

**A “transsexual daily life”:  
Possibility for Transsexual  
Empowerment**

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## **Introduction**

In the middle of 2010, my first year in Netherlands, I went to see the famous “World Press Photos” exhibition held in Amsterdam. As an Asian who grew up out of the European context, such event represents the fundamental spirit of journalism, the obligation to speak for those who cannot. I was and remain aware this event is, of course, not as optimistic and idealistic as it claims. In order to convince the spectators and to create the impact on the visual level, photographers have to “construct”/represent the drastic scenes as they simultaneously attempt to “document”/presenting the realness of the event. The position of the photographer has been transformed from “presenting” to “representing”. In other words, the proper image is very often constructed by the photographers to (re)present a complete narrative. Many critics have been made about how much the constructed-ness the photography could be, as how Fenton moves the dead bones to create the horrific “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” (Sontag,2003).

I was there, as a master student in gender studies, totally annoyed by a set of pictures. It is a set done by Willeke Duijvekam. It won the third place under the category of “Art and Entertainment”. For me, it seems to be a set about the daily life aspects of a girl. The pictures focus on one subject: her seemingly innocuous interactions with the world, including her family, friends, and the society. Her facial expressions left me feeling that there was a sense of gloom about her. Except from this, pictures do not pose too many significant meanings to me. Then I read the text attached next to it, and found out that this figure is presented as one girl who is still a “man” waiting for her “treatment”. In other words, such set is the daily life profile portraying one pre-op transsexual teenage girl.

After reading, I wondered: why such set of pictures can be awarding-winning for the committee of World Press Photo? From my perspective, it is a set that hardly triggers strong feeling and emotions, and the shooting techniques are not highly advanced. It is relatively plain and ordinary series compared to the other sets. Then I went on: does it signify something special except from its transsexuality? In other words, I assumed transsexuality, as one mysterious term for the spectators, built up its award-winning capability. But then why is this gloomy emotion widely spread over the whole set? Will spectators automatically connect this negative emotion as the essence of transsexuality? To parallel with Sontag’s analysis, the settings and surroundings of these pictures demonstrated the exactly constructedness of how this photographer’s version of living a “transsexual daily life”.

This triggered a whole new set of thoughts in my mind To push these questions further, I must ask: can I and others like me—spectators with a heightened sense of gender awareness—treat the implicit connection between sadness and transsexuality as why the photographs gained fame? As one partial clue on how the public think of transsexuals, I would treat such set as the failure of how gender scholarship raises protection for transsexual community. To put it in another way, if such a set signifies the outcome of the current transsexual activism originated from gender scholarship, it failed to create one less oppressive atmosphere for transsexuals. This leads to my next question: can gender scholarship be an empowering force for transsexual community, if the photographer’s construction can be ultimately deconstructed by themselves?

Based on this thinking, I would like to perform a close reading to approach what this photographer would like to (re)present. In other words, under the context of capitalism, saying the possible economic activities and the daily lifestyles, I would try to present the constructed transsexual narrative done by the photographer. This thesis, therefore, aims at revealing the interrelated relationships between gender studies, transsexual communities, and the modern society under capitalist rules. In order to ground this observation, I will ground my interpretation into conversation with difference feminism, especially the work of Iris Marion Young, and queer studies, mainly on the ground-breaking work of Judith Butler. My main purpose is to focus on transsexual subjects on the practical level, or their appearance in this material world. Such an approach is taken to simulate the possible daily dilemma or survival strategies of the transsexual community for the others. Only by fitting in one’s shoes, the others can understand how hurt this may be. It also implicates the life-improving perspective of all scholarship generated from humanism, saying that to help such research objects to live their lives better.

Two main perspectives will be unpacked in the following text. I would first argue this set failed to presenting a “transsexual daily life.” Rather, it appeared to even someone sensitive to issues of gender and sexuality simply a representation of ordinary “teenage daily life”. The message of transsexual ambiguity is only revealed to the viewer if and when they read the series’ description. The text in this sense creates the only way to read these pictures. By putting on the lens called “transsexual daily life”, these pictures certainly reveals one different and unique snapshot of this subject. The “transsexual daily life” in the photographer’s perspective is sad, hopeless, and deeply connected with the hospital and medical discourse. Readers would easily lose the meaning while there is no such lens, and the pictures lose their uniqueness too. To put this further, this is exactly the reason why such set wins this World Press Photo award, by presenting a painful feeling of “transsexual in-betweenness”.

Second, I will connect this close reading to academic approaches that aim to

present an understanding on this “transsexual daily life”. In comparison with the drag subject presented in Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1991), the political potential is also heavily posed toward transsexual subjects by the queer activism. While drag subject is read as the successful subject who politically engaged themselves in identity politics, transsexual subjects are accused as having false consciousness by settling down in sex binary. Such misreading later on forces the transsexual subject to follow the “passing” strategy in the modern society. They simply want to “be” man or woman. In other words, queer politics are treated also as an oppressive force against transsexual community.

The “passing” strategy, however, falls into the pitfall organized by the current nationalism and heterosexual mainstream opinions. Iris Marion Young(1990a) revealed how different bodies are put in order to create one firm hierarchy that ultimately favors those that are white, slim, and heterosexual. Such the “aesthetic scaling of the body” can be standards that transsexual bodies want to “pass” in order to live their life as the others. In this sense, the “passing” logic fits in the mainstream hierarchy that ultimately oppresses those who cannot “pass”, or those “graded” as the second level. This creates the possible conflict within the transsexual community itself, and demonstrates how the power relations within might be.

In order to break down such power relations, another understanding of the transsexual bodies is required. The embodiment, in this sense, is one possible approach. According to Kathy Davis (1997), embodiment is referred as “individuals’ interaction with their bodies and through their bodies with the world around them”. Transsexual embodiment, in this sense, signifies the possible path to abandon the “passing” strategy. To formulate another narrative regarding how transsexuals interact on/with their bodies in this material world will opens a new horizon for academic practices, both practically and politically.

Starting from the new narrative of transsexual bodies, I propose to use the “strategic embodiment” derived from Spivak’s(1988) notion of “strategic essentialism” to counter strike the transphobic atmosphere in the pictures, and the society as one ultimate goal. In the purpose of tackling the racism posed against the non-whites, Spivak suggested this term as one crucial essence for activism. Taking up the discriminated identity, such as woman, non-white, and non-heterosexual, is to temporarily speak for those “subalterns” who cannot do it themselves. The “strategic embodiment”, therefore, is also one timely step for transsexuals to situate themselves in the capitalist world, and strategically speak for themselves. As long as the “scaling of bodies” is still fixed with the economical factors, the strategic might be one proper approach to survive. Such strategy helps transsexual subjects to situate themselves in the system to ensure their daily supplies. On the other hand, such strategy provides the

basic logic of coming out as transsexuals without the focus of the oppressive force from the society.

To conclude, what “strategic embodiment” may suggest is the logic of body. Similar to the others in the current material world, “transsexual daily life” situates in the efforts to use the full potential of one’s body. The difference of the body is not the reason why the non-transsexual cannot understand a “transsexual daily life”, but the fear of encountering such community. They are in the same circumstances as the others: they use their bodies to live a better life.

The following analysis is based on my understanding in Netherlands. While using all the materials looking mostly on European and American subjects, I am aware that this critique and suggestion of the transsexual subjects might be Eurocentric. In other words, this analysis has its premises under the background of Europe, which implies certain social welfare discourses and individual conditions. The landscape of transsexual communities in other places may not apply to the things I will describe. Together with other researches, readers might have the chance to construct their image of the intersection of multiculturalism and transgender community. (Winter, 2009) To push this further, there might not be “one universal” transsexual politics, and the difficulties which local transgender communities have to deal with might vary a lot. It is also a “situated knowledge” (Haraway, 1991) that I am positioning myself. Haraway brought up the “situated knowledge” to emphasize the self-awareness of the researcher. While “objective” researches are presented in journals and conferences, the presence of the researcher is usually requested at the lowest level. In other words, they try their best to dis-embody themselves. As Haraway tried to take up, there must be some subjective observation within the narrative created by researchers. The research can only be performed because they have situated themselves in the field. Only by putting researchers themselves into the power relations, the knowledge generated can be convincing. Therefore, I try to situate myself in the context of west Europe with the company of transsexual subjects, in order to envision a better transsexual future.

