

# Photographic Flashes: On Imaging Trans Violence in Heather Cassils' Durational Art

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## Abstract

This article examines the aesthetic strategy of flash photography to visualize everyday violence against trans people in the visual art of Heather Cassils (2011–14). In addition to using photographic flashes to blind audiences, these works reference violence on multiple levels: institutional discrimination through the location in an empty archive room, killings through martial arts choreographies, and microaggressions in aesthetics of defacement. However, the rigorous physical training undergone for his body art also suggests a productive mode of violence in that muscles must fail in order to grow. I trace the recurrence of the spasm across these different forms of embodied violence to show its generative as well as destructive property. This body of work opens up questions about the historiography of photography: What is the temporality of photographic violence? How can the body's resiliency be pictured? Does a trans body experienced as a *punctum* indicate queer anxieties?

**Keywords:** transgender, flash photography, temporality, *punctum*, sensation, Heather Cassils

"I am a visual artist, and my body is my medium," reads the first line of the artist statement from Los Angeles-based Heather Cassils (2013: online n.p.).<sup>1</sup> Since 2007 Cassils' major works have involved embarking on a strict training program that takes his physicality and somatic skills to a professional level. For instance, Cassils is a personal trainer; and for *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011) he followed a specially designed diet and bodybuilding regime for twenty-three weeks in order to amass twenty-three pounds of muscle.<sup>2</sup> And, for *Becoming an Image* (hereafter, *BAI* 2012—ongoing) he was instructed by a pro-Muay Thai boxer for three weeks before the performance (Cassils is a former semipro boxer). The audience's experience of *BIA* was further governed by Cassils' physical endurance:

the performed all-out attack lasted until his body ran out of oxygen, or “gassed out.”

Durational art like Cassils' practices places the component of time and its restriction at the core of the work, making the artist's and/or the spectator's bodily endurance the focus. High culture artists such as John Cage (1912–92) and Linda Mary Montano (b. 1942) are often categorized as creating durational art; their works involve taking eighteen hours to repeat a piano theme 840 times or lasting for one year of being attached to another person with an 8-foot rope, respectively.<sup>3</sup> The performances of Cassils similarly explore the effects of temporal duration on the human body through set regimens, but with a specific trans\* inflection.<sup>4</sup> The project *Cuts* supplants the cuts of gender affirming surgeries with extreme training for a “cut” muscularity, including a very low dosage of steroids (Cassils n.d.).<sup>5</sup> Besides the resulting embodiment, the project includes documenting the transformation of his transmasculine body through time-lapse photography and through aestheticizing photographs reminiscent of the fashion world. In contrast *BAI* has a stripped down design that displaces his body's visuality. While Cassils pummels a 2,000-pound clay plinth in a blacked-out room, a photography camera randomly flashes, striking the audience's eyes to represent “all the senseless invisible violence we tolerate” that is directed at trans people (personal communication 2013).

This article examines how differing durations become juxtaposed in Cassils' mixed media work as destructive and generative forms of violence. I focus primarily on 1) the discrete duration of the performance training, 2) the long duration of suffering endured by trans people, and 3) the indeterminate *durée* of flash photography and its afterimage. Notwithstanding the strong performance qualities and athleticism noted by scholarly reviews of Cassils (Doyle 2013; Jankovic 2013; Jovanovich 2013), I argue that the medium of photography, along with its

accompanying historiography, plays a key role in how the works visualize violence's varying durational qualities for the spectator: Cassils' recent work opens up a set of questions relevant to the study of gender variant and queer visual cultures: Does a trans body experienced as a punctum (a detail or intensity of time that pricks the viewer) indicate queer anxieties? What is the temporality of photographic violence? How can the body's resiliency be pictured? The article advances by tracking intersecting violences in Cassils' *Cuts* and *BAI*, and then concludes with a consideration of bodybuilding as a model for understanding the dual nature of violence's generative-destructive powers.

