

Artifice and Authenticity

Gender Technology and Agency in Two Jenny Saville Portraits

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As a gender variant visual artist I access “technologies of gender” in order to amplify rather than erase the hermaphroditic traces of my body. I name myself. A gender abolitionist. A part time gender terrorist. An intentional mutation and intersex by design, (as opposed to diagnosis), in order to distinguish my journey from the thousands of intersex individuals who have had their “ambiguous” bodies mutilated and disfigured in a misguided attempt at “normalization.” I believe in crossing the line as many times as it takes to build a bridge we can all walk across.

Del LaGrace Volcano, September 2005

Taking this deft self-description as a point of departure, I reflect as a feminist philosopher on feminist artist Jenny Saville’s portrait of its author, Del LaGrace Volcano, together with a Saville self-portrait as a cosmetic surgery patient.¹ In this study of *Matrix* (1999, oil on canvas, seven feet by ten feet) and *Plan* (1993, oil on canvas, nine feet by seven feet), I analyze how Saville’s artistic practice conveys differential agency in these two paintings and draws out the implications of these findings for the philosophy of personal identity and action.

Before I can proceed to my principal concerns, however, I must defend classifying *Matrix* and *Plan* as portraits, for neither Saville nor Volcano accepts this label. Saville explicitly eschews it: “I am not interested in portraits as such. I am not interested in the outward personality. I don’t use the anatomy of my face because I like it, not at all. I use it because it brings out something from inside, a neurosis” (quoted in Mackenzie 2005). To counter Saville’s disavowal of self-portraiture, it is worth pointing out that

the most renowned portraits do not purport to be solely about the “outward personality,” nor do they gratify their subjects’ narcissistic needs. Rembrandt’s self-portraits (1620–1669) and Velázquez’s *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1653) are paradigmatic examples of one strand of western portraiture. Rightly or not, such works are widely venerated for capturing the essential character—the inner being—of the sitter. In this genre, the face is the focus of attention because the face is presumed to reveal character. Posture, gesture, clothing, jewelry, and tools merely denote the sitter’s social standing and occupation. The mind is the locus of selfhood, and the face is the public side of the interior self. Hence the body and even the sitter’s location in social space are subsidiary. Saville’s images certainly penetrate her subjects’ subjectivity in the requisite way and to the requisite degree. But, in my view, her work surpasses the baseline standard, for she does what might be dubbed “whole-person portraiture.” She represents her subjects’ faces, as the conventions demand, but she exceeds the requirement that a portrait perspicuously render its subject’s face by also representing her subjects’ distinctive bodies stripped of garments and accouterments.

Bursting the boundaries of western portraiture, *Matrix* and *Plan* are portraits that give the body equal if not prime billing.² These works are premised, so to speak, on the proposition that the self is no less corporeal than mental. As a whole-person portraitist specializing in nude, anatomically unorthodox bodies, Saville is able to convey what I call the psychocorporeality of selfhood: the intertwining of cognition, affect, and desire in the constitution of intelligent, embodied subjects.

In the western tradition, the nude and the portrait have long been mutually exclusive genres. Archetypal nudes, such as Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* (ca. 1485) and Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538), idealize their models and claim to capture female corporeal perfection—that is to say, no one in particular and no body at all. There is a strand of western portraiture that is akin to the tradition of the nude. In these works, the painter glorifies the subject—say, by representing an emperor as a god. But Saville’s nudes always deviate from accepted beauty ideals, and the *Matrix* and *Plan* figures are highly individualized. Never catering to her subjects’ vanity, Saville’s images bring sexuality to portraiture and suffuse bare bodies with personality and agency.³ After you’ve seen Saville’s work, conventional portraiture may look incomplete, even superficial, by comparison.

Volcano is ambivalent about his relationship to Saville’s image of him:

I don’t feel like this painting [*Matrix*] is a portrait of me. I simply provided the raw material. No one needed to know who the body actually belongs to. Yet the act of writing this piece locates it absolutely within the realm of the personal. This requires and allows me to own it in a way that is not comfortable, rather than disown it, which would be more so. (1999)

I concede that Saville’s titles preserve the anonymity of her subjects, which is at variance with the usual proper name labeling of portraits. Moreover, Saville speaks of creating “a landscape of gender” and “landscapes of the body” as opposed to portraits (Schama 2005; Mackenzie 2005). I grant that Saville’s facture is seductive enough to induce viewers to forget the specificity of Volcano’s humanity and become absorbed in the canvas’s brilliantly orchestrated interplay of colors and textures. Still, I disagree that no one needs to know who posed for *Matrix*.

I'm sure that reading Volcano's texts and viewing his photography, especially his self-portraits, enriched my understanding of *Matrix*. Whatever the virtues of formalism, it's clear that relevant background information—for example, about Volcano's genetic inheritance, his struggles against body hatred, and his embellishment of his body—heightens sensitivity to artworks. If more needs to be said, comparing *Matrix* with *Passage*, a 2004–2005 Saville painting that portrays an anonymous transgendered, intersexed person, confirms that she does not treat Volcano as the personification of transgendered, intersexed people. On the contrary, Saville particularizes the *Matrix* and the *Passage* figures, and she gives a layered, nuanced account of each of her courageously exposed models.

My disagreement with Volcano notwithstanding, it is necessary to be mindful of Saville's mediating point of view. She readily acknowledges that ideas animate her art and that her reading in feminist theory infuses her thinking (Schama 2005; Gayford 1999). Moreover, she is fascinated by medical technologies of corporeal manipulation. All of Saville's work to date is directly concerned with corporeity, much of it with gender, the body image, and the dynamics of agentic power and disempowerment.

Matrix and *Plan* are exemplary Saville works, and they raise the two questions that this chapter addresses:

1. Why aren't sex-reassignment treatments analogous to elective cosmetic treatments that are popular with U.S. women, including breast augmentation, liposuction, and dermabrasion?
2. What is the role of the body and the body image in transgendered identity and agency?

