The distance between us
Strategizing a queer, artistic, personal and social politic

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Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Master of Arts (Fine Arts)
at the University of Stellenbosch

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December 2006
I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature: ____________________________

Date: ________________________________
This thesis considers radical and reactionary political strategies for questioning systems of gender/sexuality categorisation and finds both wanting in terms of the cultural insularity and mainstream assimilation each respectively engenders. An alternative is posited in the form of *radical assimilation*, a theory borrowing the best elements from both approaches. The remainder of the study is focussed on the search for personal and iconographic strategies to pursue a politic of radical assimilation in my creative production. These strategies are finally exemplified and manifested via discussions of the practical corpus of artworks that aided in the formation of this politic. The discursive framework in which this theorization occurs includes considerations of queer theory and photography (especially domestic photography and portraiture) and subjective contextualization (invoking the domestic uses of images), and all should be seen as constituting a personal discursive framework: an attempt to counter the reductive scope an uncontextualised analysis of my work allows. This study is accordingly an explication of the processes that turn the personal into the political; a critical affirmation of difference; and an attempt to narrow the distances between us.
The sentimentality of the usual thesis acknowledgments left me reluctant to include any. Still, once I started considering everyone who played a part in this research coming to fruition, I unearthed a web of connections, inspiration, support and love that the following attempt cannot even begin to acknowledge. The defence of my own sentimental blubbering is my inability to do this web of support justice with deserving eloquence:

I would like to thank the following individuals and organizations whose assistance and support made this research possible: Lize van Robbroeck and Jean Brundrit for excellent guidance, your mentorship spans an inspirational influence far greater than you can imagine; the Harry Crosley Foundation for financial support; all the intelligent and artistic people in my family who jumped in with hands-on enthusiasm when my practical and theoretical research deadlines seemed irreconcilable, especially Adrie Fouché for her patient hand and hours of dedication in front of the tapestry frame, Piet Fouché whose mill, workshop and countless money transfers helped my vision to bear fruit, Marie Fouché, whose late night phone calls kept me from falling off the edge, but most importantly, my better half, muse and rock, André Smit. The soundtrack to my life is a beautiful boy whose love I am undeserving of.
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Queering Butades’s Daughter

The mythological origins of representational art as a structural framework for my project.

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To Queer something (used as a verb) is to read a text from a change of perspective from ‘the margins of concept and study to the center’ which ‘creates a queered position for reflection, expression and action.’ (Dilley 1999:458). These queered results of reflection often go hand in hand with a deliberate reading of non-queer texts against the grain of their normative assumptions, thus outlining the ‘spaces for multiple readings within a text’ (Horne & Lewis, 1996:5).
…how dark the alley was! I thought my heart would fail me; and what a dreadful effort of
courage it needed to answer; "yes", and with what a choking voice!

– André Gide

Gide is quoted here by Johnathan Dollimore in a retelling of Gide’s second homosexual encounter, an event
that was to shape his politic from “self discipline” to “courage to transgress” (Dollimore 1996:6).
The key narrative

The title of the first artwork created for this research, *The outline of my lover*, (fig. 1) relates to the mythical origins of the art of modeling in clay (and by inference all representational art) as outlined by Mauricio Bettini in *The portrait of the lover* (1999:7). The significance of each of the characters’ relationship with each other, and the other story elements of this myth are strikingly similar to the central motifs in my practical and theoretical research. Here is the myth as retold by Bettini:

*Plastice* – the art of modeling in clay – was apparently discovered by a man named Butades, a potter from Sicyon who later worked in Corinth. As the story goes, his daughter had fallen in love with a young man who was about to leave on a long journey. On the eve of her lover’s departure, she traced his profile on the wall, following the outline of his shadow cast by the light of a lantern. According to Athenagoras, the young woman carried out this task while the man was asleep (so in a certain sense she stole that silhouette). When her father Butades saw this design on the wall, he made a model of it in clay, which he dried and then hardened in the heat of the oven, along with his other pots and bowls (Bettini 1999:7).

The facilitating technology in this very first act of capturing the image, was the lamp. If we were to modernize this story and make it applicable to the narrative of my practical research, the lamp would be a camera. The act of tracing would be the photographic printing process, and the modelling in clay of that outline, would be a reworking of that image by digital and other means. To increase the relevance of the myth we would need to adjust the gender structures slightly in order for the daughter to become a son, but leave the others intact. Give the daughter (who is now the son) the full credit she probably deserves for the act of modelling too, and this modernized, queered result will be the briefest summary of all the processes of the creative research I am engaged in.

The story now outlines the central medium and working method of my research (photography and its transformation into other entities), the specific convention which is the result of the creative process (portraiture), and the central subject position of the lovers (non-heterosexual) - which, unlike the case in the original story (who knows?), significantly informs my acts of making, and the contextual framework in which these processes take place (a domestic scene where personal and family relationships, emotive states, -responses and -acts propel the narrative).
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Introduction:

The names we call ourselves

Artists’ identities and the appreciation of their work
The discourses which particularly oppress all of us, lesbians, women, and homosexual men, are those discourses which take for granted that what founds society, any society, is heterosexuality. These discourses speak about us and claim to say the truth in an apolitical field, as if anything of that which signifies should escape the political in this moment of history, and as if, in what concerns us, politically insignificant signs could exist. These discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms.

– Monique Wittig (1990:53)

You know, friend, this is a goddamn bitch of a 
unsatisfactory situation.

– Annie Proulx (2006:308)

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1 Annie Proulx’s deliberate grammatical error is a strategy to give her character Jack Twist in the short story *Brokeback Mountain* his unique Wyoming working-class voice.
**i. Premise**

In an interview with Jamie Hakim published in *Attitude* (Oct. 2005), photographer Wolfgang Tillmans responds to a question regarding a previous interview where he stated that he is *not* a gay artist:

I think the moment you label yourself you are excluding others from being able to look at your work freely. ...[I]t has become so unsustainable to stay closeted, now it is more a question of if you make it a subject which defines you and your work and which excludes 95% of the population. *I don’t want that.* But that is purely the way you communicate the work; *how I feel and think and see that of course is 100% influenced by being a gay man.* Being born in a minority so changes the way you look at things, you have to deal with an outsider position, which is actually great training for an artist (cited in Hakim 2005:89)[my emphasis].

For people to respond to an artwork without prior contextual information about the artist to pre-determine their reaction is, according to Sadie Lee, “an automatic privilege for most heterosexual artists” (Lee 1996:121). For her there is a problematic expectation to “constantly talk and justify” her lesbianism, “rather than letting the content of the [work] register or not, depending on the viewer” (Lee 1996:121).

I believe that anybody who is gay or lesbian would be open and honest about their sexuality. I also can see the point that in labeling someone a ‘lesbian artist’ one is perhaps enforcing the belief that this is something which is not the norm and that, while it may show society that we exist, it may also suggest that we wish to separate ourselves from that society by remaining within our separate category... Often the ‘lesbian artist’ is seen merely as a producer of lesbian imagery rather than as an artist in her own right. I am interested in a lesbian artist’s contribution to art as well as her contribution to lesbianism (Lee 1996:120).

Both artists agree that their sexuality informs their work, but that the names they call themselves and the names conferred upon them as artists foreclose a larger audience than the cultures these names imply. Both artists seem to agree with Honeychurch’s view that sexual orientations...

...are not a private matter that impacts only personal sexual practices, but are dimensions of subjectivity that infuse all human experience, including higher cognitive functions; are imbricated in that sexuality, gender, class, etc.; are layered and interimplicated and therefore cannot be read monolithically; and are viewed as identities coherent enough to be recognized, but fluid enough to be interrogated (1996:345).
In view of sexuality exerting such a large influence on how one sees oneself, one’s place in society, and most importantly, how society sees one, what are the implications for an artist with a non-normative sexuality to dis-identify with his/her sexuality in terms of his/her work? How can one be (like Sadie Lee for instance) a lesbian and an artist but not a lesbian artist? The problem seems to be a small matter of distinction, yet, as Borges’s well known fable of a historically remote encyclopaedic categorization of animals² illustrates, our systems of classification can, and should be interrogated lest we assume a list like the following as constitutive of the way things really are.

Animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies (cited in Foucault 2002:xvi).

Foucault’s reading of this passage brought about in him a “laughter that shattered”:

all the familiar landmarks of my thought – our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and Other (2002:xvi).

Foucault attributes the power of Borges’s fable, to the exotic thought system’s illumination (“in one giant leap”) of “the limitation of our own [system], the stark impossibility of thinking that” (2002:xvi). The need to turn our current classification of sexualities into such an insane list is imperative if I, as an artist with a non-normative sexuality, want my work to be read without the adage “gay artist” being used in discussions of my work³ – a possibility that can only occur when our current classification’s distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality fails to signify (anything worth mentioning).

² Borges parodies the elaborate taxonomies of the 17th century with his invention of “a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge” (1946:103) – a passage that Foucault acknowledges as the inspiration for his book The order of things (2002:xvi).

³ This motivating reason for pursuing a radical politic might seem insignificant, but closer inspection reveals it to implicate so much more than it innocently states. The discomfort of being labeled a ‘gay artist’ is a discomfort breaching the confines of the art world, because it reveals the denial of access to normality. To ask the world to attach no significant meaning to the term ‘gay artist’ would be to ask the world to destroy its current rationality. What seems like a ‘small matter of aesthetics’ is therefore revealed as an epic drama – a drama with a war on Western rationality driving the narrative.
For myself, (and select others) current classification of gender and sexuality is already such an absurd list. How does one go about representing this absurdity? How does one achieve participation in such representation? And finally how can one turn any such participation into effective spaces of resistance? As a visual artist, to answer these questions I would need to navigate and evaluate political and iconographic strategies. My research therefore focuses on two areas: the search for effective or at least most beneficial political strategies to resist and subvert current systems of gender/sexuality classifications (chapter one), and secondly, to search for effective representational strategies (what I consider iconographic strategies), to have the visual means to effectively mediate the political strategies unearthed (chapter two).

**ii. Aims, methods**

The outcome of this enquiry will show the inner workings of my ongoing project: a creative project with social, personal, and aesthetic goals. The larger social goal of my project echoes the general goal of the queer project, namely the interrogation of categories of sexuality and gender in order to effect social change. The neutralization of the hetero/homo-figure as a sub-element of the normal/abnormal dualism lies at the core of

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4 I use the (highly unfashionable) term 'iconographic' specifically instead of 'visual' or 'representational' since the Panofskian term relates more specifically to subject matter and its context rather than just figurative- or visual manifestation (*The Oxford Dictionary of Art* 1994. Sv. ‘iconography’). My reference to ‘Iconography’ seems also perversely appropriate because of this branch of traditional art history’s regard for identification, classification and interpretation – the very acts my politic is so strongly against, and my practical work so fundamentally engaged with.

5 This is a very simplified generalization of the aims of queer theory. Ettinger sees Queer Theory as “discursive strategies that reject and transform the categories produced by a hostile and hegemonic heterosexual discourse” (1992:53). Jagose’s definition states that Queer Theory questions “conventional understandings of sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, oppositions and equations that sustain them” (1996:97), and Edelman reminds us that “we are inhabited always by states of desire that exceed our capacity to name them. Every name only gives those desires – conflictual, contradictory, inconsistent, undefined – a fictive border” (1995:345)[my emphasis]. This rejection, transformation, questioning and deconstruction of categorization by Queer Theory posits the hetero/homosexual figure as “master category of social analysis” (Seidman 1995:132), a figure defined as “a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviours, and social institutions, and social relations” (Seidman 1995:128). A collective definition of Queer Theory can thus safely posit the discursive questioning/breakdown of classifications with the hetero/homosexual as master category of focus. But as Patrick Dilley so succinctly puts it: “Attempting to classify a theory that posits a breakdown of classification is perilous” (1999:462).

6 The hetero/homo-figure is linked to the normal/abnormal dualism by the postulate: ‘all, and only, heterosexuals can be normal’.
my political aim. Such a project is immense in scope and my contribution to this goal will inevitably be small. Much to my advantage is the fact that I am not alone.

The personal aim of my project is the assertion and the affirmation of a singular non-normative queer identity through a creative process interrogating my relationships, my political views, and the assumptions, doubts, and the ordinariness of everyday life. Such an affirmation’s social significance lies within highly charged debates about individuals’ status in society and thus becomes inexorably linked to my political aim.

Discursive practices, according to Davies & Harré, provide subject positions which “incorporate both a conceptual repertoire and a location for persons within the structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire” (1990:46). The effective affirmation of an individual, non-normative queer identity therefore necessitates the navigation of the non-normative, queer subject position repertoire, and the subsequent location of my work (and therefore myself) within the most suitable position’s “structure of rights and duties.” The knowledge that this repertoire offers subject positions available to me implies that queer non-normativity is a discursive practice too, but one that I am actively participating in constructing. This thesis is therefore not just an investigation of the repertoire options, (whether political or iconographic) available to me as a queer artist, but also a critical evaluation and transformation of these options.

The aesthetic aim of my creative project is to find a suitable voice to use in the pursuit of my personal goal. This search for an ideal voice brings its own previously hidden

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7 The reason for using the term ‘queer’ instead of ‘gay’ indicates an alignment with David Glover and Cora Kaplan’s definition of ‘queer’ in Genders (2000) as “a signifier of attitude, …a refusal to accept conventional sexual and gendered categories, …a defiant desire beyond the regular confines of heteronormativity” (2000:106). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s often quoted definition of queer in Tendencies (1993), however, I find most appropriate in terms of its indication of the complexity and nuanced nature of the queer project and its alignment with gender causes:

Queer can refer to: the mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically (1993:8).

8 These debates are located in, and arise from many cultural structures, from popular culture to academia and intersecting every possible human sphere on the way. Questions of inclusion and exclusion, centre and periphery, power and vulnerability define the nature of these debates.
discourses to light, as the creative dialogue between making, thinking, and materials isn’t always linear. When I add ‘writing’ to this non-linear dialogue, I complicate the search for an ideal voice even more, a complication necessitating subjectivity as the most suitable tool to use in the articulation of this non-linear dialogue. Accordingly, the writing style of this study becomes increasingly defined by subjectivity from chapter two onwards. This subjectivity is, however, tempered by the desire, in Roland Barthes’s terms, “to utter interiority without yielding intimacy” (1980:98).

It is obvious that these goals all depend on one another, and that the pursuit of each cannot occur in isolation. This inseparability of active discursive currents ricochets throughout my creative practice. The neat categorical separation that I submit these discursive currents to in the first and second chapters is undermined in the third chapter which pays homage to their inseparability. In the final chapter all the discursive, political and iconographic strategies are applied to inform (but not to dictate) discussions of the practical research of this study.

iii. Political strategizing

In chapter one, my search for an ideal political strategy draws heavily from Val Plumwood’s suggestions pertaining to the neutralizing of dualisms. By utilizing her strategies as a theoretical framework, and through an evaluation of strategies that have been employed by artists with non-normative sexualities, I propose a process of Radical Assimilation as my ideal political strategy: a strategy that professes a critical and temperate engagement with both sides of the dualism as ideal. This strategy is based on the premise that continual multi-directional assimilation of the dualistic pair will lead to such a proliferation of cultures that the initial categories will eventually be nullified. For individuals to accommodate seemingly conflicting ideologies, however, Radical Assimilation tactics need to nurture a kind of individualism: an individualism that does not foreclose any cultural identification or –formation per se, but merely requires the celebration, and encouragement of many, equal, cultures. Through a consideration of essentialist and constructivist conceptions of cultural identity as subordinated to the individual, I conclude that the assertion and encouragement of individualism would effectively undermine monolithic cultural identification.

9 Barthes’ definition of Discourse: “Dis-cursis – originally the action of running here and there, comings and goings, measures taken, ‘plots and plans’…” (2002:3) is more playful and non-monolithic than its usual Foucauldian sense, and seems more appropriate in a study that insists on agency where agency is severely restricted.
The pitfalls of current artistic strategies (radical or reactionary interventions) are cultural insularity and assimilation (Maddison 2000:12). Both strategies, I will show, through attempts at reversing the dualism or denying its existence, fail to neutralize the dualism through an oversight of an integral aspect of dualistic constructions: denied dependency. Heteronormativity, however, doesn’t seem to require homosexuality (because of the general internalisation of the denial), but Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s highly influential study\(^{10}\) articulates this dependency convincingly. Moreover, her conclusions (fortified by Judith Butler) outline a useful Achilles’ heel of the norm that a strategy of Radical Assimilation can exploit: the inherent instability and panic that the norm is subjected to.

In view of the strong role that gender plays in conceptions of sexuality, Sedgwick’s outline of the arrested continuum of male homosocial and homosexual desire could, if incorporated in a political strategy, be beneficial to both the queer and feminist project since this arrested continuum, Sedwick argues, is the source of male homophobia and misogyny. A strategy that aims to return the homosocial-homosexual to a non-threatening continuum (as it generally is for women) requires a refutation of the view that the body (and thus biological sex) is somehow inexorably linked to gender. My attempt to do so follows a constructivist analysis via Judith Butler’s ‘amended’ conception of gender performativity.

\textit{iv. Iconographic strategizing}

While photography has been the preferred medium for queer activism because of its immediacy and accessibility (Smalls 2003:259), my own invocation of the photograph lies beyond this obvious choice of medium to the point where the boundaries between medium and meaning become indistinct. In chapter two, the search for an iconography that can manifest the political strategy outlined in chapter one takes the form of a discussion of aspects of photography – from the photograph’s ontological status (as snapshot, digital image or portrait) to its metaphorical status (carrier of meaning outside of what it depicts). The structure of the argument follows a line of searching for iconographic strategies of resistance within the discourses of photography embodied in my practical research. This outline does not aim to be the final word in the interpretation of my practical work. It merely aims to illuminate my artistic intentions and political strategy through selectively placing my politic within the traditions I have chosen to pursue it with:

\(^{10}\) In \textit{Between men: English literature and male homosocial desire} (1985), Sedgwick outlined the triangulation of male heterosexuality with the ‘trade’ of women and the disavowal of (male) homosexuality as a necessary dynamic for the survival of male power – a dynamic that leaves male power in a constant state of panic.
photography and portraiture. While the political strategies I consider in chapter one might prove useful to others, chapter two’s search for iconographic means to pursue them should be seen as merely my own application. The language I use in this chapter might seem to dictate certain iconographic means as ideal. I am, however, dictating only to myself by substantiating and evaluating the practical choices I have made.

I introduce chapter two with a consideration of the two dominant, opposing interpretations of photography: one which regards photography as a realistic medium, and the other that considers it a cultural construct. I propose that these two theoretical approaches parallel the two major opposing theories (essentialist versus constructivist) of cultural identity outlined in chapter one. This lengthy process, starting with the digitized image’s relationship to these dual considerations of photography, is a necessary route towards elucidating an integral metaphor in my practical corpus: the ‘realist’ photograph as essentialist conception of sexuality, and the digitally manipulated photograph as socially constructed sexuality. The presence of both in a single artefact can thus highlight the conflicts of sexuality: artifice and surface masking intuitively authentic personal identification. Following this explication, the search for my ideal queer iconographic strategy moves over to more specific photographic conventions: the disruptive potential of portraiture and domestic photography.

Portraiture is outlined as an iconographic strategy due to what Avedon calls its “erotic qualities”: the portrait’s immediate accessibility is tempered by uneasy sexual undertones after prolonged viewing (1987:59). The portrait is thus an ideal iconographic medium to initiate readings of sexuality. Yet the convention of portraiture (especially the photographic portrait) conceptually allows so much more. Like photography in general, portraiture is a meeting place of conflicts: the ‘essential’ likeness of the individual represented is easily refuted by the artifice of the portrait’s construction and the image’s temporality, yet its ‘essential’ nature is difficult to absolve completely because of the personal investment a portrait of a specific individual can have for the user and viewer11 of that portrait. Portraiture thus becomes another useful metaphor of the nuanced nature of sexuality, and a useful iconographic strategy to undermine categories of sexuality.

The chapter concludes with what I consider the ultimate iconographic site of sexual dissidence – domestic photography. The domestic photograph’s accessible innocence

11 The distinction between ‘users’ (the makers and original owners of domestic photographs) and ‘viewers’ (people who look at others’ domestic photographs but without the ‘insider knowledge’ to understand them in full context) will be taken up in more detail in chapter two.
masks complex structures of familial looks, gazes & screens that contain strong potential for active manipulation (and therefore agency for the artist doing the manipulation). The seemingly harmless normativity, even banality of the domestic photograph’s surface can easily become a site of active resistance to normativity with a small manipulation of the context of its display.