### Cuts in Time

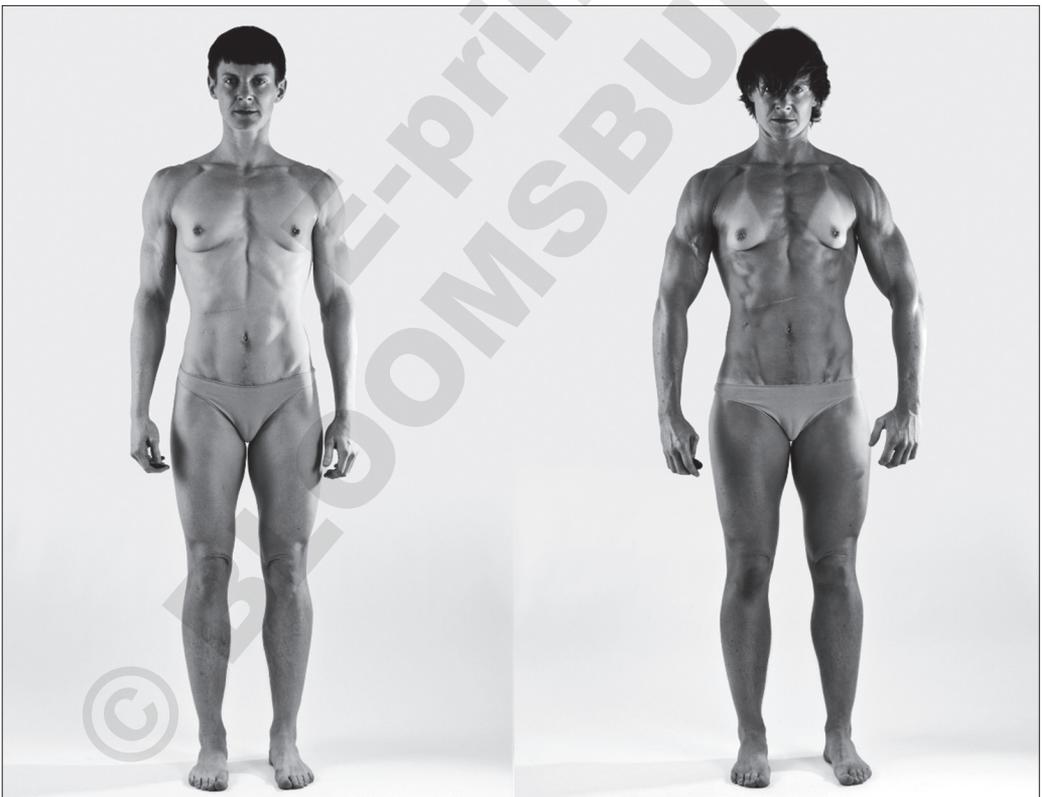
*Cuts* was the outcome of Cassils becoming a commissioned artist researcher for Los Angeles Goes Live (2010–11). He was asked to contribute to the exhibition called *Performance in Southern California 1970–1983* with a new artwork that spoke to the rich history of the area's performance culture. The piece cites two main feminist artistic sources from the 1970s, both of which incorporate gendered performance with photographic display. The title of *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011) explicitly recalls Eleanor Antin's titling of the performance *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972). Antin's version is a time-lapse photographic documentation of a thirty-day crash diet. Each day she posed nude in front of a white door to be photographed from four different angles (front, back, both sides) to record in 148 images the “carving” away, through starving no less, of 9 pounds from her physical body. By analogy to the feminine tradition of dieting to reach the ideal aesthetic form of thinness, the work parodies the Greek sculptural technique of removal in layers (Johnson 2006: 315).

The violent tone of “carving” that Cassils borrows in *Cuts* carries a transgender resonance. Contemporary “transitioned” embodiment is still

largely defined through surgical incisions following hormonal therapy (Spade 2003). Whereas the popular notion of trans embodiment involves crossing from one sex to another accomplished in the event of a “sex change,” Cassils claims to perform trans as “a continual becoming, a process oriented way of being that works in a space of indeterminacy, spasm and slipperiness” (Cassils n.d.). Spasm in this definition can refer to a bodybuilder’s strained muscles, as well as to unpredictable shifts in gender perception while on hormones. To emphasize a spasmodic, processual version of trans embodiment, Cassils uses the same technique of daily time-

lapse documentary photographs taken in front of a white backdrop to record his nude body from four positions (see Figure 1).

