

A Thin Line Between DOOR & TRAP: Why (Neo-)Liberal Trans* In_Visibility Matters

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Abstract:

As the recently published anthology *Trap Door. Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* shows quite plainly, social change and the formation of subjectivity are still closely linked to questions of visibility. These have always acted as a battleground that allows expression of different perceptions, norms, and knowledges about categories of difference. Focusing on the current moment when trans* people appear to be winning the struggle for visibility while also continuing to be subject to psychological and physical violence on a daily basis, the 21 inter- and transdisciplinary contributions from mostly trans* and queer scholars, artists and activists of color open 'new doors' for thinking carefully about the ethical question of anti-discriminatory politics of trans* visibility. Therefore, this is a long overdue and essential companion for everyone who is interested in ethics of visibility.

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Gosset, Reina, Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton (Ed.): *Trap Door. Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. Cambridge/Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017. 448 pages, 49.95 USD. ISBN: 978-0-262-03660-3.

Abstract:

As the recently published anthology *Trap Door. Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* shows quite plainly, social change and the formation of subjectivity are still closely linked to questions of visibility. These have always acted as a battleground that allows expression of different perceptions, norms, and knowledges about categories of difference. Focusing on the current moment when trans* people appear to be winning the struggle for visibility while also continuing to be subject to psychological and physical violence on a daily basis, the 21 inter- and transdisciplinary contributions from mostly trans* and queer scholars, artists and activists of color open 'new doors' for thinking carefully about the ethical question of anti-discriminatory politics of trans* visibility. Therefore, this is a long overdue and essential companion for everyone who is interested in ethics of visibility.

Especially in today's times of neoliberalism and homonationalism, when Eurocentric political agendas such as demands for equal rights, gay marriage, and domestic partnership assume a gay citizen whose affective fulfillment resides in assimilation, inclusion, and normalcy, politics of visibility can still be an empowering and protective tool for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer, questioning, inter*, and pansexual subjects (LGBT*QQI*P) against surveillance, violence, control, fixation, stigmatization, stereotypization, and discrimination. The anthology *Trap Door. Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, critically reflects on a fundamental paradox in the contemporary moment of the (neo-)liberal politics of trans* visibility: While trans* people become more and more visible in both art and popular culture, the violence against trans* people, particularly people of color, is at its highest point in US history.

The publication of this anthology marks the third in the series *Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* (ed. by Johanna Burton) and apart from six reprinted essays, most of the contributions were written specifically for the volume, taking on various forms: individually authored and collaboratively written essays, historical and contemporary illustrated dossiers, transcribed roundtables and dialogues. Despite the wide-ranging issues (trans* archives, mainstreaming, beauty, performativity, technology, fashion, craft aesthetics, collectivity, police brutality, and chosen family), all contributions critically examine the modes of trans* visibility and attempt to find answers to the following main questions: What is the what, how, where, and for whom of the current trans* visibility? What are the pitfalls of this trans* visibility? And are there any other more radical trans* politics?

Even though the contributions are not grouped into thematic categories, they can be assigned to the following four main content-related topics:

First, four texts provide a historical framework on today's trans* landscape: While Abram J. Lewis explores the strands of the radical politics of several organizing groups, Grace Dunham analyzes contemporary activist organizations in relation to their 1970s forbearers. With a critique of racial capitalism, Treva Ellison explores the life and work of historic 1960s performer Sir Lady Java. With their critical reflection on mainstream media depictions of queer and trans* people, Miss Major Griffin-Gracy and CeCe McDonald (in conversation with Toshio Meronek) conclude this section.

Second, four texts focus on artistic production: Roy Péres starts by asking where representation begins and ends in the work of Mark Aguhar, while Nicole Archer works out a mode of pattern-jamming through a close queer reading of several artists. Chris E. Vargas asks for real changes and alternative models for showing and contextualizing trans* art by using satire and humor, whereby Jeannine Tang demands from art institutions a new awareness of their excluding imperatives of trans* practitioners.

Third, three contributions deal with the archive, pushing forward a fresh definition of archives as active, present sites rather than just repositories of history: While Stamatina Gregory and Jeane Vaccaro deal with the structural impasse in the context of effectively rejected or erased trans* histories and Morgan M. Page asks for alternative models of retrieving and disseminating the past, Mel Y. Chen deals with the potential of user-generated archival structures such as YouTube tags to remap gendered and racial identifications.