Yuval Davis(1997) also claimed the process of “rooting and shifting” among different disciplines. Researchers must recognize their own root in different disciplines, and then they can start to take up different perspectives as the shift to provide multiple views. In this sense, I may root my personal observation under discipline of art critic and try to provide a possible path for future transsexual activists by shifting among queer studies, transgender studies and European studies. This claim may also provide the ground for further researches. To root in this analysis is to shift, or to move on to another understanding on “transsexual daily life”.

## **Visual Representation: Readings on Pictures**

Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it-say, the surgeons at the military hospital where the photographs are taken- or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be.

-Susan Sontag,2003:42

While trying to differentiate the physical suffering in paintings from that in photography, Sontag wrote down such sentence to signify the position of spectators in photography. Photography was meant to present something once happened in front of the camera. Only if the spectators believe in the realness of such suffering, these photos can start to be materials which they can learn from. Otherwise, it is only a temporary tool to trigger emotions for those voyeurs. Horror is the emotion triggered by the mutilation in Sontag's case. To parallel with Sontag, non-transsexual spectators can easily falls into the pitfall of being voyeurs. In my following analysis, such pitfall is in fact set up by the photographer for spectators to enjoy the visual pleasure on the one hand and to distinguish themselves from this transsexual subject on the other.

To overcome such distance, the possible approach is to distinguish to which extent such transsexual narrative is constructed by this photographer. Once spectators have the knowledge, they would indeed "learn from" these pictures. To push this further, this set of pictures may not be only treated as a conventional pathologizing narrative toward transsexual community, but a shared ideology among the other non-transsexuals. The awarding-winning fact is best proof of such ideology. As I am aware of the fact that different interpretations can be formed by different spectators, I am also deeply convinced that such gendered interpretation is the exact award-winning reason that signifies its discrimination to me. Without such gendered lens, it would just be some ordinary pictures that are commonly taken in usual capitalist's daily life. Once the discriminative discourse is located, this material world can be read or perceived a little bit differently than it used to be.

Two different aspects are mainly concerned in the following analysis: the gestures of different characters and the background/place of these pictures. My reading will present how the order and presence of objects are the crucial factors manipulated by the photographer. The order of the pictures is under my own will, same as the heading for each picture. It is not the original order which the

photographer put in the exhibition. It is arranged from the public sphere to private one. Under such arrangement, the continuance of personal emotions can be grasped by the spectators more easily.

What needs further stress is the usage of pronouns. In the description of different pictures, I used different pronouns to signify the gendered usage of language, even before I start to describe my observation. When analyzing pictures that show facial expression, I will use the pronoun “it” to signify the gender uncertainty as regards the persona represented. Face, as the most powerful cultural symbol, represents the mentality and the judgment one person hold on itself. At the same time, it is also one disguise to cover up the real characteristic of that single being (Davis, 1995). Reading the face can be treated as the main reading process of identifying the others. Put it reversely, face is the most influential aspect in daily living while people try to present themselves differently.

On the other hand, with that which cannot see the face through the camera, I prefer to use the pronoun “she” to emphasize that our judgment is then influence by the outfit. Spectators would easily presume the sex of the figure by the dress code created by fashion industry. Dress code is the metaphor that signifies the sex instead of the body. Even though the figure has not been changed by hormone or surgery, the perception on clothing has already put out the judgment of one’s sex. In other words, the physical difference between sexes is smaller than the public presumed. Besides, and might be the most important, this subject is always under the will of being female. Such usage is dedicated to her endurance of the pain caused by the physical change.

## I. While in transportation: (the public sphere)



In the center of the picture, as our main subject, one person is focused. It is in any possible means of transportation. One of its arms is bending up to hold the collar of its clothing, and the other is laid down between its two legs. It lays its sights to its front in a dull and unfocused way. There is another man sitting next to it, and there is no other person in the picture except from him. The man is not focused by the photographer. The man is not looking at him but at the scenery outside of the cabin. He turns his front more to the outside world than to the inside. They sit far from each other.

Two things are worth notice here: the proper implication of the subject's gesture and what this man represents as the gender normative in society. Certainly it is the photographer's intention to present a nervous and uncomfortable subject through its gesture. The cabin can represent the whole public sphere in general: this subject is not comfortable in public. The hand between its legs suggests the subject is under stress. It is confined by itself not to interact with the others. The collar with a hand attached is here treated the important metaphor of the daily life obligations. Such moment suggests that he wants to relieve the invisible stress from the society by getting loose of its visible collar.

To look at the other man, the focus of the lens is not on him, suggesting that he is

processed as same as the other background objects by the photographer. In this sense, the only presence of the other human being can be read as the representation of the public atmosphere. In other words, he is the representative of the society. His presence implicates that there are hidden rules to follow as long as this subject wants to situate in the society as a member. This man, however, turned his sight out of the window suggest his ignoring attitude toward the subject. The presence of this subject does not trigger his reaction and curiosity, not to mention caring and interaction. It is also be read as the possibility to subvert the social custom as long as the subject is not under notice. The oppressive force of the social custom and the subversive potential is well deployed in the relationship of these two figures.

The age difference may also signify mainstream disciplinary force. The elders are those who keep the customs and educate their next generation according to what they are told. Things against the custom are either abandoned or sentenced with punishment. It is the dirty part of the world needs ruled out. The elders are the one who execute the sentence, and the young subject is implied as the one against the rules. By showing no other presence of human beings, the atmosphere is presented cold, isolated, and cruel with the association of execution.

## II. While in the garden (the semi-public sphere)



The main figure is the center of the picture. It is standing in a yard surrounded by tall fences. It is laying its hand on a car. Several things are evenly distributed in the

background, including trash cans, picnic table, chairs, and one small shed. It looks toward the camera. It is posing a gesture ready for shooting. It does not have much expression on her face.

First and the most identical, the gesture of the subject is still under stress. The sight throwing toward the camera is uncomfortable. Reading together the first picture, spectators may receive the implication that this subject is really uncomfortable in public spaces. However, spectators would not have enough information to understand what really makes the subject uncomfortable. The pressure can be from two sides: either to be watched behind the lens or be in the public. Such ambiguity is crucial for the photographer. The tension of anxiety becomes one regular theme in public, whether such anxiety is constructed or not.

Second, this background is the key set for connecting the public life and private life. It can certainly bring in the stress from the outside to the inside. The yard, therefore, has the elements of two folds. It is open enough that this subject has to pay attention to the notice of the others, especially the camera for this shot. It is also close enough that secrets do not seem to leak, which all the tall fences speak enough for this. To push the implication further, it suggests that family relationship might be also similar with the outside world.

Third, things in the background signify the possible social class of this subject. These implications, especially the car it stands by, are the metaphors for the possible economic condition, the possible life style, and even the possible access of medical help. In other words, the subject is implied as someone with proper background, and obviously its worries are not about the material matters.

### III. While in the house (the private sphere).



The shot is focused on these two people, and the interaction between them. They are sitting next to a table in a house. Nothing is on the table. They are wearing pajamas. The figure on the right is younger. It looks down to one of its hands stretching out toward the other figure. The other hand is leaning on its chin. It is not in a good mood. It is thinking or pondering about something in its mind. The other figure is older. She is also having the same gesture with one hand on her chin, and the expression of worrying and wondering. She gives her hand to attach the hand of the younger figure, and at the same time she is laying her sight on the place they have physical contact.

