

IN_VISIBILITIES: SELF-REPRESENTATION, OTHERING, AND POWER IN
VISUAL CULTURE

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In_Visibilities: Self-representation, Othering, and Power in Visual Culture



Fig. 1: Teaser Image #13 “In_Visibilities,” detail of *Susanne fotografiert mich beim Bade II*, Edition 3+1 by Hannahlisa Kunyik, © Hannahlisa Kunyik

When we, the guest editors¹ of this issue, had our first look at the picture of the inter-medial installation *Susanne fotografiert mich beim Bade* [*Susanne Photographs Me Bathing*] (2011/2012/2018) by Viennese artist Hannahlisa Kunyik, we were immediately intrigued by the image’s ambiguity.² Looking at the picture, even if it is just a detail of the artwork which now figures as the cover of this *On_Culture* issue, has spurred questions that have preoccupied us during our studies of *in_visibilities* and representation: what or who becomes *in_visible* here, why and how?

Each of us then asked themselves further questions; for example, when figuring out what parts of a human body are portrayed here—who is shown and what does the person do? In how far could action and posture of the body be read as gendered? Does the image enable or complicate the identification of a gender? Other questions draw us into another direction: what role does the visual duplication play for the process of identifying a person or a situation? How does it modify our way of looking? Is the look focused or distracted? What emotions and associations does the image evoke in me, and why? Who is addressed by the image and who might be excluded from the position of the viewer?

These reflections lead directly to the debates on the power relations underlying *in_visibilities*, the topic which this *On_Culture* issue is dealing with. When we, in the course of our research, entered the discursive field of *in_visibilities*, we realized that the topos of visibility is frequently ascribed a predominantly positive value and is discussed as a precondition for political agency and social recognition. To ‘become visible’ is a phrase that stands for the recognition of specific needs, rights, and interests of subjects (or collectives) within public debates, to counteract discrimination and repressive structures.³ Thereby, this debate is also linked to individual assumptions of self-representation and a public acknowledgement of diverse needs and living conditions. Underlying the concept of visibility is, moreover, a presumed force of visibility to produce evidence, which has been a deep-rooted belief in societies of the Global North since the late 18th century, as e.g. Allan Sekula pointed out.⁴ These assumptions already hint at the fact that visibilities, their production, dissemination, and reception can be deeply contested.

Since the 2000s, however, the relation between visibility and invisibility has been increasingly re-negotiated, leading to a reassessment of both concepts’ potential for political agency. On the one hand, critical voices questioned the positive connotation of *visibility*, building upon a research tradition across diverse disciplines and discourses that seek to emphasize how visibility is deeply enmeshed with mechanisms of hegemony and othering. Their line of argumentation takes various directions: Firstly, visibility and the underlying visibility were examined for their disciplinary function⁵ as well as for their normative and naturalizing potential to make social orders appear as naturally given.⁶ Secondly, discussions problematized the mechanisms of how ‘others’ are constructed through stereotyping, which involves a visual dimension. That the agency of these ‘others’ is further affected by visual orders and gaze regimes, was another topic in political, post-colonial, or feminist discourses.⁷ Thirdly, the commodification and marketing of a highly visible otherness⁸ show that visual regimes are embedded in capitalist structures and neoliberal ideologies of the Global North. Recently, it has been stressed that identity politics can become instrumentalized to produce unambiguous visible identities.⁹ Finally, not only does an increased visibility of formerly invisible subjects have an empowering effect, but it can also lead to violence and oppression.¹⁰

On the other hand, concepts of *invisibility* and *imperceptibility* are experiencing a major reevaluation and are becoming strategies for challenging normative regimes of representation: It has been pointed out that not being visible (e.g., by active hiding or camouflaging) can either mean protection or privilege; likewise, what cannot be seen can nevertheless or precisely for that reason yield powerful effects.¹¹

