

Trans (In)Visibility in Art

CHELSEA THOMPTON

Abstract Through an examination of how the art world engages with transness, the piece begins with an exploration of why we need an understanding of trans subjectivity that is not beholden to or subsumed by the art world's overriding attention and interest in queer subjectivities and concerns. The author then describes how trans methodologies are applied within their artistic and curatorial practice and how those methodologies are situated within the broader context of the art world. Particular focus is given to codes as both the subject (social, governmental, and technical codes) and medium (visual and computer codes) of the author's work.

Keywords contemporary art, new media art, transgender studies, transgender, visibility

"Research-Based Transdisciplinary Artist"

"Research-based transdisciplinary artist." This is a phrase I find myself appending under my name on slide presentations and biographical materials in an attempt to construct a category that will codify my creative practices into a form that is intelligible to others. I have settled (temporarily) on this phrasing as the most suitable option for a practice that often feels ill-fitted to the tastes and categories of the art world—a world in which one of the most influential critics was making public jokes at the expense of trans people as recently as 2021.¹ I often find in my interactions with professionals in the art world (e.g., artists, students, art historians, curators, academics) that they assume this world is an inherently more inclusive and progressive space than the larger culture, despite instances like the one above. It is precisely this collective impression of inclusivity that makes it so challenging to point out the myriad ways that the art world discriminates while simultaneously capitalizing on an image of inclusivity and the labor of minoritized populations. This is particularly true with regard to race, as thoroughly outlined in Kelli Morgan's "To Bear Witness: Real Talk about White Supremacy in Art Museums Today" (2020). While the struggles faced by BIPOC and trans creators are not the same, they of course intersect and overlap, and both are subject to the art world's particular brand of objectification.

While the art world is all too often ready to devour that which is labeled “queer,” it is still generally unwilling to engage with transness, especially a theory or presentation of transness that refuses to present itself as existing as a subset of queerness. This is especially true for trans artists who are interested in something more nuanced than visibility alone, who do not want to be simply taken up and devoured by the art world as objects. One example of how “queer” has subsumed art produced from other minority perspectives is the 2020 *Hyperallergic* essay series “Reflections from Queer Art Workers.” The open call for the series begins: “The month of June is a time to celebrate LGBTQ communities. It’s a time to reflect on the rich history and culture of the queer community, commemorating advances made in the realm of civil liberties and beyond (Lopez Cassell 2020).” These opening lines of the call move quickly from “LGBTQ communities” to “queer community,” leaving no space for reflection from specific sex and gender minority subject positions. These distinctions matter. *Queer* is used here to avoid intersectional tensions contained within *LGBTQ* and therefore does not attend to the lived material conditions of transgender identity or oppression. These lived conditions often play a crucial role not only in the subject of trans artists’ work but also in whether they have the ability to engage with the art world in the first place. A “queer” community may abstractly include trans people, but such universalizing uses of *queer* also carry an implicit politics that centers cisgender gay and lesbian concerns over those of other subject positions. And yet, the images featured along with the open call in the *Hyperallergic* article are of New York City’s 2019 Trans Day of Action. In this way, transness appears in the call as a visual referent but is forced to remain silent through not being explicitly named. This appearance is not coincidental: rather, it is an attempt to trade on the radical action and sensibility evoked by *trans* while evading the broader context for why such an event is necessary. In reality, Trans Day of Action developed to center the needs of the trans community precisely because New York City Pride Month has shifted significantly from its protest-driven roots to become increasingly corporate, focusing largely on the entertainment and consumer desires of cisgender gay men and lesbians.

This tactic of trans identities being invoked within “queer” contexts without being explicitly acknowledged for their specific needs or contributions also shows up in the recent book *Glitch Feminism* (Russell 2020), which has garnered significant acclaim for its approach to gender-nonconforming and queer bodies in relation to art and technology.² In the book, author Legacy Russel draws extensively on the work of trans artists and writers, yet the word *trans* appears in the text only to categorize people—never as a way to describe a type of thinking or making. Despite being deeply invested in interrogating the intersection of technology and feminism, queer theory, and the gender binary, Russel’s text never explicitly

names the contributions of trans studies or trans methods to this investigation. Trans is instead relegated to an infrequently used identity descriptor—another example of invoking transness, but only through a mode that silences its potential difference from “queer.”

These are only two examples of a broader, ongoing tension between “queer” and “trans” in which articulations of transness that expose the cisnormativity of certain modes of queer desire, politics, and theorization are resisted and/or erased. The problem of a covertly cisnormative queerness that relegates trans and gender-nonconforming bodies to the role of visual citation, anomaly, or allegorical figuration is not new or specific to the art world: this dynamic is outlined as early as 2000 in Viviane Namaste’s *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*, in which Namaste summarizes, “Queer theory as it is currently practiced must be challenged because it exhibits a remarkable insensitivity to the substantive issues of transgendered people’s everyday lives. Queer theory’s epistemological and methodological presuppositions authorize a political agenda that robs transgendered people of dignity and integrity” (23). Queer theory, as it is applied in the art world, has not escaped the context outlined by Namaste over two decades ago. This is evidenced by the art world’s appetite for centering queer concerns and reticence to acknowledge the contributions of lived trans experience to art theory and production. The ongoing struggle for trans artists is therefore how to establish a space for understanding trans methodologies of creative production that are not encoded within queer investments in what trans can or should be. This struggle is made more complicated by an art world in which smaller, more radical sites for presenting this work are often both in opposition to and at risk of being subsumed by larger commercial and generally more conservative enterprises.

