Otherwise
Imagining queer feminist art histories

Edited by Amelia Jones and Erin Silver

Manchester University Press
List of figures
List of contributors
Acknowledgments

Introduction: sexual differences and otherwise
Amelia Jones

1 Queer feminist art history: an imperfect genealogy
Amelia Jones and Erin Silver

2 Just friends: on the making of Pop Out: Queer Warhol
Jennifer Doyle

3 Our maiden aunt, lesbianism, or the limits of queer:
Jonathan D. Katz in dialogue with Erin Silver and Amelia Jones

4 Improper objects: performing queer/feminist art/history
Tirza True Latimer

5 Queerly made: Harmony Hammond’s Floorpieces
Julia Bryan-Wilson

6 Ink on paper, again
Catherine Lord

7 On the site of her own exclusion: strategizing queer feminist
art history
Dore Bowen

8 Dyke talk, or ‘political lesbianism’ and queer feminist art (history):
Amelia Jones in dialogue with Cheri Gaulke, A.L. Steiner, and
Terry Wolverton

9 Notes from backstage: a dialogue among Pauline Boudry/
Renate Lorenz and Jon Davies
10 The male nude as a queer feminist iconography in contemporary Polish art
  Pawel Leszkowicz

11 Is identity a method? A study of queer feminist praxis
  Nizan Shaked

12 Are we still trespassing? A trans-Atlantic conversation between
  Emily Roysdon and Xabier Arakistain

13 And the altar started to moan and groan! Transfeminist artistic
  practices in Spain, a taxonomy
  Juan Vicente Aliaga

14 Thinking archivally: curating WOMEN 我們
  Alpesh Kantilal Patel

15 Striking reverberations: beating back the unfinished history
  of the colonial aesthetic with Jeannette Ehlers’s Whip it Good
  Mathias Danbolt

16 Triple threat: queer feminist of color performance art
  Jennifer González and Tina Takemoto

17 Beyond the binary: the gender neutral in JJ Levine’s Queer Portraits
  Jackson Davidow

18 Trans*feminism: fragmenting and re-reading the history of art
  through a Trans* perspective
  Kris Grey and Jennie Klein

19 ‘What have you done for me lately?’ The institutionalization of
  queer feminist art histories. Lisa Newman in dialogue with
  Vaginal Davis and Del LaGrace Volcano

20 Transition pieces: the photography of Del LaGrace Volcano
  Dominic Johnson

21 Not at the beginning and not at the end: a conversation among
  Deirdre Logue, Allyson Mitchell, and Helena Reckitt

22 Epilogue: out of the boxes and into the streets – translating queer
  and feminist activism into queer feminist art history
  Erin Silver

Index
Beyond the binary: the gender neutral in JJ Levine’s *Queer Portraits*

*Jackson Davidow*

In outlining the role of gender in his 1978 lecture course on the neutral at the Collège de France, Roland Barthes noted that, originally, ‘at the level of language … the neutral is a question of gender.’ Significantly, the French word *neutre* denotes both ‘neutral’ and ‘neuter’ in English. But in French *le neutre* is a masculine noun, or more precisely, a substantive – an adjective used in the absence of a noun it is modifying. According to French grammar, the substantive adjective *neutre* is automatically gendered masculine. In this way, the neuter or neutral, which Barthes defined as ‘that which outplays the paradigm, or … everything that baffles the paradigm,’ is always gendered despite theoretically resisting the binary.

This chapter activates Barthes’ concept of the neutral as a queer/trans feminist approach to gender identification in visual culture. Drawing upon interdisciplinary queer feminist scholarship and critical theory, I offer a new framework for thinking about gender identification in photography through Montreal-based artist JJ Levine’s ongoing series *Queer Portraits*. In each of Levine’s photographs, the subject has a neutral facial expression and is on the brink of speech, about to convey a preferred personal pronoun. Positing that gender identification is never self-evident in photography or in speech, I sketch out a theory of queer feminist neutrality through a close reading of *Queer Portraits*, a series that illuminates the queer feminist potential of Barthes’ neutral to rupture the gender binary. Given the dearth of queer feminist art histories and theories, especially those articulated around trans subjectivities, this essay moreover presses for new methods for thinking identity and visual imagery by way of looking beyond disciplinary boundaries.

