need look no further than the dandy figure of Andy Warhol to see how impossible it would have been in Cold War America to have used...
him as a soul searching macho hero and bulwark against Soviet totalitarianism. Yet this ‘inappropriateness’ lays bare the underlying assumptions valorising art as masculine action that was so dear to Cold War grand narratives. Pollock was cast as a champion of mankind’s modernity entitling him to represent humanity in a particularly masculine way, a representation Andy Warhol distanced himself from quite clearly: “The world of abstract expressionism was very macho” he observed, “the painters...were all hard-driving, two-fisted types who’d grab each other and say things like ‘I’ll knock your fucking teeth out’ and ‘I’ll steal your girl’...The toughness was part of a tradition, it went with their agonised, anguished art.”

There were other ways in which action in public space, valued most highly in the form of masculinist abstract expressionist gesture, has been contested in the public sphere by other diverse practices. The first direct attack on Pollock as a masculine action hero is the well-known painting and performance work by Shigeko Kubota, *Vagina Painting*, 1965, a performance/painting where the artist crouches over a canvas laid out on the floor with a paintbrush attached to the crotch of her underwear, applying red paint to the canvas. The suggestion is that she is actively painting with her genitals, but she also brings into public view and into the realms of art the taboo subject of menstruation. Suggesting the vagina can be thought of intellectually as productive beyond its assignment of a passive role for penetration or in child birth, Kubota also called into question the heroic, erect bodies of the abstract expressionist mythology.

An example of the undoing of traditional masculine art history is Warhol’s *Oxidation Paintings*, 1978, often referred to as his ‘Piss Paintings’. On one occasion he chose a friend, Hugo to urinate on his canvas coated with copper which would then oxidise into different colours. This quickly became a conveyor belt system of producing paintings where several men were invited over a period of time to drink wine and relieve themselves on Warhol’s murals. Warhol managed to produce away from and outside of the exclusive macho heterosexist culture of abstract gestural art. “It’s a parody of Jackson Pollock,” so Warhol declared in one account. Yet Warhol also managed, in true conceptual art fashion, to remove himself from the act of painting: the *Oxidation Paintings* de-subjectivise the artist, and create a multiplicity of authors, artists and bodies as a series of processes and affects between these bodies. The copper paint creates a chemical reaction, a ‘transubstantiation’ whereby urine changes into ‘paint’ and ‘art’. Affective, iridescent residues seem to emerge that are half controlled and half the relinquishment of control, a range of self-emergent colours and a material vitalism that is more than the expressionism of a masculine genius. It
might be objected that Warhol’s *Oxidation Paintings* are just another unremarkable example of fratriarchal bonding while under the influence of alcohol. However, the work mixed eroticism with urination and entered this into a public gallery space indelibly. It altered what it meant to produce art, that it should follow a set of disciplines, appropriate materials and acts that respected regulatory laws of sexuality and behaviour. In this sense, it rematerialized art, providing it with new materials (copper paint, urine and the oxidation process itself) as well as new definitions of performance and the historical document. Even now, looking at the large copper paintings with green iridescent patterns in an art gallery context has the power to offend conservative sensibilities and demarcations of appropriate domains of behaviour. The piss paintings are a continual corrosive reminder that Pollock can be displaced. But perhaps the best defence for these paintings is how they were used as precedents for many other acts subsequently in art history.

Helen Chadwick’s *Piss Flowers* was completed in 1991–92 are a fusion of Warhol’s piss paintings and his flower series. Chadwick created twelve bronzes as public sculptures coated with white enamel, cast from patterns made by urinating in the snow with her husband David Notarius. With Chadwick’s ‘land intervention’, pissing is transformed from an unremarkable biological fact into a co-creation of art between male and female, ostensibly dissolving an unsaid symbol of patriarchy which resides in the man’s supposed privilege in the phallogocentric economy, using the phallus as a pen to reinscribe his trace, the law, whether in painting, on sand, in the snow or into the earth. Here, Chadwick showed that this need not necessarily be so, highlighting the social taboos by which women’s bodies are regulated, and challenging stereotypes concerning female urination and control. Warhol’s *Oxidation Paintings* are rethought as women’s pissing in public space. Pissing here becomes the basis for a precise and exacting process of intensity, namely, the bronze casting and enameling techniques by which a quiet determination and investment of time, energy and sensation succeeded in creating a difference, yet also a series of synergies with Warhol and many other artists who form an alternative tradition to that which holds that art must above all remain chaste, sacred and unsullied by bodily fluids, the actual, material debasement of art.