These observations have also led to the claim that alternative concepts questioning or complementing visibility and visuality are needed to deepen insights into the mechanisms of how agency and empowerment can be acquired in the field of visual culture.¹² Consequently, concepts such as *ambiguity* or *opacity* have entered the debates, challenged the strict dichotomy between invisibility and visibility and emphasized interstices, in-betweenness, and ambivalences.¹³

Despite these critical approaches, visibility as the basis for political agency is currently discussed more than ever: Notwithstanding the manifold critique of visibility, it seems the concept still holds a certain potential to disrupt hegemonic power structures, as ongoing claims for *alternative* visibilities or the ability to *look* (i.e., to *see*) *differently* suggest.¹⁴ Especially in the context of identity politics around gender and race, the demand for visibility continues to be a central concern. But it has become even more complicated due to recent developments brought about by globalized digital and social media:¹⁵ There are steadily increasing possibilities to consume and produce images and even to generate and direct attention autonomously.¹⁶ Besides, debates about the right to one's own image and the related right of self-determination show that today, firstly, invisibility is just as contested as visibility and, secondly, that the transition between the concepts is fluid (see for example the discourse on the 'Right to be forgotten'¹⁷; or the debates on digital and analog surveillance practices¹⁸). These developments underline the need to constantly reassess the impact of visibility, its risks but also its gains.¹⁹

As researchers in art pedagogy and history whose scholarly work explores the dynamics of representing 'others,' we as editors of this *On_Culture* issue wish to bring invisibility and visibility into relation with new and less-explored case studies, to point out current dimensions and ambivalences of visual representation. To follow up on the debates presented above and to avoid a binary opposition, visibility and invisibility are conceptualized as two mutually entangled concepts. By using the underscore in the orthography (*in_visibility*), we want to highlight the processual contin-

uum between the two concepts and create a space for ambiguities that put the visibility concept under re-negotiation.

According to a power-analytical and ideology-critical perspective, the issue is interested in, first, approaches of a representational critique. Discussing hegemonic structures manifested and materialized in visual culture, these approaches reveal their powerful impacts, but also their contestability, competitiveness, and transformability. Second, the issue is interested in the question how minoritarian²⁰ politics of *in_visibility* can undermine hegemonic regimes of representation and challenge the dominant patterns of visibility, assimilation, and intelligibility. The exploration of minoritarian visual strategies that counteract processes of discrimination, disambiguation, and stereotyping due to categories of difference emphasizes the societal relevance of this *On_Culture* issue.

Following up on a long and productive debate,²¹ the issue does not aim to create a new narrative of *in_visibility*, neither do we want to even out contrasting voices. Rather, it is our aim to provide space for different perspectives on the topic and to allow for interdisciplinary dialogues and confrontations which might show the range and incompleteness of the discourses and stimulate further research.

The thirteen contributions to this *On_Culture* issue led us to adopt an understanding of visual culture as art historian Irit Rogoff offers: *Visual culture* “designates an entire arena of visual representations which circulate in the field of vision establishing visibilities (and policing invisibilities), stereotypes, power relations, the ability to know and to verify: in fact they establish the very realm of ‘the known’.”²² The interdisciplinary dialogue in this issue makes it possible to illuminate this ‘arena’ and to establish or discover connections between the approaches and the case studies analyzed. This also reveals the complexity of the term *in_visibilities*: *in_visibilities* can manifest in form of concrete visualities and yet are influenced by mental images and imaginations. In the forms of *in_visibilities* the actual merges with the virtual; *in_visibilities* not only comprise what is (not) visual but can evolve as intermedial and intertextual relations.²³

In our issue, we identify three thematic areas which we perceive as highly relevant and dynamic in the current discussions about *in_visibilities*. *Firstly*, the area of the

embodiment of representation and empowerment was illuminated and challenged by (queer) feminist and race-critical perspectives, especially in the past decades.²⁴

Kath Woodward contributes an *Essay* that follows up on her book “The Politics of In/Visibility. Being There” of 2015. Her *Essay* illuminates recent debates on and shifts in gender politics since the upheaval around the #metoo movement, which in her text becomes symbolically manifest in the evolution of the concept in/visibility to *in_visibility*. From a sociological perspective, Woodward’s *Essay* interweaves various forms of media thematization of gendered bodies in the Global North with different theoretical approaches and identifies crucial changes of gendered representations in visual culture due to social media. Finally, Woodward elucidates that visual representation and forms of looking are mutually dependent processes that structure political agency.

