

Queer Glances on Gender, Sexuality, and the Body

Presentation of my doctoral thesis

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In the summer 2006 the classic Finnish porn magazine called *Jallu* started publishing old issues under the name *Retro-Jallu*. The first issue of *Retro-Jallu* included an article from 1963 entitled "Extreme manliness. Extreme womanliness. How to understand them?" (Luoto 1963/2006, 16–17) The lead of the article reads as follows:

If we claim that in many cases, a beautiful woman with rather masculine features arouses men more than a hyper-feminine creature, one sees this claim paradoxical if not totally perverted. We might just as well claim that a man whose appearances are feminine or appealing may quite often be more popular among women than his purely masculine counterpart.¹

In the doctoral dissertation *Queer Glances on Gender, Sexuality, and the Body* [Vikuroivia vilkaisuja. Ruumis, sukupuoli, seksuaalisuus ja visuaalisen kulttuurin tutkimus] I have analysed exactly this: how popularized knowledge about desirable and undesirable genders and sexualities is produced through images. In our contemporary visualised culture images have a lot of power; they produce our sense of what is real. Visual representations of women and men have also a good deal of power: they function as objects of identification and of desire and as kinds of mirrors in our identity work. It can even be claimed that in contemporary culture visuality is most explicitly present in the

ways we style our bodies and treat them as public images. Through our bodies we tell others about our values and who we are. One's own body is a kind of display window; it is the surface where our values and attitudes – life worth pursuing – are visualised. In this sense the research belongs to that brand of visual studies which does not see visual representations as reflecting reality but rather, as Teresa de Lauretis (1987) has put it, as a social technology of gender and sexuality (see also Rossi 2003, 19–20).

As I began my research I did not have a corpus to be analysed. The research material has grown during the research. The same applies to research questions; along the way they, too, have been revised and modified. This process is openly present in the entirety of the research, since it is not a traditional scientific monograph. Even though the research at hand constitutes a book, in reality it consists of five articles published between 2002 and 2005 and of a wider theoretical introduction that frames and contextualises the articles.

The Path that Leads to the Goal: On Methodology

What about the methodology of the research? The term *method* derives etymologically from the Greek word *methodos*, referring to the way that leads to the goal. Even

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though the etymology of the word is clear the question concerning method is not simple, because the field of this study, research on visual representations of bodies, genders and sexualities does not belong to any particular field of study but rather, as an interdisciplinary project, falls in between many fields of study: art history, visual studies, gender studies and queer theory. At times the research questions have been quite far from the ones art historians often pose on their material. For example, I have not been interested in authorship and I have paid very little attention to the style, timing, authenticity or rarity of the research material – even though these are the questions through which art historians are expected to certify their competence as art historians. Instead, my concern has been in the question of why our culture is saturated with certain kinds of representations of gender and sexuality while other kinds of representations seem to be lacking almost entirely. To say it briefly, I have been interested in the cultural meanings and values that images necessarily carry along them.

One of the central themes in my research has been to posit visual images in a productive dialogue with theories of the gaze and with queer theory as well as with the theoretical concepts of *grotesque* and *androgyny*. With these theoretical tools I have exposed the ambiguity of my research material. This means that I have treated the images as examples in problematising the normative boundaries of genders and sexualities. I have knowingly stretched the interpretative limits of the research material – even if the images might invite us to normative reading.

What do I mean with *normative reading*? The term itself

refers to the American film researcher Kaja Silverman's idea of the Lacanian *screen*:

[It is] the repertoire of representations by means of which our culture figures all of those many varieties of 'difference' through which social identity is inscribed. (Silverman 1996, 19.)

This means that we have a repertoire of cultural images from which we draw from as we produce meanings. The Honourable Opponent Anu Koivunen (2004, 46) has summed up the idea that as we look at images, there seems to be a kind of ready-made interpretation at hand before we even know to it. What this indicates is that meaning production based on looking at images rests on conventions. Even though we give our own meanings to the images, we always cite previous meanings as well. Images through which subjects are culturally understood are based on previous interpretations.

In the interpretations I have brought forth less conventional meanings of genders and sexualities. In this sense the ideological starting point of the research is in the politics of looking and the methods *resisting reading* (Fetterley 1978), *oppositional gaze* (hooks 1992) *close reading* and *reading against the grain* (Pollock 1999; Palin 2004, 32, 45–46). These methods are familiar from feminist art history and roughly mean paying attention to details that make the images speak, so to say, and thereby open up space for interpretations that trouble the normative reading. These methods are useful for queer theory, which seeks to problematise mainstream or heterosexist imagery and show that it, too, has potential for queer reading. The theoretical aim of this methodology is to widen our scope

of vision. Politically it is to increase our tolerance to such genders and sexualities that might exceed the power of comprehension of what one considers to be normal.