More recently still, in Keith Boadwee’s *(Untitled) Purple Squirt*, 1995, the artist used his anus for action painting onto the surface of the canvas put on the ground (as in Pollock’s work). The paint becomes an ambiguous (ad)mixture of something penetrating from the outside and yet internalised and then evacuated, as in the expressionist model of art. It is obvious that the anus is quite deliberately offensive to many. Amelia Jones refers to these examples
against normative action as the “Pollockian performative feminised and homosexualised.”\textsuperscript{11} In 2010, Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura well-known for performing in the guise of Frida Kahlo, Cindy Sherman and Marilyn Monroe, among others, photographed himself as Jackson Pollock painting in \textit{A Requiem: Theater of Creativity/ Self-portrait as Jackson Pollock} (Fig. 1). This was based on a classic photograph of Pollock flinging paint onto his canvas on the floor. As a Japanese artist, Morimura succeeds in appropriating agency in abstract expressionism, usually preserved for Euro-American cultural traditions, and as an originary masculinity, for himself. Relevant also as a possible reading for Morimura's work is Butler's argument that gender parody, such as that involved in drag or with butch dykes, does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate because the parody is of the very notion of an original.\textsuperscript{12} Morimura's work questions identity, authenticity and the originary genius, terms by which Pollock is usually valued above others.

These artistic role reversals and recodings appropriate Pollock's action painting to make visible subject positions in art, demonstrating that they are able to ‘take action’. However, according to some arguments supporting becoming-woman, these role reversals risk becoming reactive dependent on the trace of patriarchy against which they are directed. There is a danger that this reactive kind of negation is also a kind of identification and melancholy that produces different-others always stuck in inferior positions. Accordingly, queer is always already in response to a dominant heterosexual matrix: a solely reactive force of re-signification, mockery, disrespect to the dominance of heterosexuality.\textsuperscript{13}

The difficult manoever is to avoid positing a fixed gay, bisexual or lesbian identity which reinstates the dream of hyperindividuality projected by capitalist consumerism. The dilemma artists face may be understood in general terms to be one of visibility: how to negotiate an art form that visibly puts into question stereotypes without falling back on trans-, queer or feminist visual identities that risk easy identification, therefore reinscribing stereotypes. It could be said that an artwork’s success depends upon visualising this very struggle and problem. These acts could be understood for the affects that they have produced which have changed the course of masculinist art history and philosophy, increasing our understanding of what is possible with art and identification. And perhaps also, these actions should be seen within a wider diversity of practices that seek to dissolve subjectification in variable ways which are not prescribed.

Before I turn to Keith Haring, it seems appropriate to discuss the work of Shigeyuki Kihara who artistically explores her mixed Samoan-Japanese and New Zealand heritage along with
her *fa’a fafine* (female transgender) identity, traditionally understood as a third sex in Samoan culture. This is a complex exploration, particularly in her photographic works that gently undermine naive and kneejerk notions of identity. From a Western perspective, she can be described as female transgender, which is a challenge to traditional molar categories, but from a Samoan perspective, this *is* a traditional molar category. These black and white photographs parody the style of early ethnographic photography along with all its associations of disciplining, cataloguing and exoticizing the Polynesian body. As she writes, “I disguise myself to portray a Samoan man, a woman, and a married couple. These works pay homage to my ancestors and to simultaneously subvert the dominant Western heterosexual ‘normalcy’ that continues to conflict with the existence of the *fa’a fafine* people today.” It could be said Kihara ‘transvalues’ photography itself as it withholds or defers identity and creates polysemy. In so doing, this polysemy does not allow identity to settle as ‘easy identification’ and encourages becoming as a process, as layers of representation and perception. The frozen poses struck by Kihara suggest the historical disciplining of the body repressing freedom of action, yet it is also a parody of passivity and objectification. Importantly, such a crystal allows one to experience the work as becoming-woman, and yet also, it turns over into becoming-imperceptible, and this turning, this trans-, depends on the capabilities of the viewer. One could see or ‘do’ these becomings as transvaluations of existing social categories, and in doing so, disabusing oneself of the globalizing, identitarian frames that frequently come to bear on art practices and art criticism.