In chapter three I apply the processes that shape the narrative of my practical work, as framed by the key strategies outlined in chapter one and two. A close awareness of the creative process as a carrier of analytical agency is the premise here (Piper 1973), where an exploration in written format outlines how the process of making art facilitates the formation of personal and social meanings.
Chapter 1:

Radical Assimilation

Neutralizing the hetero/homo dualism beyond the restraints of current artistic interventions
1.1. Categorization

1.1.1. Cartesian ‘Spectres’ & dualistic pairs

The “mathematical spirit fostered by Descartes” (Croce 1972:204) – symbolised by the singular viewpoint of linear perspective\(^{12}\) – inspires a belief that the world can be rationally ordered and explained *despite* post-modern, even scientific, according to Davies (1995), surrender to complexity, chaos, ambiguity and paradox. This remnant – or *spectre*, as Derrida (1994) would have called it – of modern thought can be rationalised today as problematic in terms of its non-account for other viewpoints. These rational and rationalizing categorical systems operate at the expense of overlooked discrepancies/exceptions to those categories because, according to Bauman, these compulsive ordering systems “breed, or at least legitimise and give tacit support to, animosity towards everyone standing outside the holy union” (1991:64).

The hetero/homo-figure of categorizing sexuality is one such problematic rational system of categorization. Foucault effectively argued this system as a modern invention to define, protect and police normative heterosexuality\(^{13}\) (Foucault 1978). The oppressive homophobia that this categorization engenders is probably the main motivation why the queer project aims to undermine current systems of sexual categorization – not because the system is without any logic or use, but because of the preference one if its terms (heterosexuality) is given at the expense of the other. Because of this preference, and

\(^{12}\) 3D-digital imaging processors and 3D-modeling tools – which are increasingly becoming invaluable in all areas of design, science, medicine and entertainment – use the Cartesian grid as core structuring system. The Cartesian grid is the structuring element in these tools’ programming and user-interface visualization: a telling reminder that the single *point* of consciousness that all structuring lines are construed from (the Cartesian *cogito*) remains a powerful paradigm of rationality (in the West, at least).

\(^{13}\) Foucault’s ideas are integral to queer theoretical discourse as he defined some of the field’s premises, summarized by Carolyn Dean as the following: “that sexuality [is] mutable rather than fixed; that gay and lesbian identity was invented at the end of the nineteenth century; that talk about sex proliferated rather than waned in the course of that period; that sexual identity categories [are] a means of disciplining and regulating populations in new terms; and that sexuality [is] not a repressed drive but one generated in and through a series of self-generating discourses whose agents [are] often indecipherable” (Dean 2003:129).
because of this preference's constructed nature, the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality is effectively rendered a dualism (as opposed to a dichotomy\textsuperscript{14} or even a hierarchy\textsuperscript{15}) according to Val Plumwood's definition in *Feminism and the mastery of nature* (1997):

Dualism is a relation of separation and domination inscribed and naturalized in culture and characterized by radical exclusion, distancing and opposition between orders constructed as systematically higher and lower, as inferior and superior, as ruler and ruled, which treats the division as part of the natures of beings construed not merely as different but as belonging to radically different orders or kinds, and hence as not open to change (1997:47-48)[my emphasis].

Because dualisms are so intricately and systematically woven into the very fabric of culture (and hence not open to change) neutralizing a dualism\textsuperscript{16} into a non-oppressive dichotomy seems like a nearly impossible task. Fear that the neutralization of dualisms implies a rejection of classic (western) rationality (and by implication thought, and language\textsuperscript{17}) further complicates the neutralization process. Plumwood offers a cunning response to placate this fear:

If the prevailing power relations of Western culture have determined the selection of logical theories, as they have scientific theories and technologies, then to reject this classical structure of reason does not imply the rejection of all attempts to structure or systematise reason, but rather the rejection of those which promote dualistic accounts of otherness (1997:42).

By selfishly reducing the scope of the endeavour, to work towards the neutralization of the dualisms that oppress me, the nearly impossible task seems less daunting. An alternative paradigm beyond the neutralization of sexual and gender\textsuperscript{18} dualisms now seems plausible: I imagine the world free from oppressive sexual/gender categories – a world

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\textsuperscript{14} a distinction of difference without preference (Plumwood 1997:47).

\textsuperscript{15} a preferential distinction that is still "open to change" (Plumwood 1997:47).

\textsuperscript{16} The neutralization of a dualism is a step beyond the Derridean process of *unearthing* the binary oppositions that structure a text through his theory of textuality and reading (Weedon 2000:23; Norcross 1996:136).

\textsuperscript{17} When considering that language is only possible through of our propensity to name phenomena by differentiating on finer and finer levels (at the expense of an allowance for incongruities), the abolishment of all categorical systems implies the complete breakdown of language, our primary and most effective form of communication.

\textsuperscript{18} Gender is implicated by sexuality in my case (real men are heterosexual) and I therefore deem the man/woman dualism important to dismantle. I give the hetero/homo dualism primary focus, however, since the structures that oppress homosexuals are the very same structures that oppress women (Rubin 1975:180).
free from subjectivities forged and navigated by the constraints of the current binary logic of either hetero or homo, either man or woman. This freedom, achieved by rendering the dualistic pairs powerless, would proliferate orders of gender and sexual identities due to the absence of the command to participate in either-or kinds of identities. Individuals with infinitely varied sexualities and genders (as unique as their fingerprints) would thus eventually inhabit this world. Above the neutralization of the two dualisms, (as if not difficult to achieve already) this vision of the future also requires the general acceptance of the dissolution of the term ‘culture’, as well as very creative and tenacious individuals to sustain the reformation. ‘Culture’ (singular only) will fail to signify in a world of near infinite identification possibilities without the command to conform. Individuals who identify so totally, and invest so much in certain cultural identities, will however be hard pressed to let go of their powerful subject positions or their precious ghettos. These individuals, for whom this vision of the future will seem unbearable, will not tolerate such a prospect – without a fight. Between these two camps (the powerful and the culturally insular), a gamut of individuals are already complicating dualistic identities by negotiating an existence based on multiple identifications across a spectrum of opposing, overlapping or divergent subject positions. They already inhabit my vision of the future.

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19 Butler’s theory that identity is a forced re-iteration of norms supports the use of the term ‘command’ here. I will deal with this in more depth in the sub-chapter titled Undermining cultural identification.

20 I use the term ‘sustain’, because the process has already been initiated.

21 A separatist determination, whether imposed or self inflicted, can lead to a sense of security. I use the term ‘ghetto’ to reveal the compromising origin of this sense of security.
1.2. Neutralizing dualisms

1.2.1. A conceptual framework
Plumwood outlines a very systematic, yet abstract strategy for the neutralization of dualisms (1997:60). I intend to utilize her key points, which I will attempt to summarize in the following segment, in a critique of current cultural/political strategies with specific reference to a photographic essay by Wolfgang Tillmans.

Plumwood suggests that the “dismantling [of] a dualism based on difference requires the reconstruction of relationship and identity in terms of a non-hierarchical concept of difference” (1997:60) [my emphasis]. This reconstruction, she claims, can only be achieved via a consideration of the characteristics of a dualism (1997:60). These characteristics are: “backgrounding”, “radical exclusion”, “incorporation”, “instrumentalism” and “homogenization” (1997:48-55). The neutralising strategies that correspond to each characteristic are: ‘nurturing recognition of contribution’, ‘affirming continuity’, ‘affirming independent identity’, ‘nurturing the recognition of the other as a center of independent needs’, as well as ‘the recognition of the other as complex and diverse’ (1997:60).

By ‘backgrounding’ the subordinate’s essential contribution to the functioning of the master, the master category denies its dependency on the subordinate (1997:48). The

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22 I employ verb ‘nurture’ before many of Plumwood’s criteria to start developing a strategy that focuses on doing things. Such a strategy involves not just a kind of self-recognition, but an engagement with the master category in terms of developing mutual respect as well.

23 This last criterion I will articulate in different terms than Plumwood’s. I intend to stress individualism as an integral step in the “recognition” of the other as complex and diverse (Plumwood 1997:60).

24 Backgrounding refers to the master category’s making inessential—denial of importance—, even the complete denial of the other’s reality, through the hierarchical treatment of activities that renders the other “unimportant” or “not worth mentioning” (Plumwood 1997:48).

25 Plumwood uses colonialist terminology metaphorically in her excellent feminist theorization. I accordingly appropriate this strategy by using the terms ‘master’ and ‘master category’ interchangeably. This serves to accentuate the subordinate category’s subordination through the vivid implication of slavery. In order to avoid conscious complicity in treating colonialism’s effects trivially, I shall, however, refrain from using the terms ‘colonizer/colonized’, because they signify much more specifically than an implied slavery. I can only defend
first condition for neutralizing a dualism is therefore to encourage a “move to systems of thought, accounting, perception, [and] decision-making, which recognize the contribution of what has been backgrounded” (1997:60).

The master’s denial of dependency on the subordinate leads (via ‘backgrounding’) to the treatment of the subordinate as inferior. This inferiority is, however, a constructed quality that requires the master’s disavowal (1997:49). This disavowal in turn leads to ‘radical exclusion’ (1997:49). The second condition of Plumwood’s strategy is therefore the ‘affirmation of continuity’: a process that requires the reconception “of the relata in more integrated ways” and the means to “break the false choice hyperseparation presents in reclaiming the denied area of overlap” (1997:60).

The third characteristic device of a dualism in Plumwood’s outline is ‘incorporation’. While the term intuitively seems to refer to a kind of gesture of inclusion, it actually refers to the master category’s relational conception of the subordinate “as a lack, a negativity” (1997:52). The mutual dependency of both categories on each other (in terms of “identity and organization of material life”) is not equal because the master defines the subordinate as a negation of the master’s identity (i.e. “homosexuality is not normal”). The only counteraction to this relational identity, is to “review the identities of both underside and upperside”, and to “rediscover a language and story for the underside, reclaim positive independent sources of identity and affirm resistance” (1997:60).

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26 Plumwood exemplifies the constructed nature of the subordinate’s inferiority with Booker T. Washington’s example of “how the exaggerated and genteel cleanliness of the slave-owners’ establishments served to mark them off from the ‘animal-like’ slaves, whose enforced filthiness (they were provided with no means to wash) served the joint function of marking and justifying their condition, and of linking them to animals” (50). In terms of the hetero/homo dualism, it is quite possible that the long absence of any institutional recognition of gay relationships can be seen to have created a dissident embrace of promiscuous behaviour. ‘Promiscuity’ as an aspect of (perceived) homosexual inferiority can therefore perhaps be seen as a kind of constructed ‘inferiority’.

27 Plumwood elaborates: “Differentiation from [that constructed inferiority] demands not merely distinctness but radical exclusion, not merely separation but hyperseparation” (49) [my emphasis].

28 Even non-negated statements, after careful scrutiny, reveal a negative relation to the master’s ‘positive’ identity. ‘Homosexual relationships are doomed to be short lived’ illustrate heterosexual relationships’ supposed longevity.
A characteristic related to ‘incorporation’ is ‘instrumentalism’ (or objectification) (1997:53). Plumwood elaborates: "It is [an] apparent [result of incorporation] that those on the lower side of dualisms are obliged to put aside their own interests for those of the master or center, that they are conceived of as his instruments, a means to his ends" (1997:53). The master, accordingly, constructs the subordinate’s identity around the subordinate’s usefulness, exemplified by “the canons of virtue for a good wife, a good colonized, or a good worker” (1997:53). The neutralization of a dualism therefore also requires the nurturing of the recognition of “the other as a center of needs [and] value and striving on its own account, a being whose ends and needs are independent of the self and to be respected” (1997:60).

The denial of the diversity of the subordinate category (‘homogenization’), exemplified by the master’s stereotyping of the subordinate’s identity (1997:53), is the final characteristic device of a dualism that any strategy towards its neutralization needs to address. ‘Homogenization’ encourages the “division of the world into two orders”; ‘homogenization’ necessitates binarism (1997:54). Homogenization, however, implicitly homogenizes the master category as well, because the master category is required to put up a united front (despite its own complexity) in order to “confirm its nature” (1997:53). ‘Homogenization’ can thus be effectively undermined by encouraging diversity (own and other’s) until such diversity is blatantly apparent, and by avoiding the internalization of stereotypical identities. Asserting singular uniqueness can encourage diversity and undermine stereotypes. Individualism is therefore an appropriate vehicle in counteracting ‘homogenization’.

The problem with Plumwood’s strategy as a whole concerns its application. How can one, for example, ‘nurture the recognition of contribution’ materially? What can one do to affirm the continuity of a dualistic pair? From an abstracted theoretical position one wonders why dualisms still posit problems when such a coherent counter-strategy is available. The answer, of course, concerns the broad impact that the dualism exerts on identity.

29 I am hard pressed to imagine any such generally accepted ‘canons of virtue’ for the ‘good homosexual’. Andrew Sullivan’s attempt at such a canon – the epilogue to his Virtually normal: an argument about homosexuality (1995) – leads me to believe that the hetero/homo dualism has not evolved yet to such a form of incorporation. Sullivan’s promotion of homosexuality’s virtues – especially in terms of nurturing and creativity – seems, in view of his own homosexuality, more like a desperate plea for acceptance on any terms than an explication of the norm’s view. Strategies like Sullivan’s eloquent yet flawed Virtually Normal could perhaps be useful in terms of counteracting backgrounding. Such strategies should, however, avoid assimilation by internalising the spheres of operation that the master could possibly allow, as the only spheres one should occupy.
formation. The unstable intersection of being and desire (being vs. becoming, desiring to be and desiring to have) becomes volatile under the influence of the dualism’s creation of a demanding personal-, familial-, and societal expectation of what to be, and what to desire. Does the neutralization of a dualistic pair imply the relinquishing of the identities that subscribe (consciously, subconsciously, or both) to any one of the pair’s constituents? To borrow Plumwood’s argument considering the relinquishing of reason (only the attempts at rationality that promote a dualistic view of difference should be relinquished (1997:42)), perhaps one merely has to relinquish those aspects of one’s identity that contributes to the dualistic pair’s power imbalance. Any attempt to apply Plumwood’s strategy successfully should engage with the complexity of identification on the assumption that identities can change, society can change, indeed, that change is possible.

1.2.2. The shortcomings of current interventions

Political strategies that have been used, and are still being used today to counteract homophobia will give an indication of how to conceptualise a more practical strategy aimed at a radical reformulation and neutralization of sexual categories. Two kinds of interventions available to artists wishing to question sexual categorization, are radical and reactionary interventions30 (Maddison 2000:12).

Shaun de Waal, in a review of Greg Araki’s film Skin Flick, summarises the two strategies as a distinction between queer and (mainstream) gay:

What makes [a cultural event/artefact] and its concerns queer as opposed to simply gay is related to a number of things, but one of those would include a totally unapologetic tone – no asking the straight people to be nice to us, no trying to prove how harmless we are. By contrast, more mainstream attempts to portray gay people and their lives often become squishy with their own good-heartedness (2005:10).

Stephen Maddison articulates how the two strategies operate:

As the social order reproduces itself it cannot but throw up contradiction and conflict. It is the job of culture to produce knowledge with which to handle that level of complication: more reactionary artefacts may strive to explain away contradiction and abrasive conditions, smoothing away incoherence to attain plausibility; while more

30 This distinction is however not as clear in its application as my reductive outlining of it suggests. My later examples of radicalism, reactionism, and a strategy that improves on both via references to these strategies’ presence in the work of a single artist, will attempt to problematise the boundaries of these distinctions.
radical and oppositional interests may attempt to maximize the effect of incoherence and contradiction (2000:12)[my emphasis].

1.2.2.1 Radical interventions and cultural insularity
A radical artefact is easily recognizable by its confrontational iconography or stance – usually the accentuation of markers of difference. The very same markers that distinguish homosexuality from heterosexuality (the markers that usually elicit heteronormativity’s scorn, and strong disavowal) are usually graphically represented in radical artifacts. Accordingly, general displays (or performances/publications/screenings…) of radical artefacts are shrouded by controversy ranging from heated discussion, contempt, even censorship (Gupta 1996; Stychin 1997). These responses to radical interventions pose problems for public institutions that would rather not present them, or do so only in highly regulated terms, or as separatist ‘ghetto month’ attempts at politically correct inclusion.

Insisting on difference and not making any apologies for it, is an honest and affirmative strategy. Yet this strategy is not without its problems: to assert difference is to be seen as different. Unapologetic interventions have the potential to lead to cultural insularity and could also affirm an essentialist perspective on difference. By strengthening and increasing visibility of the marginal category, the dominant culture has more reason to increase oppression at worst, or at best separate itself offhandedly (since the subordinate culture seems “to operate from a safe distance” and “quite self sufficiently so…”). Another possible adverse consequence of radicalism is that increased articulation of signs of difference can be appropriated by the dominant culture as markers of style (Harris

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31 A radical intervention, manifested in or through a work of art.
32 Aspects of the subordinate’s differentiation that the master hyperbolically elevates in order to type the subordinate as radically different. According to Plumwood: “in systematised forms of power, power is normally institutionalized and ‘naturalised’ by latching on to existing forms of difference” (1997:42).
33 The “South African Gay and Lesbian Film Festival”, the (now defunct) “Sex & Kultuur Queer Arts Festival” and such kinds of “special events” come to mind (the film festival, incidentally, spawned a “Pink Wednesdays” screening from a mainstream art-house cinema, prompted probably by the festival’s (financial) success).
34 Radical interventions (when effectively utilized) increase visibility of markers of difference. This visibility allows for the easy appropriation of that form as a stylistic influence, which, in turn, is subject to the laws of fashion (rarely affecting lasting change). When a dominant culture appropriates the cultural forms of a subordinate culture, the dominant culture merely proclaims its power by taking what does not belong to it without bothering to adjust the status of the subordinate accordingly, because appropriation, (from the dominant’s point of view) doesn’t require any radical re-evaluation of the subordinate’s status. Stylistic appropriation therefore bears some similarity to colonialism. The gender and sexual ambiguity that the popular media advocated in the 1990s (Roden 2004:33) followed by the promotion of more traditional forms of
Radical interventions therefore contain the potential to strengthen the very category they seek to resist by increasing its scope through superficial appropriation unless the subordinate culture uses the opportunity to infiltrate the dominant culture’s consciousness sufficiently to effect lasting change: when the marker of style becomes a marker of identity available to both.

On the other hand, radical interventions, through their unapologetic representation of difference, are celebrational. The solidarity and sense of community such celebration offers might temporarily relieve the hardships of belonging to a marginal culture. Cornel West, in *The new cultural politics of difference* (1990) creatively calls radical interventions the ‘Talented Tenth Seduction’: “…a move toward arrogant group insularity”. This is a tactic that has as its aims the “preserv[ation] of one’s sanity and sense of self as one copes with the mainstream”, and West criticizes this option for “revel[ling] in a parochialism and encourag[ing] a narrow…chauvinistic outlook” (1990:33). Celebration, while good for morale and for providing positive images for the ghetto’s inhabitants and possible future inhabitants, still does not address the fact that the ghetto exists in the first place. Radical inventions aim to reverse the dualistic pair via their celebration of essential difference. This seemingly empowering celebration is however still based on an identity relational to heteronormativity (Plumwood 1997:61). The celebrated difference remains ‘other’, and thus encourages a separatist determination that can only lead to cultural insularity and the perpetuation of the dualism.

The general faults of radical artefacts are their appeal to a narrow audience through confrontational (usually explicit) representations of sexuality. Radical artefacts celebrate difference on deterministic terms, and while they are pleasurable, life affirming, and morale boosting for those represented, they foreclose readings by mainstream audiences. The mainstream has no reason to value their existence (radical interventions therefore fail

masculinity and femininity today proves that queer was merely “colonized” to satisfy the desire of heteronormativity to break the monotony of its clear gender/sexuality divisions…for a while.

35 In a beautiful problematisation of the term marginal, Ferguson poses the question: “When we say marginal, we must always ask, marginal to what?” She then responds with: “The place from which power is exercised is often a hidden place. When we try to pin it down, the center always seems to be somewhere else. Yet we know that this phantom center, elusive as it is, exerts a real, undeniable power over the whole social framework of our culture, and over the ways that we think about it.” Ferguson finally defines the center in Audre Lorde’s terms as the mythical norm of being white, young, thin, financially secure, Christian, heterosexual and male: “perpetuated by those whose interests it serves” and “internalized by those who are oppressed by it” (Ferguson 1990:9).
to address ‘backgrounder’). By confronting heteronormativity with explicit markers of
difference, markers that need to be disavowed for the master to keep his always-insecure
seat of power, radical interventions can be seen to actually encourage ‘radical exclusion’.
In terms of Plumwood’s strategy, radical interventions fail to counteract a dualistic
distinction of categories by falling for the trap that she calls “the cavern of reversal”
(1997:61). By accepting “wholly or partly the dualistic construction of identity”(through an
uncritical celebration of difference), and by not “attending to the identity forming functions
of [the dualistic construction]”(1997:61), radical interventions, aim to reverse the dualism.
The mere reversal of power would keep the dualistic identities intact. The prescription to a
politic that would eventually place one in the position of oppressor should therefore rather
be avoided.