However, these grids of photos show the body’s capacity for becoming masculine through the *addition* of musculature, accentuated by the removal of fat, and its redistribution. In both cases diet and exercise mark out a temporality that feminist art scholar Clare Johnson describes as a “future-oriented duration” (2006: 315), in which the body shrinks or grows to become gendered ideals. The instant temporality of photography seems to arrest, or fix, the development of becoming



**Fig 1** Heather Cassils, *Day One Day One Hundred and Sixty One*, Detail from *Time Lapse (Front)* 2011 (artwork and photos © Heather Cassils; part of the body of work *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*) (40 × 60 in.).

feminine/masculine. Nevertheless, the grid-like documentation invites anticipatory looking for the narrative of progress. The potential teleological trajectory of gender as development is undercut by the finitude of the projects. Each project creates short-term, unsustainable living sculptures to amplify the general condition of perpetual, open-ended body sculpting.

Challenging ideal regimes of gender presentation is also at the heart of the second feminist performance from which the *Cuts* project explicitly draws inspiration. For this part of the project Cassils' titling *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis* (2011) references Lynda Benglis' scandalous *Artforum* magazine intervention *Advertisement* (1974) as a dialogue partner to discuss issues of eroticism and self-commodification. For this paid centerfold ad for her upcoming show, the left side is pure black, and on the right, Benglis appears nude in an eroticized pose reminiscent of 1970s porn. Unlike Antin's straight documentary poses that divest personality and turn her into an object to be shaped, Benglis appeals to the viewer with shocking self-display (see Buszek 2006). The ad promotes her new show by showing her wearing only reflective white sunglasses, short hair slicked back, exposing a glistening tan and slender body, one hand on her hip, the other holding tight to a realistic double-headed dildo inserted into her vagina. In sum, she strikes an aggressive "cheesecake" or girly pin-up pose. Cassils borrows directly from Benglis' photograph by combining a cocky pose with overtly mixed gender signals. The result in the *Cuts* project is a reworking of masculinity, but one that cannot be detached like a silicon cock. Cassils stands tall, arms slightly bent at attention, gazing slightly off-camera (see Figure 2). Yes, he wears a bulging white jock strap, however, it is the display of a ripped body that is the focal point of phallic masculinity. Mixed gender attribution might derive from the longish hair swept to the right closely framing a chiseled face whitened with cake make-up and bright red

painted lips. Both photographs are shot straight on, in a medium close-up framing of the figure in a turned pose, and use hard studio lighting to accentuate the surface of the body. The stylization suggests appearances are (just about) everything.

Whereas Benglis targeted the "male ethos" of the minimalist movement by running the ad in the art establishment magazine *Artforum* (Taylor 2005: 29–30), Cassils challenges homoerotic aesthetics by circulating the image to gay fashion and art publications. The collaborating photographer Robin Black, who is often mistaken for a gay man for her sexualized nudes of men, used her connections to leak the image, along with a link to the blog and zine *LADY FACE//MAN BODY* (Cassils 2011: online n.p.). Much like the intense reaction from feminists that Benglis received for daring to embody a self-determined artist identity (Chave 2005: 390), the Cassils–Black collaboration incited a backlash from gay audiences for presenting a self-determined trans identity wrought through bodybuilding science.

The presentation of trans-muscularity, or a man body on a lady face, evokes Robert Mapplethorpe's prolific collaboration between 1980 and 1982 with Lisa Lyon, a white female bodybuilder and champion weight lifter (see Patton 2001). Similar to Black's series with Cassils, Mapplethorpe often stylized Lyon to suggest iconic gay physical culture, or "beefcake" poses like the strongman to accentuate her "musculinity" (Tasker 1993: 3).<sup>6</sup> By eroticizing Lyon's muscularity and strength, while also often stressing her considerable breasts, Mapplethorpe's images become indeterminately geared to a heterosexual or homosexual gaze. Pioneering female bodybuilders like Lyon or Bev Francis battled against "heteroanxious" bodybuilding judges who favored athletic straight femininity, punishing too muscular (read masculine) women, such as documented in the film *Pumping Iron II: The Women* (1985) (Patton 2001: 119). As a queer bodybuilder Cassils combats not only heteroanxiety. In becoming increasingly



**Fig 2** Heather Cassils, *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis*. 2011 (artwork © Heather Cassils; photograph by the artist and Robin Black) (30 × 40 in.).

transmasculine he also received what I'd identify as "homoanxious" responses. Cassils reports that gay men at the gym would check out his pecs and become hostile when they realized they were breasts; further, he received an onslaught of confused commentary about the trans-positive photographs leaked online that some perceived as "freak androgyny" (2011, 2013: online n.p.).