Art is not merely a fictional representation of pre-existing realities that the artist hopes to mimic. Image making and sexual exploration are in themselves reality moulding and enhancing, lived and contested spaces of composition and exploration. In their production and reception artworks are situations, changes of perception and habits of the body in public spaces normally conventionalised to regulate such embodied, spatial practices. This particular point is well supported by feminist geographers, including Gillian Rose: “Through masculinization of the body politic, public space was also represented as a masculine arena” and that “the social constitution of different identities may also imply different kinds of space.” Shigeyuki Kihara’s photographs may be flat, but they can orient a space in and around a gallery, a book in someone’s hands, or a billboard (among many other possible spaces). Central to creating a new space and altering traditional masculine ones is image making, because images that previously seemed not to belong in certain spaces and catalogues that document history challenge and alter those spaces, narratives and contexts.
Keith Haring
In this last section, I develop some of the implications for masculinity of an art of ‘becoming-imperceptible’. In a picture of the artist Keith Haring by Annie Leibovitz, 1987, reproduced in *Vanity Fair* – the site, par excellence of the reification of the Hollywood star system – the artist stands on a table in a room in the glare of the spotlight. Everything, including the artist’s naked body, is whitewashed and then daubed with thousands of black broken signs and squiggles which camouflage him, allowing him to blend into the background. Haring’s becoming-imperceptible, blending the subject position within its environment, is also a play on Pollock’s often quoted phrase that his painting was a process of physically being ‘in’ his work, stepping onto and around his canvases; yet it also suggests the refusal to conform to an anticipated subject position, to be made visible for the judgment of whether he makes the ‘masculine’ grade. The strange irony here is that the camouflage allows his difference to be neutralised or shown to be camouflage, as the withholding of identity. Although it is clearly Leibovitz’s photograph, both Haring and Leibovitz have cooperated in a joint creative dissimulation, involving performance, painting, photography, editing, dialogue and negotiation to produce an artwork that is social, spatial, ‘synergetic’, complementary and historical, and all of these movements and efforts converge on the production of the image. This is one of Annie Leibovitz’s finest works and it is one of Haring’s. The image delays and dispenses a *conatus*, the exchange of energies that creates further energies and channels of communication, whether these are through the print media of *Vanity Fair* or the multitudes of ways by which such images are reproduced again and again on the Internet.

![Fig. 2 Picture of the artist Keith Haring by Annie Leibovitz, 1987, reproduced in Vanity Fair](image-url) © Annie Leibovitz/Contact Press Images, courtesy of the Artist
Haring and Leibovitz’s identities are hidden in their own work, in different ways. For Haring his body is hidden amongst his own hieroglyphics, the kind of Surrealist script of ancient symbols from lost civilisations. He is also a riddler, a text of puzzles that covers his nudity and hides his identity—a camouflage that many gay, lesbian and transgender people feel compelled to adopt in many societies where their sexual orientation is blocked, condemned or (often violently) punished. Thus, Haring’s text both hides and reveals. Paradoxically, even his nakedness is invisible. The work embodies the very dilemma between identity and non-identity politics. And for Annie Leibovitz, she has managed to become-imperceptible even amongst this project of becoming-imperceptible.

Haring is seen here not only as a living work in a context of a sentence or paragraph. He is also a cartoon of himself, a skeleton, a broken script suspended in the camouflage of a painting, installation, photograph, performance. He appears to stand on a coffee table in a living room in an unremarkable house or apartment. This ‘script’ had by this time become a signature style for Haring, a medium of describing the world for an artist born of a Pop art sensibility of comics developing into the love for the counter culture of graffiti. But what is remarkable about this graffiti is not only a kind of ‘horror vacui’, an obsessive covering of space with wriggling figures, but the number of ways such a script could be interpreted. Not only does it remind us of chemical equations and signs for chromosomes and genetic markers but they also remind us of the genetic substructures of viruses, or DNA. The script is thus microscopic as it is macroscopic: out there in the urban spaces of big cities.