Because Saville's paintings convincingly represent lived human bodies—subjectivized, agentic corporeity, as distinct from inert, objectified flesh—they provide an invaluable aid to reflection on these issues. Her sympathetic engagement with stigmatized bodies helps to reconfigure the standard gestalts of the human body that viewers typically carry with them and thus to convert fear and disgust into empathetic attention if not appreciation and understanding.⁴ Based on my account of the pathos of *Plan* and the agentic vitality of *Matrix*, I argue that conceiving the agentic subject as a rational deliberative capability that uses a conjoined body as the instrument of its will is not conducive to understanding the agency of transgendered people. If, instead, agentic subjects are viewed as embodied subjects and embodiment is understood as a locus of practical intelligence, the agency of transgendered individuals becomes intelligible.

Impaired Agency and Medical Technology

It would be irresponsible to comment on *Matrix* before placing it in the social context from which I view it. To some extent, my U.S. context overlaps with Saville's British context. In both countries, countless nontransgendered girls and women suffer grievously because of disparities between their body images and culturally ubiquitous beauty ideals, and this suffering is coupled with gale-force commercial and interpersonal pressures to "solve" these problems by resorting to a medical fix.⁵ In the

United States, the soaring popularity of breast augmentation as a sixteenth birthday or high school graduation present for girls and the “mommy makeover”—a menu of postnatal procedures to lift sagging breasts, tighten the vagina, and siphon off extra pregnancy weight—attest to the virulence of this blight (Boodman 2004; Singer 2007). The U.S. insurance industry and the British National Healthcare Service deem reconstructive procedures elective unless they are prescribed to remedy a diagnosed psychiatric or other medical condition. Whereas health insurance commonly covers breast implants after a mastectomy, it does not pay for breast augmentation sought for personal aesthetic reasons. In the United States, most patients or their families foot the bill for cosmetic treatments.

Saville got to know this medicalized gender climate while observing a New York City cosmetic surgeon at work and incorporated what she learned in a number of her subsequent paintings. It is fitting, then, to begin with one of the bluntest and most poignant of these works, *Plan* (figure 9.1).



Figure 9.1. *Plan*. © Jenny Saville. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.

Plan

Jenny Saville used her own face and body for the figure in *Plan*—a towering frontal nude of a pre-op liposuction patient after she has been prepped for her procedure. That *Plan* is a portrait of the artist marked by an aesthetic surgeon and ready for sculpting is not its sole irony. The pre-op inscriptions span most of the figure's body. Except for a single horizontal line traversing her lower belly, the principal markings consist of four sets of concentric, irregularly spaced, wobbly circles. The crude target patterns look as if they had been drawn by a sloppy artist using a magic marker, not a twenty-first-century surgeon using sterile tools. These epidermal drawings turn the figure's surface into a topographic map of a flawed terrain. The sculptor-cum-surgeon's corrective labors will produce a geography that satisfies current taste in the lineaments of female flesh. The notional post-lipo map has a more level, more symmetrical, presumably more pleasing design.

Approaching this tall, vertical painting, you immediately register huge thighs topped by a mass of pubic hair. Your eyes travel up the torso, and the last thing you notice is a face. Either you are looking at a foreshortened standing figure seen from a kneeling position or a foreshortened prone figure seen from a point just above the figure's knees.

The perspective exaggerates the size of the thighs, accentuates the pubic area, and shrinks the size of the head. Indeed, the tiny head is tilted at a painful angle straining to cram itself inside the picture frame but doesn't quite succeed. The figure's knees and calves are cropped, and her inscribed torso and thighs nearly fill the canvas. The offending, targeted central body is the subject of this work. Doubly symbolic, the target patterns represent both the objectification of the figure's body and the subjugation of this body.

Many other details of this work reiterate the themes of body alienation and defeated agency. The geometry of the painting doesn't settle whether the figure is lying on an unpolished steel gurney or standing against a dull gray background. Although no platform is delineated, the distribution of the volumes of the figure's body suggests a flaccid body lying flat rather than a tensile body holding itself erect.⁶ The seemingly prone position of the figure heightens the sense that she is at the mercy of demands and processes that are beyond her control.

Not only does Saville's foreshortening minimize the size of the figure's head, the horizontal line of the figure's right arm partially occludes it. The cropping and marginalization of the head notwithstanding, the face Saville depicts is haunting. The complexion is bluish grey—colors of injury, stupor, dismay, and sorrow. The lips slightly part as if a cry has just been emitted or a plea is about to be uttered. The eyes gaze down toward the viewer, yet they seem to be staring at nothing. This face is a study of helplessness and silent supplication. The spatial obscurity of the figure's head, the forlorn, plaintive expression on her face, and her blank eyes read as signs of diminished agency compounded by desolation.

Still, this figure is clearly doing something—she is trying to protect herself. Between the dense whorls of her marron pubic hair and her head are huge mammary mounds. Trying to conceal them and perhaps reacting to the chill of the clinic

as well, the figure wraps her thick right arm around her chest and clasps her fingers tightly to the opposite shoulder. Although the arm hides her nipples, its weight squashes her breasts, making them appear more conspicuous because they bulge down toward the viewer. This desire for concealment prompts her to glue her gargantuan thighs together. Trying to make herself as compact as possible, she simultaneously tries to defend her genitals from prying eyes and instruments.⁷ Her effort is wasted, however, for no one can will herself to shrink, and she'll soon be under anesthesia. *Plan* does not echo the demure gestures of feminine modesty that typify classic female nudes. It shows end-game gambits that cannot succeed—piteous, futile, defensive gestures.