The *Article* by art historian **Annemarie Nowaczek** ties in with the gendered politics of *in_visibilities* by further differentiating the linking of forms of seeing and being looked at in feminist art. Taking as example the intermedial installation *Susanne fotografiert mich beim Bade* (2011/2012/2018) by Viennese artist Hannahlisa Kunyik, Nowaczek proposes the concept of *perverting performance* as a prism to re-construct *in_visibilities* of femininity. *Perverting performance* is discussed as a subversive strategy for citing and simultaneously perverting traditional modes of representation to claim agency.

Postcolonial and critical race studies frequently draw attention to the power of the *white* gaze and problematize spectatorship as well as repressive or stereotypical representations of the Global South. Postcolonial ambivalences of making cultural identities *in_visible* are discussed in **Claudia Ba’s** *Article*. Ba engages with a case study of West Africa’s *Intangible Cultural Heritage* by UNESCO, the Kankurang, an *in_visible* rite of the Mandinka ethnic group in Senegal and The Gambia. She critically analyzes the rite’s *in_visibility* in the course of its heritagization and commodification. Thereby, the author raises ethical questions of the dynamics of spectatorship, faced by the researcher themselves and fueled by the global tourism industry.

The fact that artistic practices, like fine art, but also literature and film, have a particular potential to subvert hegemonic regimes of *in_visibilities* by producing counter-visibility or alternative visibility is evident in Stella Chachali’s and Victor Santos Rodriguez and Maevia Griffiths’ *Articles*. From the perspective of literary studies,

Stella Chachali shows in her analysis of the genesis of Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary* how *in_visibility* can serve "as a methodological and hermeneutical key for unlocking the semantics"²⁵ of intermedial dynamics. By analyzing the intermedial narratological techniques of the text and the context of its production, Chachali illuminates the constantly shifting semiotic significance of visibility and invisibility related to narrating voices.

The power of the film medium, on the other hand, is further explored in the *Article* of **Victor Santos Rodriguez and Maevia Griffiths**. Santos Rodriguez and Griffiths examine the possibilities and conditions of agency in the context of (in)securitized migration by engaging with the experiences and politics of the *in_visible* body of 'undocumented' women domestic workers in Switzerland. Thereby, they connect the analysis of interviews with domestic workers with Griffiths' anthropological documentary film *Elles, les (in)visibles* and discuss bodily practices of rehumanization and resistance. Here, it comes to light how invisibility can refer to the powerlessness of subjects, but also to privileges.²⁶

The second focus of this issue is digitization and the role of digital media for *in_visibility*. The contributions show that, despite all the criticism, the power of making things *visible* is still very topical and is becoming even more explosive due to the development of new technologies. Opportunities for individuals to publicly communicate and create networks increase just as multiple forms of data collection and surveillance do. Some of the contributions point out the ambivalences of these developments:

Cultural and media theorist **Ramón Reichert** focuses in his *Essay on social or political bots* which are situated at the interface between visibility and invisibility: working out of the invisible or being camouflaged, bots influence what becomes visible in social media. They direct social media users' attention or even fulfil political propaganda. Thereby, social bots not only complicate the notion of identities in the digital age—blurring the boundary between humans and machines—but also problematize the concept of agency, which implies ethical concerns: By considering social bots a threat to democratic communication, it becomes apparent that the nexus of visibility and representation is central to the functioning of democracies.