Four aspects can be told through the picture. First, the expressions of two people are very negative. Following the stress implication from the public sphere, they are presented as not being able to deal with this oppressive force from the society. Such force is carried into the house. They share something heavy together. Second, they have body contact and both of them are not in tension. Going together with the age difference the picture suggests that these two people have close relationship, even kinship. The hand given out by the older figure suggests that she is comforting the younger one. Third, the place and the clothing on these figures suggest they are in a private sphere, or at least “the sense of home”. Such “sense of home” is implying one

safe place to share worries and burdens. Their clothing, white underwear or pajamas, gives the biggest support for such private implication. Fourth, there is no object in the foreground and the background is blurred. This leads spectators to focus fully on the interaction to these two subjects

#### **IV. While in the bathroom(the ultimate private sphere)**



The main figure is in the bathroom. There are two sets of washstand. She is looking closely in the mirror to check details on her face. Spectators can only see her back, and partly of her face in the small mirror on her right. Facial expressions are not available. One of her hands is touching her own face. She is wearing a black short skirt with pink sleeveless t-shirt. Her full body figure is presented. No one else is beside her.

Two aspects grab my attention here. First, the relationship between spectators, the subject, and the mirror is crucial. It present multiple ways of looking. Spectators look at the subject through the lens or the photo. In this photo, the subject is looking at her “real” self through the mirror. Spectators, however, is blocked from the “real” image that the mirror presents. This triangular relation triggers spectators to imagine how the subject is preparing herself in the private sphere, in order to make a coherency appearance in the public sphere. In other words, spectators are looking at

someone transforming from the private sphere to the public sphere. As mentioned, face, as the most powerful cultural symbol, represents the most of the mentality of any subject. In other words, face as one “interface” of presenting characteristic can be either one honest reflection or one tricky disguise. The level of emphasizing one’s presence differs too. By organizing different facial parts, one subject can surely present itself to stand out, or to emerge back into the crowd. In this case, the unseen face is the key factor for spectators. Since the face is blocked by its body, the real face is read differently as a symbolical implication: the perfection of the real body parts. In other words, the unseen/missing becomes the perfect/almighty. Pursuing the “perfect face” is heavily implied to connect with the process of makeup. It is one universal experience for female spectators to relate themselves with the subject. From personal connection with the subject, it is very possible that spectators start to sympathize the subject. All the negative emotions are then deeply connected. Spectators worry the same worries as the subject did.

Such picture therefore implies the empowering message: she is empowered by such process, which most of us also have such experience. This is one process of empowering. Although there is stress in public, the subject does not withdraw herself but face it under her own will. Yet spectators do not know anything about the stressful object, this process signifies her courage.

Second, there is the other set of washstand. It seems like there is someone sharing her private life together. She shares the ultimate secret with this person, even in the bathroom. This implies this absolute support. Similar to the older female gives out her support, the absent figure will always be on her back. In this implication, she can be understood as living in a comparatively safe surroundings, with protection and care.

## **V. Commonly Shared Elements**

To view these four pictures as a whole, there are two commonly shared elements. First, all four pictures are slightly overexposed. It turned out that all pictures are carrying one extra white tone on the basis of the objects presented. Besides, the basic tone of these pictures is also white. Here I am referring to the background, saying that the white gloomy sky, the interior of the house, the bathroom, and the pajamas they are wearing. This whiteness implies a sense of cleanliness, which sometimes refers to hygiene. Second, all objects in the pictures are carefully selected. Other than those with metaphorical implications does not appear. I am referring to the other people while in transportation, objects on the table while in the house, and the daily showering tools while in the bathroom. This implies the sense of orderliness. By only

putting the meaningful objects, the photographer can emphasize his message. It rules out the possibility for spectators to read pictures differently by recognizing the other objects in the picture. Objects are imbued with meanings, suggesting subject's possible connection with the society. This outcome makes the spectators only focus on the subjects, and the interaction with other figures, which are the ultimate intention of the photographer.

Such orderliness also presents the power of the social system. The power can reach as far as possible until the very private part of any subject, including this one. Social disciplines are confining this subject in a very extreme way. Although the subjective empowering present its/her will to fight back, the commonly shared orderliness is the testimony of how the disciplinary power puts ideologies on social members.

### **Script for Spectators: Text as one Transsexual Lens**

To organize again what has been told in this set of photos: there is this subject, and it/she is bothered by something. This thing bothers it/her so much that it/she feels stressed while in public. Although it/she has a tense relation with the public, its/her family is supportive and is facing the problem together with her. It/She may come from a middle class family, which daily living issues may not be its major concern. In general, spectators can only see a subject with worries, and it/she is similar to the other members in this society. Every single being in the society has its bother, and everyone has his/her own embarrassment while being in the public. People have to build up one coherent image toward the public. This subject lives the same condition as most of the others.

The wonder of spectators comes to the determined end by such text attached next to these pictures:

Eva is a teenager with Gender Identity Disorder(GID), receiving treatment which may in time lead to sex-reassignment surgery. Born a boy (and called Koos), Eva always behaved like a girl and felt an intense desire to be one. At age of 13, Koos saw a TV documentary about GID and realized what was amiss. Together with his mother, Koos visited the VU medical Centre in Amsterdam, which has a GID team for children. Here, after extensive psychological testing, cross-sex hormonal treatment may be offered after the age of 16, and sex-reassignment surgery after 18.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is the original text from World Press Photo website downloaded at 8<sup>th</sup> of December, 2010. The web address is :

The context of these photos, therefore, is revealed. The reading of the pictures is well connected by this term: Gender Identity Disorder. As I have mentioned, objects in the pictures carry their own implications. While in the transportation, she is stressed because of her existence as one pre-op transsexual. The man in the transportation is taken up as the general view toward the transsexuals: uneasy and neglecting. While in the yard, she is also stressed because of photographer's lens. Such lens can be the representative of the social discipline as well. The tall fences represent her guard toward the curiosity from the neighbors. The objects in the background tell the story that she does not have financial problems going through the surgery.

While in the house, the figure holding her hand is her mother without question. She is also worrying very much about her condition. The pajamas are implying this transsexual process as something private. The most confronting part is in the bathroom. She is constructing an image of herself to present to public. Other than the non-transsexuals, she is trying to reach to image of the other sex. The face unseen is the implying such ultimate goal of transforming: not only from the private to the public, but from male to female.

What worth extra attention is the other set of washstand. While she is using the other one, this washstand represents the absence of the other figure. In the reading without knowing her as transsexual, this is the spot for someone close to her. This someone is not there with her at the moment. After knowing her as transsexual, it represents her another body, the body after surgical process. It seems like this vacancy is reserved for her post-op body, or to be precise, reserved for her unaccomplished dream. It points out that she has not had her surgery yet. The imaginary line of desire/sex is also drawn. She is about to cross that. As if the familiarity of spectators does get aroused by the perfection of the face, this picture can be read as the invitation of taking part into her life. It gains the convincing power for the spectators. She is just the same as the others.

The cleanliness and the orderliness are the most important and widely applied metaphors as the background. They are the crucial bases that link such subjects accurately with the hospital and medical discourse. Since the hospital is always connected with white and hygiene, the subject surrounded by white objects must have a deep connection with it.

Following this reading, the subject is suddenly different from what spectators can get from pictures. It has been specialized into something that other than the normality. This text, therefore, distinguish this subject from the others, including the spectators.

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[http://www.worldpressphoto.org/index.php?option=com\\_photogallery&task=view&id=1759&Itemid=257&bandwidth=low](http://www.worldpressphoto.org/index.php?option=com_photogallery&task=view&id=1759&Itemid=257&bandwidth=low)

Originally, spectators can try to imagine what really bother her/it, which can be a usual daily event. With the text, the spectators would cut out their connection with this subject to signify she has the bother that most of the public do not.

