Picturing “Doing Gender”

Danielle Lutz

Grand Valley State University, lutzd@mail.gvsu.edu

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I. Introduction

A. Artist Statement

This series explores the idea of “doing gender,” a term coined by sociologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman, in which gender is an active and constant accomplishment (West and Zimmerman 1). Our culture has created a gender system in which we determine certain characteristics to be either masculine or feminine, and we learn from a young age which of these characteristics is appropriate for men or women. By expressing these masculine and feminine characteristics, we are essentially creating a performance in which we “do gender.”

My photographic series is composed of diptychs with masculine and feminine gender performances. This shows the physical ways that individuals can “do gender.” Through changes in their physical presentation, the individuals in these photographs are illustrating the way that gender is performed through active accomplishments; this is not a natural occurrence, but a product of socially constructed expectations.

B. Overview

This body of work was created for the purpose of being included in the 2014 Senior Thesis Photography exhibition, *Framed Illumino*. When I began to consider what I wanted to create for my senior project, I was uncertain as to what I wanted to photograph, but I had some ideas of the topics I wanted my photographs to address.

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In addition to studying photography, I am also majoring in sociology. I felt that for myself it was very important that I use my knowledge of sociology to address a topic that I am passionate about for this project. I strongly desired to create a project that would allow me to tie together my love of photography with my love of sociology. Within sociology, the topic in which I am most interested is gender. For this reason, I knew that if my project addressed this topic, I would be very enthusiastic about it.

Within my studies in Sociology, I have been examining gender as a socially constructed institution. The gendering of bodies is not a natural occurrence, but one that is engrained within our culture so deeply that it is believed to be natural (West and Zimmerman 1). Because this idea is so compelling to me, I decided to illustrate it through photographs. Thus, I conceived the idea of my project “Doing Gender,” in which I enabled myself to address this idea by capturing its physical embodiment with a camera.

II. History

A. Personal History

My first experience with photography occurred when I was five years old. My parents bought me a pink plastic camera that used 110 film, and I used this to take some photographs. My father was very interested in photography so I sometimes would use his cameras to take photographs when we were on family vacations. I received my first digital camera when I was in middle school. It was a point and shoot Fuji camera that my parents bought me for my birthday. I used this camera a lot to take photographs documenting trips that I went on with my parents and I used this camera for several years.
In my junior year of high school I started to become strongly interested in photography. I was invited to be a member of my school’s yearbook team. There were only a few people on the yearbook staff that year so we all had a substantial involvement with capturing all of our school’s events through photography. I was in charge of photographing many school events, especially the sporting events. This was my first experience with a DSLR camera; we used Nikon DSLR’s. Our instructor did not teach us very much about the cameras; we were very much on our own to figure out how to make photographs. Although I didn’t have much experience with photography, I really enjoyed it and it was my favorite aspect of creating the yearbook. During my senior year of high school I was an editor of the yearbook and was in charge of much of the photography. Many of my evenings were spent photographing after school events that took place. I began to experiment with my photographs and learn how to add my own artistic touches to what had previously been generic yearbook photographs.

During my last two years of high school, I often borrowed my father’s Canon Rebel, which was a digital DSLR, and I would make photographs with it. I practiced photographing places around my house and experimented a lot with the camera.

When I began my first semester of college I was unsure of what I wanted to study, and in my second semester I determined that I would major in Women & Gender Studies. I soon realized that although I loved learning about Women & Gender Studies, I wasn’t very interested in any of the career paths to which it led. At the time I was still very interested in photography, so I decided that I would take a college level photography class and if I enjoyed it, I might make it my major. The summer after my freshman year of college I took a beginner’s photography class at my local community college. I really enjoyed the class and at that point decided I wanted to continue studying photography.
When I returned to Grand Valley in the fall as a sophomore, I courses Photo 1 and History of Photography. I enjoyed these classes and so decided to continue in the photography program as a photography major. As much as I enjoyed photography, I was just as interested in sociology. Since I couldn’t choose between the two, I decided that I would double major in both of them.

