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*Paper prepared for the
Fifth Euroacademia Forum of Critical Studies
Asking Big Questions Again*

11 – 12 November 2016

Lucca, Italy

*This paper is a draft
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Nikki Lee's Transgender Performance: The *Projects* of Drag Queens, Lesbians and Strip Dancers

Between 1997 and 2001, the Korean conceptual photographer, Nikki S. Lee, conducted fourteen photographic *Projects* mainly in New York and other major American cities. In her works (**Slide 2**), Lee appears as a slippery agent, infiltrating a range of American social and cultural groups, including drag queens, exotic dancers, yuppies, Latinos, black hip-hoppers, lesbians, senior citizens, neo-swing dancers, Japanese teenagers, skateboarders, Ohio trailer-park dwellers, Asian tourists and Korean schoolgirls.¹ For each project, Lee dramatically alters her appearance through a blend of clothing, make-up, diet, hair extensions and use of hair dye, as well as tanning salons. After transforming herself, in her own words, into someone who looks like 'eighty percent of any person from whichever group', Lee accesses to each chosen community with a point-and-shoot camera and announces her artistic intention to become a member for a short period of time.² She spends time with other group members, adopting their gestures, behaviours and mannerisms and joining in their everyday activities. To document her temporary membership, Lee asks a friend or a passer-by to take snapshot photographs of herself embraced by other group members in a series of deliberately chosen contexts.

The indexical nature of photography enables Lee to exhibit her time-stamped snapshots as 'fake' documentaries of various simulated personas she performs. Following the vernacular ritual of snapshot photography—posing and smiling to mark memorable moments of holidays, parties, family reunions and other public events, Lee's works fabricate scenarios of 'social belonging' in the disguise of other group members she has ever hanged out with for a period of weeks or months. Through her *Projects*, Lee proposes a distinctive way of imaging identity, which is considered, as the philosopher Alison Weir argues, no longer a static category that enforces 'sameness across group members', but an active practice based on 'recognition of the

other, and an openness to transformation of the self'.³ With a specific focus on Lee's *Projects* in association with the formation of gender identity, this paper reconsiders Judith Butler's conception of 'drag', and examines in what way this mode of drag performativity is practised in Lee's playful performance of 'gender trouble', raising questions about the construction and representation of both individual and collective identities.

Lee's first project is *The Drag Queen Project* (1997) (**Slide 3**). Wearing a black sequinned dress, long black gloves and high heels, Lee has herself photographed hanging out in a Manhattan drag club. Her ensemble is complete with heavy make-up and a platinum blonde wig. In one photograph (**Slide 4**), Lee stands in the middle of three drag queens, all dressed in evening wear with high heels and a wig. Although they stand together as a 'community', the height difference between the petite Lee and other three towering drag queens reveals Lee's status as an outsider—a woman who mimes a man miming a woman. According to Butler, drag instantiates an 'imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality'.⁴ By miming a subcultural, 'female' gender role adopted and falsified by male performers, Lee disrupts and obscures her naturalized 'womanliness', revealing how gender, as a form of performance, can be both produced and destabilized through repetitive acts of imitation without an original.

This particular mode of drag performativity might be understood as a functioning template for Lee's later practices—her performance as a member of a wider range of social and cultural groups. In response to the misreading of gender performativity as free theatricality, in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler distinguishes between gender as a product of the 'forcible citation of a norm' and drag as a voluntary, artistic performance through the parodic citation of a norm.⁵ According to Butler, 'in the drag ball productions of realness, we witness and produce the phantasmatic

constitution of a subject, a subject who repeats and mimes the legitimating norms by which it itself has been degraded'.⁶ As for Lee's practice, she tends to constitute various individual identities and group memberships by imitating, adopting and reinforcing a selection of stereotypical semiotic codes, those which have partially deviated from the daily reality of her chosen groups, and reduced their social and cultural constructions. Conducted as a voluntary process of self-determination, self-fashioning and self-transformation, Lee's performative practice, I want to suggest, demonstrates a similar mechanism to drag, which reiterates, yet, at the same time, degrades the legitimating norms and traditions of her adopted communities.

Indeed, in addition to the exaggerated satire and playfulness in the conventional drag performance, Lee's adoption of a drag mechanism in her practice also seeks to articulate a humanist egalitarian utopia, which aims at constituting social and cultural attachments beyond established identity boundaries and hierarchies. However, there is no doubt that Lee's mimicked, dramatic projection of identities runs the risk of abstracting the collective existence of her adopted groups into a series of reified, illusory images. As shown in *The Drag Queen Project*, Lee intends to integrate into this particular subcultural group by simply wearing its typical clothing and makeup, and visiting drag nightclubs. In Lee's photographic works, drag culture has been reduced to a performative 'feminine' image comprised of superficial, essentialized visual signifiers.