This is the process of pathologizing. As Foucault (2006) has deployed how modern world constructs deviance as “disorder” or “illness” by implication. The photographer is following the same logic. This subject is different enough to categorize her as something sick. The “disorder” tag is attached by putting in these words to define or to locate the subject. Spectators would follow this logic to believe this subject need medical help.

If spectators go back to those information grasped from the pictures, it is simple to understand that there is one “trans lens” working between spectators and pictures. Such lens is the fundamental work done by the photographer. He had his intention to organize the objects and figures while he took the shot. Therefore, these photos are making reasonable sense to win the award right because they defined the subject into “disorder”. Through the reading I performed, photographer uses his shooting technique to emphasize the main theme, including the background, the objects, and the overexposure. These techniques, however, are the only implications. There must be one obvious theme under the spotlight that these implications can finally work. In other words, the title must be special enough. While it is not treated as that special, it loses its magic, not to mention to win such award.

This specialty, therefore, is one oppressive force for transsexual community. The transsexual again is performed as the different subject, regardless how similar this subject lives its own life like most of the others. This subject can be referred to the eastern subject which Said have brought up. While the eastern is treated something different and special, they are also thought of as someone less civilized and barbarian. They might even have some “illness” because of their difference.

Just as what Sontag points out, spectators including the committee of World Press Photo are the voyeur. They look at one transsexual life through this “transsexual lens”. They sympathize with his subject while she is trying to live her life. They alleviate the pain which she faces on daily bases, but take out visual pleasure to amuse themselves. To push this further, transsexual daily life may not only be connected with hospitals and hormones, it is still one living experience that contains joys, sorrow, excitement, and love etc. This conventional way of pathologizing is keep the illness out of our sight, as we the public are all the doctors. There must be something other than the negative feelings. Transsexuals deserve to be happy, but oppressed.

## **Textual Representation: Reverse Reading**

It is commonly assumed that spectators would read the pictures first and then the text because it is one photography event. As the analysis performed above, the powerful indication of the text becomes the catalyzer of those pictures. With its transformation, pictures have their very fundamental connotation on transsexuality, but to speak by themselves. In this sense, the chemistry would be different if spectators perform a reverse reading, saying that read the text first and then the photos. This reading also opens another horizon for spectators<sup>2</sup> to engage themselves into the process of creation. With the help of such text, spectators can present their transsexual subjects, not necessarily the one presented on this set. On the other hand, such reverse reading can also reveals how such subjects is constructed by the photographer. In order to present one unified image, the subject is forced to speak the voice of the photographer, but hers.

As many books focusing on academic writing (such as Malmfors,2004) point out, the first sentence carries out the most important information about the following paragraphs. It is the key sentence that determines a specific topic or concept. It gives out a general image of such topic. The first sentence, therefore, coined the topic as one subject with GID. It informed readers that there is one person who “has” this disorder. According the name, it is very possible that it is a girl. She is at her teenage, which suggest she is young. Because of this disorder, she is “receiving treatment”. Such treatment ultimately will lead to sex change. This sentence provides the framework for spectators. Spectators then could start to picture one subject that has confusing sex appearance. To push this idea further, the subject might even have masculine appearance that need to change sex fundamentally, like those drag queens on the stage.

What grabs my further attention is the usage of “teenager”. What “teenager” implies is the transformational process of such age. It is such a period that every aspect is developing, mentally and physically. By using the term teenager is to emphasize its instability, which mentality and figures changes drastically. It is then one comparison to the spectators who are presumed as matures. She is the instable deviant teenager that can possibly shift between the sex dichotomy, and spectators are the stable normal adults that know which side they situate.

The second sentence indicates the period of this disorder, which starts from the moment this subject is born. This sentence in fact reveals its biased view as

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<sup>2</sup> In the following paragraphs, “spectators” and “readers” are referring to the same group of audience. I use the name differently by emphasizing the movement of either “reading” or “looking”.

essentialism. It points out that there is one “intense desire” to be a girl while this kid was born a boy. In other words, this desire is born essentially with this subject. It is embedded within her life. Since the transsexual desire has not been biologically located on genes or any other indicators carried with pregnancy, transsexuality is still one uncertainty between essentialism and constructionism. In other words, it has not come to conclusion yet about how transsexuality happens. This sentence presents the partial information that misleads the readers to the most extreme conclusion: they are born abnormal. The third provides a crucial moment that such subject identifies her “disorder”. The documentary became a heavy and identical evidence for this subject. She is firmly convinced by such doctrine performed by herself. She “realized” that she needs further treatments. In this sense, she fell back to the same pitfall of constructing herself as the deviant, by deeply convince herself that there is something “amiss”. As long as she retreated the “amiss”, she can be categorized as normal again.

The fourth brings up how this subject reacts with such understanding on her condition. It also brings up the family support which mother as the representative. This is the only presence of the other human beings. This presence is the most encouraging indication that the subject has her family support. The situation and consideration would be totally different if there is no support with family members. It also suggest that the subject does not have to face her treatment alone, especially to take up the transsexual stigma by herself.

The last one points out which treatment is waiting in the coming future, and the possible age of its happening. The term “here” poses its significant importance in two ways. First, it is the indicator of locating the subject into the medical process. While she is referred as a teenager, she is located in the chronological time schedule of these medical treatments. It implies that her way of transformation is going well. She is going to pass without any delay. Second, it is also the indicator of position. The protocol of treating transsexuals differs from country to country. Such signifier is then locating this subject into the medical context of Netherlands.

Based on this paragraph, spectators are standing at the same position with photographer, saying that the position of representing the subject. In other words, spectators can also picture their version of such transsexual in their mind, before they see the photos. It is then one creation for narrators to fill in the blank which the text cannot complete yet.

To organize the text as the basic information of this transsexual subject, it can be listed in the table 1. With all these materials, readers can imagine their version of representation on this transsexual subject. To put this idea further, even generalizing such information as it is commonly shared among transsexual community.

	Objects	Further Information
1.	Subject	Androgynous
2.	Gender Identity Disorder	Illness
3.	Documentary	Turning point
4.	Mother	Representative of family members
5.	VU medical centre	Hospital with GID team for children
6.	Psychological testing	
7.	Cross-sex hormonal treatment	It happens at 16
8.	Sex-reassignment surgery	It happens at 18

Table 1 Listed information adapted from the text

Going back to the pictures, spectators can surely find out the photographer's logic, and he did present his subject based on the text. First, the subject is presented androgynous. It would be hard for spectators to tell this subject's biological sex under the influence of dressing, hair style, and the figure of its body. Second, the subject is presented in "daily life" circumstances. By this, photographer transmitted his message successfully with the careful selection of the scene, the background, and objects. He also created the space for spectators to fit in the transsexual life. Third, he puts his subjects into the surrounding of medical discourses. The representation of "patient" is precisely projected on the subject with the effect of overexposure, the bitter facial expression, and the cleanness from pajamas and backgrounds.

Intentionally or not, these three aspects lead to misreading easily. While spectators combine the "daily life" aspect and the "patient" aspect together, their imagination of "transsexual daily life" reached to one concrete image: transsexuals are not happy about their body and their lives are intensely connected with the hospital. To push this further, spectators may treat of the medicine as the only solution for transsexuals. It is then impossible to posit themselves in the shoes of transsexual subjects to think of other possible means. This is, again, the process of pathologization. Medicine is the only and powerful "correct" answer to "illness" or "disorder".

Some might argue that such paragraph does not provide enough information to put the subject into the context of her surroundings. I would propose that the potential also lies in the same shortcomings that different imaginations can be reached. In other words, there must be some other aspects that this transsexual is less painful, and less connected with the hospital. Similar as the position of the photographer, there could be all possible representations that deploy a transsexual daily life, but the conventional pathologization in medical discourse.