Working as an artist in this context has made me desirous of a creative mode that opts out of this extractive relationship trans finds itself in with queerness, desirous of a trans gesture that is numerous and that does not define itself through its difference from, or relation to, queerness or queer theory. This desire stems from a deeper urge for a dignified life that does not require me to climb onto a pedestal of someone else’s construction to be seen and cited—a desire instead to be seen on my own terms, in my own time, and for my transness to appear (or not) when and as I see fit.

With these conditions of (in)visibility floating around in my mind, I find myself writing and rewriting presentation slides for my most recent work, *Landmarks*, a project that explores the ways trans bodies are visualized and misread by technology.³ What is so vexing about preparing these presentations is that my practice feels destined to be misapprehended in ways not dissimilar to those explored in the work itself. In other words, my work seeks to demonstrate a numerous trans practice—a practice engaged in multiple trans methodologies and reflecting the

complexity of lived trans experiences—to a world primed to misread it by subsuming those methods into a queer canon while simultaneously objectifying the work’s transness. This vexing condition has prompted me to begin creating works that consciously resist spectacularization by shifting the focus away from the viewer’s visual access to my body and toward technologies and acts of viewing themselves.⁴ This approach protects the work from being made a spectacle by instead making a visual spectacle of hard-to-perceive systems that oppress trans bodies. My trans artistic praxis gives form to these oppressive systems by exploring their boundaries and gaps, reading the ways they try (and often fail) to apprehend trans subjectivity and the consequences of those readings and failures.

I type the phrase “research-based transdisciplinary artist” while wondering if something called a “trans artist” can be permitted to exist. It is hard to imagine “trans artist” being understood as I would hope in an environment so ready to see artists and their practices as “queer” but so reticent to afford the same importance to trans subject positions. In naming myself a “trans artist” I would be understood only as an object, a thing made to appear. The absurdity of this situation, simultaneously being a trans artist and not naming myself as such, drives my artistic inquiry and methods, which involve forming and investigating similarly ludicrous questions such as,

Who made the river a cyborg?

What would happen if the spine of a book was a point rather than a line?

As a trans person, is it better to be seen accurately, or not seen at all?

When these questions are working well, they are pointing toward what is hard to name and hard to see, functioning as a way to begin thinking about the near-invisible systems I seek to interrogate. It is not that these questions are completely without merit or logical grounding but, rather, that they point to other, “absurd” ways of being and knowing. In asking, “Who made the river a cyborg?,” I am asking us to consider the river as a body that has the potential to be a cyborg and also has not given its consent to this process of transformation. These types of absurd questions also inspired my turn toward code as a way to begin exploring potentially absurd answers. Code, perhaps especially code that only exists for me in my studio, is a material that allows me greater freedom to explore ways of thinking by making it possible to write processes that express thoughts, text, data, and imagery in a variety of forms that would be otherwise impractical to achieve. These explorations include feeding my writing into a program that tears it down into fragments and builds new sentences from the pieces to help me catch a glimpse of what undergirds my writing voice, procedurally comparing different source texts

to one another to explore their relationships, melding and overlapping archival images to see new visual relationships, and pointing algorithms at one another to see how they exist in conversation. While many of these experiments never escape the studio, they are essential to the way I formulate the shape and scope of my work. Through this work, code helps me see the forms produced by systems of language and codification.

Grounded by my preparatory research and rooted in these questions, I am able to begin the visual and technical studio explorations that come to form actualized works. The material of my work is broad-ranging and includes video, computer code, archival materials, digitally fabricated objects, writing, traditional sculptural processes, printmaking, and bookbinding. This range of materials and approaches is bridged through a transdisciplinary (in contrast to interdisciplinary) approach wherein I move ideas across and through materials, letting the inherent formal and theoretical qualities of the material change and inform the original idea or question. An example of this is my 2019 work *Productive Bodies*. This project explored questions of visualization as violence, technology in relation to the body, and colonial conceptions and renderings of bodily boundaries by juxtaposing representations of the industrialization of the Mississippi River and representations of trans bodies in medicine. Central to this project was a commitment to nonlinear narrative as a way to resist giving viewers a simplified message and instead, placing them in an ever-changing, infinitely varied situation. My first work for this project was a nonlinear artist book (see fig. 1).

The pages of the book consisted of archival documents printed on transparency sheets, laser-cut mylar, and laser-cut vintage graph paper. The pages were bound using a mechanism I designed to allow viewers to move and turn pages around nodes, thereby retaining the bound nature of a book but resisting the traditional linear organization of information (see fig. 2). My resistance to linear narrative comes from a constant pressure to account for my transness, or as Eva Hayward (2017: 256) describes,

Even beyond health care, a narrative for “why you want to transition” is solicited by lovers, friends, family, and many others. To transition, to change or alter sex/gender demands a story. Personally, the demand helps with the unexpected, with the inevitable feeling of bodily betrayal. Socially, the account assuages anxiety that sex/gender might change for anyone. Stories, then, are acts of violence and deception, even as they are made necessary.

The move toward a nonlinear narrative structure in my work can thus also be understood as a way to sidestep this ever-present pressure to account for my transness, to make myself comprehensible.



Figure 1. Chelsea Thompto, *Productive Bodies (Book)*, 2019. Artist book: archival documents, mylar, vintage graph paper, and 3D printed mechanism. Procedurally generated sound art: studio recorded and archival audio and code. Courtesy of the artist.

