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They/Them: A Sculptural Exploration of Gender Fluidity

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Abstract

Human identity is complex, multifaceted, and intangible. Human beings have both internalized and externalized parts of themselves that are a challenge to wholly represent in visual art. The Social Identity Theory, developed in 1979, suggests that each person has not one "personal self," but rather multiple levels of the self that surface or disappear based on social context. These levels are influenced by both nature and nurture, and can only be discovered and determined by the individual to whom they belong. Gender, being one level of the self, is more complex and fluid than most people realize. This paper and its corresponding body of work explore internal and external struggles the artist has experienced surrounding gender identity, while opening the conversation about gender nonconformity, and providing solidarity and relatable content to those experiencing similar identity struggles. This body of work is influenced by Jenny Holzer's feminist text-based sculptures, Yayoi Kusama's mental illness and fear-reflecting works, and Vaginal Davis' mixed media pieces on gender identity.

1. Introduction and Research

The struggles I have had and continue to experience and associate with my identity formation are centered around gender identity, which is why I have chosen to focus on this in my body of work. How can mixed media sculptures be used to convey and communicate the complexities and fluidity of human gender identity? Humans are such multifaceted beings, externally and even more so internally, that it would be difficult to portray any level of the self with a single medium, let alone one as complex as gender.

Each human's personality is made up of an extremely dynamic and unique set of characteristics that is influenced by environment, surroundings, experiences, and genetics. In linguistics, the word "personality" is derived from the Latin word persona, meaning "mask[1]". Comparatively, in psychology there is no universally agreed upon definition for the term "personality."[2] Both interpretations confirm the idea that personalities do not have a homeostasis, while insinuating that people have the ability to be presented and perceived differently than their true forms. This is a direct result of binary societal norms that are deeply embedded in every aspect of Western culture. Human beings are more fluid than they realize. However, it is still seen as acceptable to assign labels to people based on their appearance and perceived attributes. Yet, how can we embrace the natural fluidity within ourselves when labels are being flung at us from every direction since birth?

In order to understand the creative portrayal of human gender identity, the academic and scientific portrayal must be somewhat understood. Sigmund Freud is responsible for the popularization of personality psychology and the development of the psychoanalytic movement. Freud devoted his life to observing, understanding, and documenting the human psyche. He theorized that the most basic factors that influence who we are stem from our needs as organisms- hunger, thirst, the avoidance of pain, and sex.[3]

Carl Jung was a student and eventual colleague of Freud's worthy of noting. While Freud centered his work around scientific backing, Jung's theories were more abstract. Jung is widely known for his developments in analytical psychology. This encompasses individuation, the attainment of self through identity formation, and self-actualization,

the realization of one's full potential as a human being. This realization can include expressing one's creativity, quest for spiritual enlightenment, pursuit of knowledge, and/or the desire to give to and positively transform society.[4]

The Social Identity Theory, developed in 1979 by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner, suggests that each person has not one "personal self," but rather multiple levels of the self that surface or disappear based on social context. These levels are influenced by both nature and nurture, and can only be discovered and determined by the individual[5]. They include but are not limited to gender identity, sexuality, mental health status, physical health status, and day-to-day preferences and dislike.

Additionally, gender variance has been present in other cultures for thousands of years. The *hijras*, people of a legally recognized third gender in South Asia, date back to 1500 BCE[6]. The umbrella term *two-spirit* refers to people of indigenous Native American tribes who are gender variant[7]. It is important to note that pan-Native terms are not always appropriate. *Two-spirit* has been a commonly accepted term among Native Americans, though most tribes use terms in their own languages to describe the gender variant people of their communities[8].

2. Background

When I was in elementary school, a few important thoughts began bouncing around in my head. Firstly, I told my parents that all good people must be bisexual because that means they love everybody. Little did I know how foreboding this simple thought would be. Secondly, I realized that I was not a girl. I did not look at my body and associate it with "girl." My body was mine and belonged to no other identity. I had never been talked to about gender outside of the binary roles (men and women) and associations that Western culture recognizes, so I kept quiet and tried to ignore how I felt.

