The Break

Ian Gerson
Virginia Commonwealth University

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The Break

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

Ian Gerson

MFA, Virginia Commonwealth University

Director: Massa Lemu, Assistant Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

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# Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................2

I. Recognition.................................................................................................................................4  
   "i most notice your absence when i look for a mirror"

II. The Break..................................................................................................................................9  
   "the unseen. the in-between."

III. Opacity....................................................................................................................................13  
   "the moments when language fails."

Bibliography....................................................................................................................................19
Abstract

The Break

By Ian Gerson, MFA

*The Break* is a personal investigation into problems and possibilities of representing my specific transgender identity.

Trans as a tactic to speak about a state of forever becoming, forever in between, outside of and in opposition to dominant social norms of being.

Trans as a model for a different way of viewing and being in the world.

Can we form a different kind of horizontal shared power though a collective refusal to play into existing structures from which we have been excluded? What are the potentials for modeling other ways of being, other ways of (dis)engaging, other ways to be in the world?

What if we can disengage words from their established meanings? Can we re-see each other without the language that upholds the social conditions that maintain internalized categories? Can we collectively create the conditions to imagine the possibility of building other worlds in this world?
I believe in the world and want to be in it. I want to be in it all the way to the end of it because I believe in another world in the world and I want to be in that.

- Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, the undercommons: fugitive planning & black study

Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.

- José Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity
I. Recognition
six weeks after your death
finally in a room full of people you knew
and i'm suddenly sharply aware

    i realize i modeled masculinity off you.

    i most notice your absence when i look for a mirror and can't find one. ¹

maybe there's something /

    in the shadows /

not just the shape that blocks the light
the trace where light is blocked

a thing that can't be seen
that can be felt but not touched

dancing between camouflage and erasure

    fragments

    chopped up

known to those who know /

    remaining legible to who

    made to be legible for what ²
a refusal

to fail

to succeed

to exist on your terms

something that can't be taken away /
something escaping your sight

can't take what you can't name
Does recognition, and its prerequisites of assimilation, amount to the subject's self-determined life or to her survival as merely living in the matrices of self-definition provided by regulatory power? How can political signifiers that designate subject positions in terms of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class retain their contingency and openness to future rearticulations? To ask such questions, I think, is to keep open the question of how one survives recognition and the regulatory power upon which recognition is necessarily premised, even if liberal recognition is indeed that which we cannot not want.

- Athena Athanasiou in conversation with Judith Butler, "Recognition and Survival, or Surviving Recognition" in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*

Social mirrors: Ourselves reflected by peers, by those who "see" us. When mainstream society and biological family refuse to recognize us, refuse or are unable to see us, we build our own families out of a need to be recognized, out of a need to survive.

Silver glass mirrors: A physical visual representation, always backwards always reversed. The mark, which is a lie. An outward manifestation entrapped in worlds and names. The physical mirror shows the established understandings of language on the body, forces into invisibility the parts that exist outside the labeled terms. Ourselves imaged onto ourselves, forming the ways we define and internalize who we are.
So we refuse to ask for recognition and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls.

- Jack Halberstam, Introduction to The Undercommons by Moten and Harney.

ante-recognition. seeing before the labels. seeing before the language which forms the edges. words that form the parameters. that put the box around the thing. that put the boxed thing in proximity and relation and category to other things. the words, place, the thing / subject in ante-recognition is before recognition, before the placing of categories, names, labels boundaries, with which comes limits, hierarchies, false truths. recognition necessitates language which forms limits to what a thing can be. through recognition and labels our collective imagination of what could be possible of bodies and identities is made fixed and limited. by seeing and placing the thing seen within a category and thus in a relation to other things previously and in the future seen, things heard about with the same word, the recognition is a limit. ante-recognition is a state before recognition. maybe as babies we first see this way, before language pollutes the field of sight. maybe we see things that do not yet have names this way. before recognition. before the thing is placed.

what would transition look like if we could collectively change the ways we see ourselves, alter the apparatus not the subject? contort the gaze and change the lens? it is so hard to tell where my sense of self comes from. how much it is informed by the surroundings and the ways we are taught to see. normative society. normative ways of seeing. what if we can change the ways we see rather than the ways we are? what if we can disassociate shapes and colors and sounds from their relationships to power?
II. The Break
the unseen. the in-between. stutter. stop. breath. can't find the words. ripping at the seams of speech. scrapping the base. pounding at the edge.

pressing. stressing. fissure.

when your reflection cracks. when your eyes lie. when evidence cannot be weighed. when truth breaks down. 4 void, irrelevant, obsolete.

cut. break. tear.

how hard it is. how long it takes. no fixed end. forever in between. never fixed. never still. and still. make this space a home.

4 I’m after the way concern with perception and cognition (of the things themselves) leads to the deconstruction of ontology; the way deconstruction generates riffs and rifts, odds and ends, of philosophy and the intersection in philosophy of semiotics and phenomenology.