It seems unlikely that we would expect an involvement in the messy, distressing and
disruptive business of radicalism when the inducements not to are so powerful and
pleasurable (Maddison 2000:192).

1.2.2.ii. Reactionary interventions and cultural assimilation
Artefacts that utilise reactionary strategies are difficult to recognize on the one hand, or
sport assimilationist iconography on the other. In the first instance, the artist would aim to
avoid iconography that could be interpreted as originating from homosexuality, or that
would appeal to homosexuals only. Artists of the first instance “do not see or experience
[their] work as arising from [their] sexual orientation” (Farber 1996:115)36. Alternatively,
reactionary artefacts could originate from a self-conscious homosexual subjectivity, but
these artifacts contain iconography that represents homosexuality as not much different
from, or non-threatening to heterosexuality. De Waal utilised a pithy description of
reactionary artefacts (as quoted earlier in this segment as often becoming “…squishy with
their own good heartedness”) in specific reference to the mainstream cinematic examples
“Philadelphia” and “In and Out” (2005:10).

Reactionary intervention is a political strategy that West calls the ‘Booker T. Temptation’ –
namely “the individual preoccupation with the mainstream and its legitimizing power”
(1990:33). This strategy attempts to erase the major markers of difference (as opposed to
radical interventions’ celebration of them) but usually on the dominant culture’s terms.

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36 Robert Farber admits that high-modernist abstraction allowed him a kind of ‘escape’ from modes of making
art that would have required him to deal with the emerging realization of his homosexuality during his youth
(1996:115). His perspective changed on realization of his HIV-positive status, and his abstractions
increasingly incorporated texts and imagery based on his HIV activism through the organization ACT-UP
Douglas Crimp, in *Mourning and militancy* (1990), indicates the underlying motivation for reactionary strategies in an uncommon reading of Freud:

> Probably no gay man or lesbian can have an untroubled response to Freud, but we must nevertheless take care to maintain a crucial distinction: the ambition to normalize, to adapt, belongs not to Freud but to his later "egocentric" revisionists, to whom gay people owe a good portion of our oppression. This is not to say that there is no vision of normalcy in Freud. Only that there is also no such thing as ever fully achieving it, for anyone (Crimp 1990:235).

While the desire to conform, or to ‘normalise’ is an essential motivation in everyone’s psychological make-up and therefore a good argument in reactionary practices’ defence, Freud’s assurance that nobody can ever achieve normality fails to address the fact that some still consider themselves more normal.

Attempts to fit in, and political strategies that proclaim fitting-in as imperative, require a disavowal of the aspects that differentiate at the expense of individuals for whom such a disavowal would be an impossibility, or for whom such a disavowal would be a negation of an identity already burdened with complexity and maintained with difficulty. ‘Passing for normal’ is not a possibility for those whom the dominant culture really considers not normal: those who cannot hide the markers of difference their subordination is based on. Aiming to hide those markers are furthermore an added complication for individuals who need to navigate the constraints of gender, race, class, health and religion above their sexuality. Reactionary strategies aiming for mainstream validation should keep in mind that markers of difference are not accessories that can easily be hidden or exchanged for more acceptably ‘normal’ signs. Reactionary interventions, through their attempts at camouflaging difference, endorse the rightness of heterosexual markers of normality, an endorsement that leaves the power imbalance intact. By focusing on the areas of the dualistic pair that overlap, and by downplaying or denying the undeniable areas that don’t, reactionary strategies can reinforce “the very inferior complexes promoted by the subtly [homophobic] mainstream” (West 1990:33).

37 Although West uses “racist” here, (and my appropriation might seem like a trivialization of the colonial impact on people’s lives) his alignment to the queer project (as seen from the introductory quote to this chapter) would (I hope) excuse such a gross manipulation of his words. "Biased" would probably have been the most inclusive term, but for the purposes of this current argument I need to highlight the biased mainstream’s homophobic aspect.
Reactionary strategies, through their denial or downplaying of difference, therefore operate on the wrong assumption that the boundary between the dualistic pair can merely be erased. By internalising the disavowal of difference, even through the subtlety of downplaying, radical interventions attempt to merge the dualistic pair, but ultimately on the master category's terms. In terms of Plumwood's strategy for neutralizing dualisms, reactionary strategies seem to counteract ‘radical exclusion’ and ‘backgrounding’ through their apparent focus on ‘reclaiming the denied area of overlap’, and ‘nurturing recognition of contribution’ but the internalised disavowal of the markers that don’t overlap are indeed an internalisation of the master categories’ ‘incorporation’, and by inference ‘instrumentalism' and ‘homogenisation’.

Plumwood specifically refers to reactionary interventions under the guise of “merger strategies” (1997:59), which aim to overcome the dualism by encouraging the denial or the downplaying of difference. “[T]he lack of confidence to affirm a distinct identity” (1997:59) usually leads to an internalisation of the master category’s culture and accordingly the wish to be just like the master. Access, however, is not granted, or only tentatively granted on the master category’s conditions. Reactionary interventions, through their encouragement of uncritical assimilation, unknowingly keep the power imbalance of the dualism intact.

1.2.3. Radical Assimilation

1.2.3.i. Beyond the restraints of current approaches

Radicalism and reactionism, through attempts at reversal or denial, fail to neutralize the dualistic construction of sexuality through an oversight of an integral aspect of dualisms: denied dependency:

A dualism […] results from a kind of denied dependancy on a subordinated other. This relationship of denied dependancy determines a […] logical structure, in which the denial and the relation of domination/subordination shape the identity of both the relata (Plumwood 1997:41).

Despite this integral oversight (an oversight that I will deal with specifically later in this chapter), both strategies’ comparison to the specific criteria that Plumwood suggests as necessary to neutralize a dualism illustrate that aspects of each might be useful. In comparison to Plumwood’s outline, both radicalism and reactionism succeed in some aspects yet ultimately fail in many others. Through a consideration of how radicalism and reactionism can be improved, I propose Radical Assimilation as an ideal strategy.
Reactionary strategies seem to address ‘backgroundering’ and ‘radical exclusion’ by creating ‘positive images’ of homosexuality through representations of the areas of overlap between the dualistic pairs. This aspect of reactionism should continue to be utilized, but with a consideration that the master’s acceptance is not the only goal and that the master’s is not the only criteria (reactionary interventions often internalise the very structures that lead to subordination). Highlighting aspects of similarity can lead to a comfortable sense of acceptance by the dominant culture, but on the dominant culture’s terms. A creative approach would highlight the aspects of difference at the same time and unlock the potential for identification with those aspects by the dominant culture in order for cultural assimilation to be mutually directional – a potently disruptive process of Radical Assimilation.

Radical interventions internalize the master categories’ ‘incorporation’ of the subordinate as a negativity or lack through an uncritical celebration of difference. Radical interventions should therefore heed Plumwood’s suggestion of searching for independent sources of identity: sources that are not negatively relational to heteronormativity. This poses quite a problem, for it seems that the only way to overcome a relational identity, is to search for markers of difference to celebrate that are beyond the dualistic conception. As a start, therefore, radical interventions should be critical of, and strongly differentiated from heteronormativity and homosexuality. A critical engagement with both sides of the dualistic pair however presupposes the wrongness of monolithic cultural identification. The only alternative to monolithic cultural identification (and hence the most effective way to overcome ‘incorporation’) is individuality and multiple identifications with multiple cultural identities that individuality realistically presupposes.

Radical interventions’ celebration of difference seems to address ‘instrumentalism’ through encouraging recognition of “the other as a center of needs [and] value and striving on its own account, a being whose ends and needs are independent of the self and to be respected” (Plumwood 1997:60). This celebration is, however uncritical of normative heterosexuality’s ‘incorporation’ (and hence, still relational to heterosexuality as a negativity), and the same critical engagement with the dualistic pair as a whole is required (as I suggested above when dealing with ‘radicalism’ and ‘incorporation’).

38 Since mainstream gay & lesbian culture is the usual receptacle of heteronormativity’s offhanded denigration of radical interventions, a critical differentiation from mainstream homosexuality in required in order to avoid cultural insularity.
Neither radicalism nor reactionism addresses ‘homogenization’. Indeed, radical interventions’ uncritical celebration of difference could result in representing those aspects of difference on which heterosexuality bases the stereotyping of homosexuality. Reactionary interventions’ assimilationist stance requires the internalizing the master’s homogenization of homosexuality, which explains reactionary interventions’ sometime internalized homophobia. ‘Homogenization’ is, however a very useful aspect of dualistic construction, in that it represents an Achilles’ heel of the master category: In order to maintain the binarism, the master category is required to put up a united front (despite its own complexity) in order to “confirm its nature” (Plumwood 1997:53). Homogenization can thus be effectively undermined by encouraging diversity (own and other’s) until it is blatantly apparent, and by avoiding the internalization of stereotypical identities. Asserting singular uniqueness can encourage diversity and undermine stereotypes. Individualism is therefore not only an appropriate vehicle in attempts to counteract ‘incorporation’ and ‘instrumentalism’, but also at counteracting ‘homogenization’.

A balancing act between the two strategies seems the most plausible and effective option: to insist on difference and sameness, to temper a radical intervention with aspects that do not foreclose accessible readings by a general public, but which are confident to not fall for the trap of the general ‘good heartedness’ (internalised homophobia) of reactionary practices with aspects that are undeniable markers of difference. In the same way that markers of difference are easily appropriated by the dominant party as markers of style, the continual representation of aspects that are similar combined with aspects of difference in the same space, unlocks the potential for mutual appropriation. Indeed, the ‘naturalized’ way in which difference is presented (through its combination with the similar), could make the process more accessible, and perhaps more rapid (than an application of radicalism alone). Mutual appropriation and the eventual identification with markers of difference can (when continually represented and adapted) diversify cultural identities to such an extent that the initial categories will be superfluous. The valorization of personal identity as complex, multi-layered and unique, can greatly aid this process through representations of viable, more realistic alternatives to monolithic cultural identity. Social domination will be erased out of the dualistic conception when, through the process of Radical Assimilation, categories of sexuality will be so inclusive as to be void. Showing the other as different, will cease to be the empowering strategy of the dominant culture, and will have no meaning, when society consists purely of radically individual others. This strategy requires the systematic undermining of cultural identification, a process daring
individuals “to recast, redefine and revise the very notions of ‘modernity,’ ‘mainstream,’ ‘margins,’ ‘difference,’ ‘otherness” (West 1990:36). 39

1.2.3.ii. Radical Assimilation as manifested in a cultural artefact

Turner Prize winner, Wolfgang Tillmans’ photo-essay of a male couple on holiday in Italy (see appendix), can be seen as both subtly reactionary, and subtly radical. In No shock, no scandal, just a gay couple on holiday10 (2002), the black and white images of the essay’s content portray scenes of domesticity in which Tillmans’ subjects interact around a kitchen table (2002:52-53) check their email (2002:56-57), sunbathe next to the pool with a bottle of beer close at hand (2002:54-55), and generally do what all normal people on holiday do: relax. Tillmans represents his models as displaying no obvious markers of difference (for the uninitiated viewer). His documentation of the mundane experiences of a male homosexual couple on holiday serves to explain away difference by making the overlap between heterosexuality and homosexuality apparent. The essay seems to communicate the reactionary (and assimilationist) assumption that “we are just like you”. The remainder of the photo-essay, however indisputably adds “…in many respects”.

The photographic reproduction of one of the protagonists’ back (revealing only the elastic of swimming trunks and hairy lower back) (2002:50-51), gives the essay a subtle radical shift. The shift is subtle because of the image’s political ambiguity. Since most male bodies do not meet classic ideals, this image might be seen to proclaim a reactionary stance. Yet the artist’s own homosexuality (self-proclaimed, and apparent in view of many of the works in his oeuvre’s un-ambiguous radicalism), combined with the knowledge that he had to be with the couple on holiday (in order to photograph them) places the viewer’s gaze as that of a homosexual man looking at a homosexual couple on holiday. The marker of difference that swerves this image towards being interpreted as radical is the artist’s own gaze: homosexual men look at male bodies in radically different ways. Tillmans’ daring us to find the hairy back attractive, combined with speculation as to the relationship between the artist and his models places the image subtly, yet securely in the radical category. The discursive acrobatics I had to employ to substantiate this image as radical are however not necessary in order to label the introductory image of the essay (2002:48-49) a radical artifact.

39 These are aspects of an ideal cultural subjectivity according to Cornel West’s conception of the Critical organic analyst (1990:33).
40 Tillmans’ probably decided on this title in view of the reception of many of his more radical works by the general public (The general outrage at his winning of the Turner Prize comes to mind…).
For his essay’s introductory image, Tillmans documented the gay couple sunbathing in a languorous embrace on a blow-up mattress in a tiled pool. The couple’s embrace clearly exceeds the limits of decorous male homosocial behaviour. They are touching in a way and in a context that heterosexuality would deem inappropriate and improper. Since this inappropriate touch is explicitly represented, this image can therefore be seen as radical through its representation of undeniable difference.

The essay as a whole addresses the failures of radicalism and reactionism. By presenting imagery of men that is far removed from the mainstream gay male norm of classical masculine ideals, Tillmans opens up the possibility of being accessible to a larger audience. His temperance (and hence critical engagement) with mainstream gay iconography avoids easy categorisation as ‘gay artefact (…of no importance)’. His unambiguous representation of difference, likewise, prevents this essay from being interpreted as assimilationist. By steering away from stereotypical representations (aided by the ‘naturalness’ of his snapshot aesthetic; by representing an instance of unique non-normativity (his models do not approximate mainstream gay ideals), Tillmans represents the Other as the same yet different; naturally mundane yet infused with signs that undermine easy classification; independently self-sufficient; but not threatening enough to substantiate separation. No shock, no scandal…(2002) is therefore an expression of Radical Assimilation in practice.
1.3. Undermining cultural identification

Identifications belong to the imaginary; they are phantasmic efforts of alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitation; they unsettle the “I”; they are the sedimentation of the “we” in the constitution of any “I.” Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshalled, consolidated, retrenched, contested, and, on occasion, compelled to give away.

– Judith Butler (1993:105)

Since Radical Assimilation as a political strategy requires a consciously distrustful identification with- and reluctant distancing from both normative heterosexuality and mainstream gay/lesbian identity, this balancing act necessitates the dissolution of cultural identity. In the following segment I will problematise our current conceptions of cultural identities as either essentialist or constructivist. Because both conceptions fail to account for individual identities, I conclude that individualism is cultural identity’s natural refutation, and that the assertion of individualism is therefore a necessary requirement of Radical Assimilation.

1.3.1. Problematic conceptions of cultural identity

Stuart Hall, in *Cultural identity and Cinematic representation* (1989), conceptualises cultural identity as a site with no eternal meaning by comparing two views of cultural identify, one the assumed essential, and the other the plausibly constructed\(^{41}\). On the one hand, cultural identity can be defined…

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\(^{41}\) Social construction theories concerned with sexuality as cultural identity are commonly the domain of scholars who focus on analyzing the socio-historic circumstances that give rise to gender and sexual identities, and whose conclusions fortify the fluidity of sexualities. Constructivist theorizations, on the other hand, can become quite removed from the actual experiences of individuals with non-normative sexualities (for most of whom these willfully obscurantist texts are completely inaccessible in the first place).
...in terms of the idea of one, shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self" hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves" which people with a shared culture and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as "one people" with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of actual history (cited in Gever 1990:193).

This view of cultural identity is the generally assumed, politically mobilizing and deeply entrenched, essentialist view. Hall’s second definition takes a Foucauldian view which defines cultural identity as...

...not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture...[but] subject to the continual play of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, [cultural] identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (cited in Gever 1990:193).

Cultural identity becomes a suspect phenomenon due to the fluidity of its spatial and temporal manifestation and its requirement of an identification on behalf of a collective of individuals with very little in common. A strategy for resistance that is critical of both dominant- and subordinate cultures can be facilitated when the romanticized notion of ‘culture’ (dominant or subordinate) is viewed as a fluid narrative of history without any eternal ‘core’, and as an imaginary construct formed largely to facilitate and entrench power. But to use constructivist interpretations to brush off all cultural identities as irrelevant disregards the complex nuances of identity-formation and the emotionally grave importance that identifications with cultural identities carry.

Many marginal groups politically need an embodied narrative of identity or self around which to activate and form community. This is true for gay people and feminists, for people of different ethnic backgrounds and with different class solidarities. So what does it mean to claim to dissolve these differences under a more fluid communication which ultimately deconstructs these binaries [normal/abnormal for gay people, man/woman for the feminists, black/white, master/slave, colonizer/colonized for ethnic groups etc.] as artificial? (Campbell 2000:137)

Artificiality, even when irrefutably proven, is not sufficient grounds for disregarding a phenomenon’s existence. Indeed, the artificial fist can probably do more damage than its fragile biological counterpart. The valorisation of construction theories in terms of sexuality furthermore falsely proclaimed the freedom to ‘construct’ one’s sexuality. This false sense
of agency became quite apparent in how Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity was interpreted, and through her deliberate distancing from these interpretations.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler states that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (1990:33). This thesis was widely interpreted as endorsing the intrinsic subversive potential of parody – an endorsement especially celebrated by gay male writers and activists (Maddison 2000:38) since artificial sexual stylisations (such as drag & S/M) could now be valorised as potent political tools subverting gender and heterosexual normativity through parading the dominant gender and sexuality structures’ requirement of hyperbolic display (and hence, artificiality) (Glick 2000:32). This interpretation wrongly equated gender performativity as a conscious act, a performance. The valorisation of gender performance as proclaiming a confident means of subverting oppressive gender and sexuality structures forgot to take Butler’s warning – that the repeated acts of gender stylisation occur within highly regulated power regimes – into account. Butler distanced herself to an extent from such a reading in *Bodies that matter* (1993), and in effect proposed that constructivist interpretations of sexuality are not that different from essentialist determinism:

> ...sexuality cannot be summarily made or unmade, and it would be a mistake to associate “constructivism” with “the freedom” of a subject to “form her/his sexuality as he/she pleases”. A construction is after all, not the same as an artifice. On the contrary, constructivism needs to take account of the domain of constraint without which a certain living and desiring being cannot make its way. And every such being is constrained by not only what is difficult to imagine, but what remains radically unthinkable: in the domain of sexuality these constraints include the radical unthinkability of desiring otherwise, the radical unendurability of desiring otherwise, the absence of certain desires, the repetitive compulsion of others, the abiding repudiation of some sexual possibilities, panic, obsessional pull, and the nexus of sexuality and pain (Butler 1993:94).

Butler warns that constructivist approaches should be tempered with a kind of essentialism. Are essentialist understandings of cultural identity therefore all we have to work with? The varying successes of activist lobbying for equal rights under anti-discrimination law through essentialist argumentation seem to answer ‘yes’.

An essential sense of self is a potent means of (if not a requirement for) the mobilization of a cultural identity. In terms of homosexual cultural identity, the gay community’s essentialist narrative of identity states that homosexuality is like a bodily given – one
cannot choose one’s sexuality. This essentialist claim is politically mobilising, and highly
subscribed to. As the basis for a gay liberation politic, Butler, in an interview with Margaret
Sönser Breen, is quick to point out the flaws of gay essentialism:

I have seen how arguments in favor of gay essentialism, however, are used politically
for gay rights advocacy. Since if you can say that you cannot help your condition, then
homosexuality becomes ostensibly more like race and sex, and its chances are
increased for gaining protection under the precedents currently forming anti-
discrimination law. But I would be skeptical of a cynical use of essentialism for
advancing rights, if only because the very essentialism can be used against lesbian,
gay, bi-, and trans people when it turns out that they do not conform to the definitions of
their identity that the law, under other circumstances, came to accept (cited in

Butler is stressing the well known critique of essentialist political lobbying. Essentialist
arguments imply “a unity that betrays the very real differences (of race, class, style, sexual
practice) embodied by individuals in diverse social locations” (Esterberg 1996:260) – If the
accommodation of diversity is seen as the very aim of the constructivist project,
constructivism refutes essentialism plausibly. Yet, constructivism, as voiced by Butler
earlier, should heed individuals’ experiences of a kind of determinism. How can one
resolve this circular argument?

Essentialism has been widely discredited:

It remains true nevertheless that the essentialist quest in the name of an authentic self
has proved wanting, especially within dominant cultures, and many of its adherents
have lost their faith when confronted with the post/modern repudiation of such a self.
As the autonomous self disappears, so the dialectic between law and desire, dominant
and deviant, becomes much more complex (Dollimore 1991:26).

While Max Kozloff, in The self portrait: the conflict between self presentation and self-
exposure (1999) hints at the suspect nature of constructivism.