These feelings did nothing but grow. In middle school, I came to the conclusion that I was bisexual. Surely this label would solve my internal identity turmoil. That was not the case. In high school, the feelings I had surrounding my gender and sexuality screamed at me every single day. I became very depressed and began severely self-harming. When I was fifteen, my parents learned about the self harm and sent me to therapy. I was diagnosed with major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder. My doctor put put on a few different medications. The rest of high school was an ongoing identity crisis heavily affected by depressive episodes and the fact that it felt like no one understood or could explain the feelings I was having surrounding gender. I felt like I had to choose: boy or girl, gay or straight, crazy or sane. I settled into the lesbian label even though that never felt quite right.

After moving to Asheville, North Carolina to attend the University of North Carolina at Asheville immediately after high school in 2013, I met handfuls of people whose explanations of their genders were exactly in line with mine. I was introduced to the terms "nonbinary," "genderfluid," and "agender." I realized I no longer had to choose. The following year I came out as genderfluid and began using the neutral pronouns they/them. I finally felt like I had figured out who I was, and the most reassuring part was that I wasn't the only one. Despite this, new challenges arose. Explaining gender nonbinarism to my friends and family proved to be more difficult than I thought. I was constantly bombarded with "Why don't you just pick one?", "Are you going to have surgeries?", "What's your sexuality?" Gender is a spectrum, just like sexuality (though the two are not correlated). My gender lies somewhere in the middle of the gender spectrum and might fluctuate one way or the other, which falls in line with the Social Identity Theory. The concept that genitals do not equate gender is hard to grasp for most people in our society, gender is very binary. Genitals are also not as binary as most people think. There are people who are born with a combination of genitalia, and are known as intersex, so the fact that gender binaries and expectations are so heavily present in most societies causes the erasure of intersex, trans, and nonbinary people. We are a minority, and like all minorities, we exist and we are important.

3. Process and Methodology

People perceive and react to information and occurrences differently from one another. Each person's perception of reality is no exception. The different levels of the personal self are shaped by each person's reality, and by what their mind chooses to do with the information they gather day to day. For me, the line between real-time occurrences and lucid dreams is often blurry, which can make reality unpredictable and scary, yet incredibly crucial to my understanding of the fluctuating levels of myself. My dreamscapes both confuse and inform my perception of reality, and therefore my perception of myself.

Because rhetoric and wording is instrumental to how I make sense of my gender identity, I often arrive at the titles of my pieces within my own poetry and writing. From there, I research the etymology and various definitions of key words in phrases or titles in order to fully understand the words I want to use, which helps me decide whether or not certain words are appropriate and do justice to the ideas and feelings I am trying to represent in each piece.

The media I typically use include but is not limited to fibers, wood, metal, clay, Polaroid photographs, words, and found natural objects such as plants and insects. When it comes to the execution of a piece, I think extensively about media, scale, form, color, and why three dimensions over two dimensions. The nature of mixed media sculptures involves a lot of practicing and troubleshooting. Sketching, writing, reading, and pushing the limits of my materials occur throughout and are fundamental in my methodology and my everyday functioning.

During my time in the BFA program I have received a lot of constructive criticism. The feedback that has stuck the most with me is "less is more." I tend to pack my pieces with materials and symbolism that sometimes the idea gets lost in the quantity of media and business of the piece. I have been advised to think about intentionality and simplicity. This has added another step to my process in where I built up a piece into a rather complicated thing, and then shave it down in order to give the viewer something at which to arrive. Because of this process, my pieces hold more history and character than before, adding another layer of depth to the final product.