A rather different perspective on the possibilities of digital data is voiced by **Mona Schubert**. In her *Perspective* "Hijacking the Patriarchy" Schubert discusses the case

studies of digital protests by the Russian punk band Pussy Riot and the feminist collective LasTesis. Schubert shows that new and ‘tailored’ forms of networked visibilities can create decentralized online communities that stand up to the challenge of rethinking media agency. Social media and platforms like *Youtube* are presented as possibilities to shape visibilities and create agency as well as ethical critique in contrast to regimes of invisibilization.

Lisa Stuckey combines the perspectives of (audio-)visual culture and contemporary art studies to discuss minoritarian approaches to espionage and hegemony-critical uses of intelligence. Building upon four case studies that analyze investigations by the research agency *Forensic Architecture*, the paper illuminates technical and methodological strategies of spies, scientists, activists, and artists creating evidence by making specific contexts and sources *in_visible*. The *_Article* thus pleads for a multisensory understanding of *in_visibility* so that forms of evidence can be considered in their diversity.

Stuckey’s contribution leads to the *third focus* of the issue: Since processes of knowledge formation are closely intertwined with *in_visibilities*, some contributions have specifically addressed the question of how research contributes to the *in_visibility* of marginalized subjects. What powerful effects do research and knowledge production or distribution unfold? What are the implications for researchers?

Lisa Maria Pregitzer uses an intriguing observation as the starting point for her *_Perspective*: the fact that the discipline of art history, which in view of its research subjects holds an intimate and immediate relation to the visual, still and frequently applies a metaphorical use of visibility and invisibility to discuss artworks. Pregitzer problematizes curatorial and art historical strategies of making women artists (especially of the late 18th and 19th century) visible in art historical discourse, collections, and exhibitions. Finally, Pregitzer’s *_Perspective* points out methodological and conceptual alternatives for art historical research on women artists.

Art historian and curator **Taya Hanauer-Rehavia** takes a different way to address a similar question: In her *_Perspective* she reflects on a curatorial strategy employed in her own exhibition *P is for Pussy*, shown in the artist community space, *The Bookstore*, in Amsterdam West, 2017. The author discusses her curatorial methodology as a way of dealing with forms of social oppression of women represented in and by the art histories embodied in collections and archives.

In her *_Perspective* “Making the ‘Other’ Visible in Ethnographic Research” **Ekata Bakshi** shares her reflections on bringing together feminist claims with methodological approaches of her field work in West Bengal, India. Through the lens of the intersection of caste and gender, Bakshi puts her role as a researcher up for debate as a privileged role. Consequently, Bakshi shows the effects of the presence of the researcher for the dynamics in the field which also affects the objective of supposedly making women *visible*.

Charlotte Püttmann and Sarah-Lea Effert discuss the role of the *in_visibility* of anti-Semitic sculptures in German churches. Their *_Perspective* takes the form of a personal exchange between the authors, with each of them writing from their respective disciplines, philosophy and art history. Through their dialogue exciting questions on monuments and memory in relation to visibility arise: What is the relationship between (not) seeing and (not) remembering, whose memory is dominantly represented in monuments, and who defines the didactic aims of how these monuments are presented and contextualized today?

Riley Linebaugh questions hegemonic knowledge formations through the lens of *in_visibilities*: Linebaugh sheds light on power and politics of colonial archives and their ability to control access to specific knowledge, on the example of the FCO 141 series at the National Archives at Kew (England). In her contribution it becomes clear, how *seeing* and *giving sight* can take on the role of witnessing and conforming narratives, pasts, and individual existences. By insisting on possession of these files and thus controlling their reception, the colonial archive perpetuates a colonial gaze regime.