The use of online media to circulate the images meant that an encounter with them was not limited to artistic contexts in which gender confusion might be (politely) celebrated, but opened up the project to transphobic vitriol at large. In wanting "to achieve a confusing body that ruptured expectations," *Cuts* was extremely successful (Cassils 2013: online n.p.). But particularly when Cassils published on the US edition of the Huffington Post a chronicle of his experiences during the twenty-three weeks of *Cuts*, along with images and video, the hateful reactions skyrocketed. In response, Cassils created three collages titled *Disfigured Image: The Resilient 20 Percent* (2013) to transfer the hate speech from the threatened camps to the pin-up images that sparked the rage. No longer an impermeable, durable digital image, the fragility of the printed photograph on paper allows Cassils to express with his own hand the experience of permanent damage. The defacement depicts the violent dismemberment of his trans body (see Figure 3): eyes scratched out, throat slit open, lips sown shut, burned areas threaten the body, and, lastly, bloody slashes marked across the gender incongruent breasts. Using marker, gold paint, gouache, and razor etching, the image becomes symbolically perforated by the "litany of hatred" (Cassils 2013: online n.p.). The *Homage* photograph now appears to reference the height of trans-muscularity, but also anticipates the defacement of a trans identity in *Disfigured Image*. The brutal representation of a chest surgery that de-breasts the figure underscores the way that a trans body is expected to conform to gender norms, or else.

Damaged but refusing to disappear, the image becomes an interface for multiple durations of violence and recovery from it. The bullying attacks made possible by instant online commentary reverberate with a long history of social stigma faced by transgender people. The title names these as the resilient 20 percent, referencing the fact that worldwide transgender murders increased by 20 percent in 2012.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, Cassils is far from alone in searching for resilience strategies to help communities and individuals recover from transphobic attacks. Counseling and trauma scholarship concerning trans people have shown that in addition to institutional discrimination, trans individuals experience an outsized measure of gender biased microaggressions and traumatic life events such as rape or domestic violence (Singh and McKleroy 2010; Nadal, Skolnik, and Wong 2012). The pervasiveness of transphobic discrimination has prompted out transgender woman of color actress Laverne Cox to suggest that "our entire society is experiencing a collective gender anxiety," which acts out the fear of an upset gender binary order through violence against trans people, particularly those of color (2011: online n.p.). Trans lives become marked by trauma, and anticipation of the threat of violence. Such taxing experiences are akin to what Lauren Berlant qualifies as a slow death, "a physical wearing out of a population" in which mental and physical suffering seeps into the everyday environment rather than being confined only to sporadic events (2007: 754).

I propose that *Disfigured Image: The Resilient 20 Percent* visualizes for the (transphobic) viewer the closeness of the photographic image to the material reality of the social world. The slashes and burns into these images show the points wherein the viewers had a gender anxiety awoken. In this sense, the second set of pin-ups retrace the various elements that might indicate a threatening gender binary disorder: Roland Barthes famously used the term *punctum* to



**Fig 3** Heather Cassils, *Disfigured Image: The Resilient 20% 2013* Collage: photo paper; marker; gold paint, gouache, razor etching (artworks © Heather Cassils; part of the body of work *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*) (11 × 17 in.).

