

03 – GLITCH THROWS SHADE

GLITCH FEMINISM: A MANIFESTO



The meteoric rise to cultural acclaim and recognition of self-defined “cyborg” and artist Juliana Huxtable, in recent years, is important and timely. Within the realms of art, music, literature, fashion, she seeks to shatter the rigidity of binary systems. Raised in College Station, Texas, Huxtable was born intersex and assigned to the male gender. During the 1990s, in a moment where the Internet and the mythology of its utopia was on the rise, Huxtable male identified, going by the name Julian Letton.

In a conservative Texan, Christian milieu, claiming a trans identity seemed unimaginable. Yet when she left home to attend small liberal arts Bard College in upstate New York, she entered a period that marked a blooming in her sense of self, one she speaks about openly: “I was fully brainwashed by the Bible Belt shit … but the Internet became a form of solitude. It gave me a sense of control and freedom that I didn’t have in my everyday life, because I walked through life feeling hated, embarrassed, trapped, and powerless. I felt very suicidal.”¹

As her art practice expanded, Huxtable’s engagement with various digital platforms—chatrooms, blogs, social media, and beyond—increased the visibility of both her visual and written work, creating the opportunity for it to circulate both within and beyond the contemporary art world. At the same time, images of Huxtable herself circulated mimetically. A GIF travels virally online, emoting via the eternal loop of digital affect, quoting Huxtable’s reaction to the question, “What’s the nastiest shade ever thrown?” to which she replies, “Existing in the world.”

The 2015 New Museum Triennial in New York City brought the power of Huxtable’s creative presence to new heights. Huxtable’s nude body in repose was the subject of artist Frank Benson’s 3D-scanned plastic sculpture *Juliana*. Benson’s statue is an homage to Huxtable and a “post-Internet response to the … Grecian sculpture *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* … like that ancient artwork, Huxtable’s naked pose reveals body parts of both sexes.”² Benson makes contemporary his take on this classic, with Huxtable leaning on one arm, the other extended in a yogic “mudra” hand gesture, and the figure painted a metallic green.

In the gallery space, Benson's sculpture of Huxtable was positioned adjacent to four inkjet prints of Huxtable's own work. This included two self-portraits and two poems—both titled “Untitled (Casual Power)”—as part of Huxtable's 2015 series “Universal Crop Tops For All The Self Canonized Saints of Becoming.” The titling of the series hearkens a celebration of transformation, of becoming, signifying a cosmic journey toward new, more inclusive canons and, by extension, selves. The self-portraits, respectively titled “Untitled in the Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm)” (2015) and “Untitled (Destroying Flesh)” (2015), show the artist in Nuwaubian Nation avatar, painted in one portrait in a neon violet and in the other an alien green. The artist's poems accompanying the portrait prints wander through past, present, and future, awash with technicolor meditations on a wide range of topics: climate change, COINTELPRO, Black reparations, sainthood. In these texts Huxtable calls forth Octavia Butler, Angela Davis, Aaliyah, and the “hood surrealism” of Hype Williams, who directed many of the music videos of 90s-era Black pop and R...B stars.

In a conversation with artist Lorraine O'Grady, Huxtable reflects on the experience of showing her work—and her body, via Benson's sculpture—in the Triennial:

I had a growing sense of anxiety ... Performance offered a powerful way to deal with questions of self-erasure or presence, tempting an audience with the idea that I am performing to enable their consumption of my image or my body—and then to ultimately refuse that. Text and video and all of this media become modes of abstracting presence or abstracting myself in the present. And so right now performance feels like a way of dealing with the sort of aftermath of a cultural moment.³

Huxtable's exercise in “abstracting presence or abstracting myself” as a mode of performativity—between online and AFK—intersects with glitch feminism's cosmic ambitions to abstract the body as a means of reaching beyond its conventional limitations. In her celebrity, Huxtable regularly exercises a “necessary visibility,” electing to make her cosmic body visible through ongoing

documentation of herself online, most notably via Instagram.⁴ She explains, “the Internet and specifically social media, became an essential way for me to explore inclinations that I otherwise would not have an outlet for.”⁵

For Huxtable, as with many others using online space as a site to re-present and re-perform their gender identities, the “Internet represents … a ‘tool’ for global feminist organizing … [and] an opportunity to be protagonist … in [one’s] own revolution.” It is also a “‘safe space’ … a way to not just survive, but also resist, repressive sex/gender regimes”⁶ and the antagonistic normativity of the mainstream.

Huxtable herself is a glitch, and a powerful one at that. By her very presence Huxtable throws shade: she embodies the problematics of binary and the liberatory potential of scrambling gender, embracing one’s possible range. Such cosmic bodies glitch, activating the production of new images that “create … [a] future as practice of survival.”⁷ The glitch is call-and-response to Huxtable’s declaration of being, that “shade” of “existing in the world,” enduring as the “nastiest” form of refusal.