In this context it is necessary to bring forth one concept: *vikuroida*. In English the verb *vikuroida* means *to buck*, as in “a horse that bucks.” In Finnish, the concept of *vikuroida* accentuates the performative power of images. This means that representations do not passively wait for someone’s interpretation. In fact, images and researchers, for example, participate in a dialogue in the meaning production. Bucking also refers to the idea that visual representations are not bound to any one interpretation but that they are always open to new meanings. Images that buck constantly resist the reduction of meanings in one unifying reading.

Etymologically, the verb *vikuroida* is extremely interesting: the genealogy of the word leads to Latin and to the verb *to figure*; to shape, and to mould. As the verb has travelled from the Latin to the Finnish language, the word has lost its Latin appearance and in the process become the vernacular or broken form of the term *figure*: *vikuroida*. The noun *vikuuuri*, which derives from the verb, refers to broken figures, that is, to faulty forms. In this sense *vikuuuri* is the vernacular form of the figure. If *vikuroida* refers to the act of resistance, then *vikuuuri* represents in the Butlerian (1990/1999; 1993) sense the *queer bodies* that are situated outside the heterosexual matrix. In its simplest form, this can mean, for example, cross-dressing or passing that trouble the binary gender system. In my usage the concept of *vikuroida* refers to the open dialogue between researchers and visual images in the meaning production. In this,

vikuroida aims at bringing forth the heteronormativity of art history and the ways in which it strives to closet non-normative representations of gender and sexuality.

Rethinking the Possible

The theoretical frame work of the research lies in visual studies and queer theory. Studies in visual culture are part of a project that deconstructs the hierarchy between art and other forms of visual representation. As a form of critical theory, visual studies does not aim at destroying the legacy of art history even if it is critical of its methodologies and ideological starting points. Nevertheless, visual studies aim at renewing art historical research questions and at bringing new research questions to the field of study.

Queer theory, on the other hand, makes critical questions on the supposed naturalness of genders and sexualities. According to Judith Halberstam (2002, 629), queer theory is “dedicated to denaturalizing the body and its pleasures”. Queer theory does not seek unchangeable gay or lesbian identities; it does not assume that there should be any transhistorical sexual subjects. On the contrary, queer theory presupposes that all genders and sexualities – heterosexuality included – are the products of specific historical practices within certain historical and social contexts. What this means for visual studies is that the question of sexuality and how images participate in the production of sexualised identities is taken seriously. One of the outcomes of the research was to make lesbian desires visible within Finnish art history, where the discussion on

lesbianism and lesbian desires has been almost completely missing.²

Judith Butler is one of the major figures in queer theory in general and in my research specifically. In her powerful book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990/1999) Butler criticises the idea of coherent gender by calling forth the figure (or should I say the *viikuri*) of the *drag queen* as well as other abjected queer bodies that seem to be persons but who nevertheless fail to embody those culturally imposed norms that make genders understandable. According to Butler:

The dogged effort to "denaturalize" gender in [Gender Trouble] emerges, - from a strong desire both to counter the normative violence implied by ideal morphologies of sex and to uproot the pervasive assumptions about natural or presumptive heterosexuality that are informed by ordinary and academic discourses on sexuality. The writing of this denaturalization was not done simply out of a desire to play with language or prescribe theatrical antics in the place of "real" politics - -. It was done from a desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such. (Butler 1990/1999, xx. Emphasis mine.)

The last sentence of the quotation is very important to my research as well. It can be said that my desire was also to make life possible in showing that there can be ways of looking at images that speak to those bodies that are abjected from the prevailing gender system and thereby situated in the field outside of vision – outside the frame. I have followed Butler in the sense that I have queered and bucked against the normative interpretations of visual representations. I see this as a necessary process grown out

of the desire to make life more comfortable in a world that is saturated with images and where the images function as our closest mirrors, informing us about our identity work. I have desired to explore whether there are possibilities to theorize genders and forms of sexual being troubling the heterosexual binary of feminine women and masculine men.

In this process, Butler's theory of *gender as performative* has been the main theoretical model that I have used. But unlike in Butler, the focus of my research has been in mainstream visual representations, in advertisements taken from such magazines as the *Vogue* or in the hard core imagery of contemporary Finnish art. In this sense I have used the term queer as a verb, as an active doing, as *queering the mainstream*. I have exposed that queer readings are not alternative ones but that they can be found everywhere, if only one knows how to look. In the footsteps of Alexander Doty (1993) I have also aimed at opening up new queer spaces for interpretation by moving away from using only one specific sexual identity category – gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight – in analysing the meanings of visual representations. This has been made in order to show that all images, even if they have been produced for the so-called average audience – meaning heterosexual, middle-class, white women and men – they also have potential to carry meanings and to address other, non-heterosexual, non-middle-class and non-white audiences. This said it must be added that I do not suppose that gayness or lesbianism is automatically queer. They, too, have their own norms and hierarchies. For example, within lesbian