It is well known that Haring died at the age of 31 of acquired immune deficiency complications. Many of his paintings are a feverish production amidst a massively intricate celebration of life. Haring’s work has a comic, sexual biomorphism where genitalia are reconfigured in bizarre transformations of the sex act. The body is lost in a universe of particles. Most of all, his overcrowded figures, wriggling in their plenitude, generate vibrations and sensations, lines and forces in the world, creating an irrepressible heterogeneity where bodies flow through and beyond each other. This is a plenitude that is not represented by painting but is composed variably within its very material substance. Haring’s wall paintings are “an inexhaustible plenitude”, a phrase Gombrich used to describe Raphael’s Stanza della Segnatura. However, Gombrich wrote pertinently, “This plenitude is no illusion.”

Although Pollock’s art was understood as an attempt to paint Man into abstract expressionism, Deleuze and Guattari write, “There is no becoming-man because man is the
molar entity par excellence, whereas becomings are molecular." And this is what Haring’s art attempts, not action man but his molecularisation. In Keith Haring’s work, just as in Francis Bacon’s, there is a gritty and sensuous struggle of bodies within figurative art against traditional masculinity. Pollock’s abstraction lends itself to visions of spiritual (and privileged) masculinity made transcendent in abstraction. In the other direction, Haring and Bacon’s works excavate the imperfections of the body revealing the process of figural disintegration in its unmaking, the desiring-struggle from the docile body, the immanent struggle for movement across and through different bodies. Perhaps struggling is also becoming, and perhaps different struggles become with each other as process.

The sensations delayed by Bacon and Haring’s art are delayed also by bodies that linger in front or through the spaces these artworks arrange. Haring’s practice is the lives of bodies, their trajectories and motivations meeting and crossing each other in chance encounters, affecting and being affected by these planned and unplanned intersections. His work does not represent heterogeneity, it is a heterogeneity of differences, speeds, lines of force, subpersonal particles, affects and schizoid assemblages. The visual dazzle is more than the perceptual tricks of Op Art, in Haring they are an uprooting of one’s orientation and composure. As Roger Callois writes about performance, the stability of perceptions must be destroyed in order to “inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind.” This is another expression of becoming-imperceptible. Masculinist action, initiation, power and ‘virile’ creativity are distributed amongst dogs, angels, hybrids and particles denuded of faciality. One loses oneself in the overall density of patterning in these works that do not represent sensation. Their lines, waves and colours create sensations that positively undo the controlling impulses of recognition and identification.

These graffiti-signs continue to bring together qualitative differences, experimentation and expressions of desire, establishing “an ethics based on the transformation of negative into positive passions.” By transforming microscopic multiplication into an artistic metastasis, Haring was able to switch introspection into an explosion of virulent artistic creativity, outwardly bound, social, spatial and affective. Strengthening this is Braidotti’s belief that: “[we] are at the end of the post-nuclear model of embodied subjectivity and we have entered the ‘viral’ or ‘parasitic’ mode...Read with Deleuze, this mode is anything but negative. It expresses in fact the co-extensivity of the body with its environment or territory.” Elsewhere she writes: “What we most truly desire is to surrender the self, preferably in the agony of ecstasy, thus choosing our own way of disappearing, our way of dying to and as our self. This can be described also as the moment of dissolution of the
subject – the moment of its merging with the web of non-human forces that frame him/her.” Leibovitz and Haring can disappear behind and before the image, dissolving into the waves, lines and patterns of sensation extended by their works.

Haring’s graffiti enable his own style of disappearing, becoming-imperceptible, yet which is not an end, as such, but an affirmative unfolding of future events, as a materiality that has a part to play in many other subsequent becomings with and between viewers, and in this sense, the works open up to the unforeseeable. As Colebrook writes: “The sensations presented in art are not those of the lived subject but are powers to be lived for all time, allowing us to think the power of perception beyond the selves we already are.” Haring’s paintings, on walls, on buildings, in streets, in social spaces, on canvases are, altogether, a plane of immanence where non-human elements, bricks and mortar, sticks and stones and grasses in corners enter into the field of affectivity in order to embrace non-anthropocentric possibilities. Haring’s raucous chaosmosis not only de-subjectivises freedom, it is also a de-subjectivising of death. In other words, death is a process of becoming-imperceptible to the nth degree.