Cruelly exposed as she is, *Plan's* nude is naked and agentially neutralized. Despite the evident tension in the fingers gripping her shoulder and between her thighs, no defined musculature—no sign of agentic potency—is anywhere to be seen. The greyish creme pallor of the figure's skin and dirty tan and bruise-blue passages that define the volumes of her limbs and torso cement this body's inertness. The woman-patient that Saville portrays has compressed herself as much as she can short of self-inflicted implosion. All the agency that is left to her is to ante up and hand herself over to the medicalized beauty industry. Desperate and out of options, she is doing just that. *Plan* is sympathetic to her plight but vehemently denies that she is an exemplar of postfeminist agency.⁸ Saville represents a desexed victim who gives the lie to the ideology of choice and liberation through medicine.

Cosmetic surgery has been a vexed topic in the feminist art world at least since Orlan began performing episodes of *The Ultimate Masterpiece: The Reincarnation of St. Orlan* before art audiences in 1990. It remains contentious among feminists to this day.⁹ The best that can be said for it is that hiring these services may be the "best solution under the circumstances" for some women (Davis 1991, 31). I have no doubt, though, that as a rapidly and noticeably aging woman, it is incumbent on me not to dye my greying hair, botox out my wrinkles, or lipo away my cellulite. I don't pretend to be immune to the blandishments of the industries clamoring for my patronage. However, I don't believe in fabricating an illusory simulacrum of eternal youth or runway beauty, and I believe strongly in resisting the infliction of unachievable and insulting standards of feminine attractiveness.¹⁰ Like Saville, I regard the alternative as agentially disenfranchising.

Transgendered Bodies and Medical Technology

There are no "after" images among Saville's paintings of female figures—no pictures of smiling post-op women feeling great because they look so great. There's a post-op head—looking battered with ugly stitches around her ear and a tube protruding from her mouth—but no happy outcome images (*Knead* 1994, oil on canvas, sixty by seventy-two inches). The reverse is true of Saville's paintings of transgendered, intersexed people—*Matrix* and *Passage*. These works are by no means banal "satisfied customer" images, but they do not depict disowned, subjugated bodies. They depict defiant corporeity and sexual agency.

Other philosophers incisively analyze how dominant gender norms and the medical establishment constrain the agency of transgendered people (e.g., Nelson 2001, 125–35; Butler 2004, 75–101). To obtain access to pharmacological or surgical technology, transgendered individuals are each obliged to construct a version of their life stories that coincides with a stock script: “From the beginning, I’ve felt like a man trapped in a woman’s body (or vice versa), and I’ve always preferred acting in masculine (or feminine) ways.” Perhaps this template and the diagnosis of gender dysphoria that it licenses actually fit the lives of some transgendered individuals. They certainly don’t fit everyone’s. Any inquiry into the agency of transgendered individuals must acknowledge the adverse impact of the institutionalized regimentation and pathologization of transgender in western societies. But I won’t rehearse objections to these repressive practices, for Saville’s artwork doesn’t recapitulate them. Instead, it provides a glimpse of agentic possibilities that a transgendered person may seize in the teeth of a hostile social context.

If you are heterosexual, nontranssexual, and nonintersexual, and if you suppose that normalized schemas for human bodies are not deeply entrenched in your psyche, you’ll (very probably) come away from Saville’s *Matrix* or *Passage* disabused of your beliefs about your own open-mindedness and comfort zone. Here is art critic Suzie Mackenzie (2005), exclaiming about *Passage*: “Penis and breasts all at the same time. It’s electric, it’s like wow! To see something in a way you have not looked at it before.” She might as well be naively reacting to a carny “freak show” or transported into the mind of a child confronted by the “primal scene.” Art criticism is usually couched in more measured, analytic terms. To my own chagrin, when I saw *Matrix* and *Passage* in New York exhibitions, I latched onto the question of how the models came to have the anatomical configurations Saville depicts, and I took some pains to find out.

In interviews, Saville outlines the biomedical interventions that gave rise to her models’ bodies. She supplies this information without being asked to. Why? Her observations about cognition and history in relation to gender and corporeity answer the question:

I’m painting Del LaGrace Volcano at the moment—intersex person who’s been taking testosterone for three-and-a-half years. Del’s body fascinates me as it represents a human form proceeding through a self-initiated process of body transition. He/she is a mutational body with gender defying body parts. You want to push Del’s body into a category of male or female but can’t—he/she is in a process of becoming. (Gayford 1999)¹¹

And:

With the transvestite [depicted in *Passage*] I was searching for a body that was between genders. I had explored that idea a little in *Matrix*. The idea of floating gender that is not fixed. The transvestite I worked with has a natural penis and false silicone breasts. Thirty or forty years ago this body couldn’t have existed and I was looking for a kind of contemporary architecture of the body. I wanted to paint a visual passage through gender—a sort of gender landscape. (Schama 2005, 126)

Clearly, Mackenzie’s discombobulation and my prurient curiosity about the genesis of these bodies are symptoms of our purblind investment in dual conceptions of

properly gendered bodies, no doubt shored up by simplistic assumptions about biological naturalness. Our resulting suspicion of the artificial and presumed ability to ferret it out must be dispelled if either *Matrix* or *Passage* is to be interpreted with any insight whatsoever. In the interest of space, I confine myself to exploring *Matrix*.

Matrix

"I grew up believing I was a walking monstrosity, not quite female, not really male, fat ugly and unworthy of anyone's gaze" (Volcano 1999). Because the resemblance between this remark and many self-descriptions given by nontransgendered girls and women who suffer from body-image problems is unmistakable, I focus on the contrasts between Saville's nude portrait of Volcano and her nude self-portrait as a liposuction patient. In particular, I ask what sort of agency she bestows on Volcano's body in *Matrix* (figure 9.2) but withholds from her own in *Plan*.