Starting from here, the subject is then slightly shifted from the material level to

symbolic level. It is not only about this singular subject, but the general image of the whole transsexual community. If the image of a “transsexual daily life” can be portrayed as complete as possible, we, saying the potential photographers, have to think: what else are the other crucial aspects we have to take into consideration? As mentioned, this set has presented the very conventional image under the influence of capitalism and medical discourse. Such understandings cannot be described as “real” or “fake” ones. They are only slices cut out of transsexual lively experiences, no less and no more. Each of them builds up its politics on the daily bases.

### **Symbolic Representation: Transsexual Portrait in Gender Scholarships**

Gender scholarships, together with all the other representation, project their imaginations on this transsexual understanding as well. Focusing specifically on Judith Butler’s ground-breaking work, it somehow also reveals its liberating force and oppressing one. Such academic approach performs its dominant power in the transsexual community, and forces transsexual subjects to pick up the “passing” strategy in order to survive in such capitalist world. In the following analysis, I will try to locate transsexual subjects within different logics generated from different focus.

While portraying transsexual subject as the intersection, my intention has two folds. First, it is the approach to present my own understanding of “transsexual daily life” that generates from gender scholarships and real practices. My attempt is to present one strategy of transsexual bodily usage, that transsexual communities could find it useful in the coming future. It is one humanist approach that the ultimate goal is to help subjects live a better life. Second, it is also a radical approach that tries to fill up the vacancy of gender activisms generated from feminisms. Taking the current capitalist and modernist world into consideration, I assume my attempt would help transsexual community from the very material level. Ultimately, I firmly believe the theoretical position has its potential to create a logical path for the material one, as long as scholars work their best out.

### **Powerful Queer Strategy: Gender Politics but Material Life**

The transgender subject in Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble (1990) poses its important gesture in gender activism and daily practices. In her way of constructing her “queer” subject, this transgender subject is treated as the most sustainable support of her theory. Because of her liberating and powerful analysis, NGOs on transgender

issues take this theory in as their main and fundamental ideology to perform their activism. This approach, however, is not performed without oppressing others outside of her connotation.

### **Gender Performativity**

Some of her terminology and references must be deployed, before going into her main purpose as to “queer” the normative heterosexual discipline and the binary sex. Butler defines gender as: “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).”Starting with reading Freud(1984b) on melancholia and Wittig(1992) on naturalization of heterosexuality, she believes the connection of gender and the biological sex is constructed. It is one mechanism that incarnates identity to the social understanding of sex. She uses the famous Beauviour’s quote: “One is not born a woman, but rather become one” as the example. She mentioned, “It is, for Beauviour, never possible finally to become a woman, as if there were telos that govern the process of acculturation and construction. (1990:33)”In other words, the process of “acculturation and construction” makes “something” to “become woman”. Gender(woman) is then performative(by applying acculturation and construction) to any subjects. Such process is her most inspiring and motivating idea of “gender performativity”.

She goes on with this quote, “For instance, if sex and gender are radically distinct, then it does not follow that to be a given sex is to become a given gender; in other words, ‘woman’ need not to be the cultural construction of the female body, and ‘man’ need not interpret male bodies. (ibid:112)” Here, the implication of potential transgender subject comes to readers’ understanding. The process of becoming woman can also be taken up by the other sexes, or by different physicality other than female.

### **Recitation and Subversion**

Based on this understanding, gender becomes one field that subjects can actively play with. Once subjects understand what has been “performed”, they can actively remove these identities or perform something else. Such process implies one subjective agency that engages oneself in the identity politics. In other words, the subject can be conscious of and ultimately change the gender construction, saying man or woman. Gender identity therefore is the playground, and heterosexuality is the rule to play at most of the times.

Queer, in this sense, is the possible process that “fixes” the dominant rule that favors certain players in this field. Two important strategies are applied by Butler here: recitation and subversion.

Recitation, as one strategy, has its very same fundamental base with Foucauldian thoughts on the original and the copy. As what Prosser points out:

That *Gender Trouble* was subject to a set of reiteration and recitation proliferating meanings beyond the intention of the “original” might be considered especially fitting given its own attraction toward Foucauldian proliferation as effective means for denaturalizing copies that pretend to originality.....The original underwent a certain overreading, playful exaggeration, a mischievous adding of emphasis, yet nevertheless remained a discernible referent. (2006:260)

This recitation in fact builds up the whole construction of heterosexuality piece by piece. Recitation generates its some extra meanings every time it recites itself, among the interaction with other human beings. By manipulate and misreading the original, the construction is then powerful enough to oppress other. Such seemingly organized logic is well deployed as “heterosexual matrix” on Wittig’s(1992) analysis of the straight mind’s naturalization. This process sustains heterosexuality as normal and natural. The ideology of the heterosexuality is then fixed on the biological sex: female is opposed to male, and suppose to fall in love with male.

On the other hand, this can also be treated as the potential to de-construct such well organized logic. As long as the new meanings are well kept within the metaphor, saying that such meaning is still under usage, it is possible to overturn what is oppressive. The original definition of gender would be blurred by these new implantations. Queer, in this sense, are implied with the process of uncertainty with definition and self-reproduction on the symbolic level.

This mechanism is similar to what has been brought up during textual analysis. Based on the same text of describing transsexuals, different subjects, saying the photographer and spectators can imagine one unique version of this transsexual life. Through some “overreading, playful exaggeration, a mischievous adding of emphasis”, the content of this term “transsexual” may only refer to a medical syndrome, but a lively body, a something else. On the symbolic level, saying for the understanding from others, this term become multilayered, rich and diverse in meanings, “yet nevertheless remained a discernible referent” as “transsexual”.

On the other hand, such strategy can also reveal a contradiction of what the photographer tried to present on his image. The constructed “cleanliness” and “whiteness” are the very powerful metaphors for supporting the authoritative power

of photographer. While no other objects are presented in the scene, the spectators can only focus on what the photographer has given meaning to. Under this definitely power relation, the recitation mechanism can hardly be performed. This mechanism, however, is still available for all the spectators, as long as they have the intention to question the dominant discourse, and to generate several new ones.

Besides from the process of generating new meanings, the process of subversion is also one important strategy that Butler applied, especially on the term “camp” (Davis,1997). While the negative literary meaning of camp was assigned by the public to the homosexual community, the process of subversion is the political counter-strike strategy to gain their pride back. Such action has two main goals: visibility and fluid identity. By carrying such discriminated identity publically, the presence of such community can surely gain its position in the society. Since it comes out of the closet, it can be counted as part of the society. In this sense, it is the very first step that roots the community back into the society, to gain its visibility. The next step then is to be proud of such marginal identity. Performing such recognition with this identity is then subversive to the mainstream opinion. It is the action that break down the original construction of identity hierarchy. In other words, the hierarchy is less rigid while the discriminated identity is preferred. With these two purposes, the subversion is the key strategy for margins to beat the centrals. It confuses the original boundary of identities. Shifting among identities is more possible and preferred, comparing to the original rigid hierarchy.

It is these two elements that support Butler’s idea on queer. They constantly generate new subversive meanings and refuse to locate themselves into the one singular definition. They want to stay in margin and constantly weaken this gendered sex dichotomy. Such combination then radically pushes the drag subjects to the front of queer politics. As Prosser(1998) signifies:

.....it is this camp reversal of terms that conveys the sense that the transgendered subject of drag is always in the margins of the text.....For it is as the personification of camp-the third/intermediate term that reveals the constructedness of the binary of sex, of gender, and of the sex-gender system- that queer studies has anointed the transgendered subject queer.  
(260, italics original)

Before Butler, drag performance is barely counted as one gender identity but the sexual preference. To count drag as a identity, however, challenges the solid identity hierarchy, saying heterosexual perform its power over homosexual. It fits exactly back to Butler’s strategy. First, Drag performance is then without a doubt at the marginal position, which can radically weaken the constructed hierarchy. Second, drag also

challenges the process of recitation. By successfully reciting the other gender onto personal bodies, it is the solid proof that gender is manipulative, but fixed with biological sex.

