

Queer\_Feminist Perspectives on the Politics of Porn Performance and Sex\_work as Culture Production.



# Post / Porn / Politics

Ed: Tim Stüttgen

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#### IV. Dis/Identifications:

#### Performance and Embodiment, Drag and Transgender Politics.

**William Wheeler**, artist, performer, filmmaker, author and translator, works about the formation/loss of identity, the influence of border-areas on identity/body, and practices of self-representation and (un)gendering. Born 1978 in Virginia, raised in Virginia/Mississippi, he studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is based in Berlin since 2000. "one hand on open," a experimental feature film made in collaboration with Stefan Pente, world premiered in the 2008 Berlin International Film Festival in the section "Forum Expanded." He is continuously producing new film/video, installation, (video-)performance, and writing projects solo and with Stefan Pente and "smoking mirror," the arts production unit founded by Pente/Wheeler in 2006.

# William Wheeler

William Wheeler [http://www.smokingmirrorpresents.blogspot.com]



**Tim Stüttgen** Let's maybe start with some obvious facts. How did you, growing up in Mississippi, get aware of drag performance and how did you dive into that? Can you tell us about your background, biographically and artistically, and how drag started to play a role in your life, what your first experiences, both active and passive, were?

**William Wheeler** I should start by saying that I grew up in Missinipe. People commonly get my real hometown, pronounced Missinippi, mixed up with Mississippi, which is a state in the deep south of the US, near New Orleans. Mississippi and Missinippi are both Algonkian words, though the first is Ojibwe and the second is Cree. It's easy to get all these Algonkian names mixed up orthographically. Origins are difficult to locate, including the origins of names. Some people just say that it all goes back to the land bridge and the vikings, leaving it at that.

My home village, Missinipe, is a hamlet in the northern part of the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, located in the Saskatchewan voting district, or "riding," called Desnethé-Missinippi-Churchill River, a French-Cree-English name. This riding alone takes up over half of Saskatchewan, is about 350,000 square kilometers large – about the size of Germany – and has a population of about 68,000 (less than in Berlin-Wedding, where I live now); and two thirds of the riding's population is comprised of Cree, Métis and other aboriginal people. Missinipe is sort of in the outer area of the inner area of this riding, and has a year-round population of about 20, one of which I used to be.

I first started being from Missinipe when I was six years old, because before that "Missinipe" didn't even exist as a hamlet. Then, we were all from a larger area called Otter Lake. In 1984 the name of my small community, on the peninsula that stretches into Otter Lake, was dubbed "Missinipe." Though Missinipe is indeed derivative of the very important Cree words, misi nipi, or "great water," in the case of our hamlet it got spelled Missinipe with an "e" for some reason. (Some people even say our village, Missinipe, is pronounced differently than Missinippi, more like Missinappy.) Misi nipi means "big waters," "great waters" or "many waters/much water" in the Cree language – the dialect spoken around Missinipe is Nihithawiwin, or Woods Cree. Michi zibi (Mississippi) means "greatest river" in Ojibwe, or Anishinaabemowin, which is spoken in the US and Canada, though Woods Cree is spoken only in Canada. The Churchill River – which has actually always been called the Missinippi river but was renamed "Churchill River" (after the Englishman John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough and governor of the Hudson's Bay Company from 1685 to 1691) – this river, it's Cree name, the Missinippi, gives another of the many names to this region in northern Saskatchewan where I'm from: the "Missinippi lake country of northern Saskatchewan." However, this is a name that's used mostly for "recreational zoning," in this case for canoe tourists.

In the Americas, names and origins in and of themselves are only capable of scratching the surface of what has happened and what's really going on presently within an appropriative process based on land, history, sovereignty of the rich, and capitalism.

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If we appropriate names and respell them, it's still with our Roman alphabet, and we're still dealing with mere names. We still remain oblivious to the Cree alphabet and what it means to read, write and speak Cree.

Witnessing all of these dynamics while growing up in Missinipe is one reason why I consider drag an interesting, but also difficult, practice which has the potential to stand for a legacy of thievery, trauma and misunderstanding. Many North American whites get into "Indian drag" as an exotic excursion "outside" of what they would consider to be their generic, humdrum, whitewashed "American" lives: they get into a kind of "blackface." They're not only renaming themselves temporarily, they're "acting Indian," reproducing stereotypes, reproducing politics. This is a kind of drag I was exposed to as part of my "origins."