culture, the prominence and dominance of masculinity has produced profound theoretical omissions: as masculinity has been valued more than femininity within lesbian feminism, the possibility of active lesbian femininity has also been erased. In other words, according to the stereotypical assumption the femme lesbian's femininity is not visible in the same manner as the butch lesbian's masculinity is. It has been stated that the butch's lesbianism is evident in her way of discarding femininity and still remaining female. The feminine lesbian is said to discard masculinity but *not* heterosexuality. In the research I have exposed how the connection between femmeness, femininity and female anatomy exposes the erroneous idea that feminine identifications should be defined in passive terms (Martin 1996, 90). Instead, femmeness must be conceptualized as active and as a concept that is useful for the queering of gaze and desire in that it exposes the mobility and fluidity of all gazing and desiring.

Masochistic Self-Torture and Plastic Surgery as Politics of Identity

In the first article or case study called "A Heroic Male and A Beautiful Woman. Teemu Mäki, Orlan and the Ambivalence of the Grotesque Body" (2002c) I analyse two performances, the Finnish artist Teemu Mäki's video performance *The Good Friday* (1989) and the French artist Orlan's performance of metamorphosis *The Re-Incarnation of Saint Orlan or Image(s)/New Image(s)*. The article problematizes the concept of *heroic masculinity* through Mäki's masochistic performance.

In Mäki's video performance, the audience is first shown an ideal, masculine body, the symbol of heterosexual male masculinity. As the video proceeds, the phallic body is tor-



Video still from Teemu Mäki's video performance *The Good Friday*, 1989. With the permission by the artist.

tured as Mäki bangs his head on a metal cabinet door so that finally the blood-splattered body falls to the ground beyond the visual frame. My reading of the grotesque body suggests that the masochistic self-torture on the video is symptomatic of the narrowness of the concept of normative heterosexual male masculinity. If becoming a man is some-



Images from Orlan's performance *Omnipresence*, 1993. With the permission by the artist.

thing to be acquired and achieved through painful and mutilating rites and rituals, it can perhaps be speculated that in order to dismantle and break through this concept, what is required is precisely super-masculine measures: violence. In the video, the gym-built body is associated with normative heterosexual masculinity, against which femininity, other than white masculinities, and other than heterosexual forms of male sexuality are stigmatized as unnatural, not masculine.

The performance or metamorphosis of the French artist Orlan, on the other hand, brings forth the practise of cosmetic surgery as a social tool for constructing femininity in contemporary culture. Orlan, who has undergone plastic surgery in the name of art has shed light to the debate between the idea of women as passive victims of the beauty industry versus women as active agents in negotiating their bodies and their lives within the cultural and structural constraints of a gendered social order. The idea in altering the appearances is often not to become more beautiful, but to become more ordinary, more normal, more acceptable (see, for example Davis 1995, 12, 53). Orlan has also declared that her goal is not to become more beautiful, or to look younger, but to become more herself. Orlan proposes that in the case of cosmetic surgery, one could (or should) speak of a new transgender, FTF, female-to-female or MTM, male-to-male identity (Orlan 1996, 88). Orlan's ambivalent, bloody and anaesthesia-reliant performances aim at illuminating those mechanisms of power and gaze which define the norms of the ideal and beautiful but also what is normal.



Boys Will Be Girls Will Be Boys Will Be Girls...

