

Trans Intelligentsia

A Western Pictorial?

ZOWIE DAVY

Abstract Katie Herzog's *Transtextuality (Senate Bill 48)*, an installation "depicting 48 portraits of transgender men and women of letters," took on the mammoth task of displaying portraits of trans pioneers who represent transgender intelligentsia. The celebration of her Western "sitters" is an impressive display, and their academic work has no doubt contributed vast and wide-reaching insights into mine and the lives of some of my trans sisters, brothers, and others. However, her wall of fame, while potentially innocent in its creation, neglects the class, ethnicity/race, sexuality, and other situational aspects of trans writers' lives that may have impacted the performative aspects of knowledge production about (trans) gender beyond the Western imaginary. Although this trans celebration may feel subversive because it challenges the status quo of those whose knowledge counts vis-à-vis cisgender people, we must be constantly drawn to ask, does the subversion suppress others?

Keywords transgender intelligentsia, knowledge, art installation, archive

The transgender movement and field of transgender studies are global and diverse in character; hence, they contain within them many conflicting discourses. Western calls for transgender citizenship and rights revolve around the establishment of civil identities, including birth certificate change, and legislation to enable marriage and rights to parent, foster, and adopt. Other areas include the right to freedom from psychiatric diagnosis based on gender identity, access to appropriate medical care, the right to freedom from harassment and abuse, employment rights, and the right to self-expression. Added to these are more nuanced cultural, economic, political, and relational desires that impact the negotiations that take place within trans lives. Imagine how many different wishes, aspirations, beliefs, and value systems there are in a global community of trans people. Katie Herzog's *Transtextuality (Senate Bill 48)*, an installation "depicting 48 portraits of transgender men and women of letters" (katieherzog.net), took on the mammoth task of displaying portraits of trans pioneers who represent transgender intelligentsia.

Looking at Herzog's representations brought Bidy Martin's (1996: 112) warning to mind: pay attention to what gets blocked even as the supposedly repressed or once disallowed enjoy a new stage. Through a prevailing and precursory discourse, the performative aspects of this installation call into existence the hegemony of Western intelligence and knowledge and indeed transgender studies. The focus on these particular trans people of letters reifies a knowledge base that historically has sought to restrict gender identities to a binary formation and characterize expressions of gender and sexuality as diseases in need of cures. The celebration of these "sitters" academic work assumes that they impact the freeing of all trans lives because of their theoretical, empirical, and political contributions and writings. While I do not doubt that each and every "sitter," because of their contribution to *an* academe, has brought vast and wide-reaching insights into mine and the lives of some of my trans sisters, brothers, and others, this is only because of the privileged role that has been awarded US and European scholarship surrounding Western and often white transgender subjects. The focus on these wordsmiths does not add to a critique of the colonial enterprise, in that it suggests that European settlers are building progressive political models and that the rest, in other locations, should follow (Aizura et al. 2014).

The distance between Western trans celebrity in *Transtextuality* (*Senate Bill 48*) and non-English-speaking pioneers who are working toward equitable rights for trans populations globally has thus become wider than it need be. This wall of fame, while potentially innocent in its creation, neglects class, ethnicity/race, sexuality, and other situational aspects of trans lives that impacts the performative aspects of knowledge about (trans) gender. I hear a clear message being offered in the installation: that of the importance of those whose words count. Unfortunately, this statement also engenders a marginalization of indigenous knowledge emanating from biology, psychology, gender, sexuality, history, and so on.

How do artifacts wittingly and unwittingly contribute to the production of meanings around trans knowledge and intelligence? What about the knowledges and insights of those who do not speak English, and those cultures that do not have a history of binary genders or laws that prosecute or require an intrusive surveillance of our bodies? Are these knowledges not to be celebrated for resisting colonizing binary logics? This display of art has huge implications for what will be archived as trans struggles because the portraits in the installation, which have already been bought and archived in a museum's collection, provide only a partial history of what counts as an academic/linguistic transformation, of how both trans performances and the performative are constructed. There are no disclosures of certain lives without erasures and silences of others (Namaste 2000). The installation, as I see it, was imagined as an open nod to pioneers who have

impacted people who were interested in researching the lives, politics, insights, and potential “history,” “herstory,” and “zirstory” of trans identities and politics in the West. However, because of the lack of diversity, the installation will homogenize a Western view of trans lives, making invisible (once again) the knowledges and insights of our global sisters, brothers, and others.

It may appear subversive to exhibit this trans celebration, to challenge the status quo of honoring those whose knowledge counts vis-à-vis cisgender people. But we must be constantly drawn to ask, does the subversion suppress others? No artistic project may be able to capture all the layerings of what constitutes trans people of letters, but recording only five nonwhite pioneers (who mainly work in English) is in my view an error of judgment by the artist. Perhaps Herzog should have searched for “sitters” beyond English letters and included those who have contributed theoretically, empirically, and politically from wider cultures. Otherwise, the aesthetic critique that Herzog offers is hardly better than the source of her contention.

Zowie Davy is senior lecturer at the University of Lincoln, United Kingdom. Zowie’s work centers on transgender aesthetics and the medico-legal system and has recently looked at the implementation of the Gender Recognition Act of 2004. Zowie has published widely, and her monograph *Recognizing Transsexuals* won the 2012 Philip Abrams Memorial Prize.

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