As I was experimenting with different nonlinear binding formulations, I was also looking at other materials and what they may offer this approach. Drawing from the same body of research and guided by this idea of nonlinear narrative, I next created a procedurally generated video work. The piece, written in Java, layers and styles video in real time, drawing from edited and curated video lists assembled for the work. The program layers four videos together to create an ever-changing Xerox copy-like effect (see fig. 3).

This idea was further explored through a procedurally generated audio piece that, similarly to the video work, was written in Java and featured overlapping audio edited and curated for the project. These three works have been shown all together, in pairs, and completely separate from one another. Each drew from the same body of research and started from a shared idea of nonlinearity but changed in response to the constraints and opportunities presented by the material. Nonlinearity here operated as a way to create a curated yet ever-shifting set of narrative relationships, resisting quick resolution while still inviting viewers to consider what the subject of the Mississippi River might have to say about trans embodiment.

Beyond the category of “research-based transdisciplinary art,” terminology that I have started using only recently, I have been searching for a more substantial way to put my work in context and conversation with other artists. While there are artists, such as micha cárdenas, whose creative practices and



Figure 2. Chelsea Thompto, *Productive Bodies (Book)*, 2019. Detail of pages and binding mechanism. Archival documents, mylar, vintage graph paper, 3D printed mechanism, procedurally generated audio. Courtesy of the artist.

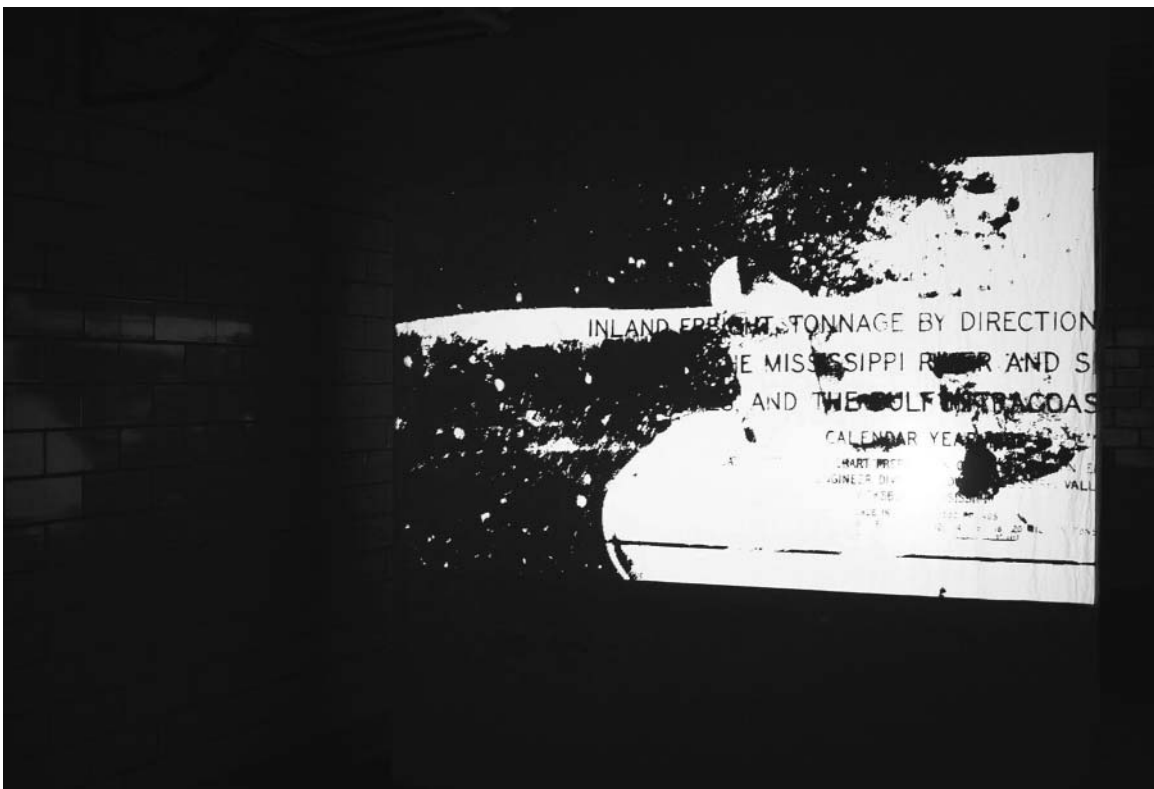


Figure 3. Chelsea Thompto, *Productive Bodies (Video)*, 2019. Procedurally generated audio video installation: archival and studio recorded video and sound and code. Courtesy of the artist.

theoretical work resonate deeply with me and others who are engaged in art and technology, I have found little in the way of writing to help me understand how my exploration of codification and systems relates to trans studies and technology.⁵ I took it on myself to draft the below “Transcode” manifesto to address this lack. This manifesto serves as a framework and guiding document for my practice and contextualizes my work in relation to trans studies and technology.

Encoding

In 2015 I was struggling with how to incorporate text into my then largely sculptural practice. The text in question was highly personal, but something I felt compelled to share. I decided that I would ask for labor from the audience as a method of mutual exchange: viewers could read these highly personal excerpts but would need to decode them first. This led to the creation of my first *Transcode* piece: a visual system to encode text (see fig. 4).