“…an intellectual vogue (deconstruction) still insists that personality is only an exterior arrangement.
Post-modernist theory has been heavily involved in questions of personal inauthenticity, the artifice of
bad faith, and the substitution of performance for an increasingly questionable spontaneity.
Individualism – so goes the argument – is merely an outdated liberal cliché, with no relevance to
current behavior. No one of us chooses, so much as he or she is programmed, to play a social role.
For all practical purposes, we are defined by the set of impersonal protocols through which we
interact (Kozloff 1999:49).
Despite the fashionable academic acceptance of constructionist models of identity as critically outlined by Kozloff, the idea of an authentic self (another ‘spectre’ of Modernism haunting us) is still widely held and much perpetuated by the popular media. The essential self is such a potent mobilizing myth, such a strong foundation of cultural identity, and such a near instinctive, compelling consolation in the ever-spreading consumerist spectacle of surfaces and frivolity, that it must be accommodated somehow.

Since essentialist and constructivist models of identity are both plausible, yet not beyond criticism, we need to consolidate the two instead of submitting them to ‘either/or’ kinds of arguments where one holds favour and the other is supposedly discredited. Butler agrees that our views of determined sexuality and constructed sexuality do not account for the complexity of individual identification:

There is a tendency to think that sexuality is either constructed or determined; to think that if it is constructed, it is in some sense free, and if it is determined, it is in some sense fixed. These oppositions do not describe the complexity of what is at stake in any effort to take account of the conditions under which sex and sexuality are assumed. The ‘performative’ dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms. In this sense, then, it is not only that there are constraints to performativity; rather, constraints calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity. Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance. Moreover, constraint is not necessarily that which sets a limit to performativity (1993:95).

Concerning essentialist premises, Diana Fuss suggests a temperate strategy for dealing critically with essentialism. In Essentially speaking: feminism, nature and difference (1989) she suggests that “essentialism as a core premise of theories of identity should not be celebrated or deconstructed in extreme… [but] …should rather be assumed and questioned simultaneously” (1989:104). The same moderation, I would suggest, should be applied to constructivist conceptions of sexuality.

Jonathan Dollimore’s influential Sexual dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault (1991) consolidates both conceptions of sexuality in its introduction through a creative analysis of the writings of Oscar Wilde and his contemporary André Gide. Dollimore argues that Wilde’s writing originated from a constructivist ‘sensibility’ through a consideration of Wilde’s personal politic of irreverence, indecisiveness, play, celebration of surface and the anti-authentic. On the other hand, Dollimore considers André Gide an

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42 I used Butler’s outline of the complexity of individual identification as this chapter’s introductory quote.
essentialist through the confident way that Gide’s later work asserts his homosexuality as a natural, essential part of his being. Since both authors dared to transgress societal norms by embracing their homosexuality (albeit in different ways) Dollimore concludes that essentialist and constructivist ‘sensibilities’ are merely two divergent roads originating from the same ‘transgression’.

Dollimore finds in Wilde an early-modern expression of a kind of proto-constructivist sensibility in a reading of Dorian Gray: “…for Wilde, anyone trying to be natural is posing, and embarrassingly so, since they are trying to mystify the social as natural” (1991:10). Gide, on the other hand, motivated by the same ‘transgressive desire’ as Wilde, interprets this desire as essentially authentic: “I should like very submissively to follow nature – the unconscious, which is within myself and must be true” (cited in Dollimore 1991:13).

Because these divergent interpretations originate from the same non-normative desire, and because traces of both essentialism and constructivism are nearly always found in proponents of each interpretation’s politic, Dollimore concludes that a desire that is different from society’s norms can find utterance in converging ways: “…these are indeed divergent paths, for them and for us. But…these are paths which cross and reconverge: historically, conceptually, and experientially” (Dollimore 1991:18).

1.3.2. Cultural identity as subordinated to the individual

Since our current conceptions of sexuality as either essentialist or constructivist originate from the same individual desire to transgress (as outlined by Dollimore), and since both essentialist and constructivist accounts of cultural identity do not do the complexity of individual identities justice (as outlined earlier via Butler), cultural identity as sexuality is subordinated to the individual. When cultural identity becomes oppressive (as manifested in the heterosexuality/homosexuality dualism for example), its natural counteraction accordingly relies on the assertion of the individual. Individuality, however, can

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43 Which should be interpreted as equal to ‘homosexuality’ in terms of this discussion, since both ‘transgression’ and ‘homosexuality’ is the insistence of difference against society’s requirement to do (or be) otherwise.

44 This summary of Dollimore’s argument, which is only the introduction to a thorough thesis of transgressive reinscription, (bearing some similarity to Butler’s original thesis of subversive repetition of gender performance in Gender Trouble (1990)) is not doing its beauty any justice. For the sake of brevity I’ll have to concede to this reductive account, and strongly suggest that a reluctance to read Dollimore’s biblical text should yield to a reading of its first chapter at least.
superficially be discredited as a marketing tool, proscribed and relied upon for accelerated high-consumerist turnover.

In order to garner continual support of the high-consumerist system, a sense of personal individuality is required through a shallow sense of worth. The consumers’ sense of worth should however be unattainable (or just-out-of-reach) for the ensured continuation of the system. Worth, as measured through status-objects, fulfils this aim perfectly since status-objects are difficult to obtain, (only after working hard and saving even harder….) and easily dissatisfied with (the result of the constant flow of ‘new’ and ‘improved’ status objects). A less commercial individuality, (and dare I say ‘authentic’?) one that does not proscribe to society’s requirements – be it high-consumerist, or normative heterosexuality – is difficult to defend because such an individuality is quite simply seen as abnormal (mainstream pathologization) if not completely immoral or degenerate, anti-social, or selfish.

Dollimore responds to this dilemma through another reading of Oscar Wilde whose compelling arguments illustrate the norm’s double standard. According to Dollimore, Oscar Wilde interpreted evolution theory as positing that the “principle of differentiation [is the principle] to which all life grows” (1991:8). Dollimore subsequently paraphrases Wilde’s famous dictum: “selfishness is not living as one wishes to live, but asking others to live as one wishes to live” (1991:9), which leads Dollimore to conclude that individualism is on higher moral grounding than “uniformity of type” (1991:9) and that “individualism will generate cultural difference and diversity” (1991:8). From this we can deduce that individualism is not opposed to cultural formation per se, and that the assertion of individualism would indeed proliferate cultures as varied as individuals. Common sense would temper this assertion of individualism with the cultivation of a respect for others’ right to autonomy.

The complex structuring of cultural identifications and their power imbalances can only be breached when, once and for all, dispensing with the concept ‘culture’ (singular). ‘Culture’ can only be dissolved when there are no claims to monolithic identities. The nurturing of a certain kind of individualism would serve this purpose, since the individual, as I have argued, is the natural refutation of our current conceptions of monolithic cultural identity.

Cornel West distinguishes between ‘group autonomy’ as an “[o]penness to others… [that] does not entail wholesale co-option”, and ‘group insularity’ as “narrow chauvinist”. He makes this distinction in order to warn against the first term being wrongly interpreted as the second (West 1990:33).
1.4. Undermining gender

If we, as lesbians and gay men, continue to speak of ourselves and to conceive of ourselves as women and as men, we are instrumental in maintaining heterosexuality. I am sure that an economic and political transformation will not dedramatize these categories of language.

– Monique Wittig (1990:55)

Gayle Rubin, in an article entitled *The traffic in women: notes toward a political economy of sex* (1975), noted that the system that oppresses women and the system that oppresses homosexuals, are strikingly similar (1975:180). When considering the different permutations of the terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ conjoined with ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’, and evaluating all these permutations according to the current structuring of power in society, it is not difficult to realize that the ‘masculine, male heterosexual’ comes out as the most privileged with every throw of the dice.

Radical Assimilation as a strategy can only succeed if the related dualism of gender (man/woman) is also unsettled by it. In order to do this, the denied dependency of the hetero/homo dualism has to be taken into consideration. To avoid complicity in an oppressive system, a critical look at what it means to be “a man” in society is required of such a strategy.

1.4.1. The denied dependency

The homosocial/homosexual discontinuum.

In her influential book *Between men: male homosocial desire in English literature* (1985) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests ways of understanding the interrelationship between the sexual and the social desire46 between men. I find her conceptual analysis of the

46 Sedgwick likens her use of the word *desire* to the psychoanalytic use of *libido*, to specifically not indicate “a particular affective state or emotion” but rather an “affective or social force, the glue, even when its
relationship between ‘men working in the interests of men’ and ‘men interested in men’ highly fascinating as one of her conclusions is the explication of how there is an “always-already-crossed line” (1985:89) between homosocial and homoerotic desire. This already crossed line according to Steven Maddison is

…the blurring of fantasy scenarios with which male power eroticises itself – in effect seduces itself into reproducing. Men are encouraged to identify with masculinity – with the ideal homosocial subject, one to whom the display of attractiveness to women is evident, even hyperbolised...The characteristics which manifest this display are a man's thing for other men (2000:75).

Yet this eroticised male power is “enacted from within an understanding of the proximity of the dangerous realm of same-sex passion – the negotiations, suppressions and disavowals of that understanding are constitutive of men’s mannish relations with other men” (2000:73). This hyperbolized display of masculinity lies at the heart of Judith Butler’s explication of performative heterosexuality: a proposal of heterosexuality’s very unstable state of being, insisting on ‘commanding’ individuals to conform to heterosexual standards:

The hyperbolic conformity to the command [of compulsory heterosexuality] can reveal the hyperbolic status of the norm itself, indeed, can become the cultural sign by which that cultural imperative might become legible. Insofar as heterosexual gender norms produce inapproximable ideals, heterosexuality can be said to operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of “man” and “woman.” These are for the most part compulsory performances, one which none of us choose, but which each of us is forced to negotiate (1993:237).

The homoerotic functions in this mechanism (of male power reproduction) as a boundary that men are always in fear of already-having-crossed. This is a plausible explanation for male homophobia because redemption from that ‘already-crossed’ state can only involve the significant disavowal of homosexuality (and “the active production of misogyny”) (Maddison 2000:74). To nurture the idea of the male homosocial and homoerotic as a non-threatening continuum (as is the case with female homosocial/homosexual relations) would thus remove homophobia and misogyny which are the results of this dis-continuum. A strategy that would work towards this end, can be approached through highlighting the instability and panic men are subjected to. The deep-seated idea of masculinity as manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship” (1985:2).
somehow inexorably linked to the male body as natural effect and cause needs some consideration, because male dominance, through the hyperbolized display of masculinity, will not tolerate the repair of the broken continuum of homosocial and homosexual desire, since this dis-continuum is an apparatus of male domination. The only way to break the link between male bodies and masculinity, to sever ‘anatomy’ from signifying anything other than ‘anatomy’, is to utilize a constructivist approach. Such a severance will impact on all gender, since the final result will be the complete severance of bodies and gender. Butler’s constructivist approach relies on Lacan’s view of sex as a symbolic position:

Over and against those who argued that sex is a simple question of anatomy, Lacan maintained that sex is a symbolic position that one assumes under the threat of punishment, that is, a position one is constrained to assume, where those constraints are operative in the very structure of language and, hence, in the constitutive relations of cultural life (Butler 1993:95-96).

Bodies, despite their genital fixity (and, in the case of the intersexed person, sometimes ambiguity) is shown via the transsexual and the intersexed to be merely one of the raw materials utilized in the construction of gender. Being born male does not equate with being a man in every case. (Female to ‘a woman’ is likewise not a pre-determined equation.) Our current naturalized view that male bodies signify ‘men’ and female bodies, likewise, signify ‘women’ merely attests to the efficiency of gender as a self-replicating power apparatus. It is in the unaccounted-for exceptions that the body as essential given fails to demarcate any true currency. Again, bodies, to reiterate Butler, have no choice in how they are to be performed. How the body is used to navigate being ‘man’ or ‘woman’ is the result of a careful unconscious reiteration, disavowal, and sometime conscious identification. In this sense (to return briefly to a previous argument) constructivism contains some essential determinism, but a determinism that is spatially, temporally and contextually mutable, (even though it might seem like ‘men have been men’ since time immemorial, ‘man’ does not signify the same thing for every culture in every location in every time period) and therefore, contestable. How such a resistance is possible in a practical way is a question that I will attempt to answer in the search for an iconographic strategy in chapter two.

1.5. Summary

A strategy that aims at breaking down sexual categories through the critical celebration and disavowal of both categories, may seem highly contradictive – and possibly is. The only valuable counterargument to such criticism is that one cannot stand outside of discourse: one can only use the languages one knows in an attempt to overthrow those
same languages. While this view seems to foreclose any kind of agency, agency is possible, at least on a critical level. The ‘impossibility’ of escaping discourse seems less daunting to overcome when discourse’s resilience is likened to that of the diamond (impervious to anything except itself)\(^\text{47}\).

Cultural reformation is a slow, but possible process (as proven by the gains, however slow, made by women’s liberation groups for example). Change is possible and it can be accomplished with sensitivity and style by using the tools at your disposal: the very discourses of the systems you aim to overthrow: the discourses of normativity.

The ideal political strategy for a cultural worker aiming to disrupt sexual categories would be to engage in a paradoxical give and take with discourse: confident in stating difference, yet eloquent enough to seduce the mainstream; executed with passion and the belief that change can be effected, yet tempered with a moderation that is both assuming and questioning; accessible to a wide range of audience identifications, yet complex enough to avoid universal generalization; layered with paradox and ambiguity, indeed revelling (but not celebrating as law) in the cracks and the rifts that the reproduction of the social order produces all by itself already: the insufficiency of categories; the impossibility of universality; the instability of masculinity; and the persistence of the ‘I’ in the unaccommodating ‘we’.

\(^{47}\) Audre Lorde’s famous analogy “the Master’s tools can never dismantle the Master’s house” (cited in Blumenfeld & Sönser Breen 2005:21) comes to mind as a response here. While her analogy is very clever and colourful (and caused me to pause and to question my belief in the possibilities of affecting change quite anxiously…) I have, subsequently realized her figure’s fatal flaw: the mere consideration that the Master would be saddened and resolutely indignified by such a gesture (who wouldn’t?) made me realize that it is not beyond imagination that His tools can be used to disassemble His house.
Chapter 2: Strategizing iconography

Aspects of photography as useful tools for the manifestation of a Radical Assimilationist politic with specific reference to digitisation, portraiture, and domestic photography
It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world within words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.

– John Berger (1972:7)

I am disappearing, he thought, but the photographs were worth it


Few memories are so pleasant as the memories of your holidays. And yet, you allow these memories to slip away! How little you remember, even of your happiest times! Don’t let this year’s holiday be forgotten – take a Kodak and save your happiness. Make Kodak snapshots of every happy scene. The little pictures will keep your holiday alive – they will carry you back again and again to sunshine and freedom; they will enable you to chat once more with your jolly companions, and to enjoy another hearty laugh over the fun you had. Remember, you can learn to use a Kodak in half-an-hour. The only holiday that lasts is a holiday with Kodak.

– Kodak advertisement, 1920

Narcissus stands gazing at the source; the viewer stands gazing at the painting; and the same relationship emerges in both cases

– Philippe Dubois (1998:142)

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48 The advertisement from which this copy is taken is reproduced in Holland (2000:144) originally from the Punch picture library, London.
2.1. The digitally manipulated photographic image

2.1.1. Digitization and the ‘death of photography’

The constructedness of a photographic image becomes particularly apparent in digitally manipulated form. Martin Lister has pointed out that “what were formerly two broad and often contradictory ways of understanding photographs themselves have been parted” (1995:10). These views - one the realist, insisting on the camera’s objectivity, the other what could be called constructionist⁴⁹ - have for a brief period been transferred to distinguishing analogue photography with digital image making and -manipulation techniques (1995:10). Christoph Doswald gives a possible explanation for this separation of what used to be a photographic concern, in the light of art’s relationship to technological advances. In the preface to his edited volume published for the exhibition Missing link – The image of man in contemporary Photography (1991) at the Kunstmuseum Bern, Switzerland, he states that the emergence of new media tends “to trigger a Pavlovian defence reflex in those loyal to the old”, and therefore that “the sceptical attitude once reserved for photography is now directed toward digital imaging machines” (1999:18). This plausible explanation is echoed by Reck: “[t]he presumption that aesthetic experience is deformed or perhaps even destroyed by new technologies is a constant in the history of the imagination and of image systems” (1995: 64).⁵⁰

Just as the advent of photography signalled the death of painting for many, so too did the advent of digital imaging tools signal what many have deemed the death of photography, or the dawn of a post-photographic era (Batchen 1994; Crary 1990; Mitchell 1992). As can be discerned from the dates of the cited publications (the early 1990’s) - digital imaging techniques can be said to have been in its infancy then, and accessible to a very select few – the death of photography can easily be discredited in the light of contemporary

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⁴⁹ as verified by everyone who has ever created strikingly different photographs from the same negative through creative darkroom techniques as one amongst many other reasons for claiming photography as artifice.

artists’ practice of seamlessly utilizing both digital and traditional technologies in their work to the extent that digital photography and digital photographic techniques are now considered part and parcel of photographic practice. The new technologies have since then clearly been assimilated as yet another image making tool despite all the death warnings.

2.1.2. The realist position and Modern vision

In 1859, The Lancet\(^{51}\) reported that “photography is so essentially the art of Truth – that it would seem to be the essential means of reproducing all forms and structures which science seeks for delineation” (cited in Tagg 1980:41). In Photography and modern vision: the spectacle of natural magic (1995) Don Slater gives a compelling explication of how photography, from its inception, was bound to a positivist understanding of vision and hence fell in the gamut of the ‘real’ and the ‘objective’.

Due to its trivial realism – its meticulous, objective and impersonal representation of the surface attributes of matter – photography could be seen as exemplary of modern, and modernizing, vision; photography interpreted in terms of its realist qualities appears to have a special and intimate relation to the positive, to be a machine for the production of positivist vision (1995:223).

The bulk of his essay is then spent explicating the irony of photography as a “machine for the production of positivist vision” starting with the premise of visual spectacles as necessary for inspiring belief in a positivist vision: “if modernity is based on restricting ‘believing’ to ‘seeing’, on the idea that seeing is the only valid basis for believing, then it must constantly generate visual spectacles which inspire belief” (1995:223). The apparatus for perpetuating a positivist world-view relies heavily on constructed spectacles! Slater describes the “spectacular nature of scientific demonstration” in terms of the very first public announcements of photographic science as taking the form of “complex abstract cultural moments” (1995:223). These spectacles find a familiar contemporary counterpart in science popularised by television programmes on ‘science’ channels\(^{52}\).

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\(^{51}\) One of the oldest and most respected British medical journals still published today.

\(^{52}\) Drawing parallels with conceptions of sexuality would by conjecture imply that an essential normative sexuality would need to present its normalcy with spectacle. Gender and sexuality as performance takes on a different character: normative sexuality requires explicit performance. Sedgwick’s display of masculinity also comes to mind: homosocialism becomes the spectacular arena for the presentation of normative masculine heterosexuality.
Photography’s claim to reality lies in its optical and mechanical physicality – *something must have been* in front of the camera. This *something real* lingers on in spite of easily understood claims to photography’s artifice. Chris Jenks in the introduction to his edited volume *Visual Culture* (1995) calls the artifice of images the “iconographic, or metaphoric, role” of *all* visual images’ function, in that they “stand for a state of affairs” and “not assume the status of literal descriptions” (1995:14). Photographic realism, a result of “an empirical philosophical tradition, a realist aesthetic, a positivist attitude towards knowledge and a technoscientistic ideology through modernity”, has “led to a common-sense cultural attitude of literal depiction in relation to vision” (1995:14).

Undermining such a compelling critique of photographic realism calls for some very creative discursive choreography. Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1980) considers photographic realism *magical*:

> The realists of whom I am one… do not take the photograph for a ‘copy’ of reality, but for an emanation of past reality; a magic, not an art… The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time (1980:88,89).

Mariane Hirsch in *Photography, narrative and postmemory* (1997) Shares this continuous belief in a vestige of truth or ‘the real’ in photography:

> As much as I remind myself that photographs are as essentially constructed as any other representational form, that every part of the image can be manipulated and even fabricated, especially with ever more sophisticated digital technologies, I return to Barthes’s basic “ça a été” (“this has been”) and an unassailable belief in reference and a notion of truth in the picture (Hirsch 1997:6).