Lee continued her performative exploration of gender identity in *The Lesbian Project*. In this series (**Slide 5**), Lee appears as a female butch-lesbian. Sitting alone in a gay bar in Manhattan, Lee stares at the camera, while holding a cigarette and a bottle of beer in her hands. She leaves her blue checked flannel shirt unbuttoned and shows a grey vest underneath. Clad in dark brown corduroy slacks, Lee positions her legs apart to assume a 'masculine' posture. In contrast with Lee's stiff pose and frontal

gaze, two women lovers behind her are captured in the midst of a passionate kiss.

This project also includes a series of photographs, which depict Lee's daily life with her 'temporary' girlfriend—a young white woman with short blond hair, who was fully aware of Lee's project and assisted her in performing a 'fake' family life.⁷ In this way, the 'truthful' snapshot, which usually promises an unscripted immediacy and authenticity, is employed in Lee's works to document a lie. In one image (**Slide 6**), Lee and her partner snuggle together on the sofa while watching the television. Empty bottles, used paper cups, take-away packs and bags are scattered around. Captured here is a casual and cosy moment of the young lesbian couple at home. Moreover, one of Lee's photographs (**Slide 7**) features an intimate moment, when two lovers are in the midst of a kiss as they tightly hold each other and rest their heads on a white pillow. Since the camera directly focuses on their heads and the room is brightly lit, this scene is clearly coded as a performance rather than a natural affective gesture.

Like drag queens, butch women also take the central position in Butler's discussion of gender performativity. According to Butler, the butch's performance of masculinity reveals and dramatizes the radical contingency between heterosexual gender ideals and the imitative performance of them.⁸ It is the explicit visual signifiers of gender transgression projected onto the butch subject that demonstrate alternative realities to the apparent naturalness of heterosexuality. In her artworks, as an admittedly straight woman, Lee mimes masculine gender codes and styles to enact a butch-lesbian persona, crossing conventional boundaries of gender and sex.⁹ Her practice is conducted as an imitative performance similar to drag, which both reinforces and destabilizes established heterosexual norms and traditions. In this way, Lee collapses the social and cultural division between heterosexuality and homosexuality, masculinity and femininity.

Furthermore, the line of demarcation between the butch and femme role is not so explicit in Lee's photographs. Her temporary 'femme' girlfriend (**Slide 8**) has even shorter haircut and wears gender-neutral clothing in plain and dark colours. She too appears coded as a butch. Lee never indicates clearly whether her girlfriend is also a straight woman impersonating a femme or whether she is a butch lesbian temporarily adopting the femme role for her project. By fabricating a 'fake' family life with a relatively 'masculine' femme figure, Lee also puts into question her own performance of a butch lesbian through the parodic citation of masculine norms and styles.

According to Lisa Walker, in contrast to drag queens, who perform degraded, simulated gender identities on stage, butch and femme roles are 'sexual styles that also parody the notion of true gender identity'.¹⁰ This argument is slightly different from Butler's configuration of the butch subject in her discussion of gender performativity. From Walker's perspective, the butch lesbian is not simply an image composed of transgender signifiers, but a sexed body disrupting the naturalized norms of heterosexuality. In opposition to Butler's performative economy of gender identity, which 'relies heavily on a notion of the body as visual surface', Jay Prosser has also suggested that the formation of gender identity demands 'some recognition of the category of corporeal interiority (internal bodily sensations) and of its distinctiveness from the body's external appearance'.¹¹

In this sense, Lee's performance as a butch lesbian is never comprehensive and successful. In other words, she can adopt the external appearance and demeanour, but never the 'corporeal interiority' of the butch subject. Following the mechanism of drag performativity, Lee's imitative, queer performance of transgender identities, in fact, reifies the particular subject she enacts, ignoring the importance of the corporeality of the sexed body in the formation of gender identity. The photographic moments of 'being at home' or 'being in community' compiled through her superficial,

incomplete impersonations draw attention to the limitation and bias of defining one's individual and social existence merely based on apparent, visual labels.

Unlike her queer performance in *The Drag Queen Project* and *The Lesbian Project*, Lee, in *The Exotic Dancers Project* made in 2000, played excessively with her 'original womanliness' in a particular nightclub setting. A range of snapshot photographs were taken to reveal the life of female strippers. In one photograph (**Slide 9**), clad in a hot pink bikini and black high-heeled sandals, Lee performs a pole dance with other co-workers and strips off her bra in front of paying male customers. A black lace ring fastened on her right thigh is used for keeping tips. Although the photograph is awkwardly cropped and terribly blurred, it still captures a typical scene of striptease culture—the consumption of the female body for the erotic pleasure of men. Another image (**Slide 10**) features Lee standing in close proximity to another strip dancer outside the Gold Club after work. Lee wears a loose hoody top and jeans very different from her glamorous and revealing outfits on stage, while her colleague has also been covered up with layers of outdoor clothes. It becomes difficult to identify them as strip dancers except for the big pink cosmetic box in Lee's hands, which carries the make-up she needs for her professional 'disguise'.

