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Toward a Trans Method, or Reciprocity as a Way of Life

ABSTRACT It is reductive yet accurate to assert that Chase Joynt and Jules Rosskam first met because they are both trans people who make documentary films. While the alignment of these affinities does not necessarily prefigure a friendship—in fact, many would argue and experience the opposite—they have found kinship in their shared approach to positions as institutionally embedded academics who are also publicly exhibiting artists. Inspired by Michel Foucault’s “Friendship as a Way of Life” (1997) and the cross-disciplinary, conversational theory making of Lisa Duggan and José Muñoz, James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, and Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, they use dialogue to extend the intimate interdisciplinary legacies and potentials of thinkers collaboratively discussing social issues. Together, they ask what might be possible in envisioning, theorizing, and enacting a trans cinematic method—a praxis for artists and scholars alike to be in meaningful, mutually supportive, world-sustaining relationships. **KEYWORDS** collaboration, dialogue, filmmakers, reciprocity, transgender

Jules Rosskam: One of the ongoing concerns that emerges in our conversations together centers on the role of The Institution in our lives. You refer to us as “institutionally embedded academics who are also publicly exhibiting artists.” While you don’t use the word “institutional” in direct proximity to “artist,” I would argue that artists are also embedded within an institution—that is, if we conceive of “the arts” (The Arts) as an institution, knowing of course that it is made up of many different institutions. Given the current moment, in which there is much public attention given over to the historic—and contemporary—violences of institutions, I wonder what we are able to do from these “embedded” locations. Which, of course, is not a new question. Though I do wonder if thinking about whether or not it is possible, or useful, to imagine the world without The Institution means something new, or different, in light of what the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement have asked us, yet again—and perhaps with greater and greater urgency—to look at, and change?

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Chase Joynt: Your comments remind me of the work of Chris Vargas. I first learned of his multiyear, multimedia, multi-platform project Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art (MOTHA) when he launched an awards ballot for trans cultural producers in 2012. Were you on that list? I remember thinking to myself, *this is both an opportunity and a trap*. I remember feeling complimented that I was nominated and also feeling dread. I now understand Vargas's entire oeuvre as pivoting around this strategically contradictory formulation: How can you be both *of* and *against* the institution, and its many violences and validations, simultaneously? It is not lost on anyone, including Vargas, that his anti-museum project is now sought after, and funded by, the museum—ahem, The Museum—itself.

I love the image in figure 1, Vargas's sprawling MOTHA broadside from 2012, a collage of individuals he describes as “híroes & trancestors; artists & activists; the famous & the infamous; the real & the fictional; the living & the passed; those who self-identify as trans & those who predate the category altogether.”¹ Somehow in an image of 280-plus tiny faces, there we are together, nestled in like the buddies we would eventually become. I noticed our proximity in the poster in the hours after meeting you in person for the first time in 2019.

JR: It's so funny that you bring up Chris Vargas because I was *just* rewatching some of his work yesterday, as I am currently overhauling my History of Queer Cinema course. In particular, I was watching some episodes from *Falling in Love . . . with Chris and Greg* (2008–13). When they first started making them back in 2008, I was so happy that they were staging these conversations about trans men's bodies, desires, and identities, which were more typically happening “off the record.” Also, in the second episode, while on a make-or-break-the-relationship road trip, they end up getting married in Vegas. Between when they initially decide to do it (as a publicity stunt) and when they actually arrive in Vegas, Greg has come clean about the fact that he wants to get married for real, and Chris has realized that he is in a relationship with a homonormative homo who appears to want him to de-transition so he can have their “biologically conceived” baby. This kind of thing could fall flat, as they could have just highlighted Greg's (political) shortcomings, but in the end, each of their personal and political motivations are made suspect, highlighting the ways in which our desires to partake in, or reject, institutionally sanctioned activities and rites of passage are always more complex than they at first appear.