As I've said, Volcano had been actively cultivating his intersexed body for three years before he posed for *Matrix*.¹² But the painting isn't about how Volcano came to be endowed as he is—his reconciliation to being intersexed and his enlisting of medical services to accentuate his body's "hermaphroditic traces." The painting is about the amplification of his agency that results from his acceptance of his body and his use of male hormones. Volcano avers that his project is to mobilize "technologies of gender," as distinct from technologies of anatomy. Characterizing himself as a "gender abolitionist," he assigns himself the role of embodying a "bridge we can all



Figure 9.2. *Matrix*. © Jenny Saville. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York.

walk across” (2005). He’s a nonpareil humanist activist, and Saville’s painting keeps faith with his self-understanding.

A nude portrait befits Volcano because his body is the vehicle of both his art and his politics. Both *Plan* and *Matrix* show figures of colossal proportions—vast expanses of flesh. As in *Plan*, the *Matrix* figure is prone, but unlike in *Plan*, a cushioned platform is inserted beneath the *Matrix* figure. Whereas *Matrix* presents a well-supported individual, *Plan* presents one with no visible means of support, nothing to sustain her. Like the *Plan* figure, the *Matrix* figure is foreshortened—the thighs appear massive, the genitalia outsized. Volcano’s sex is thrust forward and painted in saturated hues. It’s the first thing you see. But, unlike in *Plan*, his head is in no way diminished—neither in size nor in force of character. By defining the contours of the head using planes of color, Saville gives it an appearance of strength. There’s a hint of a sneer on Volcano’s lips. His eyebrows slightly raised, he lifts his head to gaze directly at viewers. In contrast to the submissive, lowered eyes of the figure in *Plan*, Volcano’s glance is challenging.

In more ways than one, this figure defies “anatomical correctness.” Inasmuch as this work portrays Volcano’s self-styled, hormone-boosted, gender-abolitionist body, its subject is a body that has been deliberately manipulated to transgress corporeal norms. Saville’s professed purpose in making this work (and *Passage*) is to represent “the idea of floating gender that is not fixed” (Schama 2005, 126). She sought out Volcano to model for her because “he/she is a mutational body with gender defying body parts” (Gayford 1999). To get across her vision of “floating gender,” Saville distorts some somatic spatial relations. On the left side of the canvas is Volcano’s masculine head perfectly framed by womanly breasts that are sited exceedingly high on his chest. On the right side of the canvas, Saville places the predominantly female genitalia so conspicuously far forward in the crotch that they encroach on the figure’s abdomen. Despite the resulting emphasis on the seeming contradictions of Volcano’s body, the figure does not look like a hodgepodge of mismatched body parts. On the contrary, the figure in *Matrix* fuses presumptively incompatible corporeal elements to constitute a new human form.

Certain corporeal anomalies are plain to see. The figure has a moustache and goatee plus breasts and minus a regulation penis and testicles. Why doesn’t this image collapse into a biomedical collage—a pick-your-own-parts body composite? This figure doesn’t look undone by incoherence because Saville adroitly merges or juxtaposes other compositional elements. An androgynous tattooed decorative band encircles the slim upper arm, which morphs into a mountain of a shoulder. Directly in front of the shoulder, a big, soft breast slumps to one side. Together they form a pair of hills, natural neighbors. Volcano’s genital region is visually salient, both because Saville’s facture in this section is especially lavish and because the figure’s hips tilt forward to show off the genitalia. The paint here is layered on in thick swathes and dabs of color—shades of pink-tinged creams, tans, and browns. The drawing is not at all like an anatomy textbook image. It’s impossible to distinguish the parts you studied in sex-education class. Chromatic brushstrokes blend into one another, blurring the genitalia and creating folds of delicate flesh. Volcano has made sure that his genitals aren’t neatly classifiable, and Saville paints him that way.

I agree with Donald Kuspit that Saville “restores beauty to the primitive genital organ” (1999). However, I think that he errs in interpreting *Matrix* as a descendant of Gustave Courbet’s *Origin of the World* (ca. 1866). *Matrix* doesn’t resurrect the age-old metaphor tying female reproductive paraphernalia to creativity. Saville’s pigment tones and paint application are so lush that the tissue she describes looks sensual, excitable, sexually engaged. Kuspit notwithstanding, *Matrix* depicts the seductiveness and vitality of erogenous tissue in a manner that conveys sexual agency. Though by no means pornographic, this bit is very sexy.

Still, *Matrix* is hardly a rapturous celebration of gender-bending, medically mediated corporeity. Volcano is well aware of the hazards of gender abolitionism, and Saville ensures that her rendering of his body incorporates this danger.¹³ The *Matrix* figure perches precariously at the edge of the supporting platform with an arm hanging straight down and a thigh dangling off the edge. Tilted toward the viewer, the figure is a little off balance. Although Saville provides solid support below the figure, she has had him assume an uneasy pose—a pose that comports with Volcano’s disequibrated, disquieting stance regarding gendered embodiment, not to mention his vexed social status. Viewers of *Matrix* see a form that is at risk of falling, yet somehow holding steady.

Yet, they also encounter a figure who offers himself for viewing.¹⁴ Commenting on his own photographic work, Volcano affirms his recently found artistic and sexual agency:

I am using my body and body parts as source material in my photographic practice with increasing frequency. . . . To reach the point where I could become my own subject took twenty years. At last I was able to own my body enough to give it away visually. While producing these images I felt the power one can access when freed from conventional notions about what constitutes an attractive body. (Volcano 1999)

Saville grasps the agency Volcano gained by refining and augmenting his intersexed body and making images of himself. *Matrix* captures Volcano’s agency of evolving and self-presenting as a well-nigh postgender, corporeal amalgam.¹⁵

At first, Saville’s title, *Matrix*, seems antithetical to Volcano’s express desire to spotlight his masculine identity and agency and to downplay his femininity, for one definition of “matrix” is “womb,” and the prominent genitals of the *Matrix* figure appear to me to be closer to female organs than male ones.¹⁶ Yet, other definitions of “matrix” align her title with his identity as a gender abolitionist. Clearly, Volcano aspires to spark “a situation within which something else originates, develops, or is contained” and perhaps to be something like the “principal metal in an alloy” or a brand-new “mold or die” (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/matrix>).