Before I began the class History of Photography, I probably could not have named a single photographer that I admired. I knew of a few famous photographs that were appealing to me, but I knew almost nothing about photographic history or any photographers whose work was inspiring to me. Throughout History of Photography, I was greatly drawn to photographers who made a social or political statement with their photographs. In essence, these photographers combined sociology with photography. Before taking this class I had thought little about the ways in which I could combine my two majors, but learning about the work of these photographers taught me ways in which sociological principles could be analyzed through the use of photography.

In the first semester of my senior year, I became good friends with a few artists who were passionate about social change, especially within the realm of feminism and gender-related issues. These friends were extremely interested in creating and analyzing art that addresses the social issues about which they are interested in. Prior to our friendship I knew next to nothing about contemporary art, but they taught me much about how contemporary art can be used as a tool for social analysis and social change.

During the second semester of my fourth year at Grand Valley, I took History of Photography II. This class had a strong influence on my current views of my own photographic work. In History of Photography II, I focused all of my personal assignments on feminist and
LGBT photographers. Photographers and artists such as Susan Meiselas, Barbara Kruger, and David Wojnarowicz really opened my eyes me as to how one could make social and political statements with their artwork.

Prior to my senior year, I knew I was interested in the idea of sociological image making, but there was not necessarily a specific theme that interested me. I began to focus on artwork relating to gender my senior year. Although I primarily exhibit this interest by analyzing other artist’s photographs, I am beginning to see it take shape in my own work as well.

B. History of Photography

There are many works by historical photographers that have opened the door for this type of photography to be acceptable. My photographs for this project document individuals portraying a gender-related performance; this idea of capturing a performance through photography can be seen numerous times throughout the history of photography. From its beginnings, portrait photographs were often made to display a specific portrayal of a person. In order to achieve this portrayal, the subject of the photograph needed to perform for the camera.

An example of early portrait photography is Solomon D. Butcher’s photographs of families taken between 1886-1912 for his collection *Pioneer History of Custer County, Nebraska.* In these images the families that Solomon D Butcher photographed often posed in front of their sod houses, and some of the families chose to place many of their most valued possessions next to them outside of the house.
By placing their possessions outside of their house, the families are creating an idealized image of their family, proving to the viewer that they own things of value, thus communicating that they are happy and successful. These photographs can be viewed as a performance in which the people depicted create a specific image of themselves that they want to be captured in the photograph (Carter 12). Rather than creating a neutral image of themselves, each of the families chose what they felt was important to portray to the viewer of the photograph and thus they included that in the frame.

Another early photographer who created portraits of performances was August Sander. His collection *People of the Twentieth Century*, first exhibited in 1927, used photography as a way to capture different types and categories of people. Rather than portraying the personality of the person in the photograph, Sander’s photographs used one person as a way to represent an entire category of person. His photographs are of people who work in certain professions or belong to certain social categories; the subject in the photograph is performing as whatever type Sander is intending to portray. Although Sander’s photographs do work to reveal information about the person each of them portrays, they are meant to show different types and categories of
people, letting the individual person in the photograph represent the entire group of people (Misselbeck).

Ralph Eugene Meatyard is a photographer who created portraits of people while their faces were covered with a mask. He did this in order to erase the person’s individual sense of personhood; covering a person’s face hides opportunity for expression and identification. By doing this Meatyard enabled the body language that the person was exhibiting to be the main indicator of their identity. Thus, in these photographs body language is the main aspect of the individual’s performance. Although their face is hidden, it is possible to identify them based on body language (Hirsch 350).

III. The Images

A. The Images

My photographic series is comprised of diptychs. Each pair has one photograph depicting a masculine gender performance, and one depicting a feminine gender performance. Some of the photographs are composed as formal portraits, with the model posing like they
might in a typical portrait. Other photographs depict a specific action in which the model is actively doing something that is involved with a gender performance.