Through two photographs taken in different situations, Lee articulates the significance of masquerade and performance in constructing this particular night-club, subcultural female persona. The erotic, flirting image of the strip dancer is, in Lee's works, rendered as a cultivated mask which can be worn for attracting male customers' attentions and making money, and removed after the performance. This is shown even more evidently in another photograph (**Slide 11**), in which Lee and a fellow dancer browse clothes in a local costume shop. A variety of six-inch heels and leather dresses are visible in the background. Lee wears a simple round-necked blouse and her colleague is in a white strapless shirt and dark overalls. In this photograph, the

dancers are not portrayed as objectified, erotic figures consumed by male audiences, but active customers for a specific subcultural style, involved in an endless circle of consumption and self-fashioning.

However, Lee's photographs, which present striptease culture as a visual style and profitable performance, lack a critical consideration of the controversial, sexist aspect of the strip club. Her elaborately programmed performance in this particular subcultural context, similar to drag, constitutes illusory images of strip dancers, which, in fact, essentialize the reality of their social and cultural existence. Her temporary membership of the group (**Slide 12**) is demonstrated largely on the basis of the conventionality of snapshot photography. Guided by dominant social norms and cultural ideals, the tropes of domestic bliss, interpersonal intimacy and social harmony have become iconic images of mundane snapshots.¹² People incline to perform intimacy and show gestures of mutual affection in front of the camera. It is this aesthetic convention of snapshot photography that enables Lee to stage the falsely signified 'intimacy'— 'a quality of extended engagement normally based on deep knowledge, rapport and trust'.¹³ Lee's snapshots, which record her daily engagement with the strip dancer group, are juxtaposed with each other as residual proofs for her successful transformation into an acceptable, temporary member. In her works, other group members around her are rendered as props for the formation of her fabricated moments of 'belonging' to the community.

According to Weir, to identify with another we must have the capacity to 'travel to her world', so as to enable our recognition of her experience and 'her resistant agency', and shift our relation from indifference to interrelated interdependence.¹⁴ 'To travel to her world' refers to a friendly gesture, which articulates the willingness to learn about the other and transform the self, as well as the relation between each other.¹⁵ Lee's photographs (**Slide 13**) create an artistic mediation for viewers to imagine the

experience of building up new collective relations with social or cultural groups that they 'might rather not see and not know', even if in a superficial and performative way.¹⁶ Indeed, Weir's notion of 'travel to her world' is not aimed at fully assimilating to the community of 'others'. Instead, it proposes a new form of conception of 'identity' and 'community', which can be both constructed and reconstructed through self-transformation and mutual communication with other subjects. Lee's practice, to some extent, demonstrates a democratic ideal of constructing community bonds freed from established social, cultural and political boundaries that divide self and other, similar to what Weir has proposed. However, as a privileged, controlling artist, Lee never actually travels to the world of her chosen groups in the manner outlined by Weir. In the guise of the performative moments of 'community life' staged and programmed for the camera, Lee's artworks pay little attention to 'the broader socioeconomic, political and cultural forces' that render her adopted communities hegemonic or marginal, privileged or disempowered in society.¹⁷ This stands in stark contrast to Weir's model of 'identification with', which requires the recognition of social power relations and one's resistant agency. In this sense, Lee's photographs make up a performative illusion, rather than reveal a deep reality of collective belonging.

¹ Different from other thirteen projects, which are taken in America, Lee's *The Schoolgirls Project* was taken in Seoul when she came back to home for holiday in 2000.

² Gilbert Vicario, 'Conversation with Nikki Lee', in Lesley A. Martin (ed.) *Nikki S. Lee: Projects* (Osfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001), p. 107.

³ Alison Weir, 'Global Feminism and Transformative Identity Politics' in *Identities and Freedom: Feminist Theory Between Power and Connection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 65.

⁴ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 125.

⁵ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 232.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁷ According to Lee, 'the pictures of intimacy with my fake girlfriend—she knew what I was doing, so she really participated in the work... We were both performing'. Cited by Carly Berwick, in 'Extreme Make over', *Artnews* 105, No. 3 (March 2006): 112.

⁸ Butler, interpreted by Lisa Walker. Lisa Walker, *Looking Like What You Are: Sexual Style, Race, and Lesbian Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 205.

⁹ As Butler argues in her article 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', 'there is no "proper" gender, a gender proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense that sex's cultural property'. 1993a: 312.

¹⁰ Walker, *Looking Like What You Are*, p. 205.

¹¹ Jay Prosser, 'Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex' in Susan Stryker & Stephen Whittle (eds.) *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 271.

¹² Catherine Zuromski, *Snapshot Photography: The Lives of Images* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), p. 10.

¹³ Miwon Kwon, 'Experience vs. Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the Works of Lan Tuazon and Nikki S. Lee' in Alex Coles (ed.) *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn, de-, dis-, ex- 4* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000), p. 86.

¹⁴ Weir, 'Global Feminism and Transformative Identity Politics', p. 78.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁷ Kwon, *One Place after Another*, p.143; Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', p. 197.