

TEXTE ZUR KUNST

NEW DEVELOPMENT

FRAGMENTS OF A MISSING INTERSEX ARCHIVE GINEVRA SHAY

While acronyms for queer and trans communities have come to include the “I” for intersex, as in LGBTQIA, one is hard-pressed to find that “I” presented in the art sphere. Ginevra Shay pulls together poetry, cinema, myths, and music to form the beginning of an intersex archive. Outlined in chapters, this essay is written through the theme of the void and explores its gape and its potential. Here, the intersex experience weaves through stone tablet, primordial ooze, dreams, flowers, and hymnals. Invoking contemporary and ancient works, “Fragments of a Missing Intersex Archive” becomes a poetic guide for anyone interested in traversing paths seldom taken, so one may pursue under-considered options for the present and for the future.

ANGELIC VOID

AN ANGEL OPENS UP THE RUSTED GATES
THAT MAKE WHOLE AN EMBANKMENT.
THE ANGEL FLUTTERS WITH THE FORCE
OF CORPOREAL FIGURES WHOSE POWER
INSPIRES A SLIPPAGE OF FEAR TO PANIC
IN THE VIBRATING SOULS OF DOCTORS,
LAWYERS, PRIESTS AND BIOLOGISTS WHO
CUT AWAY WINGS. A HYPER-SWIFT CLOS-
ING AND RE-CLOSING OF PERCEPTIVE
ABILITIES AND MAN-MADE WOUNDS
IMPERCEPTIBLE TO THE HUMAN EYE IN
ITS MICRO-REPETITIONS.

WHAT BETTER WAY TO RE-ARTICULATE
SPACE AND TIME THAN THROUGH A
BODY LITERALLY BEYOND THE SCOPE OF,
YET STILL WITHIN, THE WORLD OF MAN
(AND WOMAN). THE PHALLIC/VOID DIVI-
SION COLLAPSES, NOT AT THE LEVEL OF
METAPHOR BUT IN FLESH. ANGELS CAN
ONLY BE REPRESENTED IN GESTURES
BECAUSE THEY ELUDE PLACE.

– From Juliana Huxtable, *Intersex* (2019)¹

In the angelic void there are no opposites. The void can hold all forms. Emptiness is absolved and angels’ earthly shapes transform.

Angels know divisions are patterned knots to simply untie.

They defy ordering truths to unravel new openings. Fences fall to meadows. Flowers no longer need to turn toward the sun. All things can be drawn together. In the softness of chaos.

Angels can enter where there is no room. They see the vast image.

As in not valid on birth certificates or state documents (they flutter past errors and limitations). As in filling the space that is perceived non-space between male and female. As in declaration. Not legally binding. The angelic void of intersex is heavenly discharge.

PRISMATIC DREAMS

What is mine? Dreams?

While dreaming, a figure comes to the protagonist that’s part angel part ram part satellite
Hack ...

Into land rights and ownership
Into business law, proprietorship
Into the history of the bank
And question the business of slavery
Of free labor, its relation to today’s world
Into ambition into greed
Into suffering and sufferance
The treatment of one faith towards another ...

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Juliana Huxtable, "BAT 2," 2019

Time held a mirror and reflected a world of
parallels
Of fear and longing
With no sense of belonging
But that dissonance became a song in me
What should have destroyed me
What attempted to gender or boy me
Set me free

– From *Neptune Frost*, written by Saul Williams,
directed by Saul Williams and Anisia Uzey-
man (2021)²

In dreams, the wanderer finds paths through
the dark, seeing before dawn; the reward is
discovering what remains invisible to the rest
of the world. In the techno-futurist dreamscape
Neptune Frost, allegory reveals the deep entangle-
ments of the governed body and the desire for
autonomy. The protagonists of the film, Neptune
and Matalusa, wonder what belongs to the vision-
ary hacker, the wandering laborer, the intersex
star-child: A prismatic dream?

Neptune Frost is ultimately a story about the
power of dreams and the importance of trusting

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in oneself to turn against abusive power structures. A prismatic dream represents the multidimensionality of hopes and desires.