(Figure 3)

This diptych is an example of a model who is shown performing actions that are associated with a specific gender. This illustrates an individual actively “doing gender.” In the masculine portrait, she is shaving her face, an action that is typically associated with masculinity. In the feminine portrait, she is putting on lipstick, an action that is associated with femininity because of how makeup is often seen as an essential part of performing femininity. These photographs were made with the intention of highlighting the ways that gender is an active performance, and that it is something to be achieved when an individual repeatedly performs certain actions associated with femininity or masculinity. To maintain a successful gender performance, one has to actively be doing these actions in order to be seen as properly masculine or feminine.
In this diptych, the model is not doing a specific action; rather, she is simply posing as she would in a formal portrait. In photographs such as these, the viewer can focus on the physical aspects of the model’s two different gender performances. Because the poses are somewhat similar in the two photographs, it is easier for the viewer to notice the subtle and not so subtle differences between her masculine and feminine performance.

There are several things that differ between this model’s masculine gender performance and her feminine one. Firstly, her outfit is much different. In the feminine portrait she is wearing a dress, a clothing article typically associated with femininity. Comparatively, in the masculine portrait we see her in a suit and tie.

Another important difference in these two photographs is her pose; the feminine portrait shows her sitting in a way that can be termed “lady-like,” with her legs together and back straight. The masculine portrait shows her in a more powerful pose, with her legs apart in a way that commands space. Although these two poses are similar, they allude to the different ways men and women are taught to present themselves in public. Women are taught to take up as little space as possible, keeping their legs together and making themselves small. In contrast, men
typically are taught to take up space; this is a characteristic that is often seen through spread legs and a wide posture.

A third difference that can be seen in these photographs is in her face. An obvious distinction is her makeup in the feminine portrait and lack of makeup in the masculine one. This simple change has a great effect on how feminine or masculine her face looks. She also has a small smile in the feminine portrait, and a more blank face in the masculine one. The smile alludes to submissiveness, a trait that may be perceived as feminine.

When examining the diptychs, it is apparent that some models are more successful at portraying two different gender performances than others are. I intentionally used a variety of models, some who could successfully “pass” as a different gender, and some who could not.

![Figure 5](image1)

This diptych is an example of a pair in which the model can successfully pass as both masculine and feminine. Through just a few changes in dress, pose, makeup, and hairstyling, she performs both masculinity and femininity in a way that looks almost “natural.”
In comparison, this is an example of a diptych in which the model arguably does not perform femininity as successfully as he performs masculinity. Due to certain innate characteristics of the model, such as body hair and body shape, he does not portray femininity in a way that would be viewed by society as a passable performance.

These observations can illustrate the various degrees of gender fluidity that women experience and men do not. By comparing these diptychs of a man and woman, one can make several observations about how the ability to perform masculinity or femininity differs among different people.

A final comparison between two types of photographs is a comparison between pairs in which the differences between masculinity and femininity are subtle, as opposed to when they are quite obvious.
In this diptych, the difference in masculinity and femininity is subtle. Aside from differences in his hair and clothing, the main difference lies in his facial expression and body language. In the masculine photograph, his face is tilted up, giving him the appearance of a strong jaw and expression. Although he isn’t looking at the camera, his expression is still very strong and powerful. In the feminine photograph, his face is tilted downwards and his facial expression is much less dominant. He looks rather insecure in the way that he gazes away from the camera; this concerned expression suggests femininity.
These photographs show a much less subtle difference between a feminine performance and a masculine one. Due to the extreme difference in the model’s clothing, femininity and masculinity are immediately indicated. Wearing makeup in the feminine photograph gives the model a very apparent indication of femininity when compared to the masculine one. His poses in the two photographs are quite similar; however, one is much more feminine than the other, the result of a small change in leg placement.

B. The Body of Work

As a whole, this body of work addresses several ideas connected to West and Zimmerman’s concept of “doing gender.” The photographs as a whole convey the idea of gender as a performance while individually they address specific aspects of this topic. There are many aspects of the photographs that I added intentionally as a way to affect the meaning of the photographs.