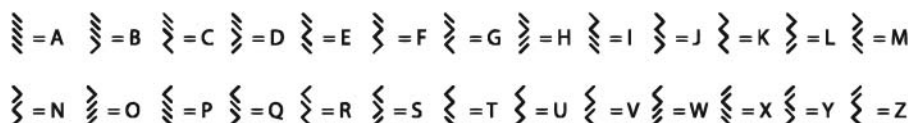


Figure 4. Chelsea Thompto, *Transcode*, 2015. Code key for artist-created font/encryption system. Courtesy of the artist.

The code uses binary logic and forward and backward slashes stacked five high to create its glyphs (see fig. 4). By using the same slash symbol, mirrored only to produce a binary logic, I aimed to complicate what constituted a binary in the first place. In addition to this logical exploration, the code also served to slow down the viewer’s ability to read the work, forcing them to invest time and energy instead of quickly consuming the text. This investment of time on the part of the viewer served to partition the text I was working with from the quick, trauma-porn-like, consumption that trans narratives are often subject to by cis-gendered audiences. This empowered me to explore narrative threads in my work that I had previously considered too sensitive to approach. This gesture of trans-coding would stick with me—so much so that in 2017 I devised an ending to this work that involved getting my given and chosen first names tattooed in the transcode system on my forearm (see fig. 5).

This idea of a transcode gradually shifted from a literal encoding system to a way of thinking about the potential that trans and code have together. This led to the first draft of the *Transcode Manifesto* in 2018. Conceived as a living document, the manifesto continues to change and develop while also resisting clear documentation of its lineage. As such, each version of the manifesto, including the one here, begins with an acknowledgment and negation of its version.



Figure 5. Tattoo of *Transcode* font on the artist's left forearm, 2017. Text contains the artist's given first name and current first name.

Transcode Manifesto

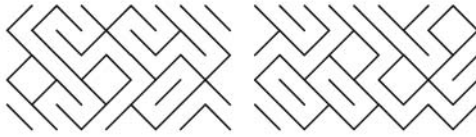


Figure 6. “Transcode Manifesto” rendered in *Transcode* font.

Version_

“My body is encoded, coded, and recoded always. When my body is projected across the country via the telephone system to talk to a stranger, it is often coded as male by the operator, while simultaneously my voice is encoded into a uniform digital system and compressed for its journey. This conversation, to process a payment, centers what is for many the most masculine-seeming aspect of my body: In this moment I am transformed, removed from the context of my corporeal body. I am imagined as male in the mind’s eye of the equally disembodied voice on the other end. But it is not a transformation for the operator, as my body has never been anything to them before the call. Maybe then it is simply another facet of the multiple ways my body is being processed, and my failure to code my body as feminine within every system. I encode, code, and recode my body, always. My voice becomes higher, wavelengths shorten in response, posture changes despite this only being a voice call. I am left wondering if I have just reified the codification of voice as gender. I’m left to wonder how much this system is changing me and how much I might be able to change it in turn, left wondering what a radical intervention might be in the face of definitional and categorical violence—where the ever-increasing drive is to define smaller and smaller aspects of ourselves, to separate, catalog and index. To encode, code, and recode.”

The version of this manifesto that you are reading is the first version, the rough draft, as well as the third or fourth versions whose changes are/were/will be relatively minor, or possibly cataclysmic. It is at the same time the final and most definitive edition, as any discrete version of the manifesto is a by-product of all the other versions, including those not yet written. Rather than relating to one another in a linear fashion, they are instead rhizomatic: the result of this is that every version of the manifesto that has or will be published exists in a non-hierarchical relationship to all other versions. Any given version should be understood as simultaneously preceding, succeeding, or tangentially related to every other version. This is because transcode work at its core refuses linear understandings of narrative, time, knowledge making, and labor. Instead, transcode work insists on lingering in the ebb and flow between categories, definitions, and destinations—to see the many iterations and tangents of a work as inseparable from its final product and inscrutable to the logic of cause and effect. How might an ending have affected its own beginning?

In the formulation “A to B,” transcode invests in the liberatory power of the *to* as a space of movement, possibility, and rupture. The prefixal *trans-* of *transcode* means “across,” “beyond,” “through,” “changing thoroughly.” By lingering in the space of the “to” the linear arc can be disrupted, as one finds oneself able to look not only back at *A* and forward to *B* but also side to side, upward, downward, inward, and off the path. By seating work in this space, transcode opts out of and interrogates the drive toward linear, binary, and static logics, offering a means of imagining otherwise the categorizations and narratives put forth by these logics onto fluid subjects. Written in code, this could read like:

```
// A function moving from A to B.

// Establish the starting position.
let position = 'A';

// Change the position from 'A' to 'B'.
if (position == 'A') {
  // This is the space of possibility, entire
  // programs and realities could be written
  // in this space between 'A' and 'B'.
  position = 'B';
}
```

Figure 7. Commented JavaScript representation of the line above: “In the formulation ‘A to B,’ transcode invests in the liberatory power of the ‘to’ as a space of movement, possibility, and rupture.”

Transcode examines code as a base material in culture’s generation of meaning and narrative. Code meaning: “a system of signals or symbols for communication,” as well as “a system of principles,” and “instructions for a computer.” Transcode, then, is an interruption of and traversal between codes. An effort in placing oneself at the site/sight/cite of meaning making, exposing the codes (structures, processes, laws) that undergird supposedly inherent truths (of gender, of ownership, of land).

- Transcode is numerous trans, meaning it enacts and explores trans in its subjects, methods, themes, and forms.
- Transcode work, while stemming from an interrogation of transgender issues, seeks to hold space for other and multiple trans identity configurations.
- Transcode work is transmaterial, meaning its projects engage a variety of forms that may shift over time.