Dysphoria II (Figures 1-2) is a prime of example of my current process. I began by painting with acrylic on fabric, cutting up the fabric, stitching it back together, and then cutting an eighteen inch circle out of the fabric. I then adhered the fabric circle to a piece of eighth inch birch plywood and cut out the circular shape on the bandsaw. Next, I cut four inch by two inch pieces out of the same plywood to which I adhered paper, on which I had rusted razor blades, and then used to create a fence around the plywood circle. After that I poured a few layers of resin on top of the circle with Polaroids encased in between each layer. I sanded the final top layer of resin with sandpaper, starting at 50 grit and ending with 2000 grit. I decided I didn't like the plywood fence around the edge, so I broke those off (kept them for a potential future project) and cleaned up the edges. Finally, I took three pieces of plywood (roughly four inches by three inches) in which I had drilled a two inch hole in the center of each that I filled with resin, and adhere them to the top layer of resin, floating a half inch above the face of the circle. These three pieces of plywood were originally intended for *dysphoria I* (Figure 3), but found a new home within this piece. The four inch by two inch pieces of rusted paper fence that I broke off the circle wound up being used in two more resin pieces. The first is entitled *dysphoria III* (Figures 4-5) while the second is untitled. There is an inadvertent recycling that occurs within all my pieces. Breaking pieces down and building them up into new things suggest history and fluctuation, both of which are key elements in human gender identity.

Figure 1. *dysphoria II.* plywood, cotton fabric, acrylic paint, embroidery thread, Polaroid photos, resin, paste wax. Al Slydel. 2017.

Figure 2. detail image of *dysphoria II.*

Figure 3. *dysphoria I.* plywood, cotton fabric, acrylic paint, embroidery thread, Polaroid photos, resin, paste wax. Al Slydel. 2017

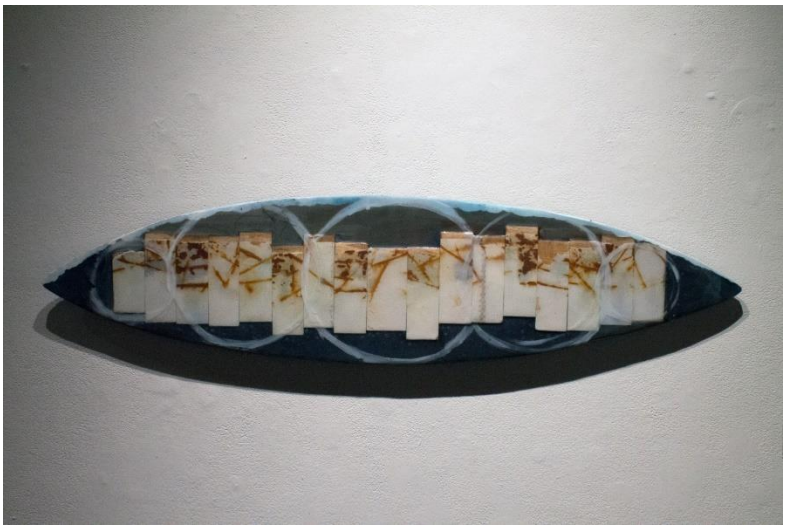


Figure 4. *dysphoria III*. plywood, cotton fabric, acrylic paint, resin, paper, salt, water, rust, paste wax. Al Slydel 2017.

Figure 5. detail image of *dysphoria III*.

My process also includes looking to artists who have similar concepts, backgrounds, and use similar media and methodology. Jenny Holzer, Yayoi Kusama, and Vaginal Davis are just three of many contemporary artists who fall into those categories. Others I shouldn't fail to mention are Alice Fox, Kiki Smith, Joseph Cornell, Claes Oldenburg, Egon Schiele, and Frank Ocean.