Transgender, Corporeity, and Agency

In discussing the gender-medicine juncture, it may be tempting to focus exclusively on political analysis. However, this temptation must be resisted, for it leads to neglecting the diversity of individuals’ needs, values, motivations, and strategies

for negotiating interpersonal derogation and institutional subordination.¹⁷ Nothing is gained by unconditionally condemning or endorsing biomedical gender interventions. Here I seek to balance political, interpersonal, and personal viewpoints in order to clarify disanalogies between the mass medical come-on to nontransgendered women and the heterosexual mating scene that supports it, on the one hand, and various sex-reassignment options and the social context in which they are considered, on the other.¹⁸

Volcano's body and "hermaphrodyké" self-presentation constitute a standing critique of normative gender binarism and an ongoing reproach to anyone who, in Indra Windh's words, can't "count past two" (Volcano and Windh 2003).¹⁹ In contrast, a nontransgendered, female cosmetic surgery customer's postprocedure body complies with and helps to perpetuate this invidious ideology.²⁰ Not surprisingly, there are interpersonal and discursive pressures in transgender support groups to consolidate a transsexual identity (Mason-Schrock 1996).²¹ Although quite a few advertisements for Asian clinics turn up in a Google search for sex-reassignment surgery, and anecdotal evidence indicates that some surgeons regale audiences at conferences for transgendered people with exaggerated claims about the need for and benefits of their services, the western medical profession is not selling sex-reassignment procedures to transgendered people in the aggressive and systematic way that it is selling femininity-perfecting procedures to nontransgendered women. Whatever pressures there may be to buy sex-reassignment technology, they certainly have not gained the juggernaut power and cultural omnipresence of the beauty business's marketing to nontransgendered women (and increasingly to nontransgendered men). Indeed, resistance within transgendered communities to availing yourself of medical technology is on the rise (Heyes 2007, 58).

In my view, then, Volcano is right to ascribe both progressive political agency and personal autonomy to his appropriation of hormone treatment. However, because neither political agency nor personal autonomy is an all-or-nothing achievement, I acknowledge, as does Volcano, that bigotry and other repressive forces unjustly limit the political impact of his dissident body and art, as well as the freedom with which he enacts and the satisfactions he derives from his transgendered, intersexed identity.

Whereas *Plan* proffers an ironic allegory of art and medicine as conjoint practices in virtue of gender norms and power relations, *Matrix* brackets medicine for the sake of exploring the positive agentic possibilities of transgendered embodiment. Obviously, lots of women who have undergone cosmetic procedures testify that submitting to the knife or needle enhances their agency. Now that they are more attractive, they feel better about themselves. Consequently, they act with more confidence in a wider range of social situations. No doubt, many of these claims are true, and I have no reason to believe that Saville would dispute this. But since *Matrix* depicts enhanced transgendered agency, I'll concentrate on this topic and ask what this portrait, in conjunction with Volcano's autobiographical texts and self-portraiture, implies for agency theory.

It is useful to recall Volcano's assertion that it took him twenty years to free himself from ideals of attractiveness grounded in gender dimorphism and to gain

sufficient body-esteem to start photographing himself. Judith Butler concludes an essay on justice and the struggles of intersexed people by striking a similar chord. Rejecting modernist suggestions that either a universal human core or an ineffable individual core can legitimate an intersexed person's demands for biomedical treatment, Butler proposes that a conviction that standard issue genitalia are irrelevant to the "lovability" of a person does legitimate these demands (Butler 2004, 71–74). Following Butler, Volcano's recollection of his own history might be understood as a process of crediting his own lovability and developing a healthy form of self-love.

Because Jay Prosser contests Butler's rejection of the claim that agency presupposes an individualized self to direct action, his reliance on Didier Anzieu's account of the "skin ego" seems altogether incompatible with Butler's thought (Prosser 1998, 65 ff). In some respects, Prosser's and Butler's accounts are indeed irreconcilable.²² However, Sandra Bartky's discussion of a somatic dimension of love provides a point of intersection between them. Reflecting on a six-month separation from her partner, Bartky writes, "I realized after several months that I was suffering from something I had never seen described: it was a *skin hunger*. It wasn't sex that I missed so much as the comfort of a warm body in bed, the feeling of being held and stroked—touched" (Bartky 2002, 102). Whereas Butler's suggestion about lovability make senses of the loneliness of skin hunger, Prosser's psychoanalytic account of the need for sex-reassignment procedures makes sense of the necessity of undergoing some or all of these interventions as a precondition of feeling worthy of a loving touch.

Prosser recognizes, as does Butler, the facility with which the medically mandated narrative template of transsexuality infests the personal life stories of transgendered individuals, yet he counterposes this worry with a psychoanalytic account that lends a bit of credence to that "master narrative." In my view, his use of Anzieu's theory of embodiment and subjectivity is helpful for purposes of grasping the agency of transgendered individuals who seek out medical body modifications.

According to Prosser, "the transsexual does not approach the body as an immaterial provisional surround, but, on the contrary, as the very 'seat' of the self" (Prosser 1998, 67). Following Anzieu, he holds that your awareness of the surface of your body together with your sense of ownership with respect to your material form are integral to your body image, which, in turn, is integral to your sense of selfhood and agency (68–73; see also Gallagher 2005, 24–25, 35, 38). Your body image is not simply an imaginary replication of your corporeal contours. It is an emotionally charged construal of your body. Consequently, your "authentic body"—your owned body image—may fail to coincide with your actual body (Prosser 1998, 70).