Both Barthes and Hirsch’s difficulty of disregarding a certain ‘truth’ in photography (an indication that our everyday experience of the world is still haunted by a positivist attitude towards knowledge) echoes the difficulty queer theorists have in writing the corporeality of the body out of gender and sexuality conceptions.\(^\text{53}\)

### 2.1.3. The constructivist position

The positivist understanding of photographic realism – what could also be called its documentary credibility – has, according to Slater’s explication, been gradually destabilized by a variety of conditions: the previously noted subversion of realism through

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\(^{53}\) Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter: on the discursive limits of ‘sex’* (1993) comes to mind.
the idea of spectacle as initial undermining factor (1995:223), but subsequently also what Jenks calls “the transformation of the belief in vision as knowledge into the practice of vision as fetishisation”, and finally “the loss of faith in facts as being productive of truth” (Jenks 1995:23). Christoph Doswald summarises these circumstances to their originators. He places the blood of the final demise of photographic realism on the hands of deconstruction, and digital manipulation technology:

Photography lost its documentary credibility during the 1980’s – the consequence of doubts sown by deconstructivists and media theorists as to the truth content of the machine-made images produced during the decade. Finally, the emergence of digital manipulation techniques called the last remaining link between the depicted subject and the visual image into question (Doswald 1999:11).

Specific ontological counter-arguments to photographic reality centre on the disjunction between the fraction of a second of life that a single photograph represents and the actual flow of events in time. Related to the time aspect is also the massive amount of contextual information that is necessary for the image to produce any sort of validity to its experienced meaning but which is seldom represented by the photograph alone. Other considerations include: the easy manipulation of the photographic image (from the onset of framing one view at the expense of another; creative darkroom techniques; to manipulation by digital means) as well as the complete staging or fabrication of the photographed object which could best be described (in terms of domestic photography54) as the conscious or subconscious performative act of the photographic event.

54 The term ‘domestic photography’ refers to the cultural practice of documenting and validating personal rites of passages through photography; births, weddings, holidays etc. The term ‘snapshot’ is perhaps more familiar, but it doesn’t quite give an indication of the genre’s close relationship with conventions of ‘normalcy’ in the domestic sphere that the photographs of this genre engender and perpetuate, nor does it include the professional photographs that form part of the family albums or collections; family portraits taken in a studio, wedding pictures taken by the professional etc. ‘Domestic photography’ is also used instead of ‘personal-’ or ‘family’ photography because the relationship between ‘family’ and ‘the personal’ according to Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh (1982) is too easily seen as an equation. The equation excludes too much. This is especially applicable in my own work since I draw from the large differences between my personal life and my family life, which I then play off against each other during the creative process. ‘Family’, as yet another contested term, also has specific meanings in queer circles and does not necessarily include biological bonds. ‘Family’ is, above that, an especially sensitive subject in the light of failed activism towards legislative reforms of Clause28 in the UK that defined same-sex relationships as ‘pretended family relationships’. 

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Stefan Banz explains the time aspect (as prime element aiding the subversion of photography’s claim to reality) clearly in his article *The Photograph as Misunderstanding* (1999).

A photograph is always an extraction, of 1/125th of a second, for instance, from life. It is a Now, and there is no Before or After. Thus, strictly speaking, photography has nothing to do with life. Life, reality, takes place in time and space. But a photograph is neither time nor space. It is simply this Now or this Then and therefore tells us nothing about life as it really unfolds. […] In this sense, photography is the most abstract medium there is, since it has essentially nothing to do with the facts of life. This is not to say that it really has nothing at all to do with life but simply that it is not life itself and cannot represent it. Its meaning depends solely upon us as recipients. We determine the kind of life we breathe into the photograph…[P]hotographs lead us both emotionally and factually astray. They remain a misunderstanding (1999:31)[my emphasis].

Thomas Koerfer, in *Various encounters* (1999) briefly discusses the work of snapshot diarist/photographer Nan Goldin. He shows a similar suspicion of photographic reality in yet another turn of events related to the contextual critique of photographic realism: the performative nature of the photographic event:

…it is sometimes hard to determine whether photography exerts a formative influence upon life – were the tears prolonged for the photograph? – or whether life points photography in a new direction. A new kind of give and take emerges in the relationship between photography and life (Koerfer 1999:44)

Photography as expressing some essential truth about reality is finally judged to have failed, yet is validated in the light of the immense variability of photography’s uses. John Tagg aptly likens photography with ‘writing’ (as opposed to ‘literature’ or ‘art’) to explain this (1988:14-15). Photography’s multiple uses can, according to Lister’s account of Tagg’s argument, not “be usefully understood as if they all belonged to one grand, selective and linear enterprise held together by a unifying idea and a defining set of canonical works” (1995:11). This implies that any number of interpretations is valid, subject to each interpretation’s specific context. The apparent contradiction in terms then turns out to be a strange unity of opposites – a unity that Slater calls “natural magic” (1995:220).

**2.1.4. The divide that never really was**

Consider how Hirsch, as proponent of photographic realism, acknowledges photography’s construction – “photographs are as essentially constructed as any other representational form” (1997:7), and how Banz, as constructivist, acknowledges photographic reality – “this
is not to say that it really has nothing at all to do with life…” (1999:31). Hirsch’s acknowledgment of photographic construction, and Banz’s acknowledgment of photographic realism illustrate the nearly common knowledge validity of both distinctions. Photography is both a realist and a constructivist medium. The degrees by which a photograph can be considered more real than constructed and vice versa, depends on the context. The realist position cannot then ever be the sole definitional element of photography and digital augmentation merely enhances the constructed-ness inherent in all photographs – a constructed-ness that aids in the rendering of the image as a spectacle, a cultural event bearing a weight of agency (albeit an agency that can only fall within Barthes’ and Slater’s magic, or an agency with an evidential force as opposed to verifiable truth) – an agency dependent on the direction the creator of the event nudges it, and the direction in which the viewer casts his interpretive gaze. Manipulating the direction of the spectacle is of utmost importance since a spectacle demands something from the viewer: a judgment as to whether the spectacle is to be “marvelled” at or scorned” (Hatt 1993:64). A politic that insists on agency assumes that something can be done. Doing something is the first step towards validating such an assertion. I therefore propose the constructed image to be the first element of an ideal iconographic strategy because the constructed image is the initial arena, the spectacle that demands something from the viewer.

### 2.1.5. Towards an iconographic strategy: Photography as sexuality

The distinction between opposing views of the photographic medium resonates with the opposing conceptualizations of sexuality, gender and identity: essentialism (the body as illustrating some essential truth about sexuality) and social constructionism (theorization of gender and sexual categories as socio-historic constructions). If the photographic image is both ‘real’ (an indexical trace of a physical event) and constructed (manipulated, stripped of context, re-contextualised in a subjective entity functioning as spectacle or even completely fabricated bearing only other things that could pass in front of the lens), sexuality - as confronted with the same oscillating dynamics (of the essential body and the constructed identity) – then operates with the same consolidation: The body as given is subject to the same constructive potential - a potential that can only render the evidential force of the body magical.

55 American spelling used by the author.
Because of the striking similarities between these distinctions of photography and sexuality, the hand printed photograph, with its flaunted optical-mechanical-chemical physicality can easily become a metaphor of essentialist notions of sexuality. The digital image (as enhancement of the photograph’s construction), with its flaunted disembodiment (as spectral code available to anyone) and potential for seemingly unlimited manipulation, re-contextualisation or even fabrication, can similarly be used to imply constructionist views of sexuality. The digitally manipulated photographic image as literal combination subsequently becomes the perfect medium in which to express sexuality as a strange, yet natural unity of conflicts. The political strategy behind such an expression confronts the viewer with the familiar-yet-foreign. Bridges between cultures are easily built on aspects that are similar. The bridges are altogether unnecessary if no differences exist, so the differences (the foreign) should be voiced in the same space to avoid being co-opted and assimilated into oblivion.

The success of this strategy depends on the viewer’s necessary identification with the similarities presented. The image of another human being is the perfect medium for this aspect due to what Chris Doswald calls the photograph’s Lacanian mirror function:

As viewers of images of human beings, we not only learn something about the subjects but ultimately gain insights into ourselves at the same time. The photograph also functions as a mirror in the Lacanian sense – even when it is not we ourselves who are represented, we cannot help but measure ourselves against the images we encounter, placing ourselves automatically in the scene and the picture. (Doswald 1999:14)

Phillipe Dubois (quoted in the introduction to this chapter) correctly likens this process to narcissism. Drawing on the viewer’s narcissism through the depiction of a human body in order to create an arena for political action – albeit intimate and personal – seems to be a good strategy for creating a space where personal assumptions can be questioned, and possible insights gained.

This strategy outlined thus far entails the following:

a) An understanding of the constructed image as aiding the creation of a cultural ‘event’ or spectacle that bears a weight of agency,
b) the digitally manipulated photographic image as the ideal medium through which to express sexuality as a strange, yet natural unity of conflicts, and
c) the use of the human form to function as a ‘mirror’, setting up a space for personal identification on the part of the viewer.

These elements, however, are still lacking in so far as they are over-generalised. Since all works of art are constructions of one form or another by virtue of their having been made/conceived, the constructed image is too broad a criterion to nudge interpretation of the event as concerned with sexuality. The digitally manipulated photographic image, as one such construction, can be a useful tool in the expression of sexuality as a strange unity of conflicts, but only when the connection between photographic distinctions and those of sexuality are made apparent. All digitally manipulated images do not necessarily express anything about sexuality. Something else needs to be present before the central metaphorical structure I would like to use strategically can be accessed.

The addition of the human form to the criteria opens up the possibility of readings of the work to venture into issues surrounding sexuality, but it is still not sufficient. While the human form may give certain accessibility to the event and create a personal framework from which potential insights are to be made, not all human forms are necessarily read in a sexual context. And none of the criteria aids in fulfilling the goal of asserting a non-normative queer identity as yet.

In the following section I will draw from discourses of Portraiture and Domestic photography in search of further possible means to counter this problem of over-generality.
2.2. Portraiture

If only the portrait could speak… if only the portrait could love, like the exquisite statue of a woman that Ovid’s Pygmalion carved with his own two hands – a statue that was finally able to love, thanks to the intervention of Venus. But Venus has long since ceased to exist and, outside of literature, lovers no longer have a goddess on whom they can call

– Mauricio Bettini (1999:5)

Lovers’ portraits are born of absence, but are, according to Mauricio Bettini, paradoxically signs of both absence and presence: “It consoles us, and is also the source of our greatest anguish” (Bettini 1999:5). This strong personal and emotional meaning that emanates from portraits of intimate companions can surely add to a reading of a portrait of the lover as being concerned with sexuality. Yet, the relationship between the creator and the sitter of the portrait is not always apparent when viewing a portrait without such prior contextual information. Richard Avedon’s reading of a Schiele self portrait comes to the rescue:

I think there’s an element of sexuality in all portraiture; the moment you stop to look, you’ve been picked up. You look in a way you’re not allowed to look in life. Is there any situation in life where you can look at the Duchess of Alba for half an hour without ending up dead at the hands of the Duke? A confrontational, erotic quality, I think, should underline all portraiture (1985:59).

Whether a confrontational erotic quality should underline all portraiture or not is not of much relevance here (the least successful definitions of art probably include the word ‘should’). Of importance is the erotic quality underlying all portraiture. The portraits of myself, my lover, and my father that I produce are automatically sexually charged for me as creator. Avedon’s proposal that there is an element of sexuality in all portraits raises my hopes that an erotic quality will not go unnoticed (even in the absence of any overt eroticism in the portraits) by uninitiated viewers of my portraits.
2.2.1. Towards an iconographic strategy: Portraiture as sexuality

Drawing yet another parallel with conceptions of sexuality, this time with the performative nature of portraiture, results in a favourable consolidation of essentialist and constructivist conceptions of sexuality: a portrait of Peter can only be a portrait of Peter (unless some very creative discursive reasoning leaves a portrait of Peter actually a portrait of John) due to the individual’s likeness that the portrait ‘captures’. The individual’s portrait is an essential likeness. Some likenesses are hyperbolised through personal investment. These hyper-essential images carry special weight because they contain what Barthes calls (on deliberation of an image of his mother that, for him, is the ultimate likeness) “the impossible science of unique being” (1980:70-71).

The arguments for photography as a realist medium apply here as well. Because the photograph physically ‘captures’ light reflected off the photographed person, the photographic portrait is considered, above being an iconic sign (due to its features in common with the referent), to be an indexical sign too (like a footprint, having physical touched the referent) (Bettini 1999:49). Barthes emphasises this physicality: “The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here” (1980:80). This physicality leads him to evoke the essential body (because of its irrefutable physicality too) in concluding that light is “a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed” (1980:81)[my emphasis]. Yet this essential likeness is subject to near infinite variations of performance that forms an integral part of a portrait’s creation.

2.2.2. Performing the portrait

The act of sitting, or posing for a portrait (even the ubiquitous ‘cheese’ of the snapshot) is a spectacle in miniature – a performance. An uneasy artificiality co-exists with the near

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56 Portraiture as a performance is not the only subversion of the photographic portrait’s ‘essential’ likeness. The temporal alteration of the real face in time – the result of aging, renders a photograph of the self taken many years before to be experienced as distant other. (The common verbal response: “I can hardly recognize myself in this picture” comes to mind.) Douglas Nickel in Snapshots: the photography of everyday life, 1888 to the present (1998) elaborates that the dissociative result of viewing even very familiar images of ourselves ‘alienate us from ourselves…showing us enigmatic versions of our persons… and fragmentary re-enactments of our lived experiences’ (1998:13).
unquestionable reality of the individual’s likeness. Barthes, as expected, experiences this unease hyperbolically:

Posing in front of the lens (I mean; knowing I am posing, even fleetingly), I do not risk so much as that\(^{57}\) (at least, not for the moment). …though this dependence [on the photographer for my existence] is an imaginary one (and from the purest image-repertoire), I experience it with the anguish of an uncertain filiation; an image – my image – will be generated (1981:11).

Because the image of the self is so confrontationally real; because it constitutes such an unambiguous representation of the individual; the creation of that image goes hand in hand with the strong will to manipulate that image favourably. The fleeting, near subconscious repertoire of images that the individual draws from during a portrait’s performance is, according to Doswald, a result of the mass dissemination of human images:

Knowledge of the effects the picture will have plays an important yet paradoxical role in this process of self-presentation, of posing. Thanks to the mass dissemination of human images in the media, our minds are filled with countless subject images, all of which have model character. Thus our behavior in front of the camera always involves recourse and reference to previously existing images. The images are inside us, and we are in the images (1999:14).

The performance of the portrait renders a problematic air of artificiality to the final portrait, and creates a conflictual unity of opposites: the likeness of a recognizable individual is created through a constructed spectacle (even if the performance is subconscious or fleeting).

Avedon proposes that this conflict need not be problematic, that the awkward conflict between an essential likeness and created image evokes the wrong kind of argument. Suspicions that a portrait is somehow unnatural are flawed in view of all performances’ intrinsic *unnaturalness*. If a performance is always unnatural, the only judgment to be made from it concerns whether the performance is effective or not\(^{58}\):

\(^{57}\) Barthes is referring to “certain Communards [who] paid with their lives for their willingness […] to pose on the barricades” because “they were recognized by Thiers’s police and shot, almost every one” (Barthes 1981:11).

\(^{58}\) Perhaps it can be deduced that all sexualities are in fact neither natural nor unnatural in a similar fashion. While this argument uses some very creative logic, this deduction is quite interesting. If Avedon is to be paraphrased as if he were speaking about sexuality instead of the performed portrait, sexuality as a performance’s balance of effects could then be deemed as neither natural nor unnatural, but rather good or
Because portraiture is performance, and like any performance, in the balance of its effects it is good or bad, not natural or unnatural. I can understand being troubled by this idea – that all portraits are performances – because it seems to imply some kind of artifice that conceals the truth about the sitter. But that is not it at all. The point is that you can’t get at the thing itself, the real nature of the sitter, by stripping away the surface. The surface is all you’ve got. You can only get beyond the surface by working with the surface. All that you can do is to manipulate that surface – gesture, costume, expression – radically and correctly (1985:56).

The recourse to manipulate the surface of the subject (since it is the only medium available to work with) is heavy with the responsibility of rendering the manipulated object effectively (a good performance). Avedon’s radical and correct manipulation implies another question concerning the specifics of a correct manipulation: When exactly can a manipulation be correct? From his article it seems the only correct performance is a self-conscious one: he finds a kind of an enigmatic beauty in a photograph he took of Francis Bacon. Bacon was apparently well aware of the artifice of a portrait’s construction. He performed well after internalizing Avedon’s expectations of the sitting (1985:64). A ‘correct’ manipulation – a self-conscious performance of the surface – yields an enigmatic kind of beauty.

Portraiture, like sexuality, is therefore a complex unity of seemingly irreconcilable dualisms: the essential likeness and its constructed performance, and is therefore useful to evoke as an iconographic strategy to question categories of sexuality. The portrait’s construction, however, complicates this strategy through another layer of meaning that needs consideration: the portrait as only meaningful as a mask.

2.2.2.i. Performance as a mask

The performative nature of portraits, (especially within the realm of domestic photography) whether consciously performed or subconsciously performative, has been theorised under the metaphor of the mask (Barthes 1980; Hirsch 1997). The performance of a portrait, however, is not limited to the obvious likening of the posed smile to a mask – the mask is a useful metaphor in understanding the reading of portraits as well.
Concerning the photographic portrait, the difficulty one finds in reading beyond the surface of the image can be thought of as a mask. The instant of the photograph’s creation masks the temporal context (the before and after) of the photographed event, thus rendering the resulting image impenetrable:

I must therefore submit to this law; I cannot penetrate, cannot reach into the photograph. I can only sweep it with my glance, like a smooth surface. The photograph is flat, platitudinous in the true sense of the word, that is what I must acknowledge (Barthes 1980:106).

The discursive ideologies we project on to an image also mask the same temporal context. Hirsch calls these ideological masks “semiotic lenses or screens through which we read photographs, and through which the images themselves are constructed as objects of social meaning” (1997:85). Barthes goes so far as to suggest that photographic meaning is possible only in terms of the masks the photograph assumes:

Since every photograph is contingent (and thereby outside of meaning), photography cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask. It is this word that Calvino correctly uses to designate what makes a face into the product of society and of its history...the mask is the meaning, insofar as it is absolutely pure (as it was in the ancient theatre) (1980:34).

If the mask is the meaning, a portrait’s meaning can be manipulated favourably through the various elements that constitute the mask, or by illuminating the context of the portrait’s construction (in other words to remove the mask).

The elements that constitute photographic masks are: the performative mask (the performance of a portrait), the superficial mask (the superficiality of the photographic surface if the portrait is photographic), and the ideological mask (the conventions by which

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59 The superficiality of the photograph is due to the amount of contextual information one needs in order to make sense of it. Marianne Hirsch calls this superficiality the “photograph’s power to conceal” (1997:85).

60 Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology seems most appropriate for enquiries into the visual field and it is in his terms that I use the word. In For Marx (1977) Althusser defines ideology as: “…the system of representations by which we imagine the world as it is” (1977:233).

61 Richard Avedon, as quoted earlier, echoes Barthes in this regard: “…the surface is all you’ve got” (1985:56).

62 In a world where meaning is infinitely deferred, the removal of a mask will only reveal another mask. This is perhaps why Avedon exclaims that: “…the surface is all you’ve got” (1985:56). To illuminate the truth behind the mask is an impossibility since the revealed truth will only be masked by a new ideological framework. The only potential for agency is therefore in the manipulation of the surface.
a genre of portraiture is usually interpreted). The self-conscious manipulation of the masks of a portrait, or the intervention in subverting the obvious masks of a portrait, will therefore allow the portraitist political agency.

The principal convention by which the domestic portrait is interpreted is familiarity (Hirsch 1997:86). The ideological mask in the genre of domestic photography (from which all of my own portraits originate), the screen through which the domestic photograph gains its meaning, is the myth of the family. The masks of portraiture, according to Hirsch’s reading of Barthes:

…are social roles containing allegorical or mythic power, thereby enabling political readings. As we pose, we assume particular masks; as we read photographs, we project particular masks, particular ideological frames, onto the images (Hirsch 1997:86).

To achieve agency when utilizing the portrait for political gain, the operational dynamics of the mask (the masks we project, and the masks we assume) within the realm of the domestic photograph needs to be carefully considered. It is within the realm of the domestic photograph that I find the ideal site for an effective queer iconographic strategy.
2.3. Domestic photography

Ultimately, Photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is pensive, when it thinks.

– Roland Barthes (1980:38)

Family photographs may affect to show us our past, but what we do with them – how we use them – is really about today, not yesterday.

– Anette Kuhn (cited in Hirsch 1997:189)

I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.