No matter whether it is the unescapable physical and emotional effects and affects of technologically driven violence (micha cárdenas), the destabilization of human/animal and gender binaries by contemporary anti-Black and anti-trans* violence (Che Gossett), the fragility of bodies and the strength

of collaboration (Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos), the mainstream media's embrace of queer and trans* content in the face of an increasingly conservative gay mainstream (Heather Love) or trans*-exclusionary radical feminists as a violent tool against trans* women as part of feminism (Sarah Ahmed) – all these essays emphasize the limits of art's operation within the symbolic in the fourth section.

Throughout the anthology it becomes clear that it is important to not only distinguish between radical strategies for trans* liberation and rights-based neoliberal projects focused on trans* visibility, but also to be skeptical about the dangerous mechanism of neoliberalism to manage a specific kind of determination between 'acceptable trans* people' who work towards the shared ideologies of neoliberalism and 'disposable trans* people' who reject the neoliberal ideologies of assimilation and conformity.

The fact that most of the authors are involved in creative practices, which include artistic, activist, critical, and curatorial endeavors, and their demand for "new visual grammars" (p. xviii) proves that there seems to be a strong belief in the transformative power of representations – or as the editors put it more eloquently: Representations can open "doors into making new futures possible" (ibid.) and therefore "art, in its most expansive definition, is central to our collective liberation" (p. xxv). Following poststructuralist and deconstructive approaches with its emphasis on the performative and transformative potential of the visual, most of the analyses of trans* visibility are based on a constructivist and non-fixed understandings of representation, aiming not only for making visible but also for deconstructing and, if possible, changing formative and often unquestioned patterns of visibility. Even though not stated explicitly, with notions of visibility and invisibility the contributors seem to refer to semantic and interdependent nuances (in_visibility). It is important that these nuances are understood in context: Visibility is not only often presumed to be intrinsic to presence and self-representation in the social space (being seen and heard), but it is also linked to the judgment and stigmatization that arise from the gaze directed to the 'other'. Conversely, invisibility refers both to marginalized people – often deprived of the power of being seen and heard – and to 'normality', which makes it possible to pass unseen.

Because the list of substantial achievements is too long, I name just a few: first, the disruption of the whiteness of both trans* studies and visual culture by including mainly voices by queer and trans* people of color; second, the inclusion of voices of emerging artists and cultural producers mostly outside the art world as well as the combination of artistic and activist impulses; third, the different disciplinary backgrounds (art history, gender studies, queer studies, American studies, performance and theatre studies, and law) of the contributions prove the profound inter- and transdisciplinary

coloring of the anthology. However, considering the fact that most of the contributions point to the perils of trans* representation, it is surprising that there is comparatively little conceptual space for other radical forms of trans* politics that go beyond the paradigm of visibility.

This anthology is not only an outstanding introduction to trans* visual studies, but it is also an essential companion for everyone who is interested in ethics of visibility. Let us hope that more and more scholars, activists, artists, and curators will accept the editor's "invitation to fantasize and to dream otherwise" (p. xx) in order to be able to bring forward more secret, hidden and safe 'trap doors' for marginalized people.

German Abstract:

Ein schmaler Grat zwischen TÜR und FALLE: (Neo-)liberale Politiken der Trans*-Un_Sichtbarkeit auf den Prüfstand

Der kürzlich erschienene Sammelband *Trap Door. Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* beweist wieder einmal, dass Gesellschaftsveränderung und die Ausbildung von Subjektivität auch im 21. Jahrhundert noch eng gekoppelt sind an Fragen von Sichtbarkeit – handelt es sich doch um ein Feld, auf dem schon immer um Vorstellungen, Normen und Wissen über Differenzkategorien gekämpft worden ist. In einem paradoxen Moment, in dem Trans*-Menschen immer sichtbarer in den Mainstream-Medien werden und zugleich mehr denn je psychischer und physischer Gewalt ausgesetzt sind, öffnen die 21 inter- und transdisziplinären Beiträge von überwiegend trans* und queeren People of Color (Wissenschaftler_Innen, Künstler_Innen und Aktivist_Innen) eine wichtige Tür zum Nachdenken über folgende Frage: Wie können Trans*-Menschen in Kunst und visueller Kultur sichtbar werden, ohne wieder diskriminiert und stereotypisiert zu werden? Das Buch ist damit ein längst überfälliger und unerlässlicher Wegbegleiter für all diejenigen, die sich für ethische Fragen im Feld des Visuellen interessieren.

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