**Conclusion**

It is possible to manifest becoming-woman and becoming-imperceptible through reading a text in a double sense: the words may index actions, affects, spatial compositions, sensations and events in the world as well as producing these in the present and future. This doubling is active with image production and reception, yet perhaps with more spatial extension and visual stimulation. It is testament to visual art that one can acquire a heightened sense of ethics, politics and critical awareness through the composition of colour and space as much as through the composition of words in a sentence or the composition of one’s life into segments, flows and relations. This essay has explored how contemporary artists are situated within becoming-woman and becoming-imperceptible as realities that break up femininity and masculinity into different flows.

Becoming-woman can never be singular, uniform or the same for everyone because one becomes or changes from a different starting point, and one adopts different strategies of resistance depending on what one is resisting. The choice of a strategy does not mean that one has committed to an identity that is fused with the strategy, fixed forever, but that
identities are tactical, multisensory, polyvocal and even polysexual. This is not hopeless relativism but a commitment to an ongoing struggle between continuity and change. Deleuze and Guattari write that sexuality is the production of a thousand tiny sexes not restricted to the clichéd formula of the sex act—foreplay, orgasm, dissipation—but a creative energy that is channelled into many other patterns and speeds of expenditure and exchange, socially, abstractly, aesthetically, politically.

Art history is also a field of practice that has struggled against, as well as promoted, images that essentialise masculinity. For many years Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and others in American abstract expressionism formed a dominant paradigm whereby heterosexual masculinity was assumed to be the fount of creativity and action, an assumption that went unchallenged until feminist and queer artists took practical steps to dismantle the legacy of abstract expressionism and all it stood for. Yet it is possible to see Pollock’s work as the material substrate for the experiments of others, and for the possibilities of heterogeneity for all the artists I have mentioned in this essay. In a sense, Haring’s urban graffiti rescues Pollock from a masculinist narrative of an isolated genius and provides the opportunity to be critical of masculinity as a “coherent” or “natural” practice of self-definition. As Butler writes: ‘When the disorganisation and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force.’

This is particularly important for an art form such as abstract expressionism which not only embraced the expressive model of art, but the expressive model of gender. In art, masculinity remains intact and unchallenged because abstraction conveniently withdraws any masculinist author from view, presenting the work as the product of a cultural hero who is more than just a man benefitting from the particular power relations of the masculinity of his time.

Although it is useful to quote Butler, most of her work is less inclined towards analysing art and more to providing a sustained and detailed philosophical and sociological critique of gender formation. In many of her works it seems essential that various experiments with and interrogations of gender become recognised—a recognition which helps to constitute subjectivity. This unsettled process of challenging majoritarian categories of identity, along with mutual, ethical acknowledgement of these experiments has no direct correlate in Deleuze and Guattari’s work. One could recognise becoming-woman in its many forms. But how is one to recognise becoming-imperceptible which suggests invisibility? I return to some of the artworks I have been analysing to see how they might provide answers.
Butler’s politics of recognition and Deleuze and Guattari’s various becomings both attempt to escape the hold of traditional identity politics which assumes that identities are ready-made and to be promoted and represented in domains such as art. The complication is that, on the one hand, Deleuze and Guattari should be critiqued for largely ignoring women, gay and black artists in their positive reappraisals of abstract expressionism. The white, American, male artists they champion, with Pollock as the central figure, is embarrassingly similar to Greenberg’s masculine canon. On the other hand, what can be salvaged are becoming-woman and becoming-imperceptible, concepts that help us understand the hybridisation of abstraction and figural representation in Bacon and Haring. Here gender-based habits of social recognition become strange and uncanny, disorienting viewers who struggle to identify the figures and movements. These artworks suggest that the interrogation of identity through visual recognition is a struggle, that identities can be in flux, and this difficult struggle to identify or recognise can be instructive. In this sense, they also suggest that the kind of recognition politics supported by Butler is not an easy process, because there is a problem of becoming-imperceptible: literally in the unresolved ambiguity of the visual field where figure blends into the background in Haring or Bacon, and also in terms of constructing identity. Thus, a visual and perceptual failure to identify carries with it the burden of a cognitive failure to construct identity. This holds out the promise, therefore, of identifying differently or critiquing the scene of recognition.