- Fred Moten, In the Break
we cross off the faces in hopes they look more like us.
we leave out the parts where our bodies have other names.
we erase the ties that hold us into the fixed spaces we knew we never were.
we build a web to hold our hearts. our pain follows and is entrenched in our pleasure. and your
breath makes that mark on the glass like my neck when i left for work. your mark on my skin and
it's read so differently in the world. my scars are ones of pride. i wouldn't change them for
anything. which is only something i can say now once they are there. i wouldn't go back for
anything. i find myself searching for scars on shirtless bodies at the beach. my eyes scan his
flesh for raised discolored underscores. and i don't see it. and what if everything was different
and the other way and what if our bodies could change because we see them differently and not
because we change them. and what if we never had to find a series of doctors and follow a
script and what if we didn't catch ourselves falling into assumed behaviors just so we could
exist.

we soon find our own language. talking to each other like the faggots we wish we were. we are.
seeing you. seeing me. proving real my existence in this space where i feel, where in ways i am,
invisible, continuously escaping sight. but through clenched fists i cling to my form.

for years when asked are you a boy or a girl my face flushed and i stuttered and stumbled out
the answer that was stamped on me like my name. i didn't have access to the language to see
myself. it wasn't until i was exposed to the words that i could put those words around myself. all
the thoughts i pushed away reached the point of overflow. dripping through the cracks. i hated
myself. i thought it was sick. and now i just wish i broke away sooner. expectations so deeply
ingrained it took years to acknowledge these walls were not my own. now my work is in the
breaking.
Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted. It would create a feeling that is extremely uncomfortable, called cognitive dissonance. And because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalize, ignore and even deny anything that doesn't fit in with the core belief.

- Franz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks
III. Opacity
looking for proof you start with the marks

    your fingers trace the sutures

    points where the needles pull out

your chest heaves from an invisible force

    bruise, cut, scab, scar

    full of thoughts you were told not to think about.

you never really use that word.

    maybe it's because it makes you think of a diagnosis.

    as something that needs to be fixed.

she gave you this as a substitute for fucking.

    lines carved into your back.

bodies collapse together

    he watches unseen

    parts he will never witness. 6

    cock missing, fingers dripping.

the mark is a lie. 7

evidence only of rupture.
To feel in solidarity with [them] or to build with [them] or to like what [they] do, it is not necessary for me to grasp [them]. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to "make" [them] in my image.

- Edouard Glissant, “For Opacity,” Poetics of Relation [original text uses he/him]

It is a misunderstanding that cameras are tools of representation; they are at present tools of disappearance. The more people are represented the less is left of them in reality.

- Hito Steyerl, The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal From Representation
The double bind in political attacks on transgender visibility hinges on the paradoxical demands of being both out of sight and readily identifiable.

No, abstraction is not an escape—but it can be a method of protection or evasion when easy legibility is dangerous or intrusive. There needs to be space both for confrontational politics and for the equally political tactics of nondisclosure and intended unrecognizability.

- David Getsy on Cassils (ArtForum)

how can we create our own language of visibility. visibility for each other. so that we can reach out to each other. to find each other. to let us know we are here. we exist. i couldn’t really see myself until i saw myself outside myself. until someone else told a story and i recognized myself between the lines. can we make a new visual language with the aim that ultimately we might be able to change the way we see those with stories that differ from the norm, that differ from our own? a new way of seeing, way of naming, way of thinking that could change the dominant schema. can we find liberation through relation? can we break cycles of violence and oppression by learning to see differently? can we collectively shift the way we see and process, de-socialize and de-construct?
the pressure builds up, erupts a split with dominant society. so limited in vocabulary to express the experience of this being outside-of. so limited in images because trans is in the shifting in the motion and the shutter freezes the physical what we see. a blur across the frame. somewhere in that murky space of hard-to-explain we reach for our ways. mirroring, cropping, layering the imaged body becomes fractured and fragmented pointing towards that which is impossible to see. build our language to build ourselves.

and so we exist in this space, in this gap between what is seen and heard with who we know we are.

what if we could break from our assumptions and reliance that categorizing words and images convey an evidence of what is. can we collectively break from the assigned meanings and associated power dynamics that established language have on bodies? quit this addiction on split second snap judgment, conscious or unconscious. the abuse and trauma that goes unseen that slips out of witness though neglect, agreed up denial, and even when we struggle to explain it we don't have enough of what would be considered proof. the violence that has been invisibilized due to how the power structure sets the frame of sight and writes the story. the structure is built on this violent silence and this slanted gaze. to acknowledge what has been cast as nonexistent would rattle the infrastructural foundations on which this regime was built and on which it relies.

and is trans one of those rattlings? the pillars of binary logic are a foundation stabilizing the current power regime. a quake at the base, a crack in the pedestal, a growing rift in the system. and for those of trans experience, there's the rift of a re-orientation of one's own subject position, a bodily knowledge of the relationally of identity, the precarity of privilege, the precarity of safety. and can trans and this rift be a model for a collective perceptual shift? starting with how we view on our own bodies, disengage the importance from the physical, rethink the notion of the individualized 'self', challenge the language of singular fixed identity categories. a collective battle against the institutional control of our bodies and minds. a resistance to the categorization that divides us. and yes, the agreement into this collective shift is most urgent from those holding structural power. when we move away from the static singular self, when we acknowledge that all identity is relational, when we recognize we all see it differently and that's ok, maybe then we can imagine the possibility of building another world from this world.
We cannot say what new structures will replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming. What we want after "the break" will be different from what we think we want before the break and both are necessarily different from the desire that issues from being in the break.

- Jack Halberstam, Introduction to *The Undercommons* by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney.
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