- Transcode work sees and responds to the violences of other codes, taxonomies, and categorical systems.
- Transcode work is expansive in its understanding of bodies, seeing bodyhood as a gesture with the potential to recontextualize subjects and conceive of the body as surpassing the corporeal.
- Transcode work engages systems (computer, numerical, political, etc.) as a way of critically interrogating oppression and control.
- Transcode takes up codes as an artistic material and as a trans methodology. While not only referring to computer code, transcode does view computer code as a material with immense potential in enacting the gesture of trans.

Manifesting

As a way to expand and connect the ideas of the manifesto to actual artistic practices, in 2020 I curated an exhibition that highlighted the work of artists who enact the ideas outlined in the manifesto in their practices. The exhibition featured the work of four artists: micha cárdenas, Anaïs Duplan, Everest Pipkin, and Chris E. Vargas. The show took place virtually at Unrequited Leisure based in Nashville and the New Art City virtual exhibition platform.

The works in the show take on codes and codification in a variety of forms, the artists challenging us to see and question underlying structures and norms. By engaging codes as material, form, and subject, these works beckon us to move across, beyond, and through often violent systems and help us imagine new ones. By placing these works in conversation with one another and with the *Transcode Manifesto*, I hoped to model the potential for this manifesto to act as a codex for trans cultural production that emphasizes the unique power and perspective that trans folks wield in our interrogations of code (see fig. 8).

The virtual format of the show allowed for the works in the show and the text of the manifesto to be in direct relation to one another. The manifesto itself formed the ground of the gallery space and a quote from the manifesto enclosed one side of the space, while the artworks were positioned on the other three sides (see fig. 9). Viewers traverse the gallery in much the same way as a three-dimensional video game, using their mouse and keyboard. This format allowed for the manipulation of the relative scale of the space, text, and artworks. Through this manipulation, the visual language of a traditional gallery setting is gestured to but subverted, creating a space that, like the works in the show, engages in code as material.

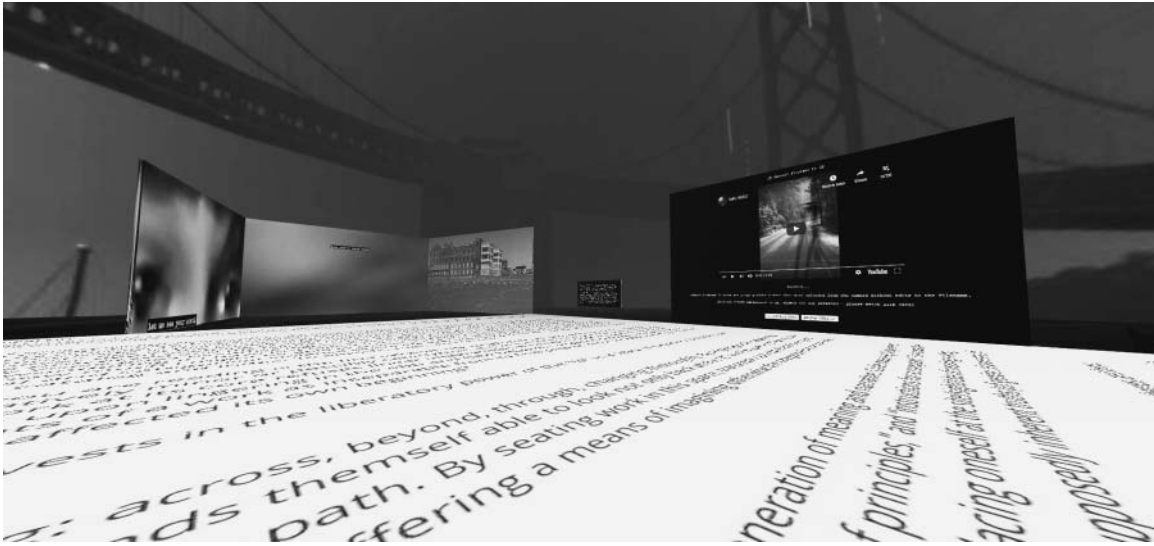


Figure 8. (Left) Anaïs Duplan, *The Lovers Are the Audience Who Watch*, 2018. Three-channel video. (Right) Everest Pipkin *Default Fileman TV*, 2019. Artist website. Both works were installed virtually as part of the 2020 exhibition *Transcode* curated by Chelsea Thompto and hosted online via New Art City and Unrequited Leisure.

