

Ileana Botescu-Sireteanu

GENDER TRANSITIONS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN VISUAL ART

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Abstract: The present study locates its concerns at the intersection of Gender Studies, Queer Studies and visual culture, in order to prove that there is a coherent dialogue between the theoretical discourses about gender and the visual representations of it. Starting from the contemporary theories of gender, the present paper focuses on two instances of representing queer identity in contemporary American photography, which are consistent with de Lauretis's gender-as-representation model and with Butler's gender-as-performance model, respectively. The study also correlates these visual representations with the theoretical descriptions of queerness consecrated by various gender theoreticians in the 1990s. In contrast with previous accounts of lesbianism or homosexuality, which called for the necessity of a third gender, the present study argues that the queer, as represented in contemporary visual art, resists definition and epitomizes a state of permanent transition located in-between the two genders consecrated by traditional Western thought. Transition and transgression are the essential coordinates of representing the queer body, which, by itself, subverts the definite contours of the gender binary. In this respect, the study considers the various descriptions of the human body generated by the contemporary Western episteme, all of which support the relevance of the body as cultural entity. This study also considers the issue of representation as problematic for Queer Studies, which argue that representation is always partial and incomplete, bound to generate stereotypes and inaccurate frames of mind. The visual representation of queerness emerges, in the case of the two artists chosen to motivate this study, as pure subversion, as straightforward challenge of the traditional gender model, as a representation of the unrepresentable, as transition in the process.