The gender neutral

*Neutre* etymologically comes from the Latin phrase *ne ... uter ...*, meaning ‘neither ... nor ...’. Maurice Blanchot, who first theorized the neutral and whose initial writings on it were fundamental to Barthes’ thinking, takes gender as a starting point for exploring the topic in *The Infinite Conversation*,

originally published in French in 1969, Blanchot understands the neutral not as 'a third gender opposed to the other two' but as 'that which cannot be assigned to any genre whatsoever: the non-general, the non-generic, as well as the non-particular.' Building off of Blanchot's definition, Barthes formulates the neutral as 'what is neither masculine nor feminine,' yet he later complicates this: 'the Neuter mixes both genders' for it 'is not that of the Neither ... Nor, it's “both at once,” “at the same time,” or “that alternates with”' Barthes thus departs from the 'neither ... nor ...' origins of the neutral, opting instead for a non-binary 'either ... or ...' model: 'the Neuter is not what cancels the genders but what combines them.'

Barthes also introduces the figure of the androgyne, characterized as 'the merger of virility and femininity' and 'a Neuter conceived as the complex degree: a mixture, a dose, a dialectic, not of man and woman (genitality) but of masculine and feminine.' He submits that, unlike the hermaphrodite who has physically intersexed genitalia, the androgyne should be considered a metaphor of the hermaphroditic situation. On a more personal level, the author clarifies that it can also be 'the man in whom there is feminine, [or] the woman in whom there is masculine,' of which the former he traces to psychoanalytic models of homosexuality. Drawing on Freud's idea of the feminine man or homosexual, Barthes claims that the androgyne represents 'any subject within whom there is something maternal.' Through this close association between the androgyne and the homosexual, it is evident that he links the gender neutral, as typified in the androgyne, with his own queerness.

The queer neutral/the neutral queer

Over the course of his career, Barthes' theorization of the neutral became deeply enmeshed with his own expression of a non-normative sexual identity. Beginning with D.A. Miller's seminal 1992 text *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, literary theorists have increasingly paid attention to a gay subjectivity in Barthes' writings and life. By about 1990 the work of key queer and feminist scholars such as Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler began to eclipse Miller's constructivist moment in 1980s gay and lesbian studies, laying a theoretical foundation for queer studies, a field that seeks to problematize and destabilize binary constructions of non-normative sexual identification. Yet it is only recently that scholars such as Nicholas de Villiers, John Culbert, and John Paul Ricco have taken up this vital challenge of revisiting and rethinking Barthes queerly. In similar fashion, my interests lie not in outing and thereby categorizing Barthes as homosexual, but in reconsidering elements of his life and work as agents that might, like the neutral, disrupt the paradigm.

According to Miller, Barthes' silence regarding his homosexuality is purely evidence of closetedness. In his 2012 book *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics*
in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol, however, de Villiers challenges this conclusion, convincingly arguing that the critic’s silence was in fact much more nuanced and methodical. Barthes’ preface to Renaud Camus’ Tricks, a popular novel about cruising and homoerotic encounters, develops a framework for understanding how he maneuvered his sexuality through a particular type of silence. Here, Barthes writes, ‘[t]o reject the social injunction can be accomplished by means of that form of silence which consists in saying things simply ... Renaud Camus’ Tricks are simple. This means that they speak homosexuality, but never speak about it: at no moment do they invoke it.”

As de Villiers offers, Barthes’ silence about his homosexuality was, like Camus’, a tactic not of closetedness but rather a more coded manner of ‘speaking simply’ or evoking without invoking a homosexual identity. Barthes continues, ‘Camus’ narratives are neutral, they do not participate in the game of interpretation.” His course on the neutral calls attention to this question in the section entitled “To Outplay Silence,” where he maintains that silence, ‘initially, [a] weapon assumed to outplay the paradigms (the conflicts of speech) ... congeals itself into a sign (which is to say, is caught up in a paradigm): thus the Neutral, meant to parry paradigms, will – paradoxically – end up trying to outplay silence (as sign, as system).” In this way, Barthes’ nuanced silence of speaking simply about his sexuality presents itself as a figure of the neutral. For Barthes, a neutral silence provides a way to outplay the paradigms of hiding or revealing one’s homosexuality. Miller, who goes so far as to distinguish Barthes as homophobic, overlooks the complexity of his silence, failing to do justice to his nuanced sexual identity.