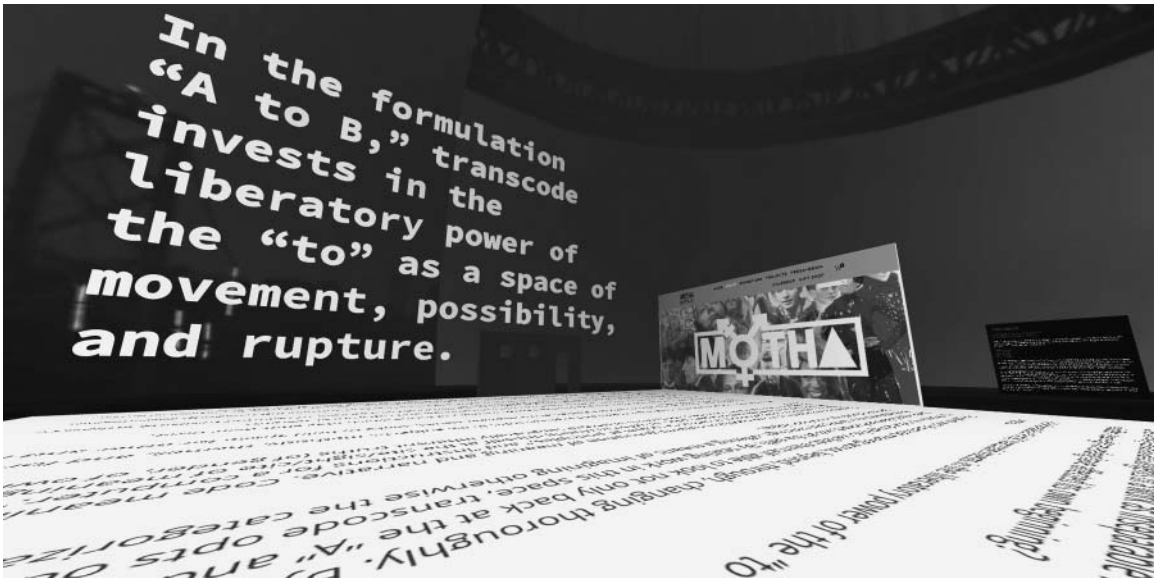


Figure 9. (Left) Text from *Transcode Manifesto* reads “In the formulation ‘A to B,’ transcode invests in the liberatory power of the ‘to’ as a space of movement, possibility, and rupture.” (Right) Chris E. Vargas, *Museum of Trans Histry & Art*, 2015–. “Forever under Construction” multimodal project. Text virtually installed alongside artwork as part of the 2020 exhibition *Transcode* curated by Chelsea Thompto and hosted online via New Art City and Unrequited Leisure.

Landmarks

Finally, in my most recent and ongoing body of work titled *Landmarks*, I am exploring the literal and theoretical codes that underpin machine learning, a technology that is increasingly enmeshed with our daily lives. This work focuses specifically on facial recognition and the metaphor of the landmark as a starting point. What follows is a foreword about the project accompanied by screenshots and text from the *Landmarks* website, formatted for a text-based journal format.

Foreword

Landmarks is an exploration of the ways machine learning and specifically facial recognition fail to comprehend trans bodies (misgendering) and the threat this failure possesses to trans livelihoods as these technologies become increasingly integrated into our daily lives. Specifically, *Landmarks* engages facial recognition algorithms as an artistic medium in an examination of how these algorithms often misread the gender of trans and gender-nonconforming people. The work consists of an interactive website featuring compositions that explore these issues.

This site is under constant construction and revision and will be open for viewing and engagement as it grows and takes on new forms, content, and ideas. The intention in doing so is to invite the viewers into the act of coding and to resist a static form. This constant revision/evolution can also be understood as performance art through the medium of code.⁶

Landmarks asks us to consider how technology sees us and what happens when it fails to see us for who we are?

Landmarks



I am plagued by a question.

As a trans person, is it better to be seen accurately?

Or not seen at all . . .

How does the algorithm see me? How does it guess what I'm feeling?

Is there such a thing as a neutral expression? Can it tell the difference between a smile caused by a joke and one that masks rage?

Do I want it to be able to tell the difference?

To be unknowable to a system may be as liberating as it is dangerous.

Empire

A map of this (data) body larger than itself...

...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Indlemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Distasteful Lines of Geography.

— Suarez Miranda, *Viajes de varones prudentes*, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lerida, 1658

On Exactitude in Science

Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley

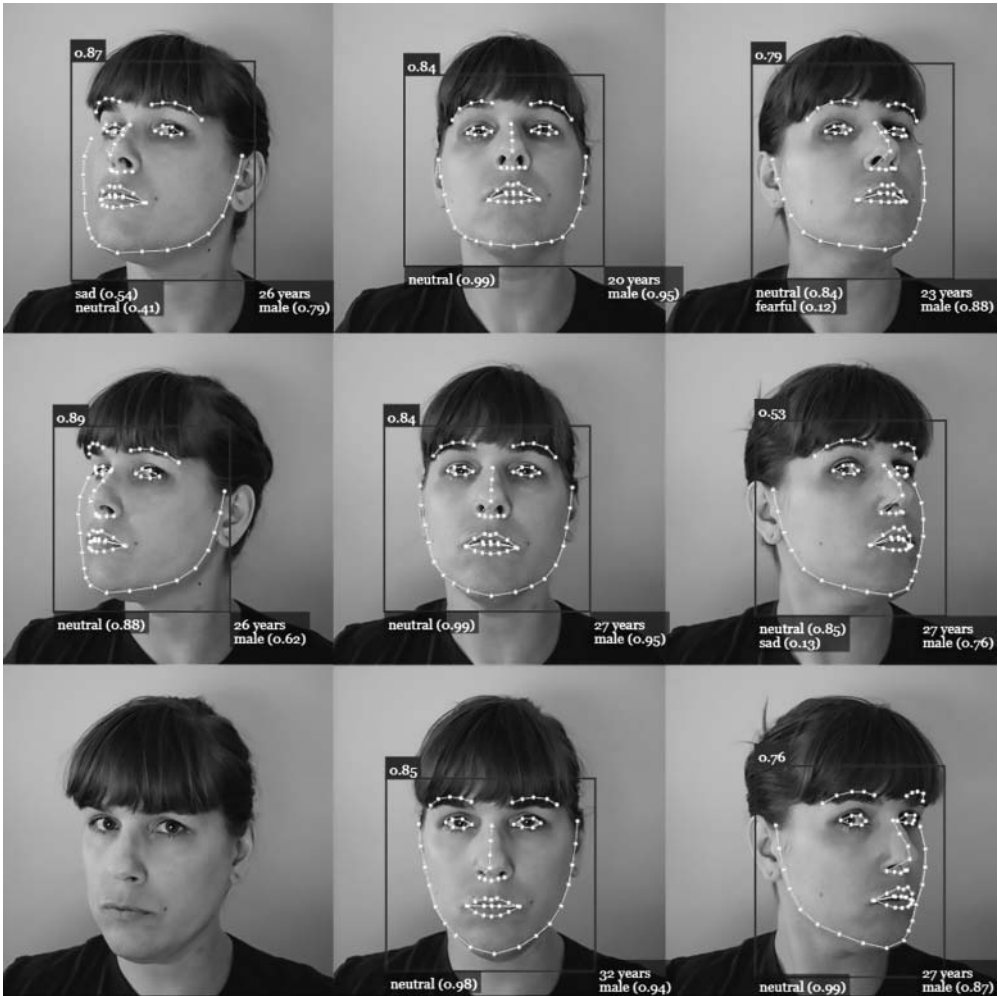
A map of this (data) body larger than itself . . .