I made each of these images with studio lighting and a seamless backdrop. While creating the lighting setup for the photographs, I paid attention to the shadows and tried to eliminate them as much as I could. Most of the shadows that I was unable to eliminate while taking the photographs were removed when I edited them. By doing this I was able to create a neutral space for the models to exist in. This gives the impression that they are subjects in a study, contributing to the idea that we are viewing a performance.

The act of creating each performance was an important aspect of this project. For each photograph, I worked with my models to decide how they personally thought they should portray masculinity and femininity. Typically the first thing we did for the photographs was make
changes to their physical appearance. Changes in clothing, hair, and makeup are some of the most obvious indicators of feminine or masculine expression. I provided some of the models with clothing to wear, while some of them brought their own. When choosing their outfits, I tried to incorporate a lot of input from them as to what outfits they thought successfully portrayed masculinity or femininity. After choosing their outfits, I styled hair and applied makeup for a few of the models. Most of them, however, applied their own makeup and styled their hair themselves. By giving the models this kind of input as to what they would wear and how they would do their hair and makeup, I was able to capture their personal views on how one can perform masculinity and femininity.

This process of creating a performance together with the models enabled for some interesting perspectives on masculinity and femininity to be captured in the photographs. For example, most of the women agreed that they should wear a lot of makeup for their feminine photograph because they acknowledged that makeup is often an essential marking of femininity in our society. However, one of the women decided not to wear makeup for her feminine performance because she does not wear makeup in her daily life and does not see it as an essential component of performing femininity.

When choosing poses, I also tried to receive a lot of input from the models as to what they felt a masculine pose is as compared to a feminine one. This allowed for different interpretations of masculine and feminine physical behaviors to be illustrated in the photographs. For each diptych, I intended for the masculine and feminine poses to be very similar. This was to show how a subtle change could make a great difference. I also kept the composition almost exactly the same in each image, creating a sort of mirror effect so that the two photographs complimented each other.
Making all of the images black and white was an important aspect of how I wanted to present these photographs as a whole body of work. I used black and white in order to affect the meaning of the photographs. My first intention for the dichotomy of black and white was to be a reference to the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity. Men and women are often seen in terms of black and white, and as naturally opposite beings. As my intention of this work is to challenge this idea, I thought it was appropriate to reference it with my choice of black and white images.

The second intention I had for the use of black and white images was to create an approximation of a yin yang with the photographs. For each pair I had one photograph with a white background and one with a black one, and then I had the model wear a white outfit for the black background and a black outfit for the white background. Doing this created the appearance of a yin yang when the photographs are placed next to each other. This added an interesting component to the images because the yin yang is often used to symbolize masculinity and femininity.

Overall, these images all work together to create a body of work that conveys specific meaning. By creating diptychs of masculine and feminine performances, they illustrate ways that gender can be fluid and is not a natural fact of bodies. Viewing these photographs helps to spark thought about this topic, and may cause the viewer to question previous ideas about gender.
IV. Assessment

A. Personal Direction

This body of images is quite reflective of my intentions for future work. Sociology and photography are two of my greatest interests and I intend to continue creating work that combines both. I have found representing sociological concepts through the use of photography to be a great way to bring these concepts into view; it creates different ways for them to be represented and allows for concrete visual understandings of them. Much like this project, I intend for my future work to specifically address gender-related topics. These will likely build upon the ideas that I have illustrated with this project. Gender performance is a topic that I can explore in countless different ways and there are many different ideas related to gender that I would like to address in my future work.

Creating this body of work was very influential in helping me form ideas and decisions about how I want to create work in the future. It allowed me to address social topics that I am passionate about and express them through photography. While creating this project, I have learned that this is the type of photography that I most enjoy making. As I continue to produce more work I plan to continue addressing the topics that interest me within sociology and use photography to illustrate them in new and unique ways.