This disjuncture is familiar from studies of phantom limbs (Prosser 1998, 78–84; Grosz 1994, 41, 70–73; Gallagher 2005, 86–106). Prosser characterizes the way discrepancies between a stubbornly intact body image and a body that has undergone amputation register affectively as "nostalgia" for a missing bodily attribute (Prosser 1998, 84). Ballerina Tanaquil Le Clercq (1929–2000), who was stricken with polio and paralyzed from the waist down at the age of twenty-seven, describes a similar experience:

“I had dreams in the beginning, for years,” she says, “of going to the theater and discovering I’d forgotten my toe shoes, or rushing from one ballet to another and not being able to get my hair up. Anxiety dreams about all the horrible things that could happen to you as a dancer—when I couldn’t even dance anymore. I outgrew those dreams eventually. Well, it was a hundred years ago. But when I dream now, I’m still walking, never wheeling. I know.” She rolls her eyes. “After all this time, you’d think I’d get the message.” (Brubach 1998)

So does Ahuva Cohen, who had sex-reassignment surgery at the age of thirty-three:

I had experienced my first epiphany about my true sexual nature under rather sleazy circumstances. When my college roommate persuaded me to take the subway down to Forty-Second Street with him to see *The Devil in Miss Jones*, I became transfixed by the images of Georgina Spelvin copulating on the screen. My simple erotic fantasies of the images of female bodies began to evolve into more elaborate fantasies of possessing a female body myself. When I met a girl and began having sex with her in my dorm room, I would imagine that someone else was doing to me what I was doing to her. . . .

I would argue, however, that the intense “nostalgia” that I had begun to feel for a feminized body had been more than skin deep. Becoming a woman for me was not about wanting to play with dolls, or about wanting to adorn myself with jewelry, or about wanting to avoid military service, or about wanting to feel comfortable in social interactions, or just about wanting to feel comfortable in my own skin, but rather about needing to be fucked like a woman. (Cohen n.d.)

Both Le Clercq and Cohen speak of ineradicable, emotional bonds that connect them to body images encoded in dreams or fantasies that are at odds with their actual anatomies.

Of signal importance for understanding posttreatment transgendered agency, Prosser points out that an amputee’s experience of a phantom limb can jumpstart adjustment to a prosthetic device (Prosser 1998, 85). Likewise, a transgendered person’s pretreatment emotional investment in and fantasized anticipation of a post-treatment anatomy facilitate posttreatment ownership of and agentic acclimation to a reconstructed body (85–89). Alas, Prosser does not theorize the agentic enhancement that hormonal or surgical treatment can underwrite for a transgendered person. Although Volcano does not write about this dimension of his life in any detail, his self-portraiture supplies abundant evidence of amplified agency.²³ Moreover, as I have argued, Saville’s portrait trumpets his agentic transmutation.

Saville’s whole-person approach to portraiture allows her to include dimensions of Volcano’s identity and agency that would ordinarily be excluded from a portrait and to represent Volcano’s identity and agency more fully than would ordinarily be possible. Two themes provide foci for *Matrix*’s composition, and they are key to interpreting this work: (1) Volcano’s “throwing down the gauntlet” attitude, centering on but not confined to his head, and (2) the unabashed sexual agency of Volcano’s body, centering on but not confined to his genitalia. I note, as well, the tender image of Volcano’s breasts framing his face. Saville conjures up a “Madonna with Child” synthesized in a single person—a mischievous, you might say “devilish,” metaphor for Volcano’s self-love and lovability.

If *Matrix* does not egregiously misrepresent Volcano, it sets a challenging agenda for philosophy of action. In what follows, I consider why the structure of many theories of identity and agency precludes explicating *Matrix*'s depiction of Volcano's agentic enhancement, and I suggest a criterion of adequacy that a theory of agency must satisfy if it is to accommodate the agentic advances that *Matrix* spotlights.

While differing in many details, a number of influential philosophical accounts of personal identity and agency rely on one of two versions of a top-down model, both of which position the mind as the supervisor of the body. The basic idea of the identity construction model is that the mind deliberates and decides which of your qualities and desires to endorse, tolerate, or try to acquire.²⁴ When you act on accepted attributes, you act autonomously. The basic idea of the action production model is that the mind deliberates and decides what to do.²⁵ Autonomous action issues from these determinations. I cannot review all of these accounts here, but, in my view, Saville's representation of Volcano is incompatible with top-down views of identity and agency. Nothing in *Matrix* warrants the inference that Volcano's mind has a monopoly on governing his conduct. What is missing in these theories, central to Prosser's view and memorably described in *Matrix*, is intelligent corporeity. To be sure, Volcano knows his own mind and acts accordingly, but *Matrix* foregrounds his agentic body.

In some philosophical quarters, Kantian insistence on pure reason as the ruling faculty of an autonomous agent is losing favor. More and more, philosophers are acknowledging the contributions of affect to discerning what sort of person to aspire to be or what would be best to do. Basal affective states, such as self-trust, have gained entrée into some theories as necessary conditions for autonomy (e.g., Govier 1993; Benson 2000). Harry Frankfurt's contention that love demarcates the boundaries of the will further underscores the role of affect in identity and agency (Frankfurt 1988, ch. 7; Frankfurt 1998, chs. 11, 14). This salubrious trend opens the possibility that more philosophers of action will recognize the link between affect and embodiment and realize how crucial embodiment is to identity and agency. Purely mental affect is the exception rather than the rule, and somatically situated feelings are indispensable to intelligent agency.²⁶

The most promising philosophical antecedent for a theory of corporeal practical intelligence is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied habit. For Merleau-Ponty, habit is "the [body's] power to respond with a certain type of solution to situations of a certain general form" (Merleau-Ponty 1962/2004, 164–65). By virtue of habit, you corporeally apprehend the possibilities for action that an environment presents; select movement that comports with your needs, values, and aims; and rally your fund of know-how to act appropriately and meaningfully (129, 151–52, 161, 165). Although the term "habit" colloquially connotes mindless routines, such as smoking cigarettes or watching hours of escapist television, Merleau-Ponty's conception of habit references a flexible capability that is attuned to new information and responsive to it. As he puts it, habit constitutes "our power of dilating our being-in-the-world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments" (166). Your know-how expands as you put it to use. Although culturally mediated, your body is agentic—that is, capable of improvisation and innovation.²⁷