De Villiers, however, asserts that ‘it is Miller’s response, not Barthes’, that is on the side of homophobia. Barthes’ “silence” is not a disavowal or a disowning; rather, it is a tactic by which he underscores precisely the vengeful Other in which he refuses to locate the meaning of his identity.” After all, Barthes describes questions such as ‘what is your sexuality[?]’ as ‘perhaps the worst violence,’” so silence emerges as an alternative tactic, though even still it may turn into a paradigmatic sign as Barthes notes himself. This neutral silence therefore runs the risk of signifying, like Sedgwick’s famed formulation of silence as a performative speech act in relation to the closet.” Nonetheless, the postulation of the neutral as ‘a right to be silent – a possibility of keeping silent” does not denote closetedness but rather a very queer volition to repudiate fixed binary ways of identifying and expressing desire and identification.”

So, if the neutral has queer potential, can the queer be neutral? This question might appear curious, for the rise of queer as a political and social identity has only taken place in the past half-century. Moreover, Barthes declares the neutral ‘good for nothing, and certainly not for advocating a position, an identity.” The term ‘gender neutral’ in present-day Anglophone queer circles
usually only refers to designated washrooms and preferred gender pronouns for those whose gender identities do not fit neatly into the binary. Although it is commonplace to use gender-neutral pronouns such as ‘they,’ ‘zhe,’ and the French ‘ille,’ the gender neutral as a unique identity, or type of identification, is a nascent phenomenon. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this essay, I explore the possibility of neutral identification through an analysis of Barthes’ later writings, as well as more recent queer and feminist theory. As opposed to claiming that Barthes understood the gender neutral as an identity, I am interested in theoretically unhinging his gender neutral in order to chart a new queer feminist way of thinking identification in relation to photography, of which Levine’s images in the *Queer Portraits* series are exemplary.

**Transgender photography**

Because of their prominence in Barthes’ later work, photography and loss must factor into any investigation of the (gender) neutral. Written after his beloved mother’s death in 1977, *Camera Lucida* is an elegiac theorization of photography, affect, and loss that has become a landmark text in art history and theory. Barthes carves out a new manner of thinking about photography, developing a vocabulary for subjective spectatorship. Whereas the *studium* translates to one’s cultural, historical, or political interest in the image, the *punctum* is a specific aspect or detail of a photograph that pricks, bruises, or moves the viewer. Yet Barthes secondly imparts that the *punctum’s* affectivity is temporal due to the viewer’s future anterior loss of the photographed subject. As he laments upon viewing Alexander Gardner’s 1865 portrait of the handsome Lewis Payne, who is about to be executed, *‘he is going to die … This will be and this has been …* Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.  

While *Camera Lucida* is undeniably canonical, it is still notable that the first scholar to theorize transgender photography, Jay Prosser, turns to the book in his important work on trans literary and visual (self-)representation. Since scholarship on this topic is scarce, with vital interdisciplinary exceptions including writings by Prosser, Sandy Stone, Judith ‘Jack’ Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, this essay on Barthes’ gender neutral in photography is both indebted to and proceeds from these foundational theorists of transsexual visuality. Thus, my analysis first attends to Prosser’s examination of photographs of transsexual subjects via Barthes, which in turn allows me to inch toward a theory of queer feminism in relation to gender-neutral identification in Levine’s *Queer Portraits*.

In his 1998 book *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Prosser illustrates the difficulty of identifying the photographic referents in images of the transsexual body through a reading of *Camera Lucida*. When
trans people choose to transition physically, which sometimes includes undergoing surgical and hormonal procedures so that traces of biological sex can be refashioned or eliminated from the body, their photographic representations might take on a new importance.  