That's why in Missinipe I really had to try my best to think up my own, previously unthought-of stuff. I realized pretty early on that I enjoyed giving myself different sensations in private, and part of that process involved recreating my environment and my shell, my clothes, trying to alienate my body from its mirror image. I liked to make weird costumes out of colored paper and trash and different old, thrown-out tools of my fathers, not to mention the out-of-style draperies and bedspreads and napkins left over after my parents would redecorate our bed and breakfast, my mother's old doilies, etc. My costumes got me interested in different kinds of sexuality, because they made me touch my body differently! They made me feel something different when I touched myself.

Aside from making me look different, they made me feel different, like I was something else, really, feeling different in the flesh. This is such a powerful feeling. But I have to say, in the moment when I realize that I might be trying to feel like an Indian or like a woman, I become very mistrustful of drag. I don't want to become someone who already exists. I just want to abstractly disavow who I am in my everyday without categorizing myself according to existing regimes of identity. However, I don't mean that disavowal is a characteristic of a purely negative, purely disidentificatory drag practice which I exclusively embrace. I like a drag practice where disavowal can even amplify what one is trying to disavow in terms of one's own everyday roles, facilitating varying types of entrance into self-critical openness and nonconformistness, with oneself as a (blurry) point of departure. I think this is a more accurate description of my work with drag. In Missinipe, I wasn't trying to represent something, I was just trying to reshape my time and space.

**TS Talking about time and space, I am interested in what you think about the double movement of drag, on the one hand being named as an inversion of past losses, and on the other hand being able to productively change (or queer) concrete contemporary environments with its presence. I think I'll leave this very open, being interested in what you think about this double movement (loss/production, absence/presence) of drag.**

**WW** For me, the productive side of drag is found in the process of research, learning and writing, which drag, in reference to my own practice, always entails, the process of writing subjectivation critically. The problem with putting drag into closed, stable identity-encampments is this: no sooner has one "learned" one language then one inevitably loses that language's relevance, that particular modifier's allure. In my mind, drag has little to do with gaining identity because it's fickle

and obsessed with the unknown. So the loss side of drag indicates, in part, a performance's object which is no longer reachable and, perhaps, no longer useful within any present situation. Put differently, the modifier, i.e. whatever "kind" of drag I am in, is only interesting to me as long as it continues to undergo replacement and change. I should change my drag as soon as I have exhausted the question: what does it mean to "be" a man, a woman, a horse, a professional, etc.; and as soon as that question is answered with what I consider to be the only viable answer – nothing – then I can move on and see drag also as an arepresentational and monological senso-erotic practice. For me, dragging is, in essence, destabilizing categories (of me, you, it, we, they).

Drag's penchant for embodying the absence/presence or the loss/production dichotomy could be found in the theme of passing. Passing simultaneously involves as many aspects of absence (the invisible, the undetectable, the assimilated) as it does of presence (the totality of identity – the power of presence, participation and infiltration in the face of sexism, trans-phobia and racism). Passing is linked to trauma in a blood-sisterhood of sorts; in some cases it can summon the bodily indelibility of trauma: the trauma of being found out and exposed to violence, or being the object of disbelief, being discredited and humiliated. And visible drag, or the ultra-visible radicalization or overturning of familiar representation (a drag queen who lets her balls hang out of her g-string), has the potential to traumatize those who do it and those who see it. It is a violence in itself.

I find the best example of this debate in Adrian Piper's amazing essay, "Passing for White, Passing for Black." One gets such an immediate sense of the leverage that traumatic experiences have in her life – the racist slurs made in her presence because people assume she's white, university officials drilling her to make her prove she's black while chiding her for taking advantage of affirmative action when she's "obviously white," black friends and community members accusing her of passing in "white drag." I can understand why she chooses not to pass for white. She doesn't want to perpetuate her and other families' lifelong history of social isolation and secrecy, which is often a requisite for passing. By disclosing her blackness in her personal and practical, intellectual, artistic life, it's like the bomb is being simultaneously defused and set off. Winning and losing at the same time. In the end she explains that, for her, disclosure is the best way, because it means supporting a kind of education against racism. Finally, in the last two pages, her closing points give me such a positive kick: ". . . my designated racial identity itself exposes the very concept of racial classification as the offensive and irrational instrument of racism it is. [. . .] Why is it that we can't seem to get it right, once and for all? [. . .] The fact is that the racial categories that purport to designate any of us are too rigid and oversimplified to fit anyone accurately. But then, accuracy was never their purpose. Because we are almost all, in fact, racial hybrids. . . ."