B. Contemporary Trends

There are many contemporary photographers who have created portraits in which the subject of the image is portraying a certain performance. These photographers have helped to
create the possibility for this sort of photography to be accepted and embraced. Cindy Sherman’s 1977-1980 *Untitled Film Stills* helped pave the way for contemporary trends of performance portrait photography. In her images, Sherman portrays herself in a variety of roles in which she takes on the character of many different women, composing the images to look like stills from a film. Although these images are self-portraits, they are not intended to be actual portraits of Sherman. Rather, they are intended to be a portrait of whatever role she is portraying at the time (Cindy Sherman).

(Figure 9)

A few years after Cindy-Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills*, Robert Mapplethorpe began making images that involved issues of gender and sexuality. These images were portraits of individuals performing in a sexual way, thus highlighting gender roles and different ways that men and women can perform sexuality. Because of their sexual content, these images were very controversial. Robert Hirsch states, “Mapplethorpe’s highly formalized yet intimate portraits push taboo areas of sexuality, especially male homosexuality in the time of AIDS, into the mainstream gaze” (Hirsch 400).
By pushing these photographs “into the mainstream gaze,” the controversy for these images allowed some progress to be made with regards to how we address issues of gender and sexuality in our society. Although many responses to Mapplethorpe’s images were negative, the positive criticism that they received allowed for discourse about the boundaries of photography that address controversial subjects such as gender and sexuality. As a result of this discourse, many photographers who followed Mapplethorpe were more easily able to create work that addressed controversial topics.

Currently, issues relating to gender and gender performance are a very hot topic in arts and media due to social issues that are receiving political attention. In current politics, issues regarding rights for LGBT people are receiving large amounts of attention. Same-sex marriage is in the process of being legalized in all states in the United States, and protections for LGBT people in the workplace are being created. While these are issues that are not exactly related to this project, they are a direct result of the ways that gender is viewed in our society. Therefore, my project is relevant to these current topics because it addresses the root of the issues that created the need for political attention on the topic in the first place.
There are many contemporary photographers who are currently producing work that addresses topics relating to gender. Sophia Wallace is a contemporary photographer who is currently making work that addresses topics relating to gender and issues that stem from gender roles. She has several different bodies of work on this topic, including “Girls Will Be Bois,” which is comprised of portraits of masculine-identified women, and “On Beauty,” which explores gender constructions by portraying men in stereotypically feminine ways (Sophia Wallace). Both of these bodies of work address gender as a socially constructed idea by portraying individuals who do not fit with our society’s expected ideas of masculinity and femininity.

C. Meta-Analysis

I believe that this project was successful because it allowed for me to communicate what I wanted to communicate. I feel that I made a statement relative to my thoughts on gender and was able to successfully combine sociological concepts with photography.

My ideas and intentions for this project remained fairly consistent throughout the semester, although they did evolve slightly. Because of this, my images from the beginning are quite similar to my images from the end of the semester, with only a few differences. One thing that did change was the way that I composed the photographs. My first intention was to have each diptych composed exactly the same, with each model being portrayed with their entire body in the frame, and posing as they would a traditional portrait. After I began making these photographs, I decided the project would be more visually interesting if I had several different compositions for the photographs. Thus, I made images with some full-body compositions,
some cropped from the waist up, and some from the shoulders up. This was successful in that it kept the photographs engaging at the surface level.

A second change that I made through the semester was that I chose to create the images in which the model is performing specific actions. Although this was not how I originally intended to photograph, it contributed to the success of my project because it made the idea of performance more of an obvious theme.

Some ideas are best understood when visualized, and this project enables for the idea of gender performance to be visualized. By making the concept of “doing gender” visual, different observations can be drawn from it. While much research on this topic is done through observing human interactions, this project shows the concrete manifestations of the concept in a way that they can be observed and deconstructed.
V. Appendix

A. Technical Notes

Items used to create these images:

- Canon 6D
- Lowel Tota Light Kit
- Canon Speedlite 600EX RT
- Background Stands
- Black and White seamless backdrops
- Adobe Bridge
- Adobe Photoshop CS6
B. Bibliography