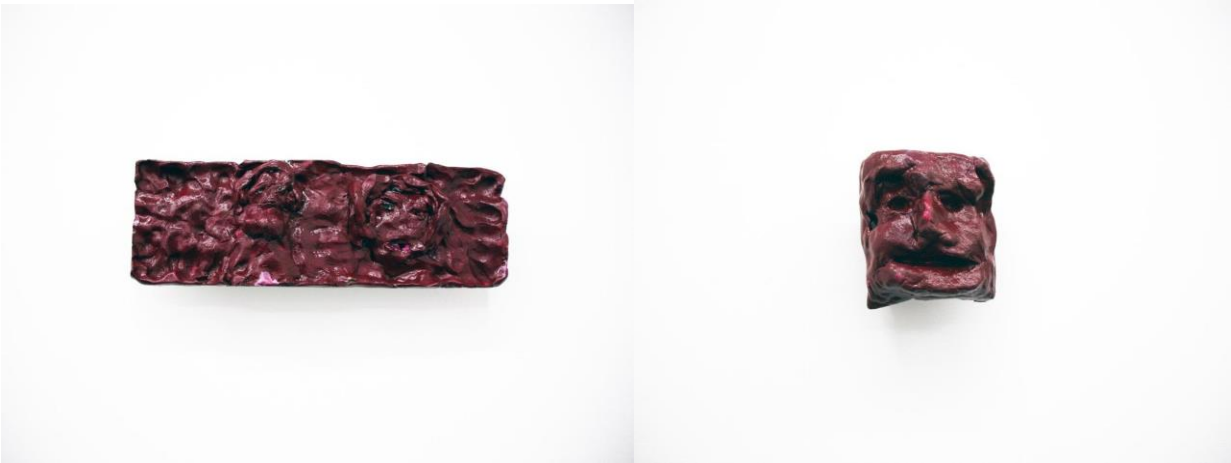
4. Influences

Vaginal Davis was born in 1959 in South Central Los Angeles and was the fifth of five daughters. Davis was born intersex, which is defined as "a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male." During this time, and even still today, doctors assign intersex children with either "male" or "female" anatomy through surgical intervention, which Davis' mother refused[9].

Davis got her start as an artist and performer in the punk scene in L.A. as the front woman for an art-punk band called Afro Sisters. This was a feat for a queer, female-identified person of color (POC), especially in the 70s and 80s. Performing in drag shows and creating politically-charged visual and performance art was a path that was very clear to Davis. Her work continues to comment on social issues that need to be discussed and challenged. Even the issues of patriarchy, white privilege, and old-world ways of thinking that her work from the 80s and 90s portrayed continue to be relevant today. She is truly a role model and a beacon of hope to queer and POC youth, and an inspiration to performance and mixed media artists today[10].

Davis has produced a plethora of two-dimensional, three-dimensional, and performance artworks. Her most recent performance pieces were debuted between 2011 and 2012. Since then she has been producing visual 2D and 3D works, most of which provide a commentary on the modern idea of femininity as well as illustrating and validating herself as a woman. In November 2012, Davis held a solo exhibition entitled HAG- small, contemporary, haggard in New York City comprised of mostly 2D works. These works include "traditional" feminine products such as nail polish, hairspray, and perfume. Davis is not claiming that one has to use these products to be feminine or female, but uses them to help the viewers understand the absurd societal expectations of gender and the implications of genitalia that is ingrained in our ways of perception and thought. Sexual anatomy is no more binary than gender. It's an identity facade that we've accepted as normal, when really, learning to love oneself and taking steps to make that possible should be normalized[11].

In November 2015, Davis held a solo exhibition entitled *Come on Daughter Save Me* (Figures 6-8) in different New York City gallery, comprised of sixteen clay-and-nail-polish sculptures. They are six inches in height, three to five inches in depth, and six to eighteen inches in length. Each piece is mounted on the wall, painted entirely with blood red nail polish, and depicts varied "ghostly, ghastly, beautiful, emotive faces and masks, Goddesses, historic and mythical women, perhaps even a self-portrait or two[12]."



Figures 6-7. detail images of *Come On Daughter Save Me.* Vaginal Davis. 2015.

Figure 8. gallery image of *Come On Daughter Save Me*.

Vaginal Davis' embrace of her identity in her work and daily life inspires me to continue to explore my gender identity in hopes of becoming more comfortable with it. I process my thoughts about my own gender by creating art, not to make sense of my thoughts, but also to portray what it is like to be a non binary person in a very binary world. Additionally, publicly displaying such art is a way to reach out to other non binary and trans people.