Because reference is ‘the founding order of Photography’ (according to Barthes), photographs of individuals going through sex reassignment can be used ‘to make visible that which begins as imperceptible’ so that the body can be manipulated and staged as desired. Prosser argues that photographs can narrate an entire trajectory to show a progression toward contentedness in a transitioned body. To prove his point, the author includes a photograph of himself as a transitioned female-assigned-at-birth trans man taken by the pioneering gender-variant artist Del LaGrace Volcano. Here, the theorist crouches at the bank of a body of water, softly gazing toward the viewer with a neutral facial expression. Some viewers (but certainly not all) might assume this photograph represents a cisgender man (that is, one who identifies with the sex assigned at birth, or in this case an anatomically male body).

Through sharing this image, Prosser mounts a critique of Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity. In her influential 1990 book Gender Trouble, Butler famously conceives gender as the effect of reiterated enactments, working to create the effect of a fixed gender. Through these repeated enactments, or speech acts, a normalized gender is produced while covering up any unstable or contradictory types of acts. Due to how Butler articulates this framework, transgenderism has become tethered to gender performativity, despite the fact that her book hardly addresses trans identities. Prosser argues that, although gender performativity might be a productive premise in queer and feminist theory, it does not successfully encompass transgender subjects. That is to say, Butler conflates transgender with gender performativity, queer, and subversive manifestations of sexual identity, and, conversely, naturalizes cisgender by aligning it with constative, straight/non-queer identifications. Through sharing Volcano’s portrait of himself, Prosser suggests that transsexuals have a body narrative and gender identity that should not be perceived as artificial, for many trans people desire to be recognized as real, natural, and non-performative. For Prosser, transsexuals can transition and become ‘real’ through authoring their own photographic narratives.

Seven years later, however, Prosser published a chapter that revised his previous thesis, recognizing that ‘[r]ead the referent back into the real, mistaking the latter for the former, I found presence in the lost past of the photograph.’ Through a more careful reading of Camera Lucida, he correctly points out that Barthes’ second punctum of temporality, the ‘that-has-been’ dimension of a photograph, coupled with the ‘that-will-be,’ was left out of his earlier text. Like photography, transsexuality is ‘a reconstruction … an attempt to return, to get back the lost referent—the ça-a-été of sex, the body that
should have been." No matter how close photography might be to recreating
the referent, to making it present, it fails. Whereas Barthes’ ‘Winter Garden’
photograph of his beloved mother (that he descriptively invokes yet does not
reproduce in the book) will never be able to muster his mother back from the
dead, Volcano’s portrait of Prosser will never secure a quintessential biological
maleness. There will always be indexical somatic traces such as surgical scars,
gendered height and hand size, all of which indicate the extent to which the
trans body can be constructed. Altogether Prosser deduces, ‘[t]his failure to
be real is the transsexual real.’

Just as Barthes expounds how photographs initiate a perpetual relationship
to loss and, inevitably, constant mourning, for Prosser, the trans body can be a
referent of loss in relation to a desired sex. Jack Halberstam, while supportive
of Prosser’s critique of Butler, believes that his claim that transsexuals long for
realness is lacking. According to Halberstam, realness is an unclear concept,
especially regarding the trans body; in this context, realness could mean
possessing particular genitalia, body hair, and living or passing as a certain
gender. Crucially, none of these visual markers of gender identity could ever
possibly signal the subject’s preferred pronoun. Attempting to move beyond
this question of trans photographic realness, the remainder of this essay
provides an alternative reading of Barthes’ second punctum of temporality
through Levine’s Queer Portraits. My contextualization of Camera Lucida
within this discourse on transsexual photography equips us for thinking
about failure, loss, and photographic representations of other trans identities
including the gender neutral.