The stakes are different for my body, the body of a transwoman, a body upon
which so many claims are being made and remade.

Bodies are screens on which we see projected the momentary settlements that
emerge from ongoing struggles over beliefs and practices within the academic and
medical communities. These struggles play themselves out in arenas far removed
from the body.

—Sandy Stone, “The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto”

Machine



Facial Landmark Rules:

Brows: 5 Points and 4 Lines Each

Eyes: 6 Points and 6 Lines Each

Nose: 9 Points and 8 Lines

4 Points from Bridge to Tip of Nose

5 Points from Left to Right Nostril

Lips: 20 Points and 20 Lines

10 Points for Upper Lip

10 Points for Lower Lip

For Each Lip:

5 Points on Outer Edge

3 Points on Inner Edge

Corners overlap

Jaw: 17 Points and 16 Lines

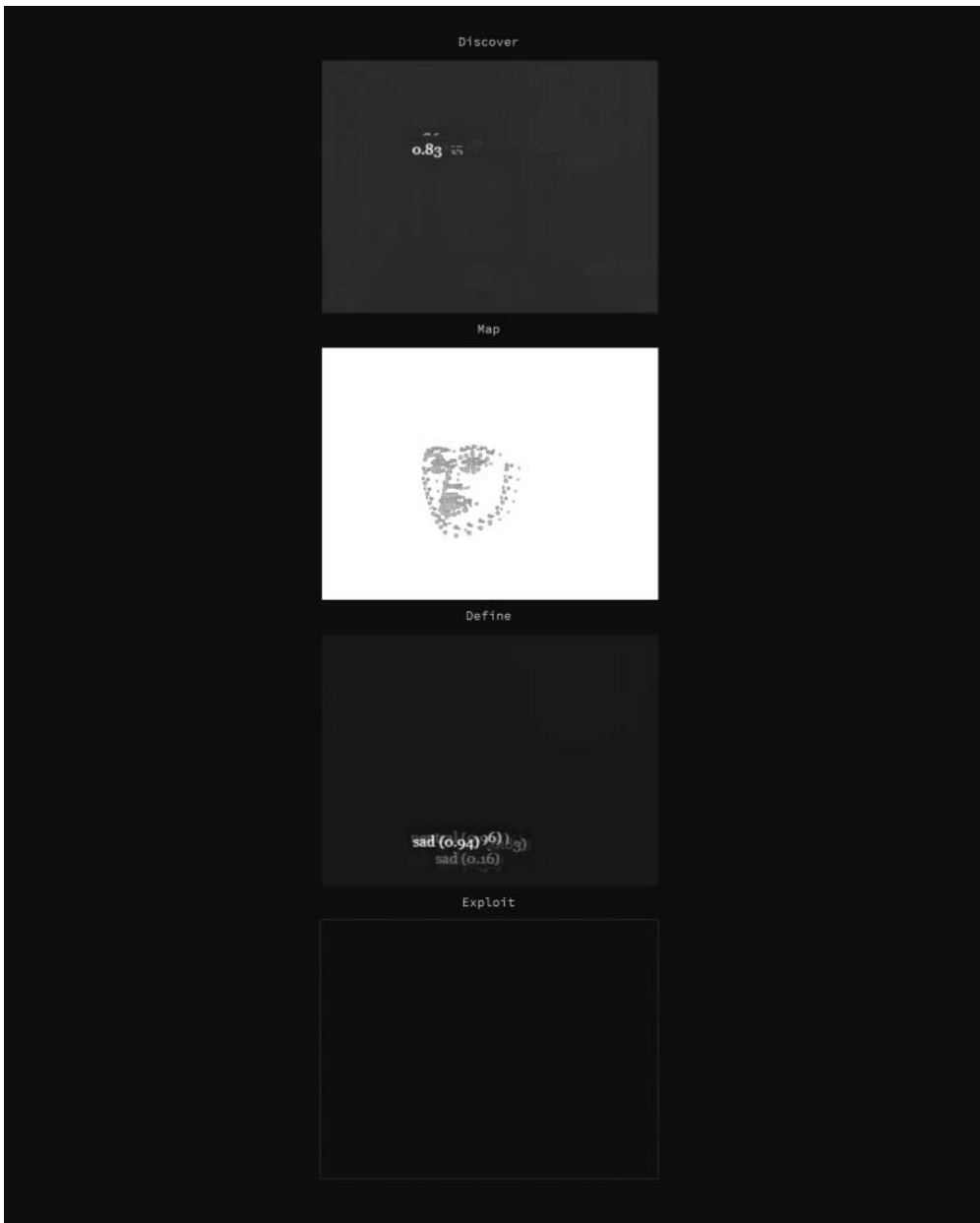
8 per side ending at Ear

This is how the system maps and labels the features of the face.