describe the affective experience of a photograph in which one feels an unexpected, unsolicited emotional onslaught from a particular detail (1980: 25–30). Later, he names a second type of punctum, “a sudden flash,” that is equally relevant to *Disfigured Image*; rather than a stigmatum of form, it comes from the lacerating intensity of time, or temporalities meeting (1980: 95–6). The “that-has-been,” or a pure representation of the past impinges with a deathliness onto the deteriorating present. The detail is equally described in violent language as an arrow that pierces, or a shard that probes a wound. In both cases, Barthes emphasizes the punctum breaking into the masterful observational mode of looking. This general enjoyment comes with gazing at culturally recognizable contents, what he calls the photographic *studium*. Shawn Michelle Smith’s reconsideration of these two structuring elements in *Camera Lucida* challenges Barthes’ claim to reading off the photograph the culturally already known, and the personally unknown (2009). Assessing his examples for the punctum in racially and sexually problematic photographs, she notes the subtle culturally laid patterns that bring a charge and activity to a photo that Barthes claims as his own sensitive wound (2009: 244–55). In short, a punctum is telling; it is affective knowledge, but by no means unavailable to analysis of the cultural schema that animates it.

Following Smith, I suggest that the achievement of *Cuts* is how these circulated works engender a punctum effect not only on individual subjectivities, but also on the body politic—registering pricks on what I propose to call the social nervous system. Michael Taussig’s cultural history of the nervous system characterizes its connectivity as “illusions of order congealed by fear” in relation to the emerging model of the modern state (1992: 2). His understanding of a system held together by nervous fear helps explain how the mythological order of the gender binary is held together by the pervasive cultural fear of trans bodies. Spasms,

which Cassils describes as a way of being trans, are of course products of the nervous system, as it becomes overloaded. I want to call for inserting an affective, punctum-ridden space for critique within queer photography studies in order to inspect the close to home, or spasms close to the bone. Giving critical attention to the defacing pricks, to the violences visible and invisible that appear in flashes, and to slow and pre-mature death would approximate the kind of “queer commentary” that Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner advocated for when queer theory was first emerging, before retroviral cocktails (1995: 343). If queer commentary, and aesthetic genres that spawn discussion of violence, death, and neglect, are to be celebrated for anything, they argue it is for holding an abstract space that brings a culture into being (1995: 346). Though the culture to be lived in, remembered, and hoped for they refer to was framed by the aftermath of the AIDS crisis, today’s queer and trans cultures are emerging with resilient courage in the face of a pervasive gendercide overshadowed by moneyed campaigns for gay marriage. Sharon Sliwinski’s study on photographic violence argues that, “the [defaced] photograph offers an uncomfortable proximity, a kind of suture between the social and psychological realms” (2009: 312). Cassils’ photographic practice of pricking and defacing might be considered a manifestation of today’s specifically trans suture. Precariously the images stitch together realms of discomfort in order to create a greater public culture for gender nonconforming bodies.

### Becoming a Spasm

In thinking of the photographic image as an affective bond or suture between the artist and the audience, the social and psychological realms, then Cassils’ next durational art project works even more closely with the audience’s nervous system to elicit spasms. *Becoming an Image (BAI)* was commissioned by ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives of Los Angeles in conjunction with the

exhibition *Cruising the Archive*. The invitation was for a site-specific performance under the auspices of the one-day event “Transactivation: Revealing Queer Histories in the Archive,” which sought to discuss “the ‘Ts’ and ‘Qs’ often missing from historical records” (ONE 2012). Thematically *BAI* is about survivors and loss in archives as well as in the wider trans\* community. Cassils explains that the performance was “to draw attention to the fact that many of our genderqueer and trans brothers and sisters are 28-percent more likely to experience physical violence” (2013: n.p.). In its set-up, the presence of Cassils wearing bandages across his chest (taping down breasts) suggests a figural representation of transmasculinity, and the staging of a boxing match in an empty, blacked-out archival room clearly narrates trans epistemic, psychic, and physical violence. However, it is through Cassils’ use of the photographic flash that he is able to signify transphobic violence. Cassils uses a temporally focused, nonrepresentational technology to engage the audience in the experience of becoming trans through experiencing the violence of spasms.

The audience receives the following instructions before entering the darkened room:

Don't enter if you are prone to epilepsy or claustrophobia; Absolutely no cameras, phones, or anything else that emits light; stand against the wall and do not step forward or you risk getting punched; THIS PERFORMANCE CONTAINS VIOLENCE. (Bishop-Stall and Bussey 2013: online n.p.)