Queer Portraits

Based in Montreal, Levine is a trans, genderqueer artist working primarily
in photographic portraiture with an analog, medium-format film camera.
For many Montrealers, Levine’s unmistakable work has come to encapsulate
the local radical queer art scene since the mid-2000s. The artist’s best-known
series of about one hundred photographs from 2006 to the present is called
Queer Portraits and represents in large-scale format their queer community,
including lovers, friends, and family. Levine’s photographs are taken in
intimate spaces that are painstakingly selected, arranged, decorated, painted,
and lit with studio lighting. The domestic environments, paraphernalia, and
outfits of the models are aestheticized through the use of saturated colors,
stimulating patterns, and other textures that symbolically give a sense of each
person’s character, as well as their relationship with the artist. Above all, the
most striking and uniform element of the portraits is each sitter’s neutral
facial expression. Indeed, the subjects’ poses and expressions epitomize what
Barthes describes in Camera Lucida: ‘I decide to “let drift” over my lips and in
my eyes a faint smile which I mean to be “indefinable” ... if only Photography could give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing! This decidedly neutral expression appears throughout Queer Portraits.

In documenting a host of subcultural identities, Levine belongs to a young generation of queer and trans portrait photographers such as Amos Mac, Zackary Drucker, and Molly Landreth whose works expand the photo-conceptual terrain of predecessors such as Del LaGrace Volcano from the 1980s and 90s. Like Volcano and other important earlier queer artists including Peter Hujar, Nan Goldin, Catherine Opie, and Lyle Ashton Harris, Levine captures the warm relationships between the queer/trans photographer and the queer/trans subjects – roommates, siblings, and boyfriends who make appearances repeatedly in various photo series. The development of each portrait is collaborative so as to ensure that the final image empowers the subject. As Levine states, ‘a lot of the[se] people ... are trans, and I’m not outing them as trans ever, and I never will. I’m photographing them in a way that helps them pass or does not, if that’s important to them. I always ask my models extensively about how they want to be presented.’

Even so, it is impossible for spectators to determine the subjects’ gender identities by simply looking at the images; to be completely in the know
requires being acquainted with the individuals personally. For example, *Berlin 2012* shows the subject looking squarely and neutrally at the spectator as they lounge upon a bed comforter with psychedelic swirls of color (Figure 17.1). Leaning against a gold bedframe and vibrant turquoise wall, Berlin wears a loose, homemade tank-top, under which their chest peeks out, revealing a dark scar that indicates the model is likely a female-assigned-at-birth trans person who has had top surgery – yet, to be sure, one should not presume their preferred pronoun. Respecting Berlin's wish, Levine photographs their trans masculine identity – as made visible by the scar and hints of facial hair – so that it is as pronounced a referent as the collection of inky tattoos spread across their chest and arms. But despite their focal tattoo's imperative to '[h]oller and hear my heartbeat,' the subject is silent and solemn. Berlin's stillness and neutral expression contrasts with the image on their cut-up shirt depicting an archetypal macho wrestler, aggressively flexing his muscles. While we are offered an image rich with detail about the subject (who seems to be a trans man), we are nonetheless denied their preferred pronoun.

The gender and sex identities of some models might seem even more ambiguous. In one portrait, Rae Spoon, an acclaimed Montreal-based singer-songwriter, appears quite androgynous (Figure 17.2). Gazing toward the
viewer with a neutral yet cautious countenance, Spoon sits quietly in a large, beat-up blue chair, right ankle upon left knee. They seem both at home and awkward in these surroundings; though their slick wingtip shoes match the chair’s wooden armrests, their careful aesthetic is slightly incongruous in the worn chair.

Spoon identifies as gender neutral. In early 2012 there was a heated controversy when Xtra, Canada’s leading gay and lesbian newspaper, refused to respect the gender-neutral pronouns of Toronto-based artist Elisha Lim, supposedly on account of grammatical concerns. When Xtra asked Spoon for an interview and feature article about the debut of their new album, they declined and instead promoted Lim’s boycott against the publication (identified as transphobic by Spoon) in a widely disseminated open letter on Tumblr. Here, Spoon comes out as a gender-neutral person who prefers the pronoun ‘they,’ reflecting, ‘for me being trans is not about being read as a man or changing my body.’

Closer to Blanchot’s interpretation, Spoon’s activation of the gender neutral translates to neither male nor female; this activation works in contrast to Barthes’ theorization of it as a mixture of both. Their gender neutrality stems from their ‘retirement’ from the binary. As Spoon claims, ‘[w]hen I retired from gender, it was because I came to the realization that the gender binary was what had been failing me all along.’ Through retiring from and utterly dismissing the binary, the musician proclaims, ‘I am a gender failure. I failed at the gender binary, unable to find a place in being either a man or woman with which I felt comfortable.’