In this sense, Butler transformed her drag subject into one queer icon in the last part of the final chapter. As the base of Butlerian transgender subject, both strategies stress their political ambition on bringing down the sex based heterosexual politics, or the “gender defenders” in short (Bornstein 1995). Such subject becomes the most accurate testimony of how gender is imprinted on one’s body. To play within the field of gender and to weaken the rigid boundary of gender construction is the ultimate goal of queer, or to apply Butlerian terminology, queering the gender politics.

### **Performative Shortcomings: On Transsexual Subjects**

Although such inspiring and politically engaged practices have been done by Butler, it is not without shortcomings, especially in its distinction between gender and sex. Her elective recitation on Freud (1984a) makes her transform the original definition of sex from Freud. It has been shifted from the material corporeality which triggers sensations and emotions, to the surface which projects the symbolical identity. Prosser (1998) performs one detailed analysis on this, and concludes:

Butler’s reading of Freud’s assertion thus figures the body as interchangeable with the ego. That is, the body appears not only as the surface entity but as itself the psychic projection of a surface. ... Butler’s recitation collapses bodily surface into the psychic projection of the body, conflates corporeal materiality with imaginary projection. In so doing, it lets slip any notion of the body as a discernible referential category. (262)

This understanding puts the body into one passive entity that only “reflects” what has been done in the psyche. To put it again, Butler’s “theoretical economy of gender lies heavily on a notion of the body as that which can be seen, the body as visual surface. (ibid: )” It is such reading, however, really supports the politics of gender performativity. Only through tearing apart the connection between the biological sex and the gender performance, the potential of a new queer politics can become powerful enough.

In this sense, it is the exact reason that such disconnection becomes one compulsive force that oppresses others, while implicating such queer politics can be fun, interesting, and liberating. Queer politics turned out to signify its oppressive force on the material level. To be precise, the dominant queer force in identity politics constructs one unwelcoming atmosphere for others, if they refuse to separate the

sex-gender connection. Such dynamic can be deconstructed in two ways, in order to understand how such structure oppressed the non-queers. First, such practice underscores the other forces in power relation, saying the economics, religion, ethnicity etc. Second, it builds up the implication that transsexuals, as also one member in the “transgender” connotation, are taking the wrong approach in performing their gender.

Butler is also aware of such bold usage of queer politics. Butler notes in her later work about the political usage of queer identity:

[Although] identity terms must be used, [and] as much as “outness” is to be affirmed, these same notions must become subjects to a critique of the exclusionary operation of their own production: For whom is outness a historically available and affordable option? Is there an unmarked class character to the term, and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics?...In this sense, the genealogical critique of the queer subject will be central to queer politics to the extent that it constitutes a self-critical dimension within activism, a persistent reminder to take the time to consider the exclusionary force of one of activism’s most treasured contemporary premises.(1993:227)

Fundamentally, Butler indicates one mechanism that de-construct the heterosexual normative, and such mechanism triggers the new way to building up new identities and reverse stigma of some old ones. The process of division, however, does not provide a firm ground for new identities to stand. After all, the gender playground, the field of identity politics, is still a field of competition and combination. To put this further, the one with power beforehand will still be the dominant one, and combine the other subordinates. This is why the heterosexual normative, together with its economical strength and whiteness, is still ruling its power over the others.

Focusing this on transsexual subject, Nataf brings her hope on increasing the visibility of transsexuals by creating a third-gender category:

Third sex/gender does not imply one single expression of an androgynous mixing. ...The third gender category is a space for society to articulate and make sense of all its various gendered identities, as more people refuse to continue to hide them or remain silent on the margins....If more transsexual people were able to identify as transgendered and express their third gender category status, instead of feeling forced to slot into the binary because of the threats of punishment and loss of social legitimacy, that third category

would be far more peopled than imagine. People could be given legitimacy by this third category, if society recognized gender diversity alongside ethnic or religious diversity. (1996:57-58)

As mentioned, Roen's critic performs her worry on this strategy:

The first, and most obvious, problem with this is hinted at in Nataf's last sentence. If gender diversity were as well recognized as ethnic and religious diversity, how much would actually have been achieved? Very little, if the long-standing and well-entrenched prejudices among ethnic and religious groups are any indication. (2002:510)

Roen's concern is precisely on the blind spot of such queer politics. Focusing on this specific transsexual subject presented above, her negative emotions can be read as the fear of being the "third-gender category". It is one restricting social power. To be precise on this social power, it is right because of the following "threats of punishment and loss of social legitimacy" that such power is disciplinary. All the stress comes from the fear of being abolished, punished, or rejected by the society, economically or physically. In other words, Nataf's proposal about the third-gender may not success, because it follows the same logic of how the public oppress others. It would be too optimistic to count on such strategy can look forward the third-gender category to be as powerful as the former two.

The facial expression, therefore, can be read as the outcome of how the restricting mainstream opinion dominates transsexual subjects. Being precise, the level of following gender dichotomy, or of "not to cross to the third gender", is and still will be the disciplinary force for transsexual community. To certain extent, the restricting force is the public transphobia that stigmatize transsexual subjects.

Besides, the separation of gender-sex leads to the misreading on transsexual approach. The heterosexual and the transsexual are accused less performative, but constative that hold up the sex-gender connection without enough consciousness. Prosser again points out:

...For if transgender figures gender performativity, nontransgender or straight gender is assigned (to work within Butler's own framework of speech-act theory) the category of the constative. While within this framework, this allocation is a sign of the devaluation of straight gender, and conversely queer's alignment of itself with transgender performativity represents queer's sense of its own "higher purpose," in fact there are transgendered trajectories, in particular transsexual trajectories, that aspire to that which this scheme devalues. Namely there are transsexuals who seek

very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply, to *be* (1998:260, italic original)

In this sense, all the constative experience generated from body should be wrongly perceived and abandoned. Transsexual experiences, which roots very much on body, are accused restricting. Comparing to the liberating queer experience, queer performers deny transsexual experiences as valid ones on the symbolic level. In other words, they believe treatments failed to provide a firm ground for subjects to perform radical gender politics. Transsexual subjects are, therefore, abolished by queer politics.

What worth further attention in this model is that its liberating proposition triggers a huge response in gender activisms, or queer activism in the later term. The radical challenge involves both the homosexual community and the transgender one. I would specifically point out its convenience in expressing such radical politics. With the flattened and simplified idea that drag performance is the expression, every member of this activism can easily engage themselves even with misreading the context. On the one hand, this consequence surely involves more people within activism. On the other, it reveals its shortcomings that ultimately abandon the transsexual subjects.

### **“Passing” for Survival**

It would be easy to assume that most transsexual subjects avoid queer politics, and the whole gender politics in a general sense. That is, these subjects choose not to engage themselves into the gender activism. They stay in the closet until being recognized and labeled with this “illness” or “false consciousness” stigma. After all, there is one “real” daily living that needs to work on, a life that need monthly payment and survive. In this sense, the most common choice is “passing” the naturalized nontransgender screening system, ruled by the heterosexual sex dichotomy. Furthermore, they also apply this ideology to judge the other members in the transsexual community.

Two of the interviewees in the work of Roen(2002) brought up their experience facing this “passing” hierarchy:

One MTF interviewee, Tania, suggested that transsexual support groups “don’t work because you feed into one another’s psychosis, and you just mind-fuck one another” She recounted her experience of a support group meeting where “one of the guys...one of the ‘girls’[laughter] was really

ugly...because you know amongst yourselves that you are trying to maintain a standard and she's not pulling it."(504)

Another case, Tracey, goes from the different aspect:

S/he reported that at the start of the meeting, "One of [the other transsexuals] came in and the first thing she said to me was 'go back to the closet!'" To Tracey, this was a clear indication that the level of gender ambiguity s/he prescribed was not welcome. (ibid:505)

The "passing" logic in this statement is also obvious, but the criticizer becomes the criticized. No matter being the subject or the object, everyone is obliged to sustain this judgment. There is no space for transition, or for being in the process of transition. The standard of gender should be well kept. The whole transsexual community is the guardian itself.