When I began questioning and challenging my gender in middle school and high school, it seemed like no one could possibly understand how I felt or what I was going through. It was a debilitating and crushing feeling. Even still, part of me despises the idea of labels, while another part of me finds extreme comfort in the solidarity of knowing other non binary and transgender folks. Either way, I aspire to be an unapologetic queer artist who creates work to reach out to those struggling with their gender identities and feel as if no one understands. I want to be a person of understanding for those who feel how I once felt.

Yayoi Kusama is another artist whose identity and concept speaks to me. Kusama is a well-known Japanese artist who is a part of the avant-garde, contemporary, pop, and feminist art scenes, and is particularly known for the usage of polka dots in her work. She was born in 1929 in Matsumoto, Nagano, Japan[13]. Her artistic interest and her hallucinations of vibrant polka dots both began at the age of ten. In her adult life, Kusama has reported many accounts

of working so vigorously on her art that went for days without sleeping which then induced even more intense hallucinations of polka dots. The dots have come to hold great meaning to Kusama, who describes them as having "the form of the sun, which is a symbol of the energy of the whole world and our living life, and also the form of the moon, which is calm. Round, soft, colorful, senseless and unknowing. Polka-dots become movement… Polka dots are a way to infinity." Kusama has been active in art exhibitions beginning in her early twenties and continues to have solo exhibitions today at the age of 87.[14]

She has battled mental illness her entire life but uses her struggles to influence her work, which has in turn made it so that her work soothes her illness. She believes in "self-obliteration," which simply means that she loses herself in/to the work in order to save herself[15]. Her work ethic was so intense at one point that she became burnt out, deflated, and in need of help. She voluntarily admitted herself to an inpatient psychiatric facility in Japan in 1977 and has lived there ever since. She continues to create art and leaves the facility periodically for her and other artists' show openings, often in New York. "Painting saved my life. When I wanted to commit suicide, my doctor encouraged me to paint more. I fight pain, anxiety and fear every day, and art is the only method I have found to relieve my illness[16]". However, she is not saying that art alone can treat mental illness, but it can certainly assist in paving the path to an inhabitable future. I have found this within myself as someone with mental illnesses.

The repetition featured in my work is a technique I use to calm myself and manage my anxiety, such as Kusama does to manage her hallucinations. The consistency of patterns and repetition is soothing and can act as visual white noise. For example, *Cope* (Figures 9-10) is more about the process than the end product. When I became anxious, I crocheted very soft, chunky, synthetic yarn with my fingers. The act felt very symbolic- unraveling a ball of yarn only to manipulate it with my plain hands into something tangible and comforting. I was vaguely paying attention to the patterns I was crocheting and the fashion in which I was connected each swatch to a previous one. The thing that felt the best about this process was the appealing tactile quality of the yarn in tandem with feeling like I was expelling my anxiety into the yarn with each stitch. It was empowering. Since this piece is predominantly about the process, deciding how the end product should be displayed proved to be tricky. I want it to be worn with pride. I decided to *feature Cope* in the untitled short film that was projected onto a bed sheet that I have owned and used for five years (Figure 10-11). The film is an abstract representation of my personal emotional experiences with and leading up to social interactions in which I am incorrectly gendered (i.e. getting to referred to by strangers as she, her, ma'am, lady, miss, etc.) Since *Cope* is featured in this short film, it has been placed directly below the bed sheet onto which the video is being projected.

Figure 9. installation image of *Cope.* Al Slydel. 2018.

Figures 10-11. Installation images of *Cope* and the video projection, *untitled*. 2018.