Taking place in conditions reminiscent of a photography darkroom, *BAI* is designed for the camera, specifically the act of being caught by the photography camera. The audience forms a ring around Cassils, whose performance of hits and kicks sculpts the 2,000-pound clay form into an enduring monument to the violence suffered disproportionately by queer and trans communities, particularly of color. During his all-out attack a professional photographer, whom

Cassils casts to be a large man, performs as the photographer.<sup>8</sup> As he moves around in the space with a hand-held flash camera, the flash intermittently goes off and enables the audience to see Cassils suspended in action. The sudden brightness sears the image of the “fight” into the retina, literally creating a live image in each person present. A temporary photograph, lasting momentarily as an afterimage, becomes the only way the live performance is visualized. Even more than *Cuts*, which also uses harsh lighting and flash photography, *BAI* foregrounds the instrumentalization of photography within the durational performance. In *BAI* the completely restricted vision for all persons within a light-free environment means that the photographic flash in the audience’s eyes summons a nonrepresentational image of violence.<sup>9</sup>

How can an image, photographic no less, be nonrepresentational? Gilles Deleuze qualifies the very special violence of Francis Bacon paintings as not simply depicting the violence of sensation; rather, he paints “to make the spasm visible,” in which materials and forces can become visible in their effects on the flesh (2005: xii). Cassils’ durational performances seem to isolate a similar effect on the flesh, but one which he claims as specifically trans. Returning to his definition, performing trans means “a continual becoming, a process-oriented way of being that works in a space of indeterminacy, *spasm* and slipperiness” (2013: n.p.). It is instructive that for Cassils a trans space of spasmodic process reflects in his artistic choice of flash photography. The spasm is a physical registration of sensation experienced as involuntary. Similar to the punctum then, a spasm signals an outside force passing through the flesh. Spasms, to borrow Brian Massumi’s terms, mark out the “timespace of indeterminacy” with resistances, resulting in differentials felt by the subject in the “something-doing” of an event (2011: 3–11). Pulses of sensation might be unappearing, but they are registered as really felt. “Semblance” is the term Massumi uses for

this process of a lived expression: “a concept for the effective reality of what doesn’t appear” (2011: 24). Semblances register felt time and pass on potential, therein lies the politicality of process. The question becomes in what way arts are activist, and orient the passing on of potential so that another novel occurrence might take place. Similarly to the occurrences within durational art, one can ask about the ways in which the indeterminacy of trans orients differential becoming toward novel occurrences.

*BAI* expresses a trans spasm, or a “something-doing,” by utilizing the force of a flash of the camera. As Kate Flint points out, for those subject to the camera’s flash, a sudden overbright glare, it does not illuminate the world, “rather, it dazzles, bleaches the world, temporarily blinds, causes distorting after-images for both photographed and photographer” (2013: 379). Interestingly, Massumi helps explain a nonrepresentational spasm by using an example of a lightning flash. He writes that of course lightning is actually seen sensorially, in that the dynamic form—the flash—is accompanied by an impingement of light rays upon the retina (2011: 23). Yet, semblance accompanies every sensorial experience: “a more expansive event that never shows in its entirety” (2011: 24). Much like the process of gender transitioning, lightning’s occurrence cannot fully appear in the visual field. This complex event of the lightning’s registration is multisensorial, but also ungraspable as a whole. A flash then effectively registers as a limited sense of vision and a felt sense of spasm. Hence, Cassils’ dramatized use of flash photography forces upon a body an unelicited, violent sensation of becoming an image. A flash aesthetically registers as dazzlingly felt: a sensation image of trans. The flash and punctum are both visual as well as affective; however, the punctum uses a visual object that is still visible to enlarge the visual field whereas the flash in this case uses light itself to blind vision so that the spectator can see something beyond visibility. In both cases the spasmodic sensation of the flash

hits the body, utilizing the sudden unexpected quality of a photographic image in the making.