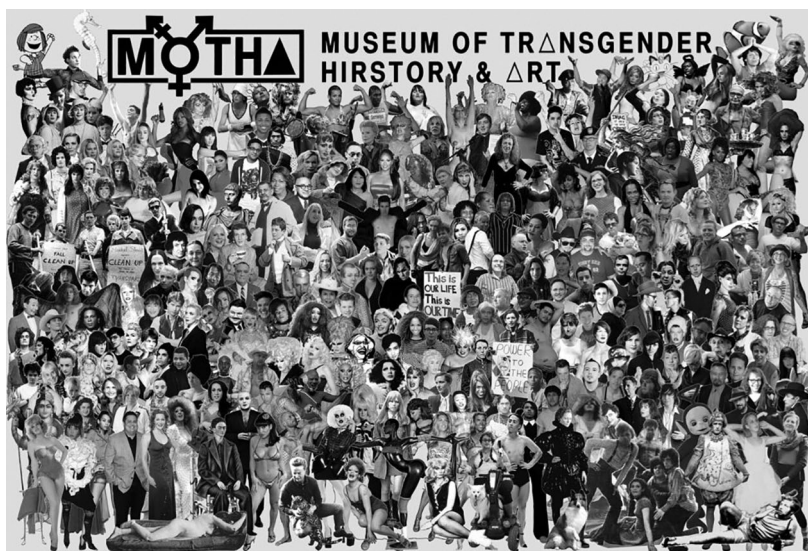


FIGURE 1. MOTH broadside by Chris Vargas, 2012, and detail with authors' faces highlighted.

Thinking back to that list from 2012, I cannot remember for sure if I was on it or not, but I would be willing to bet that I wasn't. I say that because my first thought when you brought it up was, "I'm never on those lists!" And I honestly think I remember being shocked (embarrassingly so) that I wasn't. It is human to want to be recognized

and, as you point out, this kind of recognition is also a trap. These lists breed the kind of competition we have discussed not wanting to foster, and yet if the lists disappeared, the competitiveness probably wouldn't. This leads me to believe that it's not possible to have a "good list," much like it's not possible to have a "good museum." While it's important to acknowledge that the content of these lists has been limited, and limiting, it may be more essential now to recognize that the list itself is part of the problem. A list, while engaged in a reparative act of recognition and inclusion, is also engaged in a process of mis-recognition and exclusion. Instead of replacing the lists that have typically excluded us, what might happen if we spent more time imagining what could exist in place of the list?

CJ: I read your response to my note a few days ago and have been thinking ever since about the relationship between competition and recognition. We are immersed in (inundated by?) a paradoxical sociopolitical climate that promises that *to be seen is to be valued*, while simultaneously proving that visibility does not equal safety. I think about this tension often in the extended wake of the tipping point, which time and time again delivers us to a false (and convenient) binary opposition of good versus bad representation. We are products of—and participants in—systems that choose exemplary cases. I've lost count of the number of times someone has said, "Well, Netflix has their trans movie now," as they applaud the community-driven success of *Disclosure* (2020). Of course Netflix also boasts *The Danish Girl* (2015), *About Ray* (2015), and *Ace Ventura* (1994), to name a few other "trans" titles. The singularity produced by the above statement functions as an undercut—however unintentionally. I get that people are making an argument for "better"—but better what, exactly? Good versus bad is perhaps not the most politically incisive question. Or perhaps it is not the most useful here.

The structural shifts of COVID-19 have inspired me to rethink the *why* beneath many of my choices. Why is my body in this particular location, why is this project necessary, why and with whom do I negotiate love, risk, work, and intimate proximity?

JR: This question of why is crucial. At the moment, there seems to be an urgent rearticulation of a general, "Why are things *this* way?" The answer to which (generally speaking) may be "white supremacy." I bring this up, I suppose, because much of our musings about the disciplining function of The Institution, the emphasis on "exemplary cases," competition, and the like are characteristics of a capitalist white

supremacist culture. My earlier question about whether or not we can effect any—or enough—change within Institutions is entangled within (my) whiteness. I am thinking about queer of color critique (José Esteban Muñoz and E. Patrick Johnson for example) from the early 2000s of the deconstructionist underpinnings of queer theory, which often left the (queer) subject trapped within a disempowering “discourse.” In *Disidentifications* (1999), Muñoz writes:

Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), [disidentification] is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local and everyday struggles of resistance.²

By pointing back to Muñoz, I want to point out the way in which my binaristic question (can we change things or can’t we?) is indelibly marked by my laboring within a white supremacist culture, and thus may be too simplistic. There are multiple instances already where we both posit questions trapped in a binary: “good” versus “bad,” quantity versus quality, institutions versus individuals. Of course we both “know better,” and yet we can’t seem to help ourselves.

I want to turn to experimental film for a moment, because there are useful parallels there in terms of thinking about what is possible for the individual within the institution. The work that both of us make demonstrates that we believe structures matter. We do not tell linear or straightforward narratives precisely because we believe the stories we are telling cannot be held within those generic formulations. Those structures foreclose certain articulations of self and experience, and thus need to be pushed to their breaking point so they might be remade, or remain unmade.