2.3.1. The mantelpiece

My graduation portrait has taken up quite a prominent place on my parent's mantelpiece. The double edged sword of the domestic photograph operates here to striking effect. I detest that photograph! (to the extent that I avoid the living room as far as possible during visits). It does not conform to the image I have of myself (or would like to project). The image's prominent placement burdens me to live up to the well-adjusted, intelligent, frighteningly normal achiever that the photograph displays me to be. On the other hand, that photograph, by mere virtue of its presence in the family home, (my parents are well aware that I am not that well-adjusted, frighteningly normal, intelligent achiever – and that I measure my success and social integration on very different terms than they do) has given me access to, and a kind of acceptance by my parents. That horrible photograph is a small reminder that my place in the family home is secure despite our general differences. The domestic photograph as both symbol for and apparatus of family cohesion therefore has the strange potential to alienate one from oneself in near equal
parts as its potential to solidify integration into the family unit. For many it is within the realm of the ambiguous that potent disruptive statements can be forged, and it is with Jo Spence’s question that I start this segment: “How can we begin to change the portrait, to change ideas of what should and should not go into our family albums?” (1988:94).

2.3.2. A few operational distinctions:
2.3.2.i. Snapshots & studio portraits


...[S]napshots are taken with objectives only peripherally related to those of high art, by untrained persons, and for largely private reasons; to commemorate a family or town event, to document travel, to retain the appearance of pets and loved ones, to memorialise objects of personal importance. Frequently the photograph is the event; while at root the word connotes ... instantaneity, the snapshot is more often deliberately arranged, ceremoniously posed, and unhurriedly exposed than otherwise. ...Some images are made to remember an occasion, some to invent a memory, but almost all are conceived with the maker and his or her immediate circle as the intended audience (1998:12).

The studio portrait, while not accounted for in Nickel’s definition, functions in quite the same way as the domestic snapshot: the studio photograph also commemorates family events (births, weddings, ceremonies etc.), and when there is no specific event to commemorate, the core motivation for the creation of a studio portrait (like the domestic snapshot) is the display of family cohesion, (irrespective of the actual state of the family’s cohesion). The deliberation of its creation in a formal studio atmosphere is not that much different to the ‘informal’ (yet equally deliberate) arrangement and posing of the domestic snapshot. The studio portrait’s meaning is firmly rooted in the immediate domestic sphere. The snapshot and the studio portrait, with their origin rooted in the rites of the family (the *photograph as the event*) collectively constitute the two prime variations of domestic photography.

2.3.2.ii. Access & indifference

An important characteristic of domestic photography is its accessibility. Domestic photographs have immense power to move us because they are seemingly innocent objects of sentiment:
The snapshot is, by design, an object of sentiment, and though other kinds of images may particularize or court a response by means of sympathy, the family photograph is forged in the emotional response its maker has to a subject, a relationship characterized by its sincerity. Our readings of found images are colored by this affective thrust; we react with amusement, wistfulness, enchantment, curiosity, envy, empathy, and, in the case of older pictures, an appreciable amount of nostalgia. The happy occasions generally selected for memorialization as snapshots engender the illusion of a tragedy-free past, it is true, but it is a past we need and seem to enjoy, in a form that evinces no deliberate motive to deceive (Nickel 1998:14).

But this accessibility is tempered by the closed text the photograph becomes when removed from its original domestic context. When the domestic photograph is removed from the domestic sphere, (when looking at other people or strangers' domestic photographs) the photograph suffers from what Nickel calls an “excess of meaning” because the images then “offer [themselves] to the pleasure of our active, creative imaginations” (1998:13).

In other people’s pictures we often see ourselves, sharing the collective bourgeois experience, beholding variants of our own birthdays, beaches, and grandmothers, and realizing some of the same motions we would before our own albums. Simultaneously, we enjoy anonymous images for their strangeness, their narrative indeterminacy, for the ambiguity that frequently compels us to ask, Why was this picture taken? What is going on here? What were they thinking? The voyeuristic pleasure obtained from examining another’s private documents – letters, wills, prescription labels – operates here as well, idling voluptuous speculation and vicarious sensation. Perhaps, at a deeper level, the unidentified snapshot proclaims our own condition; our innermost condition; our most acute life experiences, after all, occur within the realm of the family, which is the realm of the snapshot (1998:13).

2.3.2.iii. Users & viewers

The formulation of the personal/family photograph as a restricted code or a closed text (Bernstein 1971:76) requires a specific distinction between readers and users of domestic photographs. Patricia Holland explains the difference between the two:

Users bring to the images a wealth of surrounding knowledge. Their own private pictures are part of the complex network of memories and meanings with which they make sense of their daily lives. For readers, on the other hand, a hazy snapshot … is a mysterious text whose meanings must be teased out in an act of decoding or historical detective work. Users...have access to the world in which they make sense; readers must translate those private meanings into a more public realm (Holland, 2002:121).

This restriction of access does give images of this kind a certain allure for readers, but without the rich context of personal meanings initial allure can easily change into a view
that the images are “thin and ephemeral” (Holland 2000:121), rendering these photographs inconsequential and trivial because to fully understand them one needs to know much about their context.

Barthes (on the omission of a photograph of his mother from his richly described image text of the same photograph in Camera Lucida(1980)) captures the essence of the power domestic photographs have over us and the fundamental difference between the user and viewer of a domestic photograph.

I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you it would be nothing but an indifferent picture... in it, for you, no wound (1980:73).

For viewers of domestic photographs, the original meaningfulness of the photograph in the domestic sphere contributes to its aura of strangeness by offering a voyeuristic glance into other people’s lives, yet this aura can easily be relegated to “one of the thousand manifestations of the ordinary” (1980:73). Without the rich context of personal meanings, the photograph’s initial allure can easily change into a view that the images are “thin and ephemeral” (Holland 2000:121), a quality that renders these photographs inconsequential and trivial because to completely understand them one needs to know much about their context. The domestic photograph’s banality is therefore the result of viewers’ inability to access the photograph’s contextual meanings yet also the cause of the photograph’s voyeuristic appeal.

2.3.2.iv. The amateur & the professional
An aspect of the domestic snapshot’s accessibility is its origin at the hands of an amateur. The domestic snapshot is therefore removed from the conventions and strategies and skill that turn photography into art. Because these images could have been taken by anyone, and indeed remind us of the images taken by ourselves, domestic snapshots are non-confrontational in terms of skill or artifice. The amateur state of the maker confers upon the photograph a layer of ‘naturalness’. The domesticic snapshot’s realism is according to Barthes probably the closest that the medium of photography will come to authentic:

63 The snapshot’s vernacular has been utilised quite strikingly for fine art purposes. Where the ‘snapshot aesthetic’ is used in art, however, it is a conscious manipulation on the part of the artist and hence quite removed from the ‘authentic’ domestic photograph with no stylistic pretences. Where artists have utilised their authentic domestic photographs in their art practice, their wealth of knowledge concerning the creation and manipulation of images removes them from the domestic sphere through careful selection, decontextualisation and above all artistic intent. Wolfgang Tillmans’ earlier work comes to mind (Riemschneider 1994).
Usually the amateur is defined as an immature state of the artist: someone who cannot – or will not – achieve the mastery of a profession. But in the field of photographic practice, it is the amateur, on the contrary, who is the assumption of the professional: for it is he who stands closer to the noeme of Photography (1980:99).

But earlier in Camera lucida Barthes struggled to come to terms with the domestic snapshot’s status as amateur pursuit:

Myself, I saw only the referent, the desired object, the beloved body; but an importunate voice (the voice of knowledge, of scientia) then adjured me, in a severe tone: "Get back to Photography. What you are seeing here and what makes you suffer belongs to the category ‘Amateur Photographs,’ dealt with by a team of sociologists; nothing but the trace of a social protocol of integration, intended to reassert the Family, etc. (1980:7).

Barthes then states his wish to become a “primitive, without culture” (1980:7) in order to be able to discuss theoretically a photograph that his acculturated world of theory didn’t allow him to discuss. The social protocol that troubles his reading constitutes the prime subconscious ideological structure the domestic photograph is read through.

2.3.3. The myth of the family

The operational metaphor for the ideological framework shaping the domestic photograph’s creation and interpretation is the myth of the family, which in turn can be interpreted as a mask (as introduced earlier in this chapter). This particular mask is a result of projected Lacanian screens, familial looks and gazes, of which the search for lineage and the resulting positioning within accepted normalcy is the motive. Pierre Bourdieu explains this positioning:

[Domestic] photographic practice only exists and subsists for most of the time by virtue of its family function or rather by the function conferred upon it by the family group, namely that of solemnizing and immortalizing the high points of family life, of reinforcing the integration of the family group...reasserting the sense that it has both of itself and of its unity (1990:19).

The reason for the centrality of the domestic photograph in the construction of the family is because the camera has “replaced verbal techniques of memory preservation and self-affirmation” (Doswald 1999:14). Hirsch explains this centrality as originating in George Eastman’s invention of the Kodak camera:

With the slogan “You push the button, we do the rest,” the camera entered the domain of the ordinary and the domestic. Thus photography quickly became the family’s
primary instrument of self knowledge and representation, the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated, by which the family’s story would henceforth be told (1997:6-7).

Patricia Holland, like Hirsch, regards these dynamics of the domestic photograph in terms of the history of photography, but elaborates on it as a result of a gradual “century long shift to a consumer-led, home based economy” that “evolved as part of the interleaving of leisure and the domestic, whose development runs parallel to the history of photography itself” (2000:120).

Marianne Hirsch’s *Family frames – photography, narrative and postmemory* (1997) gives a careful account of the dynamics of the myth of the family that operate in domestic photography. In summary, the domestic photograph is: a) an instrument of the family’s togetherness and b) the means for displaying this cohesion, c) it “chronicles family rituals” and indeed d) “constitutes a prime objective of those rituals”, and through its perceived realism, e) it “natural[ises] cultural practices’ […] stereotyped and coded characteristics” (1997:7). The cohesion that the domestic photograph aims to perpetuate comes, however with a high cost: through the processes of domestic photography, f) images are created “that real families [and individuals within those families] cannot uphold” (1997:7).

To relegate the domestic photograph as an oppressive instrument of constraint is a one-sided. Barthes, again, resists the reading of the domestic photograph in this way:

> Besides, how opposed I am to that scientific way of treating the family as if it were uniquely a fabric of constraints and rites: either we code it as a group of immediate allegiances or else we make it into a knot of conflicts and repressions. As if our experts cannot conceive that there are families “whose members love one another” (1980:74).

Yet, even within families that love one another dearly, the domestic photograph can be problematic (even where the mantelpieces carry no shame, by virtue of their isolated selections they hide more than they present). Hirsch outlines some of the more troubling aspects of familial looking as “individualization, naturalization, decontextualization, differentiation within identification, and the universalization of one hegemonic familial organization” (1997:54). A closer look at the structure of the various masks, screens and gazes operational in the domestic photograph will outline these problematic areas and provide clues to how these barriers can be transcended, contested, and manipulated into sites of resistance to normativity.
2.3.4. Masks, gazes, mirrors & screens

Lacan’s seminal mirror stage has been widely interpreted and appropriated for a variety of means, most notably by feminists and queer theorists who use it to substantiate social construction theories. Since Lacan’s mirror stage shows ‘true’ identity to be fragmentary, temporal and mutable, it is an ideal tool for professing a constructivist politic. Lacan’s mirror stage shows that (our delusions of) the coherent self – what Hirsch calls the “disguise” of the “profound incongruities and disjunctions on which identity is necessarily based” (1997:101) – is a construction ballasted by the first encounter with the self in the mirror, imaged as a single body. Once the self (previously experienced as a collection of fragmentary sensations) perceives itself as a single body (the infant’s first encounter with a mirror) the self is henceforth constructed in terms of how others perceive this body⁶⁴.

In the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture. This is the function that is found at the heart of the institution of the subject in the visible. What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside… Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which… I am photo-graphed (Lacan 1978:106) [my emphasis].

Seeing myself as a complete unit is complicated further by others seeing me. And this dynamics of constructing an ideal self to live up to others’ confirming looks, is exemplified in the domestic photograph by the performance of its creation (the projection of an ideal self), the search for lineage⁶⁵ during its use⁶⁶ (a search for confirming looks and evaluation of self projections when an image of the self is encountered) and viewing (a voyeuristic look that demeans others in order to confirm the superior ideal self). Hirsch’s reading of Lacan results in her deeming ‘looking” as a suspect form of knowledge: “a form of cognition that is not to be trusted, that is and must be inflected by other psychic, epistemological, and ideological forces as the imaginary is redefined by the symbolic” (1997:101). Since the act of looking at a photograph is so intricately woven with one’s perception of self, the photograph gains its accessibility as a mediator of identity, creator

⁶⁴ Hirsch’s reading of Lacan locates the confirming look of the mother as the first instance of this realization (1997:102).

⁶⁵ The ‘search for lineage’ is an objective of looking at domestic photographs (of own and others’). It is the creation of a sense of self by considering parents’ (or other family/friends’) sense of selves via their self-representational strategies, or just the re-experience, and reconstruction of past experiences (Spence 1987; Kuhn 1995).

⁶⁶ ‘Use’ and ‘view’ is used here (in the same way as ‘users’ and ‘viewers’ earlier in this segment) to differentiate between people looking at their own domestic photographs (‘use’) and looking at others’ photographs (‘view’).
of identity, and confirmation of identity. Indeed, for Lacan the image is identity since identity is a process of identification with an outside image – the result of:

…insufficiency to anticipation – …which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and …the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development (2002:5).\(^\text{67}\)

The **assumption of the armour** that Lacan speaks of here is a protective screen\(^\text{68}\), and these screens are informed by internalized ideologies. The myth of the family (previously outlined as a mask) can be thought of as such a screen as well, and this screen is not only informed by the desire to conform to domestic expectations. In a broader sense this initial (subconscious) desire to conform nearly always gives way to broader parameters that inform and produce the masks (or the screens) that we call our identities. Kaja Silverman outlines the broader screens that historicize and contextualise the familial masks we assume and project unto others as class, race, gender, sexuality, age, nationality, historical moment, location (1992:149). Hirsch’s reading of Silverman summarises the potential for active agency the screen offers:

If the gaze and look cannot constitute subjectivity except through the grid of the screen, then the screen becomes the space of the subject’s active intervention – through mimicry or masquerade – in the imaginary relationship. …Silverman attributes agency to the looking subject, thus opening the space for resistance, for the image/screen is culturally generated and therefore can also be culturally manipulated, resisted, or contested (1997:103) [my emphasis].

The cultural manipulation of the domestic photograph (its transformation into art) – and for my purposes the domestic portrait especially – opens up the space for resistance to the ideological masks represented by, and through it, in a form that is already accessible by mere virtue of its origin as domestic photograph!

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\(^\text{67}\) Originally published in 1977 as ‘The Mirror Stage as formative in the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience’ in *Écrits: A Selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan. The 2002 revised edition was translated by Bruce Fink.

\(^\text{68}\) Lacan uses the screen in much the same way that Hirsch uses the mask: all vision is mediated by the screen, indeed it is only through the screen/mask that vision is possible.
2.4. Consolidating iconographic strategies

Iconography, medium & message via the domestic photograph:

The ideological framework through which the domestic photograph is created and used/viewed\(^{69}\) is generally subconscious. The conscious manipulation of this ideological framework embedded in the domestic photograph’s use and reading moves a political strategy that utilises such images beyond the subtle iconographic into the overt thematic. Where the use of the photograph, its digital manipulation, and the portrait to question categories of sexuality denote a broad, and at times, abstract political agency, the manipulated domestic photograph brings a political structure immediately to the foreground because the domestic photograph is, by itself, a political artefact intended to reassert the family. It is from within the realm of the mythical normal family that an assertion of difference can easily be facilitated by the inversion of the normative familial gazes that constitute the reading of a domestic photograph. Resistance to normative heterosexuality, while implied by the digitally manipulated photograph and the portrait (and only through creative discursive means), can thus easily be foregrounded as a central theme by the evocation of the (carefully selected, subtly contextualised) domestic photograph – in and of itself already in an accessible “form that evinces no deliberate motive to deceive” (Nickel 1998:14). The evocation of the domestic portrait should, however, carefully navigate the different polarities of its reading – the thin line separating the domestic photograph’s accessibility that could easily lead to indifference. By manipulating the domestic portrait into another entity altogether – when the resulting artefact is singularly unique – it cannot ever be relegated as one of a thousand manifestations of the ‘ordinary’. As a further recourse, to plant specific clues allowing the viewer some access to the photograph’s personal context could undermine the indifference stage as induced by the viewing of context-unspecified images.

The domestic photograph is a vehicle for expressing a kind of essentialist humanizing political agenda (‘we are all the same’ or ‘we should all be the same’) by means of its homogenising familial structure of being produced and used. The subversion of the domestic photograph’s humanizing agenda by means of a radical reconstruction and a calculated and subtle queer shift (either by masking the normative behind the non-

\(^{69}\) Hirsch explains the mask of familial looking as a reciprocal process: “photographer and viewer collaborate on the reproduction of ideology. Between the viewer and the recorded object, the viewer encounters, and/or projects, a screen made up of dominant mythologies and preconceptions that shapes the representation” (Hirsch 1997:7).
normative or vice versa, or queering\footnote{‘Queering lineage’ is a term I deploy to describe the pleasures of projecting a non-normative screen on otherwise frighteningly normal domestic photographs. Specific examples of queering lineage will be provided in chapter three.} the search for lineage) in a final artwork balances out this humanizing agency in a statement similar to Warhol’s: “I am another, I am one of you” (cited in Dellamora 1996:43). Insisting on the dual degrees of sameness and degrees of difference of all subjects is hence also to insist on each subject’s individual uniqueness.

The accessible \textit{innocence} of the domestic photograph can easily become dissidence with a subtle shift of context. This shift of context can be achieved by inverting the normative familial structure, or by representing an alternative familial structure. Such a strategy would undermine the stereotypes encoded by the domestic photograph’s masked readings, and revealing the seemingly harmlessly ‘normal’ as active resistance to normativity. The accessibility and initial transparent readings the domestic photograph’s innocence engender, is especially suited for a political agenda because “domesticity and transparency subsume the layered contradictions inherent in aesthetics and politics”\footnote{I deem this ‘masked, political agenda’ the most appropriate strategy to overcome the problem of cultural insularity.} (Hirsch 1997:51).

In chapter three all the previously discussed political and iconographic strategies will be consolidated with, and exemplified by, discussions of the body of work constituting the practical requirements of this research.
Chapter 3: Tracing shadows

Political and iconographic strategies informing the practical component of this research
So I resolved to start my inquiry with no more than a few photographs, the ones I was sure existed for me. Nothing to do with a corpus: only some bodies. In this (after all) conventional debate between science and subjectivity, I had arrived at this curious notion: why mightn't there be, somehow, a new science for each object? A *mathesis singularis* (and no longer *universalis*)?

– Roland Barthes (1980:8)

These pictures from my real life, are supposed to make me believe that my real life is somehow something more, lighter, that is has more beautiful moments than it actually does. I have to convince myself of that.

– Jack Pierson (cited in Doswald 1999:18)

He’s being watched, so he knows he exists. I often came to doubt this of myself. Especially now, without him.

– Douglas A. Martin (2002:159)

Antonius Liberalis tells us that once upon a time, on the plain of Thebes, the hound of Cephalus (from whom no prey could ever escape) found itself facing the Teumessian fox (an animal able to escape from any pursuer). Zeus recognized that the two creatures were caught in a paradox, so he turned them both into stone… What the real world could never accommodate (even from a logical point of view) finds refuge in the world of images.

– Mauricio Bettini (1999:73-74)
According to Barthes the “frenzied activity of language: to institute on each occasion, the system (the paradigm) of demand and response” is one space occupied by the amorous subject (2002:68). This discourse (an “interior unspoken one”), he claims, is “provoked by a furtive contact with the body (and more precisely the skin) of the desired being” (2002:68).

The frenzy of demand and response of accidental, non-verbal signs occurs only between lovers in close temporal and spatial proximity. In separation, this discourse presses on the consciousness due to its absence, and is frustratingly impossible since its existence depends on accidental bodily contact: “a tiny gesture, a knee which doesn’t move away” (2002:68). The need to engage in this peculiar lovers’ discourse becomes absurd: one cannot seek events that only occur by accident. One can only seek optimal circumstances where such an event can potentially occur. The optimal circumstance for this accidental discourse is proximity.

In the absence of the beloved, I submit this need to the imaginary for some solace in the form of memory. But memory is suspect: marked by my image repertoire’s inability to distinguish between what happened (truth), and what I imagined happened (questionable truth). When proximity, by circumstance, is frustrated, the only recourse left is to dwell on past experiences via memory (the image repertoire of the mind), and/or the photo album (the image repertoire of personal history). Both are equally inadequate: memory, as shown, is too clouded by the imagination (thus causing me to dwell on the potentially inauthentic). The photo album contains no documents of my accidental discourse. Accidental touches eschew being photographed: taking a picture of this event during its occurrence will inevitably change the circumstance of its occurrence and thus end its already short existence.\(^72\)

I never kept a diary in which to record my memories of past frenzies with better detail. Even if I did I’m not sure I would have taken notice of this particular ‘discourse’ I now long for. My memories are blurred. My snapshots are inadequate. Still the need to dwell on past frenzies of language induced by the accidental touch of the beloved’s body is persistent (Is this need an aspect of mourning?). Towards this end I create images: where

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\(^{72}\) Even if the thought arose to take out the camera, and the lover agrees, the documentation will be no more than a document of lovers documenting. The process of taking a picture will then become the new activity of engagement, thus ending the one the documentation is supposed to be of.
memory fails (or colours past events in somewhat fantastically idealized ways), and the photograph never quite captures that perfect moment, in combination, and through a rigid process of creative fusion, memory and photograph can perhaps join in an artefact that might give some solace.