This concept of gender failure, the crux of Spoon’s collaboration with writer Ivan Coyote for their 2012 touring musical show and 2014 book Gender Failure, incidentally resonates with aspects of Halberstam’s 2011 academic study The Queer Art of Failure. Mobilizing failure as a feminist and queer political force, Halberstam volunteers a theory of ‘shadow feminism’ that is ‘grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence, [and] offers spaces and modes of unknowing, failing, and forgetting as part of an alternative feminist project.’ For Halberstam, shadow feminism extends from an unbecoming rather than a becoming, thus opening up a ‘way out of the double bind of becoming woman and thereby propping up the dominance of man within a gender binary.’ Shadow feminism as a disavowal, I will soon posit, also coincides with philosopher Luce Irigaray’s theorization of lesbian pleasure as an erotic force averse to male-centered models of sexuality. Although Spoon casts it in somewhat different terms, their gender-neutral identification is likewise a rejection of the binary in the name of feminism. As they maintain, ‘[a]ll of my questions about being male and female led me to sexism,’ suggesting that failing gender or refusing gender binaries in their gender neutrality is a feminist rejection of the perpetuation of sexist binary
stereotypes. However, Spoon argues that ‘ultimately ... it's the binary that fails to leave room for most people to write their own gender stories.’

The buccal neutral

Levine gives their models the opportunity to be represented as they wish to be, helping them visually convey their own personal gender stories. But regardless of the subjects' disparate gender and sexual identifications (which are never totally evident to unacquainted viewers), the artist invariably focuses on the neutral face and, particularly, the mouth; this strategy corresponds to philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of the buccal. In Ego Sum, the philosopher theorizes the mouth as what brings about a constitutive rupture of subjectivity in which the subject both emerges through and as this rupture. This mouth – what Nancy calls the buccal – ‘is the movement, the contraction and/or distension of breathing, of eating, of spitting, or of speaking. Buccality is more primitive than orality. Nothing has taken place yet; nothing has been spoken there yet. But an opening – unstable and mobile – forms at the instant of speaking.’ According to Nancy, the buccal (bucca) is more originary and primitive than the mouth (os) due to its anterior existence to the formed subject and subjectivity of the ego. The buccal is not only the mouth prior to signification, but also a mouth through which signification, and thereby identification, occurs.

Through the persistently faint smiles in Queer Portraits, Levine captures the models’ measured neutral expression at a moment on the cusp of the buccal in anticipation of the opening of the mouth. This is the pregnant instant before the signification of the subject will occur through speech, before the subject states their preferred pronoun. Thus we can situate Levine’s photographs in relation to what de Villiers identifies as Barthes’ queer tactic of opacity: the silence of the subjects denotes not closetedness but instead a manner of speaking simply. As we remember, Barthes states in the preface to Camus’ novel, Tricks: ‘Tricks are simple. This means that they speak homosexuality, but never speak about it.’ Similarly, Levine’s portraits speak gender identity, but never speak about it; their queer buccal and, in Barthes’ terms, neutral silence offers the tactic of speaking simply, spurning the game of interpretation that perpetuates the policing of sexist binary notions of gender. In light of this, speaking simply is not only a queer tactic of opacity, but also a feminist one akin to Halberstam’s shadow feminism in its repudiation of the gender binary.

As Barthes continues later in the preface to Camus’ novel:

Bodies can be classified into a finite number of types ... but the person is absolutely individual ... once language appears, the type is transformed into a person, and the relation becomes inimitable ... The person is gradually
revealed, and lightly, without psychologizing, in clothing, in discourse, in accent, in setting, in what might be called the individual’s ‘domesticity,’ which transcends his anatomy, yet over which he has control. All of which gradually enriches or retards desire.45

These comments are remarkably befitting in addressing Levine’s *Queer Portraits*, for the artist likewise presents each subject as a neutral body with a buccal mouth on the verge of speech. Each person will become individual and full of erotic potential through the photograph. For that reason, Levine’s *Queer Portraits* can be considered the photographic equivalent of Camus’ novel, *Tricks*.