CJ: Speaking of structures of making, I wonder if now is the time to talk about talking? We have both spent considerable—too much?—time thinking about the essay (both filmic and textual) and all its formal and institutional implications. The essay, as solo-authored authority, becomes productively disrupted at the moment of collaboration. I continue to feel taken aback, moved, impacted, and persuaded by the presentation (performance?) of public conversation between friends. For example, I find ongoing political and methodological meaning in the mechanics of José Esteban Muñoz and Lisa Duggan passing ideas back and forth about hope and hopelessness—was it textual or perhaps

occasionally telephonic?—or Audre Lorde and James Baldwin’s collaborative musings throughout “Revolutionary Hope” (1984).³ What was the backstage of those conversations that we will never see or read? I wonder what is made possible by and through an investment in shaping ideas alongside another person’s understandings and provocations. It makes me think of Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman’s assertion that all relationality “puts into play reaction, accommodation, transference, exchange, and the articulation of narratives” on account of our proximity to, and engagement with, various forms of intimacy.⁴

I think so often about my training in cinema and media studies, and how canonical understandings (disciplinary summaries?) of experimental cinemas so often rely upon the over-citation of certain singular, white, male makers. I’m reminded, quite literally as I write to you, that so much of our work is in fact an act of undoing, unmaking, and even unthinking those formal educations.

JR: Those straight, white, cis men were in relationship with one another, which made one another’s work possible. Part of that process of “making possible” meant that when one reached some kind of place of power, he took his buddies along with him, and so on and so forth. This is a kind of intimacy that initially constructed the canon. I feel inclined to note that this intimacy is one predicated on exclusions, an intimacy that developed at the expense of others. And perhaps saying “developed” is misleading. It was an intimacy that emerged from the easefulness of occupying these unmarked bodies, which is different from the intimacies that we are constructing, which often emerge from the opposite experience of embodiment.

CJ: Yes. And this is what we are doing for each other, I hope, as we work both within and against the canon. As such, collaboration might be my most enduring research methodology. I wonder if you see a relationship between experimentality and collaboration?

JR: Yes! I actually think one of the reasons I return so often to the essay form—in my own work and the work of others—is because its form is conversational. It’s talking with us, not at us. And while many essays are solo authored, this conversational tone/structure invites the viewer into a dialogue, removing, or productively working against, the notion of the film(maker) as authority. I think this is part of what’s happening when cultural producers stage conversations in public, as opposed to writing a solo-authored essay, or even a coauthored essay that is in a more polished, academically respected

form. It does something to undo the otherwise authoritative voice of the academic/artist/activist/what-have-you.

There is also something pleasurable about seeing the forms of intimacy that exist between public figures that we otherwise would not have access to. It's a kind of opening up and folding in that we are generally dissuaded from doing in public; it's considered unprofessional, even (gasp) feminine. Or probably it's considered unprofessional *because* it's seen as feminine. But I digress. I am ruminating on your provocative question, "Is there a relationship between experimentality and collaboration?" One could argue that all collaboration requires (or perhaps just invites) a kind of experimentation, at least initially. Though not all experimentation requires collaboration.

Perhaps I will reformulate your question as, "*What* is the relationship between collaboration and experimentality?" I may be taking this in a very odd direction, but I'm associating to a book I reread recently, *Intimacies* (2008), which is a dialogue between queer theorist Leo Bersani and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips. In it they write, "In the analytic exchange, the self-hypotheses of the unconscious are realized—more exactly, suspended in the real—only in talk. And this talk may be the only imaginable form of a non-destructive *jouissance*, the *jouissance* of giving and receiving, through embodied language, the subjecthood of others."⁵ One thing that strikes me about this is the way it points toward creation (of self and other) as collaborative. We might even say experimental.

One of the things that happens when we say "we're just talking" is that we take the pressure off of being right, off of a kind of preexisting knowing, and open up a space for a new thought, and thus a new self, to emerge. This is inherently risky (and an experiment), as the new thought/self is vulnerable in its infancy, and what we see in these public dialogues is the care with which that new thought/self is received by the interlocutor. And then the way that thought/self is incorporated into the other, which births another new thought/self in them. While we place so much emphasis on sharing our bodies with another as *the* sign of intimacy, perhaps sharing our minds with another is just as deep, if not deeper?