In encounters with these works, we are not forced to choose between identity politics and post-identity politics. Instead, they ask us to enjoy the slippage of recognition of figures, bodies and faces, and transmute our ‘failures’ as positive moments in the visual and affective development of the work. Through, Haring and Bacon’s masculinities are messy, leaky, indeterminate, fragmented, worrying and chaotic. Recognition connotes a calm snapshot of an identity, while by contrast, these becomings-imperceptible provoke a longer – but ultimately, more rewarding – duration of restlessness.

Bacon and Haring’s artworks affirm the principles behind Deleuze and Guattari’s becoming-imperceptible by undoing habitual processes of aesthetic appreciation. They ask us why certain values must already be ‘known’ for an artwork to be meaningful and effective. The politics of counter-recognition here might be understood as an embrace of flux, the sweeping up of unsettled processes, and the realisation of becomings that are not currently recognised and do not even seek future recognition. Their art is about the exploration of semi-abstraction as a way to experiment with the unforeseen possibilities of thinking beyond masculinity. This becoming-imperceptible in the practice of art presents interesting
complications for the politics of recognition. Yet conversely, one might also venture that truly creative experiments with identity in many other walks of life (becoming-imperceptible) also become art, but they are not often recognised as such. Many examples of art that blur the art/life divide allow us to see that masculinity is not a definite, naturally occurring substance monopolised by heterosexual men. Just as any malleable material, masculinity and femininity can be manipulated, broken up and refigured by any bodies for a staggering diversity of purposes and exchanges.

Bibliography


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**Notes**

1 Deleuze and Guattari 277.

2 Colebrook 11.

3 For an in depth study of some of the synergies and divergences between Irigaray and Deleuze’s philosophies, see Tamsin Lorraine, *Irigaray and Deleuze*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999.


5 As Cohen argues, ‘in queer politics sexual expression is something that always entails the possibility of change, movements, redefinition, and subversive performance – from year to year, from partner to partner, from day to day, even from act to act.’ (Cohen 202).

6 Such a notion stems from Linda Nicholson’s suggestion that the category ‘woman’ could be rethought as an expansive multiplicity of subcategories that bear a ‘family resemblance’ to each other.

7 Crawford 141

8 Greenberg 87.

9 Quoted in Jones 68.

10 Colacello 342. See also, Jonathan Weinberg, ‘Urination and its discontents’ *Journal of Homosexuality*, Volume 27, Issue 1&2, September 1994, pp. 225-244. Weinberg also sees Warhol’s oxidation paintings as an act of transgression against abstract expressionism and treats the subject of urination, particularly gay examples, as something that has been ignored in art history.
11 Jones 92. I am indebted to Amelia Jones’ treatment of Pollock, Boadwee and Kubota, to which I add analyses of Warhol, Chadwick, Morimura and Haring using a Deleuzoguattarian theoretical framework.
12 Butler 157.
13 Nigianni 4.
14 For this quote and images see http://www.aucklandartgallery.com/the-collection/browse-artwork/15828/teine-samoan-woman
15 See also the contrasting work of Micha Cárdenas who describes herself as an ‘artist, hacktivist, poet, performer, student, educator, mixed-race trans femme latina survivor who works at the intersection of movement, technology and politics.’ And Della Grace Volcano, who writes: ‘As a gender variant visual artist I access “technologies of gender” in order to amplify rather than erase the hermaphroditic traces of my body. I name myself. A gender abolitionist. A part time gender terrorist. An intentional mutation and intersex by design (as opposed to diagnosis), in order to distinguish my journey from the thousands of intersex individuals who have had their ‘ambiguous’ bodies mutilated and disfigured in a misguided attempt at “normalization”. I believe in crossing the line as many times as it takes to build a bridge we can all walk across.’ http://www.dellagracevolcano.com/statement.html. See also, the work of Loren Rex Cameron who photographs himself through traditional genres of portraiture, recoding from within.
16 Rose, 75.
17 Gombrich 109.
18 Deleuze and Guattari 291.
19 Callois 130.
20 Braidotti ‘Becoming-Imperceptible’ 2.
21 Braidotti ‘Affirming the Affirmative’
23 Colebrook 22.
24 Butler, 173.
25 For Butler, while recognition is mired by systems of power, it is a problem for those who have been marginalised from political representation using a’differential distribution of recognisability.’ For her, recognition is linked to a critical awareness of who is allowed to be ‘recognizable’ and to specific analyses of scenes of recognition. See Williga 139.