A prism is bound by planes, but the light it refracts, like dreams, is not limited by the same physical restraints. The way the film moves nonlinearly through terrains and narratives articulates a central theme: that bodies are multifaceted and are closer to a nebulous interstellar form than we might realize. Much of Neptune's journey is learning that constructed societal norms, such as the gender binary, are in fact abusive, and that life is much more complex and transcendent.

Relatedly, Neptune and Matalusa know that time continues a reflection of parallels, binary patterns of violence and discrimination that are intertwined with ecology, data, race, and gender. When a mirror is simply a bilateral relation, it becomes a barrier, it loses its prismatic relation to the world.

Neptune and Matalusa wander with an internal sunstone, a prismatic way of seeing, which allows them to find their way through the heavy clouds. They look with stereoscopic sight where false binaries collapse into nothing but potential. They alone possess their voyage. Society holds no sway.

IN THE SPRING OF ASCENSION

When I was writing, I was performing secrets ...

– Ana Roxanne on the writing of ~~~ (2019) and *Because of a Flower* (2020)⁵

Ascension is liquid. On an unknown course it spins freely in bloom. Ascension creeps across arid expanses flowering future structures. It's coiled energy stored up in horizons that are felt before they are seen. Lost in whorls, held by world, a passage made without distance.

Ana Roxanne's album *Because of a Flower* is a suite of hymnals where voice builds the structure of sanctuary. Ethereal harmonies condense into a tactile space. Soundscapes swell and retreat, blending with field recordings to build a meandering interior and an expansive garden for the listener to wander.

Because of a Flower pays homage to Herculine Barbin (known by many names, including Camille and Alexina), a French intersex figure who lived in the early 1800s. Barbin's self-titled memoir outlines a peaceful youth lived almost entirely in convents and boarding schools for girls, where she was guided by her faith and supported by patronage to become an educator. At a teachers' convent, Barbin, then known as Camille, fell in love and had a secret relationship with another teacher, Sara. With hopes of marrying her lesbian lover, she confessed her dual-sexed nature to the bishop in her town's church confessional. Though supported by the bishop, her confession ultimately led to discrimination, exile, and a brief and ill-fated attempt to live life as a man. In her memoir, she pushes past blows she received and yearns for something beyond the material world: "your spirits cannot plunge into that limpid Ocean of the infinite, where, lost for a day upon your arid shores, my soul drinks deep."⁴

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How does one articulate the vastness of self that is suppressed through the codification of one's being for the sake of identity?

Ana Roxanne's music creates a deep well of boundless space. In her song "Camille," sampled dialogue from René Fére's film *The Mystery of Alexina* billows down cavernous halls and is chased by Roxanne's devotional lyrics and lo-fi bossa nova beats. The album creates an offering, perhaps to absolve the pain of its protagonist Camille, but also to celebrate the clandestine Shakespearean-esque star-crossed love she shared with her partner, Sara, in the convent.

Doesn't devotion sometimes exceed all imagined limitations? Sanctuary is an anywhere to nowhere in particular when a flower is its center.

Anyone who's been made to feel invisible is set free through the ecstatic joy of solitude that is palpable throughout *Because of a Flower*. Near and far, voice at times holds the listener in as close as a whisper, only to retreat and beckon the listener in once again like vespers swirling around a church nave. Its final offering, "Take the Thorn, Leave the Rose," starts with a foreboding finger-picking whose twang articulates a reminder and warning of the importance of bodily autonomy.

The body doesn't conform to unjust social constructs and neither does the spirit.

Like water, *Because of a Flower* is full of slow movement. One could interpret the end of the album as a reclamation of intersex femininity from centuries of erasure and mutilation. Here, Hermaphroditus willingly becomes Venus in her

own private spring and ascends through an acceptance of the unknown.

HEWN OF LIGHT

ineffable, hidden, brilliant scion,
forever in whirring motion,
you scattered the dark mist,
the mist that lay before your eyes.
Flapping your wings, you whirled about
throughout this world,
you brought pure light.