For the audience the performance is failed spectacle: they cannot see, at least not with observational mastery. The performance creates a nervous system around the moment of composition. The audience is subject to flying sweat and debris from the clay, the panting sounds of the fighter, his shuffling movement, and the shock of the light flashing. As Cassils beats the clay, the audience is on edge, waiting for the next series of blows delivered with photographic flashes to the eye. As Bojana Jankovic recounts in her review, “everyone’s bodies reflexively twitch in unison” (2013: n.p.). Violence condenses into a burning flash, shocking the audience individually, but passing through them collectively. More so than the form that Cassils sculpts with deft blows, the flashes become the vessel for the image. The violence of the performance lodges under the skin of each audience member and passes through the group, becoming a prickling afterimage. The photographs that result, and I have included here (see Figures 4, 5, and 6), are a poor documentary form not because they lack indexical power, but because they only served in the performance to disfigure the audience.

*BAI*’s particular use of photography in performance calls into question how photographic documentation cannot be trusted as evidentiary of experience. Photography as a representational art is placed under great duress. Foremost, Cassils hires *BAI*’s photographer to be a performer as much as blind documenter, forcing him to work in the dark. This condition means he cannot frame Cassils, or the action, as in typical documentary photography. This genre considers the photograph as a document of public history, and engine to change it. Jay Prosser offers that a “testimonial photograph” creates crossings of the private with the public, so that the viewer becomes an involved witness (*testis*) (2008: 341–2). The testimonial dimension of *BAI* means becoming involved physically in



**Fig 4** Heather Cassils, *Before*, 2,000-pound clay bash, 40.75 × 36 × 36 in. Starting sculpture from the performance *Becoming an Image*, Buddies in Bad Times, Toronto, 2014 (artwork © Heather Cassils; photograph by the artist and Alejandro Santiago).

the making of the image: not only were you there, the event is seared indeterminately on and in your body. Jankovic experienced that images “briefly flash in full colour, only to be replaced by their grayscale reflections” (2013: n.p.), haunting in their degradation from color to grays. The artificial flash of light illuminates the living, who return deadened in the afterimages. Through making explicit the power structuring the various roles of the witness, the aggressor, and the documenter, *BAI* stresses the debilitating ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering.

It invites comparison between social and aesthetic forms of slow death, taking aim at the archive’s role in the damaging lack of representation.

If not documentary, then perhaps Walter Benjamin’s imagistic understanding of history more closely resembles the sensation archive generated by *BAI*’s attempt at “turning snapshots into history;” to use reviewer Jankovic’s assessment of the performance (2013: n.p.). Benjamin favorably compares history to photography: the past is captured on a light-sensitive plate. “Only the future has developers



**Fig 5** Heather Cassils, *Becoming an Image Performance Still No. 1*, Edgy Woman Festival, Montreal 2013 (artwork © Heather Cassils; photograph by the artist and Alejandro Santiago) (24 × 36 in.).

at its disposal which are strong enough to allow the image to come to light in all its details," Benjamin muses, figuring the future reader/viewer in the role of true historian (quoted in Hauptman 1998: 134). *BAI*'s audience, populated by testimonial witnesses, might be understood as the "developers" of trans history-in-the-making, including the experience of violences, but also a horizon of potential. "A geyser of new image-worlds hisses up at points in our existence where we would least have thought them possible," he writes in "News about Flowers" (Benjamin 2006: 263). In every photograph Benjamin sees the potential for an image-world to emerge. This means that a photograph for Benjamin encodes

the "suchness" of the past now dead moment and nests the future within it (2006: 276–7). Barthes' temporal punctum also adds that the nested future is always one of death, a pricking sensation that the subject is already dead, or, worse, that his or her death will imminently occur (1980: 96). The image epistemologies of Benjamin and Barthes, derived from flash photography technology, can be expanded to the scene of every photograph: "[k]nowledge comes only in flashes" (quoted in Hauptman 1998: 134). Perhaps the political productivity of flash photography is in its capacity to open portals to new image-worlds, to expand the image archive however fragmentarily and however indebted to death.



**Fig 6** Heather Cassils, *Becoming an Image Performance Still No.2*, National Theater Studio, SPILL Festival, London, 2013 (artwork © Heather Cassils; photograph by the artist and Manuel Vason) (22 × 30 in.).