To conclude this introduction, we would like to broaden the perspective and direct the attention once more from those who produce images and those who become *in_visible* to those who are the recipients of these images. Accordingly, we plead that the analysis of *in_visibilities* must be systematically connected to the perspectives of those ‘who look.’ To transform hegemonic structures of *in_visibilities*, it is also up to recipients to look critically and to question not only the images’ modes of production but also their modes of reception and one’s own viewing position.

Following up on this, it should be investigated more consistently and systematically in the future what role education and didactic approaches take to form a ‘critical

look.’ Additionally, these considerations should not be limited to the visual, but also be linked more strongly to non-visual dimensions. As this issue shows, seeing and being seen is considered central to representation, agency, and knowledge production, yet at the same time proves to be only one part of a multiplicity of senses and ways of perceiving and communicating—which are sometimes included implicitly in the notion of *in_visibility*.²⁷ The *polyphony* of *in_visibility* promises to remain an exciting and versatile field of research.

Endnotes

- ¹ We are grateful for the work of all authors who made this issue possible, as well as for the extensive support of Isabella Kalte and the whole *On_Culture*’s Editorial Team and the productive joint work on this issue. We also thank Annika Stendebach for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this *Editorial*.
- ² We sincerely thank the artist Hannahlisa Kunyik for agreeing to us using the detail of her artwork as a teaser image for this issue. For a detailed discussion of this installation, please also see [Annemarie Nowaczek’s article](#) in this issue. We are grateful to the author who has drawn our attention to the artwork.
- ³ See for example Sandra L. Laursen and Ann E. Austin, “Strategic Intervention Brief #13: Enhanced Visibility for Women and Women’s Issues,” in *StratEGIC Toolkit: Strategies for Effecting Gender Equity and Institutional Change* (Boulder, CO, and East Lansing, MI, 2014), www.strategictoolkit.org, accessed July 4, 2022 <https://www.colorado.edu/eer/sites/default/files/attached-files/13_enhancedvisibilitybrief123115.pdf>; Ernest Owens, “Black Visibility Matters—and Not Just During Trauma,” in *The Nation*, July 2, 2020 <<https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/black-visibility-trauma-media/>>; “Wir feiern die Sichtbarkeit von nicht cis-geschlechtlichen Menschen!,” in *Queer.de*, March 21, 2020 <https://www.queer.de/detail.php?article_id=35812>; “about visible,” in *visible*, <<https://www.visibleproject.org/blog/about/>>.
- ⁴ Allan Sekula, “Der Körper und das Archiv,” in *Diskurse der Fotografie. Fotokritik am Ende des fotografischen Zeitalters* vol. 2, ed. Herta Wolf (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, 2003), 269–334; see also Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6–8.
- ⁵ Michel Foucault, *Überwachen und Strafen: Die Geburt des Gefängnisses*, 19th edition (Frankfurt, a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2014); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011); see also Sophia Prinz’ work on Foucault in Sophia Prinz, *Die Praxis des Sehens: Über das Zusammenspiel von Körpern, Artefakten und visueller Ordnung* (Berlin and Bielefeld: de Gruyter; Transcript, 2014).
- ⁶ Sekula, “Der Körper und das Archiv.”
- ⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Frantz Fanon, *Schwarze Haut, weiße Masken* (Original: *Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952) (Frankfurt, a.M.: Syndikat, 1980); Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (Los Angeles et al.: SAGE; The Open University, 1997), 223–290; Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).