– From the Orphic Hymn to Protogonos,
6.5–8⁵

In various ancient Orphic theogonies, there is a consistent shared narrative that at genesis, a timeless time, or void, brought into existence a cosmic egg. Protogonos (or Phanes, also equated with Eros), a dual-sexed primeval deity, was the first to emerge from the egg, and he battled with chaos to generate all life.⁶ As the bearer of light, Protogonos illuminated the possibility within the abyss and gave birth to the universe.

This Orphic hymn introduces an ancient light as a coruscating and prolonged temporal unfolding. Here, the illumination and evanescence of celestial bodies holds a physicality with which to build humanity and eventually identity, ethics, and the metropolis.

Connections can be drawn between the Orphic creation myth of Protogonos and the Pergamon Statue of Hermaphroditus (2nd century BCE). The Hermaphroditus statue was originally installed alongside the other gods and deities on

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the Pergamon Altar in modern-day Bergama, Turkey, which endeavored to produce a larger-than-life ideal of a great civilization and an articulation of political power. Unlike other ancient Greek altars of the Hellenistic and Classical eras, the Pergamon Altar appears to be about a cosmological event and ethics, rather than a valorization war. The Great Altar articulates a paradigm shift in the meaning and symbolism of sculpture from this era.⁷ The myth of dual-sexed deities such as Protogonos and Hermaphroditus aligns with many ancient and modern religions, where human perfection is imagined as an unbroken unity of two sexes, sometimes articulated in one body and sometimes as romantic union, as an articulation of the divine. In this symbolism, the acts of love and civility transcend the sexes to recreate the birth of the cosmos.

Hermaphroditus was part of this artistic program put forth by Eumenes II, ruler of Pergamon, in which a standing androgynous god was worshiped for his moral excellence and ability to unite the sexes as the creator of marriage.

The story of Hermaphroditus in the Salmacis Inscription at Halicarnassus appears to draw a connection to the statue of Hermaphroditus from Pergamon in date, legend, and location. The statue and inscription both portray the son of Hermes and Aphrodite. The dual-sexed god contributed to the foundation myths of the cities of Pergamon and Halicarnassus through morality and the belief that the highest human form occurred when the masculine and feminine were balanced in one. A passage from the Salmacis Inscription, which is from the perspective of Aphrodite, translates to:

Halicarnassus settles the lovely hill beside the stream of Salmacis, called dear to the immortals in song, and she occupies the lovely home of the nymph, who once took our boy in her sweet embrace and raised him, Hermaphroditus, to be outstanding [...]⁸

Scholarly research of the past decade has begun to put forth new interpretations of Hermaphroditus. The vast majority of research on Hermaphroditus statues and intersex people from antiquity is based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which has been challenged in recent years with the discovery of the Salmacis Inscription. Ovid seems to have reworked the original myth of an androgynous god to tell the story of a resistant male youth who became corrupted with the body of an aggressive female nymph. The merging of male and female in this way into an androgynous mixture of the two seems to have been his own creation, as it is not attested elsewhere.⁹

A fine line between mastery and mishandling becomes articulated as civilizations tip-toe around omnicide. When a society promotes an ideal, and that ideal changes, it often creates a swing toward an opposite belief system and a purge of the last.

The altering of stories and statues has long been common practice. The Sleeping Venus/Hermaphrodite (1st/2nd century CE), at the World Museum in Liverpool, was originally Hermaphroditus but was altered in the 1800s to have its phallus, as well as its nursing children, removed. This is only known because there is a drawing of the original statue in the collection of the British Museum.¹⁰ With clear evidence of manipulation

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Saul Williams and Anisia Uzeyman, scene from "Neptune Frost," 2021

to this prominent statue, how many other Venuses may have begun as Hermaphroditus?

Hermaphroditus evades the corporeal and the concrete to find unity in duality. Perhaps there is the potential for illumination to create a conjoinment in which the primordial and the futuristic traverse the same fever dream of contrivance. In it, the ethereal and solid find a way to unfold together in the present.

THE MISSING "I"

In the first place, let me treat of the nature of mankind and what has happened to it; for the original human nature was not like the present, but different. The sexes were not two as they are now, but originally three in number; there was man, woman, and the union of the two, having a name corresponding to this double nature, which had once a real existence, but is now lost [...]