How can I convince this machine of my gender?

How can I communicate something that is the sum of so many little moments,
gestures, and decisions?

Stages



Discover

Map

Define

Exploit

Each step is less about the body

and more about what can be extracted from it.

Rote

And then applying those rules:

The face below does not belong to a human body, it was created using an algorithm, specifically, a **generative adversarial network** trained on 70,000 faces and tasked with creating new ones. It is a composite image: an assembly of textures, shapes, and colors gathered into formations according to the algorithms rules for what constitutes a face.

Click and drag to create facial landmarks.

Each line will begin with a magenta circle where the mouse is first clicked and will end with another magenta circle where the mouse button is released. A cyan line will be created along the path your cursor takes and will automatically be smoothed upon releasing the mouse button.

Pressing "a" will undo the last line created.

Facial Landmark Rules:

Brows: 5 Points and 4 Lines Each

Eyes: 6 Points and 6 Lines Each

Nose: 9 Points and 8 Lines
4 Points from Bridge To Tip of Nose
5 Points from Left to Right Nostril

Lips: 20 Points and 20 Lines
10 Points for Upper Lip
10 Points for Lower Lip

For Each Lip:
5 Points on Outer Edge
3 Points on Inner Edge
Corners overlap

Jaw: 17 Points and 16 Lines
8 per side ending at Ear

Download Drawing



How do we know a body is a body, a face a face?

A question many tech companies are working tirelessly to automate an answer to, one upon which futures are being built, decided, and bought.

Yet we perform this task day in and day out, on screens and in person.
Passively placing people and things into categories. A task so rote is difficult to
imagine it as a task at all.

What happens if we ourselves face this task as we have programmed machines to face it, isolating the problem and giving it rules:

Facial Landmark Rules:

Brows: 5 Points and 4 Lines Each

Eyes: 6 Points and 6 Lines Each

Nose: 9 Points and 8 Lines

4 Points from Bridge to Tip of Nose

5 Points from Left to Right Nostril

Lips: 20 Points and 20 Lines

10 Points for Upper Lip

10 Points for Lower Lip

For Each Lip:

5 Points on Outer Edge

3 Points on Inner Edge

Corners overlap

Jaw: 17 Points and 16 Lines

8 per side ending at Ear

What makes a face a face? A body a body?

Is it a face (or not)? Is it male or female? Is it happy, sad, neutral, angry, fearful, disgusted, or surprised? Who chooses and encodes these categories?

How do we know, by rote, that a body is a body, a face a face?

Chelsea Thompson is a transdisciplinary artist and educator working at the intersections of art, trans studies, and technology. She is assistant professor of digital media art in the Department of Art and Art History at San José State University. She received an MFA and MA in four-dimensional art and an MA in gender and women's studies from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and has shown her work nationally and internationally.

Notes

1. On September 20, 2021, Jerry Saltz posted a meme of Marjorie Taylor Green with three other adults in workout clothes on Instagram (Saltz 2021). Green's groin in the photo is being called out for its large appearance as the bottom of the meme reads, "Something tells me Marjorie has been vaxxed," a reference to the debunked COVID vaccine side effect of swollen testicles. Saltz's caption reads, "Marjorie Taylor Green got vaxxed and now has Nicki Manaj's cousin's friend's swollen balls." The subtext here is that (a) in the pursuit of criticizing someone, critiquing their body and scrutinizing their genitals is acceptable, and (b) it is an insult to imply that she has testicles, as it implies her body falls outside cis-gendered bodily norms.
2. The book has received broad critical acclaim, including being listed in the *New York Times*'s "Best Art Books of 2020" (Smith et al. 2020).
3. The *Landmarks* website can be viewed at <https://landmarks.cloud>.
4. This is an ongoing process that began in earnest with the work *Cite/Sight/Site* in 2018. This art installation places the viewer at the center of a node, a point of convergence that examines the variety of peoples and organizations who use/embody/manipulate the term *transgender* and to what effect through video, text, code, and artist book works.
5. micha cárdenas's book *The Transreal* (2011) provides a framework for understanding trans aesthetics in relation to crossing realities and productively explores and interrogates realities through this act of crossing. In this work she also attends closely to the ways in which source code can be taken up as a material. Her most recent book, *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media* (2022), broadens the scope of transgender studies through its focus and consideration of trans of color experiences and artistic practices (which have historically been overlooked in many transgender studies texts). While these contributions are vital to my work and help form the field in which I am working, the focus of my practice is more closely related to the materiality of the systems and codes that constitute the borders and realities as well as how they are leveraged by those in power.
6. This code example is written in JavaScript for a few reasons but primarily because it is the language I am currently most familiar with and because it is the primary language of the Web, which is a space of particularly exciting possibilities for trans connection and identity formations. While it is written in JavaScript, the essential idea transcends any particular programming language, gesturing instead to code's ability to conceptualize and expand the spaces between processes and definitions.

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