The essential element of each portrait is not what the subject says or how they identify, but the fact that there is a shared queerness through the neutral, buccal expression despite the diversity of people, identities, environs, and objects that comprise the portraits. While queerness frequently centers on non-normative identification, including gender and sexual difference, Levine chooses to highlight the sameness of the subjects in the photographs through their buccal, neutral countenances.

The sameness of lips throughout *Queer Portraits* conjures up the lips from Luce Irigaray’s feminist theorization of lesbian pleasure – those of both the mouth and the vagina. In her 1977 poetic essay ‘When Our Lips Speak Together,’ Irigaray conceptualizes the lips as a site of female eroticism and connection outside of the phallic economy, famously claiming, ‘[b]y our lips we are women … Kiss me. Two lips kissing two lips: openness is ours again.’46 Like Irigaray, many feminist and queer feminist artists since the 1960s such as Judy Chicago, Harmony Hammond, and, more recently, Allyson Mitchell have fixated on the vaginal lips in what has become known as female and central core imagery. The mouth’s lips, too, in their ability to speak and express identification and desire, have been a focal point of feminist art practice, as illustrated in Joyce Wieland’s works *O Canada* and *Pierre Vallières* from the late 1960s and early 1970s.47 In varying degrees, such visual representations of the vaginal and oral lips attest to a (lesbian) feminist political artistic strategy that grounds models of sexual difference in the realm of the body.

Whereas many feminists since the 1980s have tagged Irigaray and other feminist theorists and artists like Chicago as essentialist because of their anatomically determined definition of a woman, the concentration on the lips as a feminist trope of intimate pleasure and resistance to heteronormative male-centered articulations of sexuality is useful for my thinking about the neutral expression as a site of queer feminism.48 While, for Irigaray, the lips produce real forms of pleasure ‘in moving, being moved, endlessly … in motion,’49 the buccal, neutral lips in *Queer Portraits* are still: about to move, to speak, to signify, to identify. Our pleasure here as spectators isn’t in the
movement of the lips, but the anticipation of their movement and speech. Our pleasure lies in the waiting, the not quite knowing how the lips will move.

This is especially the case in Levine’s photograph *J’vlyn 2012* (Figure 17.3). Here, J’vlyn stretches out in a resolute yet casual pose upon a conventionally ornamental sofa that clashes with their fierce, distinct aesthetic: a seductive black dress with a pink bra peeping out underneath, asymmetrical lip and ear piercings, a tangle of necklaces, transparent tights full of runs, long messy hair pulled back. Despite the bold eye makeup, J’vlyn has a neutral, buccal facial expression like the other models; their lips are about to move, as if about to state their pronoun.

On a formal level, the shape of lips is pervasive in this image. J’vlyn’s bent knees and crotch form a pair of lips; their updo swirls into another; two rips in the tights produce yet another. Even the couch cushions envelop the subject like lips. The omnipresent still lips of the photograph accentuate the composed subject whose lips are about to open and move endlessly – yet the particulars of gender identification remain unknown. In this way, Levine revises Irigaray’s classic claim (one also upheld by a great deal of core imagery artists) that ‘by our lips we are women’: the lips alone (of both the mouth and vagina) fail to determine female (or, indeed, any other gender) identification in their
silence and stillness. But, in line with Irigaray, the lips still figure as a queer feminist site of eroticism that resists inculturating phallocentric definitions of ‘woman.’ In disclaiming the gender binary and its preservation of sexist models of sexuality, the lips register a gender-neutral feminism, one based on not the lips but the lips’ speech acts. Put differently, this feminism maintains that ‘by the lips’ J’vlyn can speak simply. Parallel to feminisms offered by Halberstam’s shadow feminism and Spoon’s gender failure, this neutral queer feminism, visually articulated by the lips in their silence, dismisses binaries of sexual and gender identification.