– From Aristophanes's speech in Plato's Symposium¹¹

What happened to this third sex, the androgyne, of ancient Greek thought? Was the androgyne's wholeness a threat to the gods, and Zeus required their strength be diminished by being cut in two? Are gods alone allowed to be androgynous but humans not?

The act of getting lost can happen under innumerable circumstances – intentional wandering, secret acts of preservation, or simply chance. On the more common (and nefarious) side, original courses of objects and histories vanish through theft, censorship, war, and change in religious power. It is hard to encapsulate all that's been lost through intentional alteration, suppression, and destruction.

The paucity of the missing is perhaps what keeps one searching for fragments, and the intangibility is what makes some strive to articulate it. How does one start to define something that has an unknown form? Where does one begin?

Searching *Printed Matter's* catalogue, one item and one table came up from the search term

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Oliver Laric, "Sleeping Figure," 2022

"intersex" in a catalogue of 45,000 titles.

Wendy's Subway

Zero intersex mentions from 3,000 noncirculating titles and numerous events and programs.

Artforum

Twelve intersex mentions (first mention, 2008) in a more than 100,000-page archive over six decades.

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Zero intersex mentions in about 1,800 articles available online.

e-flux

Seventeen intersex mentions in over 26,000 documents.

Intersex individuals continue to be left out of major institutions, archives, and programs.¹²

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Misrepresented and put on display in medical findings. It begs the question: Where is the I in LGBTQIA? To recognize and normalize the intersex individual and their many known and yet-to-be-identified intersex variations in the mainstream would be to take a step toward undoing the shoddy scaffolding of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. An effort toward bodily and mental autonomy. A step toward the acceptance of difference and diversity of all kinds. It would pave the way for more research and scholarship on the intersex figures who have influenced history, culture, and politics and give more living intersex people the confidence to be seen.

The Intersex flag was added to the combined Pride flag in 2021.

Germany adopted its first law “for the protection of children with variants of sex development,” albeit with numerous loopholes, in 2021.

Nonconsensual, medically unnecessary intersex surgeries are still legal in the United States.

Notes

- 1 Excerpt from Juliana Huxtable, *Intersex* (New York: Façadomy, 2019). Edition of 5.
- 2 Dialogue from Neptune Frost (Rwanda, United States: Kino Lorber, 2021).
- 3 Ana Roxanne and Cat Zhang, “The Radiant Slowness of Ana Roxanne,” *Pitchfork*, April 14, 2021, <https://pitchfork.com/features/rising/the-radiant-slowness-of-ana-roxanne/>.
- 4 Herculine Barbin, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall, with an introduction by Michel Foucault (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 155–56.
- 5 *The Orphic Hymns*, trans. Apostolos N. Athanassakis and Benjamin M. Wolkow (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).
- 6 Alberto Bernabé, “The Gods in Later Orphism,” in *The Gods of Ancient Greece: Identities and Transformations*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Andrew Erskine, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) 422–41.
- 7 Victor Ljunggren Szepessy, “The Marriage Maker: The Pergamon Hermaphrodite as the God Hermaphroditos, Divine Ideal and Erotic Object” (master’s thesis, University of Oslo, 2014), <https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/40013>.
- 8 Allen J. Romano, “The Invention Of Marriage: Hermaphroditus and Salmacis at Halicarnassus and in Ovid,” *Classical Quarterly*, New Series 59, no. 2 (December 2009): 543–61.
- 9 Jaclyn Rene Friend, “In Corpus Corpore Toto: Merging Bodies in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*” (master’s thesis, University of Georgia, 2014).
- 10 For details on the statue’s alteration, see “Sleeping Venus/Hermaphrodite,” National Museums Liverpool (website), accessed February 1, 2023, www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/artifact/sleeping-venushermaphrodite.
- 11 Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956).
- 12 “Intersex Fact Sheet,” Free & Equal, United Nations for LGBT Equality, May 2005, <https://www.unfe.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/UNFE-Intersex.pdf>.