CJ: I'm compelled to share the story of the first time I encountered you in public—though I admit to perhaps making up some of the details because I can no longer find the source material online. I think it was 2008, and I was a newly transitioned person moving from San Francisco—a place I identify as equally formative and destructive to my self-understanding—to Toronto, a place I identify as home and the anchor of my creative and intellectual world-making. Joshua Bastian

Cole, a then unknown-to-me trans guy on the internet, posted an interview with you, a then unknown-to-me trans guy director, about a then unknown-to-me experimental film. I can now guess that the film was your *against a trans narrative* (2008), but that is a retroactive re-mapping, because I know without a doubt that the details of the film are not why I have the memory. What I remember most about the YouTube video was the enthusiasm with which Cole approached and introduced you—the audiovisual teller of trans stories—and the hope made available to an assumedly trans online public through your engagement and conversation. I remember finding as much inspiration in the recognition of trans people sharing space together in public as I did in the knowledge of the work. Thank you for that.

When we started thinking out loud together about the potentials of this shared writing, I deeply appreciated your easy invocation of Michel Foucault's "Friendship as a Way of Life" (1997).⁶ While his writing was particular to homosexuality and friendship, I recognize the myriad ways we borrow from his thinking here—as individuals negotiating our ongoing relation to systems of power, and as artists claiming that new forms of relation(ship) might unlock the codes to new collaborative futures. It seems to me that we are trying here and before and in the future to reach with and for each other as trans masc friend makers, and I wonder if it is transness or making—or perhaps the combination?—that offers the enduring suture.

JR: Your story of how you first encountered me “in public” prompts me to think about how I first came to know about you. When I’ve explained our connection before to others, it has always remained vague, as I’ve never felt certain of when and how we first came to be in touch. So I scoured my email in an attempt to find our first exchange. At first it appeared to be when I invited you to participate in the roundtable I moderated on trans cultural production several years ago. However, then I found a much earlier email in which I was asked to write a review of your epistolary book (with Mike Hoolboom) *You Only Live Twice* (2016).⁷ So of course I went back and read my review. Perhaps it’s worth mentioning that this is another project of yours that is a dialogue and, as I note in my review, “it is apparent that they are writing to one another with the intention of making the writing public, thus inviting the question of what it means to construct an intimacy that is always already public.”

It seems that collaborative writing, and perhaps “public intimacy,” is a standard practice for you? And so I am inclined to take us from

Fouacult’s “Friendship as a Way of Life” to our “Reciprocity as a Way of Life” and ask what reciprocity means to you. Or, how is reciprocity mobilized as a methodological approach in your work and your relationships?

CJ: The shared languages of reciprocity and collaboration anchor my ongoing thinking. In conversation with my partner a few days ago, we together acknowledged the many ways collaboration *is itself* about making and unmaking preexisting categories and forms of knowledge in pursuit of a shared story. And/or other beauties. Because my practice is so steeped in collaboration—a form of “public intimacy,” as you say—identity and authorship are never singular. It’s in these moments that I find myself most interested in the borders and limitations of what constitutes identity and return to the potential relationship between collaboration and transness—as each has always been, at least for me, about an investment in vulnerability, exchange, and unsettled mobilities. We started thinking out loud together by asking what might be possible in envisioning, theorizing, and enacting a trans cinematic method. Is that, in fact, what we are doing here?

JR: As always, you ask an excellent question. I’m not sure if I can definitively say yes—or no—and perhaps it’s more important for others to say whether or not we have in fact done that. I will say, however, that what you name as an essential quality of collaboration I would name as an essential aspect of transness: “making and unmaking preexisting categories and forms of knowledge.” It makes me think of trans embodiment itself as a kind of collaborative practice: the body-as-I-want-it must be in collaboration with the body-as-I-have-it. If reciprocity is, in one definition, an agreement or obligation bearing on or binding each of two parties equally, then the trans body may be one in reciprocal relation with itself. If we extend out from the self toward the other, then perhaps we can say a trans cinematic method is one that emerges from this reality, transferring the relation with the self, to relations with others, grounded in an equitable binding. Which is to say, we acknowledge the ways in which we are (happily?) dependent on others—to make art, to make change, to make freedom(s)—and our cinema(s) foreground that reality. ■

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NOTES

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1. See <https://www.motha.net/posters>.
2. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11–12. See also E. Patrick Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2001): 1–25.
3. Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, “Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (2009): 275–83; James Baldwin, “Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde,” *Essence* 15, no. 8 (1984): 72–74.
4. Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), viii.
5. Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 29.
6. Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 135–40.
7. Chase Joynt and Mike Hoolboom, *You Only Live Twice: Sex, Death, and Transition* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2016).