- 8 Antke Engel, *Wider die Eindeutigkeit: Sexualität und Geschlecht im Fokus queerer Politik der Repräsentation* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2002); Kien Nghi Ha, *Hype um Hybridität: Kultureller Differenzkonsum und postmoderne Verwertungstechniken im Spätkapitalismus* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2005); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
- 9 For the wider discourse e.g., Thomas Bauer, *Die Vereindeutigung der Welt: Über den Verlust an Mehrdeutigkeit und Vielfalt* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2018).
- 10 Engel, *Wider die Eindeutigkeit*.
- 11 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, transl. Gabriele Ricke and Ronald Voullié, *Tausend Plateaus: Kapitalismus und Schizophrenie* (Berlin: Merve, 1997). Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* [1990] (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2010); hooks, *Black Looks*, 168; Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson and Vassilios Tsianos, *Escape Routes: Control and Subversion in the 21st Century* (London: Pluto Press, 2008).
- 12 E.g. Johanna Schaffer, “Sichtbarkeit: Epistemologie und Politik eines Schlüsselbegriffs analoger und digitaler Medienrealitäten,” in *Handbuch Medien und Geschlecht: Perspektiven und Befunde der feministischen Kommunikations- und Medienforschung*, eds. Johanna Dorer et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer Reference Sozialwissenschaften, 2019), 1–19.
- 13 Ambiguity, *On_Culture* 12, <<https://www.on-culture.org/journal/issue-12/>>.
- 14 Kaya Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996); hooks, *Black looks*; Johanna Schaffer, *Ambivalenzen der Sichtbarkeit: Über die visuellen Strukturen der Anerkennung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2008).
- 15 Roland Bleiker, ed., *Visual Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018).
- 16 Markus Schroer, “Visual Culture and the Fight for Visibility,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 44, no. 2 (2013): 206–228.
- 17 Eugenia Georgiades, “Down the Rabbit Hole: Applying a Right to Be Forgotten to Personal Images Uploaded on Social Networks,” *Fordham Intellectual Property, Media and Entertainment Law Journal* 30, no. 4 (2020), 1111–1155.
- 18 David Lyon, “Exploring Surveillance Culture,” in *The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 6 (2018) <<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2018/13899/>>.
- 19 See, for example, the Research group “(In)Visibility in the Digital Age,” <<https://in-visibility.net/en/visibility-2/>>.
- 20 We use the term *minoritarian* to avoid reducing ‘othered’ subjects to a discriminated or marginalized status. *Minoritarian* indicates that a *seemingly* inferior status can be transformed into political agency and create new and empowered subject positions (see, e.g. Homi K. Bhabha’s use of ‘minoritarian,’ and also Johanna Schaffer’s use of the term ‘minorisiert’). Homi K. Bhabha, “Global Minoritarian Culture,” in *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, ed. Wai-chee Dimock (Princeton: University Press, 2007), 184–195. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Schaffer, *Ambivalenzen der Sichtbarkeit*.
- 21 A very fruitful and thought-provoking milestone for our debates was our interdisciplinary conference “Renegotiating Minoritarian In_Visibilities,” which we organized together with Oliver Klaassen and Cathérine Ludwig-Ockenfels on November 12–14, 2019 at the *International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture*, Justus Liebig University Giessen. With our *On_Culture* issue we now seek to continue and elaborate on our research and discussion of *in_visibilities*.

- ²² Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 20.
- ²³ Rogoff, *Terra Infirma*, 28.
- ²⁴ Debates on *in_visibility* of queerness and queer *in_visibilities* currently lead to very fruitful debates. See e.g. Elahe Haschemi Yekani, "The Ends of Visibility," in *Revisualising Intersectionality*, eds. Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Magdalena Nowicka and Tiara Roxanne (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 77–114; Oliver Klaassen, *Queering: Minoritarian In_Visibilities in Art & Visual Culture Renegotiated*, gender(ed) thoughts special issue (forthcoming); see also Antke Engel, *Bilder von Sexualität und Ökonomie: Queere kulturelle Politiken im Neoliberalismus* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009).
- ²⁵ See Stella Chachali in this issue.
- ²⁶ See also hooks, *Black Looks*, 168.
- ²⁷ This becomes very clear in relation to the category *silence* (e.g. *silencing voices*). See James Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance* (University of Michigan Press, 2013), 73–88; Anastasia A. Khodyreva and Elina Suoyrjö, "The Editorial for Following Sonorous Bodies," in *Unlikely* 7 (2021), <<https://unlikely.net.au/issue-07/editorial-384>>.