The difference of others bodies, or "the process of identifying the deviant body", constructs one hierarchy. Bodies abolished by the "passing" ideology are categorized as insufficient on the level of transsexuality. Only those who reached the required level are counted as someone "in" the identity. It is the system that favors the post-ops the definite power of outlook, as Nataf mentioned about the post-op superiority:

When we started to get empowered for having sex change surgery all of the sudden the distinction between post-op and pre-op became extremely important, as the postoperative you got certain privileges and power. Essentially surgery breaks down for me as a class and race issue(1996:31, italics mine)

Such outlook, however, implies that transsexual subjects reverse Butler's idea that the body is the surface of the psyche. They possess the transsexual body in order to gain the living experience of the other sex. On the same base originated from Freud's theory, it seems that both sides emphasize on the different side of the body-psyche dichotomy.

As Prosser criticize on Butler's reading on Freud, the clean cut between the body and the psyche is precisely against Freud's major concern: "the conception of the ego as the product of the body but the body as the product of the ego.(Prosser,1998) He deployed the connection and the consequences between the ego and the body in his explanatory footnote: "I.e. the ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body.(1984a)" For Freud, there is one mutual influence and it is not possible to emphasize on one of them. For transsexual subjects, such "maintenance of certain standard" on body construction becomes the fundamental

claim for holding transsexual subjectivity. In other words, inscribing the standard becomes the first and very important law to carry such transsexual identity, in order to have different sensations. This perspective is at the opposite side of queer subjects.

Going back to the photo shoot mentioned above, this “passing” logic is well represented in the bathroom. The subject is using one of the washstand, and the other one builds up the invisible post-op self. The process of preparing herself is the step she construct her body in order to retrieve the psyche, and ultimately retrieve the superior power. It is the empowering process of transsexual subjects. By perceiving her personal body differently, it is the transforming stage that ultimately abandons the old, the deviant, or the subordinated one at the other imaginary empty washstand. It is one transformation performed under the table, behind the public stage.

Such “passing” approach for transsexual subjects also comes with shortcomings. To certain extent, it matches the dominant body-policing procedures performed in modern society. Young(1990a) articulates that how the body is central to dominant cultures to designate certain group as Other. Differences in class, racial, ethnic background, sexuality, and location are widely taken into account. Bodies are categorized in order to degrade them into different levels. This process ultimately builds up the hierarchy. Through such hierarchy constructed in/on bodies, the dominant group can be privileged. They therefore “disembody” themselves as if their bodies are beyond that scale. This “aesthetic scaling of bodies”, as Young names it, is the key to the construction of this favored body, as the others are “drab, ugly, loathsome, impure, sick or deviant (1990a:123).”

In this sense, the “passing” strategy, or the “aesthetic scaling of transsexual bodies”, indeed ultimately demonstrates itself “as a class and race issue”. Body is the only and ultimate referent of recognizing other from the self. Individuals, therefore, settle down and start their regulated “daily life” on the base of their bodies. To put it in another way, it is the mechanism functioned reversely to the identity politics. One does not have claim its identity, but its physicality is used as the referent of identities beforehand. With certain physical characteristic, you are someone/-thing.

Since this physicality is treated as the crucial reference, the ideology behind passing as the ultimate transsexual solution is also problematic. The most easily located problem here is the ontological “realness” of transsexuals’ physicality. It is still “artificial” for the transsexual scaling, whatever organs are “reproduced”/ “represented” during the surgery. In other words, such physicality will never be enough. It can always be more “real”, more “authentic”. Reversely speaking, it will be never “real”, never “authentic”. It can only reach the lowest level as passing in the transsexual community, through the judgments from the oppressive public. In other words, passing gains subjects a false credibility based on its very much measurable version of physicality,

saying the “aesthetic scaling of transsexual bodies”. The affirmative response from the public triggers the self-affirmation of the transsexual subject. It is the constant passing that earns the subject its identity. From this point, it is not about the physicality anymore, but the understanding of its physicality.

### **Transsexual Embodiment: Similar but Different**

If one applicable “transsexual daily life” understanding can be put into practice, the core of that remained unclear and tangled. That is: How they, the transsexual subjects, put their understanding of their surroundings into their bodily practices? While using Davis’s definition of embodiment as “individual’s interaction with their bodies and through their bodies with the world around them.(1997)”, I would suggest “embodiment of transsexual body” as the crucial missing piece that complete the puzzle.

Two elements are important in this embodiment that signifies the difference of transsexual body. First, transsexual physicality points out the diversity of the bodies. Transsexual bodies possess the reconstructed/represented organs that contrast to the non-transsexuals. Even if the “originally born” bodies can provide one universal bodily sensation, these transsexual bodies are saying another version from that already. Not to mention the stories will be so different on the base of multiple understandings on the bodies. To put this in another way, the transsexual embodiment may be one false connotation on the premises that there is one universal feminine embodiment and masculine embodiment. Second, even within one single transsexual life trajectory, the understanding of their “different” bodies may provide different sensations. How different subjects perceive their physical alteration diverse very a lot. Even if the continuous subjectivity will not be influenced by the hormonal and surgical impact, transsexual embodiment is still one dark area that has not been explored, comparing to the other rich descriptions on masculine and feminine embodiment.

Although, such two differences may put the ultimate question mark to their lively experiences, the potential may also lies in such “artificial physicality” in order to develop the counter narrative of the mainstream. Transsexuals are “similar” to the old binary sexes, but “different” from them on the new sensations triggered by new organs. Their lives are not cut in half by the transsexual process. They are also the same subject that eat, drink, and having sex. It seems no difference with the lives of non-transsexuals. Their lively living experiences in the past physicality are still there, still part of this autobiography.

In this sense, the transsexual understanding on their physicality, or their own

versions of “transsexual daily life”, can be set free from the power relations. There are mainly two crucial parts in the inter-related web: the conventional medical discourse and the queer theories. In general, transsexual embodiment offers a friendly atmosphere that can ultimately empower every member in the community. As what Sandy Stone(1992) has deployed in her work to counter-strike Janice Raymond(1978), She stands for a concrete position for transsexual woman, by undermining the fundamentalist’s assumption that support Raymond’s narrower concept of womanhood, or the essentialized “feminine embodiment” in this case. Such speaking position for transsexual cannot be dismissed as one damaged, deluded, and second-rate voice, nor can it be inherently compromised into the “aesthetic scaling of transsexual bodies” that only those who pass speak. This subject in the photos, the forthcoming girl in the age of 18, cannot be efface and invalidate for her life experience.

As one post-op transsexual woman, Susan Stryker(2006) brought her personal experience into theoretical practices. It is possible suggestion for gender scholarships to take up transsexual embodiment other than a queer approach. As she mentioned:

To encounter the transsexual body, to apprehend a transgendered consciousness articulating itself, is to risk a revelation of the constructedness of the natural order. Confronting the implications of the constructedness can summon up all the violations, loss, and separation inflicted by the gendering process that sustains the illusion of naturalness. (254)

For Stryker, the reproduced/represented organs are the solid proof of how human beings construct their understanding on nature. In other words, nature is not constructed, but the “order” of nature, including sex dichotomy, is. From this, she mentioned her lover’s daughter’s birth:

...bodies are rendered meaningful only through some culturally and historically specific mode of grasping their physicality that transform the flesh into a useful artifact.....Gender attribution is compulsory; it codes and deploys our bodies in ways that materially affect us, yet we choose neither our marks nor the meanings they carry. This was the act accomplished between the beginning and the end of that short sentence in the delivery room: “It’s a girl”. (253)

What “a girl” signifies is the essentialist idea that the non-transsexual public commonly puts in physicality. The symbolic force indeed presents its dominant power through the recognition on sex over this newly-born. By the moment this human being is categorized, the constructed historical and cultural structure starts to generate

meanings to the other subjects. To paraphrase Bouviour, this subject is then forced to be a “woman” without possible choice. There is one imaginary *telos* waiting in the days to come, right because of her physicality.