This desire for solace in absence is defined by Bathes as a linguistic figure of The lovers’ discourse (2002) called “the absent one”, explicated by the definition:

*Any episode of language which stages the absence of the loved object – whatever its cause and its duration – and which tends to transform this absence into an ordeal of abandonment* (2002:13).

This ordeal of abandonment is, according to Bettini, one of the prime motivating emotions behind the creation of lover’s portraits in his study of ancient texts pertaining to stories where two lovers and a portrait feature. In his The portrait of the lover (1999), Plastiche (the art of modelling in clay) could not have been invented were it not for “…the feeling of regret for an absent person, that certain unsatisfiable desire which would be called pothos in Greek, desiderium in Latin” (1999:7).

Our relationships with images are complicated, but I am with Barthes and Bettini in my belief that the images that move us most are those representative of emotional attachment. To cite such a premise is to court ridicule, to forge a discourse (to borrow Barthes’s terms) exiled from gregarity.

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73 as outlined in the fundamental narrative introduced in the preface of this text.
74 Emotional attachment, while an imperative of all human beings’ constitution, has been ‘feminized’ as sentiment, and is therefore perilously close to aspects that the master tends to submit to the background.
### 3.1. The outline of my lover (fig. 1)

In the absence of a sleeping beloved whose shadow I could trace, I had to resort to my private album. The source image (fig. 2) was a deliberate choice. This was truly a snapped moment. Andre didn’t pose for the photograph, none of the usual resorts to image repertoires to base the photographic performance on applied in this case. Indeed his pained expression was the result of an annoyed reluctance to be photographed so early in the morning (“Put the camera away, we haven’t eaten breakfast yet…”). This snapped moment was truly ‘snapped’, stolen, and therefore a more ‘authentic’ likeness. I scanned the source image.

The scanner is an eye that is most suitable for dealing with the frustrating surface of the photograph; its design is motivated by the desire to quantify what the human eye tends to submit to emotion. *Photoshop* allowed me a level of access to the photograph's surface that I wouldn’t have been able to achieve with my own eyes. The manipulation software analysed the shadows that the black and white photograph was composed of, allowing me to trace different layers of shadows by guiding the program to separate the image into screens of tones. I chose seven ‘screens’, seven layers of single tones, seven shadows for me to trace – one for each year that we have been together (fig. 3).

I physically traced the seven shadows with a scalpel. Through this tracing the negative spaces were removed (the spaces that are not shadow) from seven sheets of tonally different coloured craft paper. The destructive process of cutting with a sharp blade evokes the fragility of the body. Yet the scalpel is a surgical tool, the tool of a healer, paradoxically healing through making wounds. Inflicting the scalpel on my lover’s shadow teeters precariously on this paradox: a kind of angry vengeance because he is away, solace and love because the newly created object will be a likeness of the beloved object – a kind of surrogate.

I incorporated a rectangular grid on the patterns of ‘shadow-screens’. I used a grid that divides each sheet into 16 windows as an ordering strategy to curb the process from becoming destructive (the positive shapes hang from the grid, indeed require the grid to

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75 I can’t remember the exact conversation. I imagine it to have been something to this effect.

76 What power Photoshop’s *threshold* gauge gives one! – To flood the image with light or to veil the image in darkness and every possible consideration in between with the flick of a button (or what the interface would have us believe is a sliding switch).

77 Depending on whether one considers as *positive* either light or shadow. I wanted to *keep* the shadow, hence my consideration of it as *positive*. 
keep them in place). This grid curbed the cutting of the positive spaces. It became a boundary for keeping the cut-out shapes attached to the sheet of paper. The scalping process did not divide the sheets; it merely made them selectively transparent. The sheets thus remained single whole units – like the divided, fragmented self contained in the illusion, or the reflection of a single authentic mirror self.

The completed paper cutouts\textsuperscript{78} were mounted with cardboard frames between each sheet to keep the layers separated and to provide a depth to the image that the photograph couldn’t. This depth reminds more of a topographic contour construction (thus landscape) than the modulations of a three dimensional face; an aspect that the grid seems to engender as well. The simulacra of the beloved’s face thus became a landscape, a kind of exploration of lingering perception only allowed when the beloved is asleep (fig. 1). \textit{Butades’s daughter knew this well.} This kind of feminine languorous gaze puts me at odds with societal expectation of manliness, doubly so because the object of my gaze is male too. Before I succumb to internalized homophobia with the disavowal of everything feminine as a threat to my (already precarious) masculinity, Barthes reminds me that “the future will belong to the subjects in whom there is something feminine” (2002:14).

\textsuperscript{78} I am referring to the traditional Chinese or Scandinavian cutout. History would like us to believe that the masters of the art of the paper cutout were all men. Women and children usually practised this art form in the domestic sphere; hence it’s relegation to craft and not proper art (unless performed by a man…) (Hu 1993; Farr 2000). The Chinese paper cutout, as a celebratory practice to induce good luck into the New Year seemed appropriate as an affirmation and a celebration of my love. I chose a medium that would intrinsically imbue the simulacra of my beloved with an auspiciously celebratory aura – an act of defiance against the expectation to ‘keep up appearances’ of heterosexual normalcy.
3.2. The distance between us (fig. 4)

What interests me, amongst other things, of this self-exploration through domestic photography, is the idea of suspending myself for a moment, stepping outside myself, becoming the observer and the observed at the same time. Carl Aigner, states that:

The ability of ‘being in the picture’ means not only being able to create new ways of perceiving one’s self; it also refers to the capacity to recognize and define oneself ‘as image’ (1999:66).

This distanced re-encounter with oneself as image opens up many possibilities for insights into the self on personal and social levels. When this re-encounter is channelled by the desire to create, the possibility arises to effect change on both personal and social levels.

Andre and I are smiling for the camera (fig. 5). The photo was taken outside. It was winter. The framing of our figures breaks the composition into a definite ‘left’ and ‘right’. We are not touching. There is a distance between us. The cropped image also hides any overlap that could have been interpreted as a kind of touch. (This distance still doesn’t undermine proximity, this photograph still shows us as together – so unlike the distance of our physical separation that motivated this whole body of work.) This image could be an image of any pair of young male friends, or perhaps a familial relation – brothers. It withholds the truth about our relationship. Public affection is not part of our vocabulary (we both grew up in small towns). We ‘passed’ for brothers on many occasion during our stay in the conservative Orient where the foreign environment, displacement and political insecurity led us to conceal the truth about our relationship for all but our closest new friends. Our similar haircut and general comfort with each other was assumed to signify the familiarity of brotherhood – an assumption we didn’t always feel compelled to rectify. We found it quite humorous to be the object of an occidentalizing gaze (‘they all look the same…’). Gay and lesbian liberation groups (so strongly founded on ideas of visibility and coming out) would certainly frown upon this behaviour as contra-revolutionary. Yet for us it was liberating (because it was fun) on a very private (yet superficial) level.

Citing a few examples of Roman verse where lovers designate one another as either ‘brother’ or ‘sister’, (depending on the kind of gender structures involved) Bettini deduces that this form of address (whether spoken to each other or as a way to disguise their true

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79 And rightly so, while deception might seem like an empowering survival strategy, the deceiver becomes the slave of the deceived, in that the deception needs to be sustained – a labour that the deceiver is forced to perform for the deceived.
status) is a particularly useful strategy for retaining some form of linguistic relation without having to resort to the deception of using the institutional language of marriage.

A married couple, husband and wife, obviously have an identity as a pair: they have reciprocal names by which they are designated (like the English “spouse”, the Latin coniunx can be applied equally to both of them); they have family cults in common, a living space in common, children in common. But what about lovers? What terminology can allow them to also “be spoken” reciprocally? It is a matter of producing identity as a pair within the realm of language, and thus in the realm of cultural representation. To define themselves as a pair, as a couple, the lovers make use of an already established model for this sort of paired identity: a pair of siblings. (Bettini 1999:107)

The source image was scanned again, this time the desire to represent both my beloved and myself (again motivated by the desire for solace) took the form of a substitute for togetherness – to be reconciled as image at least. The absence of touch in the image was a deliberate choice to undermine the viewer’s expectation. The figures presented are more than just friends, brothers, yet they look not unlike any homosocial pair of young men.

The creation of the new artifact (to imbue the snapshot with potential importance for readings by others it otherwise only had for me) was initiated by translating the image into pixels using the same amount as two 1500-piece puzzles. 3000 pixels were not enough to translate the portraits into likenesses. The lack of pixel resolution universalized the faces into anonymity. The digital resizing shows no respect for likeness or ‘authenticity’ with its pure concern for surface and quantifiable image information. By doubling the image resolution, but removing every second column of pixels from the Cartesian grid, I was able to restore a semblance of likeness to the portraits while still keeping to my self-imposed parameter of 3000 pixel units (fig. 6). This separation required a similar transformation of the final puzzle I transferred the colour information to, in order to prevent the image from elongating in the final assembly. I had to undermine the ‘natural’ fixity of a completed puzzle. The new artefact could only form a complete whole by being fragmented. Were it to be conjoined into a complete whole (as it was intended and designed to do by the commercial puzzle manufacturer) the new image I transferred upon the puzzle would distort into an anomaly.

I chose the puzzle as a medium because, like the paper-cutout, it is a form of creativity that is unpretentious. The puzzle builder is far removed from the artist and the esteem of his/her profession. The process can hardly even be considered a craft. Most importantly,
building a puzzle is a domestic pursuit, one that is usually defined by its solitary nature, and like the domestic photograph, created during times of domestic leisure.

On a different level, the individual puzzle piece anatomises easily into ‘male’ and ‘female’ aspects. With this consideration, the puzzle that I chose turned out to be perfectly bisexual (each puzzle piece has two ‘male’ and two ‘female’ possible junctions), except for the border-frame pieces, the pieces at the margins. The medium, the canvas for this artwork, turned out to be, by mere virtue of its design, a kind of utopia of undefined sexuality, a utopia realistic in terms of how it created its own margin; there will always be those who consider themselves more male than female, female than male: a reminder that any politic aiming for the neutralization of sexual categories should account for exceptions and take care to avoid a mere inversion of power.

One of the biggest pleasures of this project was the building of the two puzzles (I chose two puzzles depicting a ‘resting leopard’ deliberately to remove any affinity to ‘proper art’ that a print of a famous masterpiece of painting turned into a puzzle would have had). To exhibit the puzzles as they were would have made for an interesting comment on the status of art in society, but I had a different agenda in mind than mere tomfoolery with Aesthetics. After sanding down the original leopard print and priming and labeling each piece individually, I started the process of transferring the reduced digital image onto the puzzle, pixel by pixel and piece by piece, by painting each corresponding puzzle piece with acrylic paint. For ease of reference I created a pattern (fig. 7) for this process from the original manipulated digital image: a pattern that indicated in a less representative way than the original image, the location of the puzzle piece and the corresponding colour it should be painted. After mixing the right colours and painting the corresponding puzzle pieces, I crossed out those indicators on the pattern with label-stickers in order to measure my progress. This pattern became an abstracted version of the portrait, a portrait that undermines portraiture’s conventional likeness. The pattern also became a document of the making process – indicating a level of complexity not evident in the final work. The pattern also functions as a kind of ‘negative’ from which many ‘positives’ of the final artwork can be ‘printed’. The highly subjective nature of perceiving and reproducing colour in paint, combined by the sheer amount of time such an endeavour requires, makes this artwork highly unlikely to be reproduced exactly. Even were someone able to commit to the process, the result would never be exactly alike, which leads me to draw analogies with current systems of classification. Are our classificatory systems not also subject to subjective interpretation, and therefore generally impossible to apply except on abstracted theoretical levels or on highly subjective terms?
Another remnant of the process is the colour test cards that I created while I was mixing the colours (fig. 8). As a reluctant (and probably untalented) painter, I was unable to mix the exact colour (or what I perceived to be the correct colour) during the first attempt – with the exceptions of a few strokes of luck. Every correct colour mixed was therefore only the final result of a process spanning quite a few attempts. These attempts were recorded on a collection of blank index cards I had to my disposal. After completion, this collection of cards reminded of commercial colour strips used in the decorating industry, with the exception that my cards were not ordered in any way. The slight variations of tints and tones that the process of mixing and testing required, combined with my reluctance to note the corresponding grid placement of the final correct colours on the index card documents, resulted in a collection of test cards that seem to be very ordered in an obscure way, yet aren’t. Because these colour cards seem ordered (in a non-quantifiable subliminal way) they are a reminder of our propensity to systematically impose structure and order on phenomena like sexualities whose sheer diversity and variety eschews easy generalization.

The final artwork and its process residues I found too reactionary. The work displays no markers of difference for context-uninitiated viewers (unless informed through other means). I decided that the following project should rectify this without making The distance between us politically obsolete. As for my desiderium-affliction, the simulacrum of mere proximity was not enough anymore.
3.3. The distance between us ii (fig. 9)

I can see he’s proud of me. Holding me, his arm around me. The way I’m reluctant to pose, I
see I already feel too aware, out of place, don’t belong, or any observer could pick up on
that.


Our lives are now entwined

– Patti Smith (cited in Martin 2002:105)

I found the source image for The distance between us ii (fig. 10) appropriate as a follow-
up. The similarities and differences between the source images (fig. 5 & 10) seemed
perfect. The exterior, public front of fig. 5 contrasts with the warm domestic comfort of the
figures in fig. 16. This interior/exterior contrast is a telling document of our public and
private behaviour: Even though the image has been constructed for the camera (we are
looking and smiling for the camera), the domestic context allows for warm apparent
affection. This is one of my favourite photographs of us, because it transcends the artifice
of its creation, by revealing our ‘truth’ despite the posed nature of the photograph’s
creation. The similarities between the two photographs bind them together as a functional
pair: both were taken during winter (winter clothing), both show our figures cropped from
the waist up, both have anonymous backgrounds: the low-angle winter sky contrasts with
the contained anonymous interior background, chosen as such in order to balance the
likenesses of singular identities with the possibility of eliciting a kind of universal
accessibility: an uncomfortable (but not disadvantageous) balancing act between reading
these images as any pair of young men, in any location on one hand, and portraits of
individuals on the other. The touch that I so sorely longed for in the first image is here
presented in the most revealing of all my domestic photographs – a revelation that is still a
far cry from the explicitness of radical artifacts, but enough to present a marker of
difference that I am comfortable with: our embrace seems to have just crossed the line between appropriate homosocial and inappropriate homosexual interaction between men.

Again, to facilitate a reading beyond mere dismissal of the image as ‘someone else’s snapshot’, to remove the possibility that this image is one of a thousand occurrences of the ordinary, I began a process of turning the image into another artefact. The medium I chose for this was the humble game-board die (like the puzzle, a signifier of domesticity – the cheap red resin dice used in this work reminding of children/family board-games), but like the source image, this medium contains an uncomfortable crossed line: the domesticity and wholesomeness of the association with the family board game is tempered by the darker side of gambling – the cause of many a domestic disintegration.

The binary logic of the ‘male’ and ‘female’ aspects of the puzzle pieces is complicated by the six sides of each individual die in this case: where the multitude of puzzle pieces indicates a utopia of bisexuality, a collection of 6000 dice presents a utopia of multiple sexualities (or at least a potential for six different kinds) contained in each individual. The margins created by assembling the dice into a rectangular shape do not differ from the centre, and while the potential for different kinds of ‘identifications’ exist for each piece, the throw of the dice reveals only one aspect. A more realistic utopia is implied here: multiple cultures (‘we are ones/twos/threes…’), multiple identifications (‘I am a one/two/three…’) with the potential for cross identification (‘I could be a three, four or five too’), and uniformity and a universal humanity despite these different identifications (‘we are all dice’).

In order to translate a photograph into an image created out of 6000 dice I again digitized the photograph, reducing the resolution to 6000 pixels and translating the colour information into black and white. I interpreted each side of the dice as a different tone. As the dots on the red dice are white, the ‘six’-side of the dice would read as the lightest tone from a distance, and the ‘one’-side as the darkest. I had to redesign the pattern when I discovered that not all the dice were exactly the same shade of red, (no doubt the result of slack quality control during their manufacturing) which undermined the visibility of the final image too much (The image seemed noisy, like a slightly out of tune television broadcast reception – which would have been conceptually interesting had the dice metaphor been the only consideration. I opted for the importance of the source image instead, relegating the dice metaphor to a secondary position).
I redesigned a pattern (fig. 12) through digital manipulation (fig. 11) of the source image incorporating 20 shade values. I systematically sorted the dice into a tonal bar from dark red to light red, divided this tonal bar into exactly 20 separate tones and labelled each individual dice with a sticker indicating its tonal value. Assembling the image from the pattern required a consideration of the dice tonality (20 variations) and the dotted side tonality (6 variations) through loosely grouping a few dice tonalities together with one dotted side tonality. This assembly required months instead of the expected weeks, which made me realise that the work would not be able to be installed in an exhibition setting in the few days (at best) one usually has at one’s disposal. I decided to ease installation by fixing the dice together into 10 by 10 dice tiles and opted for practicality instead of the fragile beauty the assembled dice had before being monumentalised as a complete unit.

The regret I feel about this decision is counteracted by the option that became available when the dice were fixed together: the image could now be exhibited in a way that allowed the viewer to see both sides of the assembly: the front displaying the translated source photograph, and the back – which shows the work’s process and construction via the label stickers on the dice displaying the ‘six’ side to the back, cardboard spacers (selectively employed to guide the grid placement of the dice) and clear plastic tape (utilized to form the tiles).

To display the construction of the work that is not apparent when viewing only the side intended for display, became an integral consideration for all three works in The distance between us –series (fig. 4, 9 & 13). The systematically ordered ‘front’ displays an image that deconstructs itself (ironically via the schemes and strategies of its construction) when viewed from the back, because the back makes the difficult process of enforcing and applying an ordering system visible. The process, while seemingly successfully applied, turns out to be a mess of deceptions, hidden shortcuts, and brutal manipulation of elements into a system. The dice and the puzzle pieces reveal the ‘scars’ of their categorization on their back despite the seduction of their seemingly successful assimilation from the front.

The final work in this series indicates a shift in perspective from my point of view. The source images for the first two were selected from my personal albums, and accordingly signify an attempt to re-define familial normalcy. The third artwork in this series is based on an image sourced from my parents’ albums. I considered its striking similarity to the first two, indeed its near archetypal homoeroticism, an even more transgressive critique of familial normalcy because I appropriated it from the very sphere of the normal family.
desire for the absent being that motivated the first two artworks, increased in scope to now include another familial other: my father – a move which activated the central narrative of my creative endeavour (as outlined in the preface) to more striking effect in a true consideration of all its archetypal figures: the beloved, the beloved left behind, and the father.
3.4. The distance between us iii (fig. 13)

Time is brought to a standstill for fractions of a second in order to render its further progress palpable in the motionless interim. All of the bodies depicted in earlier or contemporary photographs have grown older in the meantime. The people have moved closer to death.

– Thomas Koerfer (1999:46)

Barthes differentiates photographs that move him and those that merely interest him in a further subdivision of those he likes (as opposed to those he dislikes; or those that have no feature to move him in any way at all). Images of the order of ‘liking’ can be divided into those that have ‘Studium’ (elements that “mobilises a half desire, a demi-volition, …the same sort of vague interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes one finds all right”) and those that contain a ‘Punctum’: the element that “stings, specks, cuts, …that accident – because the word also refers to the cast of the dice – which pricks me… bruises me, is poignant to me” (1980:27).

The Punctum, (or in this case, the Punctii) of the original photograph of my father on the beach (fig. 14) are numerous: its existence, and subsequent discovery (to find such a stereotypically homoerotic representation of my father was nothing short of miraculous.) This photograph seemingly represents homosocial/homoerotic desire between men as a seamless continuum in the light of the represented men’s heterosexuality. Closer inspection, however, complicates this representation in an interesting way. The figures of my father and a friend can be seen as a typical example of a posed homosocial gesture

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80 If ever a lexicon of homoerotic iconography existed, I’m sure the ‘boys-on-the-beach convention’ would fill up quite a few pages. In the absence of such a lexicon, I can suggest Patricia Bergman’s Body and body politic in Edvard Munch’s “bathing men” (1993) as a suitable alternative in its complex outline of the political and sexual dimensions of early modern depictions of male nudity. The ‘something wrong’-ness of the represented male form is due to this kind of representation’s engendering of a homoerotic gaze – something that the “gays’ gaze” has revelled in to celebratory effect, from Munch and Eakins to Hockney and Tillmans, incorporating every conceivable medium and stylistic variation along the way.
incorporating touch. My father (on the left) shying away ever so slightly in discomfort of the invaded personal space of an elbow resting on his shoulder, exemplifies Sedgwick’s state of already-crossed homosexual desire, a state that can only be recovered from by the disavowal of the touch of the handsome man next to him.  