Kusama's 1962 work *Accumulation #1* (Figure 12) is on permanent display at the Modern Museum of Art. It is a three-dimensional, regularly-sized armchair fabricated out of white, stuffed phalluses with a rather playful fringe around the bottom. This is one of many artworks that addresses her fear and aversion to men and sex. She has never identified as queer but rather is uncomfortable with sexuality all together. She has had male partners in the past, but explains, "I am terrified by just the thought of something long and ugly like a phallus entering me, and that is why I make so many of them[17]". With *Accumulation #1* and many of her other works, Kusama has given examples of using anything as influence, including the things that scare us the most. She has taught me to harness parts of my identity (even the parts I don't like) and convert them into fuel, channel them into my actions, and ultimately use them as resources for the creation of art. In turn, this will help others who connect with my art not feel so alone, which is crucial to the development and survival of human beings.

Figure 12. *Accumulation #1*. Yayoi Kusama. 1962.

Jenny Holzer is a contemporary artist who experiments with neo-conceptualism, sculpture, installations, paintings, and social activism, though she is most known for her usage of language as art. Holzer was born in 1950 in Gallipolis, Ohio. She completed her BFA at the University of Ohio, Athens in 1972, then began pursuing her MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1975. Her primary medium was painting throughout undergraduate and graduate schools. It wasn't until she moved to Manhattan in 1977 that Holzer began introducing language into her work. She began experimenting with text in public places[18]. What began as anonymously pasting posters on buildings and street signs evolved into large-scale installations on billboards, projections on buildings, and electronic LED displays[19].

Holzer's *Truisms* (Figure 13) was comprised simplified phrases from Western and Eastern philosophy, printed in black italics on white paper, pasted in alphabetical order in Manhattan. Passers-by would scribble responses on the posters which added to the importance of accessible art in public spaces. Holzer continued to use language to express her concerns and anxieties about modern society in works such as Essays and The Black Book (1979). She would not produce her work outside of anything underground capacity, until the late 1980s, as rebellion[20]. With phrases like "Pain can be a very positive thing," "Humor is a release," and "Raise boys and girls the same way" projected on buildings, printed on t-shirts, and pasted on street signs, Holzer's concise and unsettling words have been able to reach a vast and eclectic audience[21].

Figure 13. *Truisms*. Jenny Holzer. 1978.

Her usage of well-crafted phrases and simplified, concise delivery, and the ability to say a lot with very little are traits that I hope to emulate in my work. Having taken creative writing courses since middle school, as well as having gone to open mic nights and poetry readings twice a month from age twelve to age eighteen, I have special places in my heart and mind for words. The exposure to language that I've had over the past ten years is not just something I don't want to lose, but something I draw from and incorporate into my work. For example, in *ode to a former self* (Figures 14-15), the words draw the viewer in to create a more intimate experience. The typed words are from an actual handout I received during inpatient care at a youth psych ward when I was sixteen. The written words are written on a mini banner as a proclamation of the emotions reflected from when I was sixteen and older. They are handwritten for an intimate and personal experience, and written in such a way to have a poetic cadence.

Figure 14. gallery image of *ode to a former self.* Al Slydel. 2017.

Figure 15. detail of *ode to a former self.*

5. Reflection and Conclusion

Art and creation is a staple for many, myself included. Art saved me. More appropriately, art *is* saving me; saving me from the certain death of an uncreative life, allowing me to process mood swings and panic attacks, providing me with

an avenue to show others they are not alone. A life without expression is no life to live, and that is why I create. The tactile experience of making and creating, and the internal, visceral response of viewing and experiencing someone else's work feel like the most important and the most life-fulfilling things. Not only that, but art unites people of all walks of life. It has been a privilege to have access to resources that have allowed me to create this body of work.

Art is documentation that records social, cultural, and global changes. *they/them* reaches out to those experiencing similar struggles with gender, while opening the conversation for those who know little to nothing about the subject. It may seem impossible for someone to feel alone when there are over seven billion people on this planet. We may be only a speck in the vastness of the universe, but human consciousness is just as vast and complex. We, humanity as a whole, are all we have and all we know, so is crucial that we care about finding ourselves and about connecting with other people who have experiences similar to ours. Creation is an avenue through which people can relate, communicate, and connect. As beings whose identities have no homeostasis, it is necessary for us to be able to express ourselves in ways that are as fluid as our species.

6. Acknowledgements

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