Loss, especially in relation to passing, is particularly relevant if we are, in fact, within the realm of concepts. Piper was angry about being forced to shed her black identity by people who either consciously or unconsciously thought it was more

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comfortable to her to fit into what they catered to as a concept of whiteness. Without intending to be in spite of Piper's argument, I do think that an active choosing to lose one's history can be productive, for example by allowing oneself to lose concepts, to lose the status of a minoritarian agent who oppositionally assists in defining and strengthening the mainstream definition of whiteness (or fe/maleness), to enter depressurized spaces, temporary and self-critical fictions. To get lost. Though this choice to lose can be productive, it can also be horribly violent and traumatizing if the loss means obligation to conform to yet another, usually diametrically opposed, concept. One could recognize and understand self-inflicted loss as potential, as nonsense, as vacuum. Indeed the loss of contexts also enables a production of new networks.

**TS** Where do you see the spatial reality of those networks? Or is it already a success that we can imagine them? Are you talking about virtual or actual networks? My position would be that we need a new kind of queer activism (which possibly could be called post-pornographic) and collective performative interventions that exceed both the classic form of the demonstration and identitarian struggles for visibility. . . .

**WW** I prefer the idea of political movement, in general, to political activism. Movement is an exclusively transitional middle space, and movement can be, as you said before, active or passive experience, voluntary or involuntary deeds. It can be running cross-country

or dreaming. It's very excessive. For me, the most interesting kind of queer movement sees the space it inhabits as a kind of odd flux or expansive bend in the present time and space of "political progress." The inside of this flux or bend or refraction of real space is always somewhere else, a shifting transitional virtuality in which the body, let alone the intellect, sometimes has no wherewithal to participate – because the body isn't always there when the space is, because the body shouldn't have to be one's *raison d'être*, one's last resort.

I'm interested in blind sensory self-staging, the making of a new self-tactility which is not reducible to the body yet irreducible to social relations. And I'm interested in research and language. These are two possible ways for me to understand drag and its political potential: the making of a new sensory self-portrait, so to speak, starting privately and slowly entering into different networks, and self-critically researching something/someone in detail without necessarily having to embody or represent it/them. "Speaking nearby" others rather than speaking for or at them, as said by Trinh T. Minh-ha. Instead of drag practice being a "blackface" or ethnographic approach, we could realize how drag already functions in so many invisible, social, combinatory, everyday ways, and begin exploring and playing with those functions. Sometimes it happens the best at home all alone in front of the mirror. Sometimes it happens when you write a text.

Being myself a performer, when drag as activism is the issue at hand, I'd rather not have to change or influence other people's "identities," as one is expected to categorize them, the "audience" (in terms of identity politics), constituted by the "stage" (in terms of power, advocacy and representative politics). One could reject the stage.

**TS** Is there a possibility to start "rejecting the stage" also on the stage? I am always a



bit skeptical when it comes to leaving political spaces, however limited their rule of representation may be. Can you tell me a bit about your piece Border Strip, which (in different versions) you continue to perform even today. What interested you in the performance and how did you try to manage with these questions before leaving the stage? It would be great to hear some more of what you tried to do in this abstract striptease performance.

WW Border Strip is about fleeing and flight. It is a machine of sorts for producing an ongoing pool of sound, video, text, costume and drawing documents that deal with, on the one hand, the desire to sell oneself as a sexual object and this desire's, or this purchaseability's, inextricability from states of poverty and otherness, while questioning, on the other hand, the belief that bodies provide us with authentic economies, histories, desires, identities and social interactions, and conversely that authentic economies, histories, etc. provide us with authentic or real bodies, boundaries, identities. I worked a lot with my own memories but also with the memories of others, documented and/or fictional.