## Calculating Failure, a Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to consider briefly how violence might be conceptualized in the gym, where most of Cassils' durational art practice actually takes place. In the essay "Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body," queer writer and bodybuilding enthusiast Kathy Acker investigates what the process of weightlifting might tell us about violence in art. The general law behind bodybuilding is that when muscle is broken down in a controlled fashion and repaired with rest and nutrients it will grow back larger than before. Acker muses "Is the equation between destruction and growth also a formula for art?" (1993: 22). She affirms failure as a body's limit; likewise artistic destruction, controlled and precisely driven toward failure, may give way to flourishing. "I want to shock my body [art] into growth," she asserts, "I do not want to hurt it" (1993: 23). I see that at the core of Cassils' durational performances is this principle of calculated risk in the face of the material's capacity, and, as Acker says, of the ultimate material, "of the body's inexorable movement towards its final failure, toward death" (1993: 23).

If one takes very seriously Cassils' statement, "I am a visual artist, and my body is my medium," then the insertion of his body into photographic images is not unlike working a muscle until it fails in order to encourage growth of the visual world. It requires multiple durations of violence becoming differential—inverting from destructive to generative, and generative to destructive. The durational art practice re-processes, literally "working" on and through, the historiographical bulk of scientific, documentary, and pin-up photography. Through collaborations with highly specific types of photographers Cassils' visually available body seizes the tired image of queer and trans bodies, pushes it to its limit, in order to burst through to a novel version.

## Notes

- 1 Images courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. My heartfelt appreciation goes to Heather Cassils for generously sharing your images for an earlier keynote version, and for the insightful dialogue on trans art-politics. Thank you to Tobaron Waxman for introducing me to his work at the Ronald Feldman Gallery.  
Regarding gender attribution, Cassils has made public in a recent interview with the Guardian that pronouns he/his should be used: "In terms of pronouns I prefer he but I'm okay with she. I prefer to be called Cassils but don't mind if people call me Heather. I state it because I know it is not obvious" (Frizzell 2013).
- 2 The training regime was designed by two professionals: master bodybuilding coach Charles Glass and sports competition nutritionist David Kalik, who created a diet for a 190-pound male athlete's caloric intake. Cassils relates that he began training to find his own version of wellness after a serious illness, in which his entire body became septic because of undiagnosed gall bladder disease, requiring a full blood transplant (Frizzell 2013: n.p.).
- 3 See Amelia Jones and Tracey Warr's *The Artist's Body* (2012) for further discussion.
- 4 I use trans\* with the asterisk to indicate the broadest, most inclusive understanding of gender variance. Trans activists borrow this sign from computer language in which the asterisk will search for any term with this prefix. Hereafter I use trans for smoother writing and reading.
- 5 Cassils does not critique the personal decision of any trans person to undergo gender affirming surgeries, but takes aim at the cultural and scientific dominance of categorizing trans people as limited to those who desire surgeries. He states that,  
  
As an artist and as a personal trainer, I have been interested in exploring the body as material conditions for self-expression. As a trans person who does not yet want to have surgery or take full-on hormones, I was interested in what I could do via my diet and exercise to go through a gender transformation. (2011: online)  
  
For *Cuts*, he did go "to the extreme" and take half of the lowest recommended dosage

of steroids (androgens) in order to engage a society obsessed with extremes.

- 6 On the pin-up, see Richard Dyer's "Don't Look Now" (1982).
- 7 The Transgender Murder Monitoring project reports that in 2012 alone there was a 20 percent increase in the reported (not the total by far) murders of trans\* people, a total of 265; a disproportionate number of victims were transwomen, of color, and sex workers (Balzer and Hutta et al. 2012).
- 8 Thus far the photographers have included Eric Charles, Manuel Vason, and Alejandro Santiago.
- 9 *BAI* was performed four times in 2012–13, at ONE in Los Angeles, Spill Festival in London, and Fierce Festival in Birmingham, and at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York City. Each iteration has different photographer, different location with histories they embody, and a slightly different soundscore and costume. I follow Cassils' description of the first iteration most closely, and rely on reviewers and exit interviews for the others. I have not personally been able to attend a performance thus far.

Dr. Eliza Steinbock (Film and Literary Studies Department, Leiden University) writes on visual culture and transfeminist issues. Recent publications include essays in the *Journal of Homosexuality* and *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*.

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