She has such a “transgender” rage that such question is again putting her outside of the binary of two “natural” sexes:

... [Transgender rage is the subjective experience] ,of being compelled to enter a “domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation” that in its unlivability encompasses and constitutes the realm of legitimate subjectivity.(251)

It is such rage that actively resists the public attempt to invalidate transsexual subjectivity. It is similar as what Stone has fought back with Janice accuse. The subjective transsexual voice will not de-graded as one less genuine and being violated by such gendering violence in the very first moment.

Stryker, therefore, takes up the metaphor of monster to posit transsexuals. Using such figure Frankenstein in Mary Shelley(1818) to signify the term “monster”, it becomes one strategy to point out the illusion of the personhood. Going back to the idea of embodiment and put it into the distinction of human/animal, human/machine, creator/Frankstein, the boundary of this idealized human subject is put into question. If human beings embody to themselves that construct their subjectivity to differentiate them from animals or machines, transsexual embodiment can be the blind spot that radically challenges this assumption. In other words, there is no accurate solid essence which lies in such subjectivity. In the embodiment of human beings, the content of subjectivity differs when its thinking on materiality differs.

In the end of her work, she poses one positive attitude toward monstrosity within the transsexual beings:

And we do have something else to say, if you will but listen to the monsters: the possibility of meaningful agency and action exists, even within fields of domination that bring about the universal cultural rape of all flesh.(253)

In this sense, the monster performs its strategic position that temporarily breaks down the power relation after subject formation. Monster as the transsexual embodiment puts out its very simple question to the other subjects that forms up this society: why would one subject be oppressed under the choice of its free will?

## **Strategic Embodiment**

Even carrying with such radical possibility, such “transsexual daily life” has not come to a clear picture. Feinberg(1992) looks back to the documentation of transsexual people in pre-modernized<sup>3</sup> society in order to present the abolishment of current society. Several examples these cultures locate transgender people in specific occupation and specific social status. In other words, transgender in the ancient time does not only signify one identity on gender, but also one class and one way of livings. The modern society is somehow different. The rule of competition, or the fundamental law of capitalism, is determined by biological sex most of the time. It will not change unless the capitalism encountered a major change. Applying one’s advantage into the capitalism system can create the most interests for the subject, but these applications cannot contrast the ideology of the system. Feminist scholarships, for example Young’s work, have already presented a clear image how this structure of modern society is as to favor certain groups.

Under the premises that modern society is following the rules of capitalism, transsexual subjects have to earn their living by giving out their labor just as sexed others. In such condition, I would purpose the idea “strategic embodiment” generated from Spivak’s “strategic essentialism”(1998). The strategic usage of embodiment lies in the recognition of personal physicality- saying that the strength that generated from transsexual bodies. Although transsexual embodiment is different from others, their daily life is still deeply connected with the need to pay off for their material living. To push it further, the maximum the interest from the transsexual embodiment is the ultimate goal of this “temporary” suggestion. For example, the relative high reward of devoting to sex industry may be one proper approach for transsexual female. Comparatively, female sex workers fit in the need of the whole society, so it is one strategic usage that ultimately heads toward the subject’s destination. For some of the feminists discourse, prostitution or sex industry in general can be treated as the oppression from the patriarchal society. Transsexuals can surely admit this, but it is still the best choice when such oppressed position seems to gives them the best condition of their lives. In other words, political incorrectness is not the major concern of this image. It is the example that deeply connected to material life but ideology.

Take the transsexual subject in the photo set for example. As mentioned, her tall

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<sup>3</sup> I am aware that this term “modernize” is problematic with the specific colonial process that only applies to several European countries. However, I think it is proper to apply such connotation in this context, because I did try to articulate the situation in this specific area.

fence and the objects in the garden suggest her economical background. Together with the social welfare support in Netherlands, it is then not the strategic choice for her to devote in sex industry anymore. Strategic embodiment for her would be transformed to think of making her best out of her physicality, saying the combination of different sensations. For example, a strength-required job in a pure female surrounding may be a perfect chance for her.

It is also an approach that can ultimately transform the whole binary construction on sex into the “real” potential playground of gender/sex. The embodiment is the main focus here. It is only possible to root on the position that ultimately one can shift to others. Such strategy is similar to Yuval-Davis(1997) claim in doing feminist scholarships. In this sense, it is only to root in the constructed passing strategy, that ultimately such subject can deploy the structure and shift beyond. To certain extent, such strategic embodiment can be very much the same with the rule of passing, while only taking the outlook into account. The difference lies in the self perception on its body. The strategic embodiment is not about finally “being” the opposite sex, which modern technology still fails to do so, but about “passing” the oppressive force constructed binary sex system to reveal its constructedness from the bottom up. It is also one practical approach by reaching to other subjects. It is only possible to demonstrate this fragile dichotomy by strategically “being” the same two sexes. With a transsexual presence, these subjects can witness and partly “embody” the subjective experience into their lives.

Furthermore, it is one strategy that only influences the subject. As mentioned above, strategic embodiment may avoid the possible failure which the third gender politics can trigger. By politically counted as certain identity, transsexual politics then does not pose an obvious gesture that the public has to eliminate. It is more possible to become a subversive policy that overturns the structure from within. In this sense, it is similar to Butler’s queer politics that radically challenges the gender politics with certain economical consideration.

Although with all these positive effects, this “strategic embodiment” is not without drawback. First, and the most obvious, it is one strategy that takes time to engage. Such strategic rooting process implies sufficient interaction with group members and the convincing influence that ultimately triggers the different sense of what the gendered modern society has implanted. While be strategic dealing with other subjects, there might be no shared ideology, shared strategy, or shared interests that ultimately does harm to the other subjects in the power relations. It is then without a question that such activism is limited by its relation. It may not be as powerful as collective activism can trigger. There is no common interest for transsexual subjects as a group that transsexual activism can gather forces. This is the de-construction that may suggest a renovation is

urgently in need for different activisms originated from 1960s.

Second, and similar to the first, it falls to the same trap with capitalism, saying that individuals are “only” responsible for their own living economically. It is one inevitable process that power relations performs its magic as long as the capitalism still exists. The deep connection with capitalism still inevitable does harm to the labor that the gender oppression may shift to the economical one.

In this sense, another approach of performing activism is needed. It is beyond my ability to purpose one academic approach that can easily cease the conflict within feminist and gender scholarship. Davis(1995) signifies the problematic perspective for feminist scholars on cosmetic surgery: would feminists stop criticizing and step out of their academic “comfort zone”, in order to face the “real life dilemma” that every woman may encounter in their lives? It may be the place where scholars and thinkers can go. We, being transsexual or not, would love to witness the proper conjunction for capitalism and feminism. In the long run, what is called as “strategic embodiment” will be abandoned. A new way can come up, together with the economical caring essence with transsexual subjects and the radical challenge toward this imbalanced world.

### **Conclusion: Live with your body**

There is one Chinese saying goes like this: Follow with the atmosphere, Reply to the person. It has such a deep connection while on the issues with transsexual subjects: to live “with” your body. It is not about how to tolerate what has been not “correct” in the very beginning, but to listen to what this body reacts with the atmosphere. To put it negatively, such “transsexual daily life” reveals the possible failure that transsexual activisms, as long as this world is still under the rule of capitalism. To put it positively, the radical connection between the transsexual embodiment and the capitalism is not yet explored. The potential lies in the boundary of how human beings think about their bodies, especially when the technology has its huge influence on them. To conclude, strategic embodiment signifies the simple but dangerous picture of “transsexual daily life”: do the best out of what you have, and live with it as sufficient as possible.

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