Another punctum of this image, on a more personal level, is the familiarity of my father’s body when he was young, due to a striking similarity to mine (we are strikingly similar, in so many more ways than I thought). Together with this realization, the image begged me to queer the ‘search for lineage’ that is such a strong element of looking at domestic photography: the transgressive submission of the image to an active queer fantasy (to imagine how different things could have been had my father been what this photograph superficially represents him to be – a little more like myself).

These elements are opposed to the ‘studium’, or what could also be called the generality of the image that other readers of the image will observe; the elements that an audience other than myself as relative of one of the referents will be able to identify and respond to without any contextual information about the photograph. For clarity’s sake it is perhaps useful to note the specific Studia of this image: a scene of two young men posing on the beach with (what I think is) a cheap polystyrene body-board; the indistinctive anonymous landscape (it could be any beach anywhere); and bathing suits in a style and cut that could (at most) elicit some nostalgia for some unfortunately unfashionable ‘mishap’ of the past. The aged colouring of the image, faded pinks, browns and grays (combining to signify that this is an old photograph) could also elicit the viewers prolonged attention.

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81 I am probably pushing the limits of interpretation here; I could be reading too much into the distance between the figures. If the interpretation is contextually inaccurate, it could at least be plausible. Since I am a viewer of this image (I was not present during its creation, not even born, actually) I have a certain liberty to subject the image to my active imagination, and to pursue speculation to serve my own needs – another form of ‘queering lineage’.

82 I am loath to reveal so little, our relationship being much more complex than this sentence makes it out to be. Our past is slowly being overcome by our mutual maturity. I am growing comfortable with my adulthood and its supposed clearer perspectives, and he, likewise, with entering old age. Despite what this sentence might say, our growing mutual respect for each other is based on a love that is starting to transcend societal expectations (being the father of a non-normative son is not so bad…/ restricting familial bonds based on a barrier of “conservativism” can be based on inaccurate assumptions …). It is through a revalidation of domestic photography that I can start to articulate this process (and have some fun doing it).

83 Barthes also relates the ‘Studium’ with the photographer’s expected ‘novelties’, or what could best be described as ‘desired effects’. These effects are related to what are generally considered to be the functions of ‘successful’ photographs: “to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause, to signify, to provoke desire” (1980:28).
through nostalgia. In an attempt to give viewers access to elements I perceive as ‘Punctum’, to elicit a gaze that is questioning beyond the surface, I followed my general method of transforming the photograph into another entity entirely by working with what I have to manipulate: the surface.

Like in all the previous artworks, I turned the singularity of the photographic event into a pattern as a kind of reversal of the photographic process. Where the film negative is the ‘master’ pattern, and the possibility of multiple prints the negative’s use, a pattern created from a print undermines the authority of the negative, and hence the original photographic event. The creation of a new ‘master-paradigm’ (a pattern from a print), facilitates a changed perspective, one from viewership (with limited insight and agency exemplified by the restriction of the negative) to authorship (with power to manipulate, to affect change – exemplified by the boldness to create a new kind of ‘master’).

My choice of tapestry as a medium allowed for a far greater image resolution than the media of the previous two artworks in this series. The tapestry stitch resolution is however not nearly enough for photorealism – thus the tapestry retains a distinct digital, pixelised appearance, a quality this series of artworks require to set the viewer on an ambiguous trail from the authenticity of the photograph to the apparent construction and artifice of the digital image. Thus a paradoxical concurrency of oppositions is contained in each artwork – a paradoxical concurrency that I analogise with sexuality.

Tapestry’s stereotypical association with women and its relegation to a craft (suited to keep idle hands busy) was a consideration which allowed me to interrogate gender categorization too. Most importantly, however, tapestry allowed me to interrogate cultural identity because of the importance the Voortrekker Monument’s tapestries as a dispositif of Afrikaner nationalism, and my uneasy relation to this ideology as a non-normative, South African, white, Afrikaans male. To create a monumental tapestry, (seemingly) representing a pair of homosexuals, flies in the face of the Voortrekker monument.

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84 I utilise this Foucauldian term, usually translated as ‘apparatus’ (During 1992:165), to indicate specifically that the tapestries were an institutional valorization of ideology, a “tool”, paradoxically creating, and created by, ideology.

85 Any cursory view of the Voortrekker monument tapestries from a post 1994-perspective can illustrate this. The final tapestry, the Symbolic résumé of the series with its clear symbolic division between savage, darkness, chaos (and black implied by the native shields subjugated by an anchor of a colonial ship) and (voortrekker induced) civilization, light, order, I find the most revealing of the tapestries as ideological propaganda. All the tapestries are reproduced with descriptions in Kruger [et al.] The voortrekker tapestry. (1996).
tapestries due to the radical irreconcilable differences of ideology. By criticizing cultural identity, the ideological nature of my own work is revealed: a realization that I see as beneficial to a politic that is critical of cultural identification. ‘Culture’ which is revealed as an ideological construct, is thus paradoxically undermined by representing an ideological alternative.

The pattern for the tapestry that I drew up by hand (fig. 16) (a process spanning three months) was nullified by my seduction to explore a cross-stitch design software’s abilities. I subsequently decided to create the final tapestry by following the computer generated pattern instead of the hand-drawn one. The computer generated pattern allowed for a greater colour resolution through direct correlation between available embroidery thread colours and the imported digital image. Again a conflict between process and ‘truth towards the source’ was resolved in the original photograph’s favour. By exhibiting the original hand-drawn pattern and the final tapestry together, an observant eye would be able to see that the final tapestry and the pattern presented bear little correlation except for basic composition. This conflation between pattern and final result is an echo in a different format of the inevitable impossibility of successfully applying a categorical system, because the attempt is temporal and constantly bordering on the obsolete: easily replaceable by more advanced systems that can accommodate a larger amount of complexity. The process of applying a more appropriate, more complexity accommodating-system proved as difficult as applying the patterns for the previous works in this series. The tapestry, like the previous works in the series, is therefore exhibited in a way that allows the viewer access to the back, because the back of the work makes the process, its difficulties, cunning manipulations and shortcuts apparent.

The nature of tapestry needlework, and my decision to use a 13-count canvas (13 stitches per inch), forced the process into slowness. My attitude towards the time-consuming aspect of this artwork alternated between seeing the process as a luxury (an enormous waste of time and energy) and realizing that the tapestry somehow materializes and accounts for time that would otherwise have slipped away by its mundanity. The work required close to two years of dedicated work: initially I worked on it alone, but later (as various deadlines loomed) I asked some assistance from the (very keen and able) women in my family. This lengthy and tortured materialization of the image is in stark contrast to the fraction of a second that was required to take the photograph, and the developing and printing of that negative that takes a bit longer, but is still measured in days at most (as opposed to the years of the tapestry). The slow and demanding embroidery contrasts (and
thus highlights) what the snapshot implies, even just by its name – ephemerality, movement, speed, impulse.

By monumentalizing the domestic photograph in all three works in this series, by submitting it to such labour, uncommon materials and increased size, I attempted to remove the mundane domesticity that colours the reading of domestic photographs, and to provide access to the elements that attracted me to the original images in the first place. By removing the domestic aura of the original photograph, but keeping a recognizable relation to the original, these artefacts become a critical celebration of non-normative families, representing the ‘different’ as the ‘same’ and the ‘normal’ as ‘transgressive’.
3.5. **Hello, Soldier! (fig. 18)**

The studio portrait of my father as a young man had an initial allure that was impossible to pin down. I didn’t want to admit that I was falling in love with that stranger who I would have found very attractive had he been my contemporary. A troubled father/son relationship can easily be made more bearable when the father takes on the form of a less domineering familial relation: a brother, a lover that bears a resemblance, *some kind of similitude*. The (not unproblematic due to its incestuous erotic) practice of calling a queer coupling of two similar looking individuals ‘twinning’, is a near universal theme that, as Bettini has pointed out, is well entrenched in our cultural heritage from ancient Greece and Rome to the present (Bettinini 1999:107).

According to Marianne Hirsch, the reciprocal nature of the gaze is “nowhere more constitutive than in the space of the family" (Hirsch 1997:103) to the point where it becomes fundamental to the understanding of domestic photographs. The reason for this centrality is the institutionalisation of the screen of the mythological family. My (again, very young) father presents himself in uniform as an upright citizen in a staged studio portrait (fig. 19). I recognize myself through lineage and find a kind of access to my father not experienced before (via the youthfulness of my father’s image and the projected screen of my queer subjectivity unto that face – a screen of fetishisation of uniform and youth). The *normal* recognition of lineage is queered. The gaze of familial recognition becomes a transgressive look where the boundaries between acceptable paternal love and nostalgia, and questionable erotic desire begin to blur.

The tinting of the original photograph influenced the graphic colouration of the final tapestry miniature (fig. 18). Not only is the image of my father constructed through the innate artifice of studio portraiture (I imagine a reluctant grooming of the uniform the day before the shoot was to take place; the photographer deciding that a pensive look on such a youthful face was more esteemed than a boyish grin) but also through its hand-tinted colouration. The bright rosy cheeks the artist decided to grace my father’s image with struck me as especially interesting – an artificiality that reads to me today more like make-up than the ‘healthy complexion’ the tinting artist obviously had in mind. Barthes’s dislike of colour photographs stems from this historical practice of tinting black and white photographs, as if colour is a mask (like cosmetics) “…applied later on to the original truth of the black-and-white photographs” (1980:81).

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86 Barthes cites the example of an anonymous daguerreotype dating from 1843 “showing a man and a woman in a medallion subsequently tinted by the miniaturists on the staff of the photographic studio…” (1980:81) as
The mainstream gay stereotypical ordering of couples into ‘active/passive’, (another example of mainstream gay internalisation of power imbalanced dualisms as structuring systems) found yet another articulation in the naming of older-/younger man couples as ‘daddy/son’. I’m criticizing this reluctance to view a coupled pair as equals by presenting an image of my real father ambiguously as a very young man, toying with the possibility of overturning the dualism by representing the ‘daddy’ as an object of desire through flirtation with uniform fetishisation, camp (via the rosy cheeks that I insisted on rendering with saturated pink cotton thread) and contemporary mass culture’s idolization of youth.

I anticipated that this miniature tapestry (which was a precursor to the large work outlined in the previous section, a kind of a practice-run to see whether I could master the technique) would be the most alienating to my paternal family because it so blatantly queered the image. Much to my surprise everyone – from my parents to my grandparents – regarded the work with various degrees of affection. The screen of familiarity that coloured the original work for me operated in completely different ways for everyone else: I think my father sees the image in the light of our past and regards it as a gesture of affection (which it is, too); my mother sees the image of the young man she fell in love with – the man who became the father of her children (and she is also not blind to dynamics between my father and myself); my grandmother likewise regarded the image as a novel resurfacing of a long lost memento; my boyfriend, like me, saw the transgressive potential (“your dad was a hottie!”). These different (and really speculative) views illustrate how easily this potentially transgressive image can be assimilated. That some of the transgressive aspects weren’t even mentioned, paves the way for my belief that through this kind of assimilation, and through repetition of this kind of assimilation, other aspects of difference, will gradually be regarded as just another manifestation of the ordinary.

3.6. Summary

All the artworks that form the practical component of this research make direct references to the Cartesian grid. The works’ three dimensional surface treatments, however, illustrate the pure two-dimensional plane as existing only mathematically. This non-existence (and our forgetfulness about this abstraction’s pure artifice) is accentuated by the textured
three dimensionality of tapestry thread, separated layers of paper, the subtle depth of a cardboard puzzle piece & the spherical incisions of moulded dice. In further subversion of the two dimensionality of the source image, the more planar of the four works are exhibited as objects in space as opposed to works on the wall This subversion of the Cartesian grid is a subtle poetic metaphor for my aimed subversion of categories of sexualities. This subtlety is a result of careful strategizing: I want to reach my goals through open-ended poesis; to give the audience a spectacular subliminal transformation rather than a didactic three-lined argument, to be able to accommodate more views than my own and to allow, indeed encourage, more interpretations than the mere boundaries of my intentions. In short, I want to reach a wider audience – however futile or misinterpreted the attempt might be. Even a failed attempt is better than none for it belies a non-resignation to the status quo.

In my work, like my use of categories and conceptions of sexuality, the digital image/photography divide operates with similar calculated uncertainty: all my digitised imagery is reworked (meticulously by hand) against the digital utopian dream to create a physical, singular, individual entity – while retaining a distinct digitised appearance. My use of the abstraction and apparent order of the digital image echoes my concerns with categorization. The results of this process – a distinct vintage digital appearance (reminding of the simplicity of early digital experiments with images) – can be linked to the sentimentality of the domestic photograph, strengthening that quality in terms of both viewpoints (digital imagery & domestic photography).

A subversive strategy in my work concerns time; the fraction of a second that is frozen in time by the emulsion of film is subverted by the image’s laborious re-‘printing’ by manual construction, assembling, sewing, cutting: a process spanning from up to a year (in the longest case), to two months (in the shortest case). The moment – easily forgotten in the flow of time moments in the continuum of life – is revisited over and over to the point of becoming an obsession. All but the harshest or happiest of memories can have the same effect in the mind. Memories are designed to fade.

By producing a pattern, a ‘master plan’ for each artwork, I submit the final work to an ethic of ‘do-it-yourself-craftiness’. Still the works do not welcome easy reproduction. Even then, any reproduction will be on subjective terms due to the sheer scope of the endeavour.

The source photographs’ existence firstly represents a mere split second of what is in reality a seamless continuum of events. The captured moment is further complicated by
the staged pose; the anonymity of the surroundings; and the cultural values offered in view of the relationships between the men represented. Through an interrogation of the surface of these images (aided by the objectifying gaze of digitisation), I was able to turn these images from private documents into artefacts that posit the personal/political divide as an ambiguous conflict between conceptions of sexuality and the photographic medium – between universality and singularity. This ambiguity is strategically evoked to pursue a politic of mutual inclusion: to balance alienation and assimilation.

The complex web of licit, illicit, embraced and disavowed ‘touches’ between men in The distance between us-series is a criticism of the state of contemporary masculinity and its steady decline into traditional forms, and a personal journey of dealing with love despite the constraints of distance: the distances of physical separation, the emotional distances even in close proximity, distances created by societal norms, and the distances that define an individual father/son relationship within the context of non-normative sexuality.
Conclusion:
Somehow if we are going to be curious and inquisitive in the world, we have to learn how to tolerate the paradoxes inherent in being culturally and historically embedded beings. We will have to learn how to develop a sense of humour about the impossible position of being human, about being apart from and a part of, uninitiated and knower, stranger and landsman.

– Phillip Cushman (1995:23)

You’ve got to make your own kind of music
Sing your own special song
Make your own kind of music, even if nobody else sings along…

– Mama Cass Elliott.
Systems of classification, when applied towards classifying structurally complex phenomena (like ‘photography’ or ‘identity’) are problematic when they require absolute distinctions (‘either-or’ criteria): when they fail to take context into account. When ‘either-or’ criteria are put forth by a classification system, suspicions of power can automatically be voiced, because submitting categorical elements to absolute divisions allows for the easy preferential treatment of one element and the subordination of others. When context hasn’t been taken into account, the classification system has either not been utilized properly, or is invalid as a whole. The validity of the system that continues to see us as either men or women, either gay or straight, is therefore not only of a suspect nature: the system’s questionability is blatantly obvious. Systems that are exploratory, that allow multiple viewpoints, and can adjust, are therefore the most likely to be true.

In the first chapter of his *The order of things* (2002), Foucault maps the trajectories of glances, gazes, mirrors, picture frames and rays of light that constitute a reading of Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*. At a certain point of his analysis he pauses on the artist’s self-representation – the artist represented himself as about to place a brush-stroke on the canvas. The realization that the viewers of the painting (‘us’) are standing in the same space as Velasquez’s models (the king and queen of Spain), combined with our point of view not allowing us a glimpse of the artist’s work (we can see only the representation of the back of the canvas that the artist allowed us), causes Foucault to hint at the collapse of the artist, the viewer, and the artwork into one:

We are observing ourselves being observed by the painter, and made visible to his eyes by the same light that enables us to see him. And just as we are about to apprehend ourselves, transcribed by his hand as though in a mirror, we find that we can in fact apprehend nothing of that mirror but its lustreless back. The other side of a psyche (2002:7).

The mirror’s lustreless back as representative of the other side of the psyche turns the work of art into a blank canvas for us as viewers, and we are as frozen and as dumbfounded as any artist confronted with his/her image-that-is-not-yet. I believe that all works of art (some more than others) create such a space where the viewer confronts him/herself. This is a potent space where you, as an artist, can potentially breach the triangulation of self, other, and image. You are therefore in a morally ambiguous position: the nature of the confrontation with the self that an artwork allows for the viewer, depends to a degree on you as an artist. The spectacles you create, through subtle manipulation, can allow the viewer’s self-confrontation to be an experience with a range of possibilities: the experience can be subliminal, confusing, angry, devastating, nurturing, annoying,
loving, strange… or it can leave your audience cold. With this wealth of possible effects, you should engage with your work with the knowledge that your labour can have serious consequences, even if you cannot be sure how your work will be received. This moral injunction implies that you are in a position of power.

I initiated this study with a series of questions that have not yet been answered explicitly. These questions concerned the implications of artists dis-identifying with their sexualities in terms of their work. What I hope to have achieved through this research is to stress (via implication) that dis-identification with a monolithic cultural identity is the first step towards the dissolution of the system that expects such identification – that requires such identification for its continuation. The refusal to call yourself a gay or lesbian artist (even if you are homosexual…), is an automatic alignment with the Queer cause, and a positive indication that your personal politic is on par with the trends of many who are increasingly starting to affect change through the refusal to accept either-or kinds of self and societal categorization. For the artist who dares to dis-identify, the key to survival is a degree of subtlety; the key to survival with one’s sanity intact is the co-occurrence of the subscription to the refusal to co-opt. To accept submissively is to invite complicity. When ‘culture’ seems to deny you access, create your own (others will soon follow…). If going-it-alone seems like a frightful prospect initially, make some new friends (even if you only get to know them through the pages of a magazine…).

And when in doubt, remember Las Meninas: the results of your profession can cause the greatest minds to hesitate (even if just for a moment).
In the following pages, I have reproduced Wolfgang Tillmans’s photographic essay No shock, no scandal, just a gay couple on holiday (2002) which I sourced from the 5th issue of Butt87 (2002). Because of this essay’s visual nature, and because it is not readily available in South Africa, combined with my reference to it as exemplary of both radicalism and reactionism in chapter one, I have taken the liberty to reproduce it as a whole in this text. Furthermore, due to the reproductions of Tillmans’s photographs in the source as not illustrative to reportage about Tillman’s photography88, no empirical data concerning the actual photographs were supplied. I therefore reference the following images as a quoted text and not as illustrations.

87 A Dutch magazine launched in 2001. Through Butt’s reportage on public figures and “interesting nobodies” who are self-consciously unclassifiable in the hetero/homo dualism (and hence unapologetically queer) the editors (Gert Jonkers and Jop van Bennekom) apparently aim to address their disillusionment with mainstream gay culture’s homogeneity, conformity to stereotypes, and increasing acceptance as consumerist target. The interview format of the articles aid in rendering the persons reported on as individuals. The magazine’s intimate snapshot-aesthetic photography likewise avoids typecasting the subjects. The magazine’s continued publication and worldwide cult success is a hopeful sign that many agree.

88 Tillmans has however used one of the images in this essay (2002:50-51) in a recent monograph Truth study center (2005). His appropriation of his own work in various contexts is a trademark of his production. Concerning his submission for Butt, I am not aware that any of the photographs have been used in a gallery context.
Just a Gay Couple on Holiday
No Shock, No Scandal

(Tillmans 2002:48-49)
(Tillmans 2002:50-51)
(Tillmans 2002:54-55)
Illustrations
Naming locates identity. Naming also articulates reality. But, does it grant us access to a privileged or sure knowledge? [...] It’s as if [the works] recognize the impossibility, indeed the danger of a transparent, untroubled language that would too easily or too self-assuredly “name” things. They prefer to play.

– Maia Damianovic (1999:173)
Fig. 3
Fig. 6
Fig. 14


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89 American spelling used by the translator.
Zurich, New York: Kunstmuseum Bern & Stecmie.

Amsterdam & Dresden: Verlag der Kunst.