When I started with Border Strip it was important to talk about the violence of labor, the often deadly violence against low-paid, gendered workers, like maquiladoras, and in Border Strip some of this information relating to body commodification has been a point of departure for a paradoxically aversive (more aversive than abstract, more affective than subjective) striptease practice. The paradoxically aversive striptease practice examines and questions the gaze (and the labor of representation which corresponds to it) as a force which doesn't necessarily only commodify bodies unjustly (this would be too simple) but rather as a practice that engages in a social, performative confirmation of the truth and authenticity of its own sanctioned mutual relationship of control and competition with the body. This supposedly inevitable relationship of control makes the body into a material, chronological value-creator which allegedly owns, among other things, an interior and an exterior, a garment and a skin; in effect, the body is turned into an object of potential depreciation, inflation and devaluation, while often being unable to resist these dynamics (a resistance which I think should be possible). I think that striptease can stage a body's moment of being outside of these dynamics, as shown by artists like Bubu de la Madeleine and Luciano, both of whom inspired me to begin looking at striptease in my own work. My interest in striptease grew out of a personal narcissistic urge to objectify myself vis-à-vis desiring viewers, to need to feel desired, to work as a prostitute, mainly to boost my low self-esteem. But the actual stripping in Border Strip has, over the four years of its development, become more and more cold, more and more lethargic, as if to undress and seem like one is getting dressed; because throughout my research it became increasingly nagging that the stripteasing body, seen in context of its development as a performance genre which was and is still shaped by censorship, is inherently paradoxical and nonsensical, like money.

The "we will overcome censorship" attitude sets the stage beautifully for the body to function as currency, as in "we will earn money," "we will finally show you what you want" or "you'll get what you paid for" or "this is something you've never

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experienced," "a new thrill" "worth every penny." The performing body is always encoded; there is no such thing as authenticity as far as it is concerned. But if this encoding is reduced to the sexing of the body's obligatory status as money, being "exchangeable" and "measurable," cut off from the gift and the counterfeit, then we are stuck with a suspicious monetarist stabilizing force. The traditionally stripteasing body in particular (Gypsy Rose Lee, Blaze Starr, Ann Corio), imbues us with scarcity and loss, loss of authentic sex, loss of equal exchange, which is why the economy of striptease interests me in the first place. Censorship, when it is understood negatively as something to be defeated, functions as a machine for inciting desire, "stimulating growth," to put it into economic terms. It functions like money. "Show me the money," as the saying goes. In his bizarre essay, "Le Striptease," Barthes talks about the g-string, the device used in early striptease to hide the vagina, as "reimagining the woman in a mineralogical universe." Referring only to the female sex, of course, he remarks that "Striptease is based on a contradiction: woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked." Though he seemed to humanistically mock the dry coquetteries of striptease, born in its reliance on censorship and the innuendo, I would prefer to see striptease's coquetteries, its inauthenticity as an interesting critical as well as productive potential. So to answer your question in a way, a rejection of the stage, in terms of

striptease, for me would mean to indeed reappropriate and push this coquetteries to a stark desexualization, or a flat sexiness as it were, to become, as a performer in a striptease of sorts, something like an on-stage broken record, in a way to reject pathos and penetration, to take a detour around the theater stage as a liberationist device, to avoid, as an object of the gaze, getting caught up in performer/viewer dynamics which demand that the one "heat up" the other. I would like to give people enough space to try and listen to what I'm saying in reference to my body and our gazes without necessarily feeling like they, as audience, are required to be implicated, that a need or a demand has to be stirred in them in order to understand the performance's many messages and, positively speaking, participate in a "relational non/eroticism" which is dependent on the complex of text, image and sound information. I think that the sensation of being "turned on" by performances of nakedness and sex can also be tied to and codependent with a very static thingness, with a complex of contradictory information, with distance, presence and absence in the same body, giving bodies space to be more singular as objects of gazes.

## Post/Porn/Politics

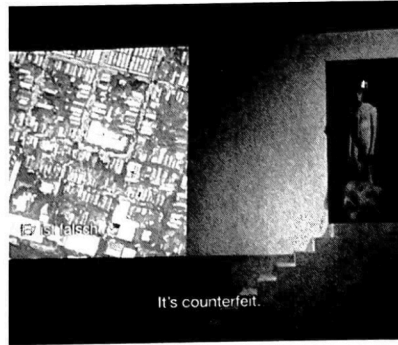


fig. 01

video still from Border Strip, performed in Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof, Hamburg, Germany; June, 2008; set within the exhibition space of Stefan Pente's solo exhibition, Reihe Ordnung sagt: SEX; video still: Ines Schaber.