In my view, one of Merleau-Ponty's examples of the workings of habit preciently anticipates key problems in theorizing transgendered agency. Consider a fashionable woman wearing a hat adorned with a long feather who effortlessly adjusts her movements to accommodate the feather's extension of her height (Merleau-Ponty 1962/2004, 165). According to Merleau-Ponty, she temporarily incorporates her apparel into her body image. Armed with this preconscious self-knowledge, she navigates the world without poking nearby people in the eye or crushing her feather in a cab door. Of course, she consciously donned this hat when she left home. Still, she didn't consciously revise her body image or consciously alter her behavior to take the plume into account. Merleau-Ponty maintains that people expand and contract their sense of their own spatial boundaries with surprising ease and frequency and that habit enables them to adjust their movement patterns accordingly.

Artist Rebecca Horn's prosthetic inventions and her films of performances in which individuals wear them demonstrate the human body's agentic malleability and versatility. For *Finger Gloves* (*Handschuhfingers* 1972), Horn constructed black hand attachments with straight, rigid "fingers" about three feet long. In the film, the performer uses her prosthetically elongated digits to feel her way around what appears to be a patio or balcony paved in stone. Through her artificial fingers, she finds her way around, encountering the surfaces of a low boundary wall and making contact with the back of a nude male body lying face-down on the stone paving. Horn never gives viewers a wide-angle look at the setting. Allowed to see only what the "gloved" performer comes across, viewers are vouchsafed a glimpse of the lived experience of an alternative embodiment.

Horn's artistic method for her *Personal Art* series is collaborative. The device she creates for each performer reflects her understanding of that individual's agentic identity. She describes her process as follows:

The actual performance is preceded by a process of development in which the chosen performer participates. The performer's desires and projections determine the manner in which he presents himself. The "garment" is constructed and made to fit the body of the wearer. Through the act of fitting it and wearing it time after time, a process of identification begins to evolve, an essential factor for the performance. During the performance, the person is isolated, separated from his everyday environment, in order to find extended forms of self-perception. (Horn et al. 2000, 24)

What Merleau-Ponty invites you to imagine and Horn's films demonstrate is practically intelligent corporeity—affectively inflected proprioceptive and sensory awareness together with conatively triggered corporeal competencies. Your repertoire of know-how not only indexes your agentic identity but also functions as a vehicle of self-reimaging and self-direction.

Still, passé headgear and trendy artistic conceits might seem irrelevant to transgendered agency. After all, transgendered agentic identities and uses of medical technology do not concern appurtenances to be put on or taken off at will. They concern a person's experienced and experiencing flesh and the option of tampering with it. While acknowledging this disparity, I submit that the continuities are more philosophically significant.

Horn, recall, did not dream up costumes and then recruit volunteers to try them out. She designed garments to “fit” her performers psychocorporeally—to echo their yearnings, fantasies, and emotionally fueled body images. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty’s lady of fashion dresses as she does because the figure-plus-hat gestalt she sees in her mirror pleases her. By her reckoning, it successfully synthesizes social standards of accessorization, her personal style, and her body image. She, too, is guided by affect and desire, and, like Horn’s performers who developed strong identifications with their couture prostheses, she identifies with her mirror image.²⁸

In my view, Volcano’s experience of gendered embodiment, as portrayed in *Matrix*, is analogous. Whatever role rational calculation may have played in his decisions about ingesting hormones and posing for Saville, *Matrix* takes no notice of it. Urgent desires, compelling feelings, and vivid fantasies centering on a radically unorthodox body image underwrite the bodily configuration Volcano engineered for himself and the self-presentation Saville ascribes to Volcano. Neither *Plan* nor *Matrix* etiolates gendered subjectivity. In both works, libidized gender saturates the models’ bodies. The *Plan* figure is a victim of the clash between her body and feminine beauty ideals. Because her body image of gendered inferiority subdues her agency, she challenges philosophers of action to explicate corporeal agentic dysfunction—anomic, numbed, deskilled, immiserated embodiment. In contrast, *Matrix* represents corporeal agentic competence—attuned, versatile, confident, intelligent embodiment. In *Matrix*, the figure embraces his “mutant” body image, and the coordination of his feelings, desires, and body image quickens his agency. Paralleling Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and Horn’s performance art, *Matrix* features Volcano’s vibrant embodied subjectivity and credits his visceral experience as an arbiter of his agency.²⁹

NOTES

1. Volcano makes a similar statement in a 1999 essay: “I no longer identify as ‘woman,’ and feel uncomfortable being read as female. I am intersex by design, an intentional mutation and need to have my gender specified as existing outside of the binary gender system, rather than an abomination of it.”

2. I am not suggesting that Saville’s work is unprecedented in western portraiture. For example, her work is often compared with Lucien Freud’s nude portraits. Although I don’t have space to make the case for this claim here, I believe that her work constitutes a significant advance in this genre in virtue of its evocation of psychocorporeality—the inextricability of selfhood, personal identity, and individual agency from the enculturated and intelligent human body.

3. For additional discussion of agentic bodies in Saville’s oeuvre, see Meyers forthcoming, “Jenny Saville Remakes the Female Nude.”

4. For relevant discussion, see Meagher 2003.

5. For discussion of the relevance of nontransgendered women’s body issues to the topic of transgendered identity and agency, see Heyes 2003, 1097–98, and Heyes 2007, 40–42.