While we may feel pleasure in awaiting the animation of J’vlyn’s lips – a moment in which the subject is merely a body of erotic potential without a known pronoun – our ignorance of their gender identification is simultaneously a loss. A key hangs from one necklace, reminding us that their sealed lips are locked in time; we will never know their preferred pronoun. Though Barthes theorizes the second punctum of temporality in relation to the anticipated future death of the subject, it is also possible to consider J’vlyn’s unknown gender identification as a type of future anterior catastrophe that we always experience as spectators. Just as the subject will inevitably die, they will inevitably identify – and our perpetual unawareness of their preferred pronoun is a loss. Similar to Barthes, we might lament the catastrophe of not knowing their future spoken identification: ‘they are going to speak ... This will be and this has been.’

For how will we ever learn J’vlyn’s pronoun? We should respect its mystery but instead end up automatically making assumptions about their gender identity based on the visual information at hand. Precisely as the adjective neutre is rendered a masculine noun in French, we see J’vlyn’s portrait and immediately assume the subject identifies on the trans feminine spectrum due to their garb and light traces of facial hair. This tendency thoroughly conflicts with a principle of Spoon’s queer feminist gender neutrality: ‘to call anyone any pronoun or name they [want] regardless of how [we] read their body, gender presentation, or behaviour.’ The portrait of J’vlyn, who speaks simply while on the verge of speech, thus pricks us on account of their unconfirmed future anterior gender identification.

Queer feminist neutrality

Levine’s photographs push us toward seeing and thinking beyond the binary, or neutrally. As Sedgwick reminds us, ‘it’s far easier to deprecate the confounding, tendentious effects of binary modes of thinking – and to expose their often stultifying perseveration – than it is to articulate or model other structures of thought.’ Despite the limits of language, Barthes’ notion of the neutral as that which disrupts the binary is a compelling response to Sedgwick’s provocation.
Gender neutrality is not being beyond or without gender but rather a possibility of unhooking ourselves from the violent discursive paradigms of normative gender and sex. As such, gender neutrality presents a political form of queer feminism. Though not the foundation upon which to construct a politics, a queer feminist neutrality calls for the reimagining of the very foundation of the political, confronting us with the demand to rethink the queer and the feminist as not over-inscribed by oppressive binaries of sex and gender. A queer feminist neutrality therefore bestows upon us the challenge to fail and leave behind these very paradigms.

By the end of his lectures on the neutral, what Barthes ultimately entrusts us with is an aesthetics of the neutral. As he concludes, '[t]o the gesture of the paradigm ... the Neutral would reply: smile. Exit the Neutral.'53 This parting image of a neutral expression is exactly what Levine captures time and again in *Queer Portraits*. The simply speaking buccal, neutral expressions of Berlin, Rae, and J'vlyn all set in motion a gender neutrality that propels us toward possibilities for seeing differently, inciting a neutral queer feminist approach to visual culture. It is through these silent drifting lips and smiling eyes that we can begin to think otherwise about gender identification.

Acknowledgment

I wish to thank Amelia Jones and John Paul Ricco for their guidance and inspiration.

Notes

2 Ibid., 6.
4 Barthes, *Neutral*, 73.
5 Ibid., 190–1.
6 Ibid., 191.
7 Ibid., 192–3.
8 Ibid., 193.
9 Ibid., 194.
11 Ibid.
13 Nicholas de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 64.


De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet*, 87.


Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 77.

Prosser, *Second Skins*, 211.


Ibid., 173

Ibid., 172.


Ibid., 51.

Levine's preferred pronouns are 'they' and 'he,' but for consistency I use the former in this essay.


JJ Levine, interview by the author, Montreal, 7 December 2011.

Accordingly, I use 'they' as a third-person singular gender-neutral pronoun for each model in *Queer Portraits*.


Ibid., 242.


Ibid., 144.


Ibid., 242.

Jean-Luc Nancy, *Ego Sum* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), 162, as quoted by and

43 Guyer, ‘Buccal Reading,’ 77.
47 Thanks to Erin Silver for bringing Wieland’s work to my attention.
49 Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, 210.
50 Spoon in Spoon and Coyote, Gender Failure, 201.
52 Barthes, Neutral, 195.