fig. 02

video still from Border Strip, performed in Kino Arsenal 1, Berlin; August, 2008; video still: Stefan Pente.





fig. 03

"Lady of the Green Lantern Waiting for Molly," pencil, cm21x30, 2008

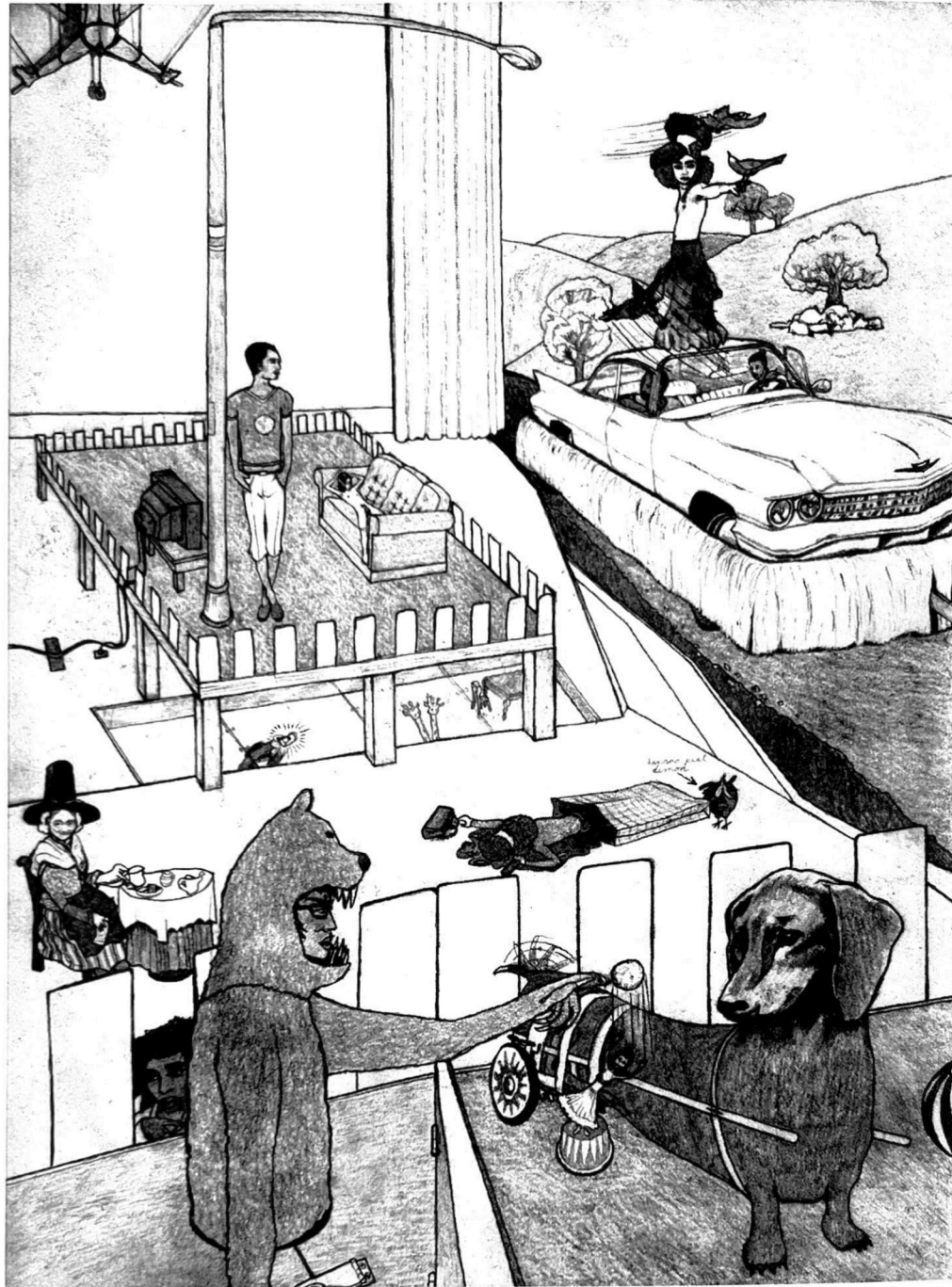


fig. 04

"Hunky-dory (Alles im grünen Bereich)," pencil, cm21x30, 2008



fig. 05

"Fuck the Police," pencil, cm21x30, 2008