6. For a related reading of the geometry of *Plan*, see Rowley 1996, 93–96.

7. She also holds her left arm rigidly straight and pulls it tightly against her left side. For relevant discussion of women’s need to make themselves as small as possible and to take up as little room as possible, see Bordo 1993, 185–212, and Bordo 1997, 127–33.

8. In addition to Saville's generous painterly treatment of the figure in *Plan*, the fact that she herself modeled for this painting provides evidence of her sympathy for the figure she portrays—indeed, her identification with this figure.

9. For my views about Orlan's work, see Meyers 2002, 133–37.

10. For further discussion of my views regarding feminine beauty ideals, personal identity, and agency, see Meyers 2002, chs. 5 and 6, and Meyers 2004, ch. 4.

11. Volcano says that a physician told him there's a 90 percent probability that he has a genetic mutation called "46XX true hermaphroditism" (Volcano 2000, 99). Recounting Volcano's intertwined personal and artistic development, Prosser reports that he first let his beard grow and then took male hormones and identified as a "Hermaphrodyké," a "queer-identified intersexual" (Prosser 2000, 10).

12. Although Saville uses bi-gendered pronouns to refer to Volcano, I'll use the masculine pronoun because Volcano affirms that he valorizes his "mutant maleness" and doesn't want to be read as female (Volcano 1999). I do this with misgivings, however, because Volcano characterizes himself as a gender abolitionist. Given the existing English framework of gendered or neuter pronouns, I suspect that far-reaching cultural changes would need to occur before language could be established that would neither gender nor thingify (I think I'm borrowing this term from Catherine MacKinnon) gender abolitionists who live their beliefs as Volcano does. As things are, we can have a third gender or an in-between gender, but we don't have the linguistic resources to refer to a nongender that isn't an "it."

13. Volcano outlines how he copes with the dominant gender regime: "Out on the street I often feel the need to pass (as male). But in my own queer community I don't want to pass as male or female. I want to be seen for what I am: a chimera, a hybrid, a herm" (Volcano and Windh 2003). Elsewhere he describes being assaulted on a London bus (Volcano 2004).

14. In this connection, it is worth noting that Saville inspires confidence in her models partly by taking risks herself. Volcano recalls: "She had photographed herself in the positions she wanted me to attempt, before I arrived. The fact that she exposed her own crevice impressed me and produced in me a desire to do whatever was required no matter how undignified or painful" (Volcano 1999).

15. For an interpretation of *Matrix* as a "study in body dysphoria" and an articulation of the thesis that you can't really choose to become the "opposite sex," see Halberstam 2005, 111. I find this view of *Matrix* dubious because Volcano assimilates his experience posing for Saville to what subjects have told him about their experiences posing for him and praises Saville's work (Volcano 1999).

16. I emphasize that this passage of *Matrix* looks this way to me because I take seriously Prosser's comment about the visual effect of Volcano's close-up perspective and enlargement of the images in his *Transcock* suite. Prosser claims that the size of these artistic manipulations enable many viewers who would not otherwise see these former clitorises as penises to grasp the "felt reality of this part as a penis" for the transsexual man who posed for the photograph (Prosser 2000, 9).

17. I discuss the interplay of individual autonomy, cultural norms, and political critique in a number of other essays—for example, Meyers 2002, chs. 1, 2, and 6, and Meyers 2004, chs. 2, 4, 10, and 13.

18. In contrast, Heyes underscores the analogies and continuities between the experience of women and transsexuals in order to make a case for feminist solidarity with transgendered people (Heyes 2007, 45).

19. Here is the context in which Windh uses this expression: "INDRA: The lenses through which I perceive the world allow me to see more than double. In fact I take in a beautifully shifting kaleidoscopic reality, an amazing mosaic of gender variance and norm deviance. Luckily, I have learnt to count past two and deliberately trained my eyes, and other senses, to detect a multiplicity of gendered possibilities all around and within me. I appreciate, value, respect, desire, admire and love what I see" (Volcano and Windh 2003).

20. It is worth bearing in mind that feminist dieters are also complicit in perpetuating oppressive norms of feminine heterosexual attractiveness (Heyes 2007, 59; see also Bartky 1990, 71–78).

21. For commentary on pernicious coercion that paradoxically enforces sex reassignment surgery as an exit route from the stigma of homosexuality in Iran, see Ireland 2007.

22. I do not have space to engage Prosser's critique of poststructuralist accounts of the subject, nor can I take up problems in psychoanalytic accounts, such as Anzieu's. In this essay, I isolate what I consider insightful in each position.

23. For reproductions of the self-portraits I refer to, see Volcano 2000, 88–98, 168–79.

24. The views of Harry Frankfurt (1988), Marilyn Friedman (2003), and John Christman (2005) exemplify this approach.

25. David Velleman's work (2000a; 2000b; 2002) exemplifies this approach.

26. For defense of these claims about embodied affectivity, see Meyers "Affect, Corporeity, and Practical Intelligence." Unpublished manuscript.

27. For complementary work in this area, see Dreyfus 1998; Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1999; Grimshaw 1999; Sheets-Johnstone 1999; and Sullivan 2000.

28. Prosser underscores the prominence of "mirror scenes" in transsexual autobiographies (Prosser 1998, 99 ff).

29. When Laurie Shrage first proposed that I write for this volume, I shrank from the task. I questioned whether I had any right to talk about life situations so different from my own. But Laurie persisted, and Ahuva B. Cohen, who underwent sex-reassignment surgery twenty years ago, permitted me to read and quote from parts of her memoir. Her text evidences such extraordinary candor, introspective insight, and skepticism about theories that I decided to try, with all due self-doubt, to take a first step toward understanding transgendered and transsexual agency. I want to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to both Laurie Shrage and Ahuva Cohen. I would not have attempted this essay, were it not for their help. I also thank Maureen Bray, director of the Sean Kelly Gallery for refreshing and correcting my memory of Rebecca Horn's *Finger Gloves*.

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