In a dystopic global landscape that makes space for none of us, offers no sanctuary, the sheer act of living—surviving—in the face of a gendered and racialized hegemony becomes uniquely political. We choose to stay alive, against all odds, because our lives matter. We choose to support one another in living, as the act of staying alive is a form of world-building. These worlds are ours to create, claim, pioneer. We travel off-road, away from the demand to be merely “a single being.” We scramble toward containing multitudes against the current of a culture-coding that encourages the singularity of binary.

Glitching is a gerund, an action ongoing. It is activism that unfolds with a boundless extravagance.⁸ Nonetheless, undercurrent to this journey is an irrefutable tension: the glitched body is, according to UX (user experience) designer, coder, and founder of collective @Afrofutures_ UK Florence Okoye, “simultaneously observed, watched, tagged and controlled whilst also invisible to the ideative, creative and productive structures of the techno-industrial complex.”⁹

We are seen and unseen, visible and invisible. At once error and correction to the “machinic enslavement” of the straight mind, the glitch reveals and conceals symbiotically.¹⁰ Therefore, the political action of glitch feminism is the call to collectivize in network, amplifying our explorations of gender as a means of deconstructing it, “restructuring the possibilities for action.”¹¹

In the work of London-based artist and drag queen Victoria Sin we can see this restructuring inhabited. Assigned female at birth, Sin identifies as non-binary and queer, a body that amplifies gender in their reperformance of it, both online via Instagram and AFK. On stage—whether out in the world or wrapped within the seductive fabric of the digital—Sin toys with the trappings of gender. Sin’s drag personae remain pointedly high femme, the different selves they perform underscoring the socio-cultural production of exaggerated femininity as a gendered trope, ritual, and exercise.

Sin dons gender as prosthesis. An homage to an expansive history of masculine/feminine drag performance and genderfucking, Sin’s costumery is replete with breast and buttocks inserts, a sumptuous wig, makeup painted with vivid artistry and a sweeping gown that glitters. Sin’s aesthetic is an evocative, mesmeric cocktail, that weaves with satire and expertise the sensory swagger of cabaret, buzz of burlesque, vintage Hollywood glamor—all with a dash of Jessica Rabbit.

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AFK, Sin's performances as drag avatar and alter-ego take up space with exaggerated curve, contour, and composition that femme-identifying bodies are often forced to relinquish. This is a striking reminder that the production of gender is, at best, an assemblage. It is surreal, in the sense of a dream, and “full of other bodies, pieces, organs, parts, tissues, knee-caps, rings, tubes, levers, and bellows.”¹² Online via Instagram, Sin occupies a pop vernacular akin to YouTube makeup tutorials, deliberately exposing the seams of their gender-prep by sharing video and photographs of what typically would be labor left unseen. In the highly stylized presentation of their constructed selfhood, we see Sin becoming their avatar through the gloss of digital drag, where the Internet offers the space of cyber-cabaret. Sin stitches together *before* and *after* imagery of themselves as they put on their “face,” with cutting commentary and humor that inspires awe and prompts inquiry about how we read bodies, and why. In these gestures, Sin is super-human, extra-human, and post-human all at once. Sin also celebrates “woman” as trapping and as trap, the trickery of gender itself underscored as a thirsty-AF agent of capitalism, at points gently divine yet still violently disorienting.¹³

Sin themself is a glitch and, in glitching, throws shade. Their body shatters the shallow illusion of any harmony or balance that might be offered up within the suggestive binary of male/female. Sin's hyperfemininity is a send-up and glorification. They play with and challenge what philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler identifies as “a male in his stereotype … a person unable to cope with his own femininity” as well as the inverse, holding a mirror up to the female stereotype, as, perhaps, a body “unable to cope with” her masculinity.¹⁴

In this vein, Sin's model of coping is complex. On the one hand, Sin's drag erases the material body via the amplification of gendered artifice, reducing it to near ridicule and undermining any assumption of gender as absolute. On the other hand, Sin's drag points toward the dilemma of the body itself by celebrating their queer body as necessarily visible, fantastically femme, larger than life, and so extreme in its existence that it becomes impossible to ignore, a calculated confrontation, vast in impact.

Sin's shade is a skin: protective but permeable, and an exciting rendering of what the future of body politic might look like as something emancipatory in its intentional error. Here we see a crack in the gloss and gleam of capitalist consumption of gender-as-product. Here each half of the binary is eating the other, a dazzling feat to feast on. As glitch feminists, we join both Huxtable and Sin here in a “reach toward the ineffable.”¹⁵ Through refusal, we aim to deconstruct and dematerialize the idea of the body as we move through time and space, as wild forms building toward even wilder futures.