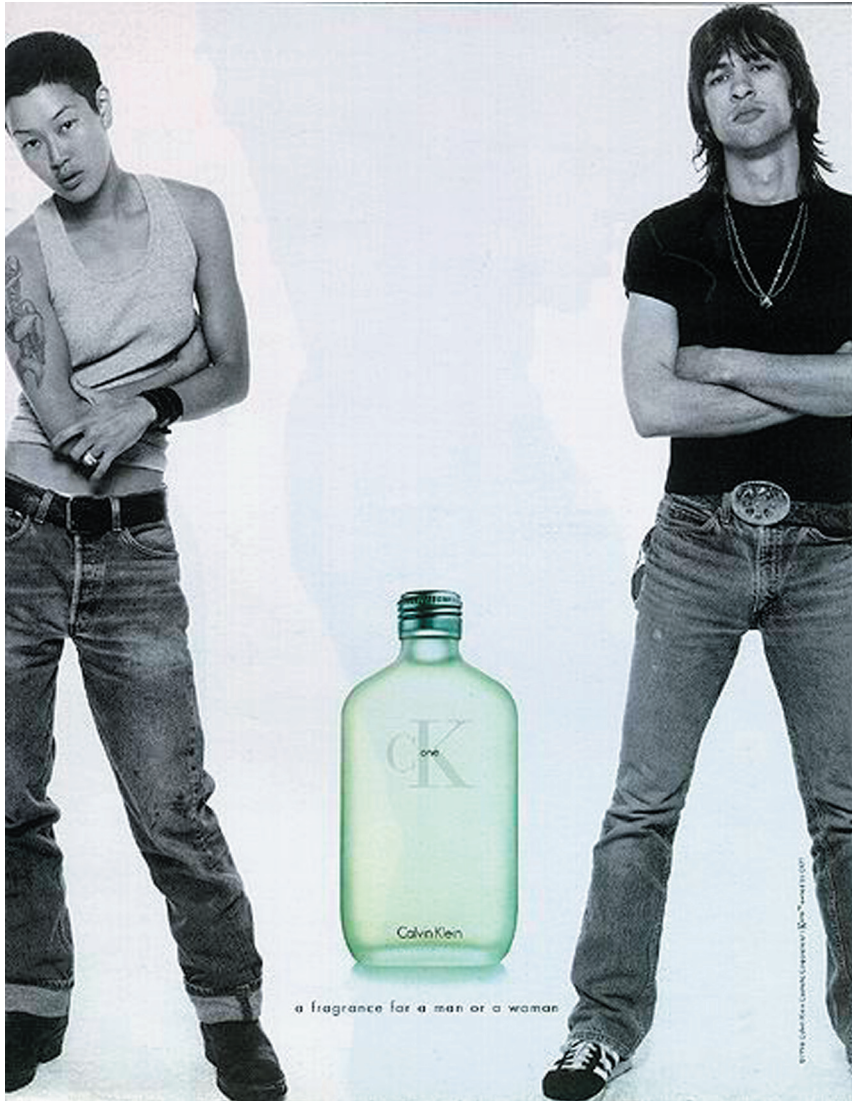
The second article “Pojista tulee tyttöjä, tytöistä tulee poikia. Calvin Kleinin mainoskuvioiden androgynian riskitaisuus” (2002a) [Boys Will Be Girls, Girls Will Be Boys. The Ambivalence of Androgyny in Calvin Klein’s Advertisements] is a close reading of the Calvin Klein perfume advertisement One (1998). In the mid- and late nineties, androgynous figures populated the pages of fashion magazines and other fields of popular culture, such as pop music. In the article, I situate the androgynous figure in relation to the classical concept of androgyny and its varying histories and interpretations. I analyse the casual posing, the messy hair styles, and the baggy clothes of the models in the Calvin Klein advertisements. The argument is that the androgynous style, which seems to blur the categorical boundaries of masculinity and femininity, is used in order to appeal to both young women and to young men. Also, the androgynous, effeminate bodies of the young boys open up space for a possible homosexual desire and gazing. The androgyny of the young female models, on the other hand, has been produced through anorexic slimness. Even though the androgynous female bodies seem to be more masculine than the average female bodies in advertisements, the critical point of the article is that androgynous male bodies allow the extension of the categorical boundaries of masculinity, whereas representations of androgynous young women merely feed into the prevailing stereotypes of femininity, namely to the fear of fat and fatness. Where do the androgynous women, exuding active sexual desire, lurk?

Lesbian Chic in a See-Through Closet

In the third case study “Läpinäkyvä kaappi. 1990-luvun muotikuvien naisandrogynia, moderni nainen ja lesbian chic” [See-through Closet: Female Androgyny in the 1990s Fashion Images, New Woman and Lesbian Chic] (2002b) I argue that even though the concept of androgyny refers to a gender, which is not female or male, neither feminine nor masculine, but rather a gender crossing the categorical, binary boundaries, the androgynous figure is represented without exception both in the older and newer research literature as a nude, beautiful, and passive young male. The concept of androgyny does not refer to the harmonious state of being, or to the utopian equality between femininity and masculinity. It is a masculine concept, erasing both female femininity and female androgyny.

In this case study, I analyse fashion advertisements taken from the late 1990s mainstream fashion magazines. In them, androgyny is often used as a visual tool for gender-blending. I re-vision the concept of female androgyny through the analysis of Ralph Lauren and Chanel advertisements, and trouble the conventional masculinist use of the concept of androgyny.

The article situates the androgynous female figures of the fashion advertisements in the long tradition of the representations of the female androgyne: to the fin-de-siècle contestations of gender and sexuality, where the concepts and the figures of the new woman, the dandy, the hermaphrodite, and the cross-dresser played a central role. The article argues that the figures of the female androgynes in



Calvin Klein, One, 1995.

the late 1990s fashion magazines do not problematise the dichotomous gender binary. The androgynous women do not pass as masculine women let alone as men but, rather,



Chanel, 1998.

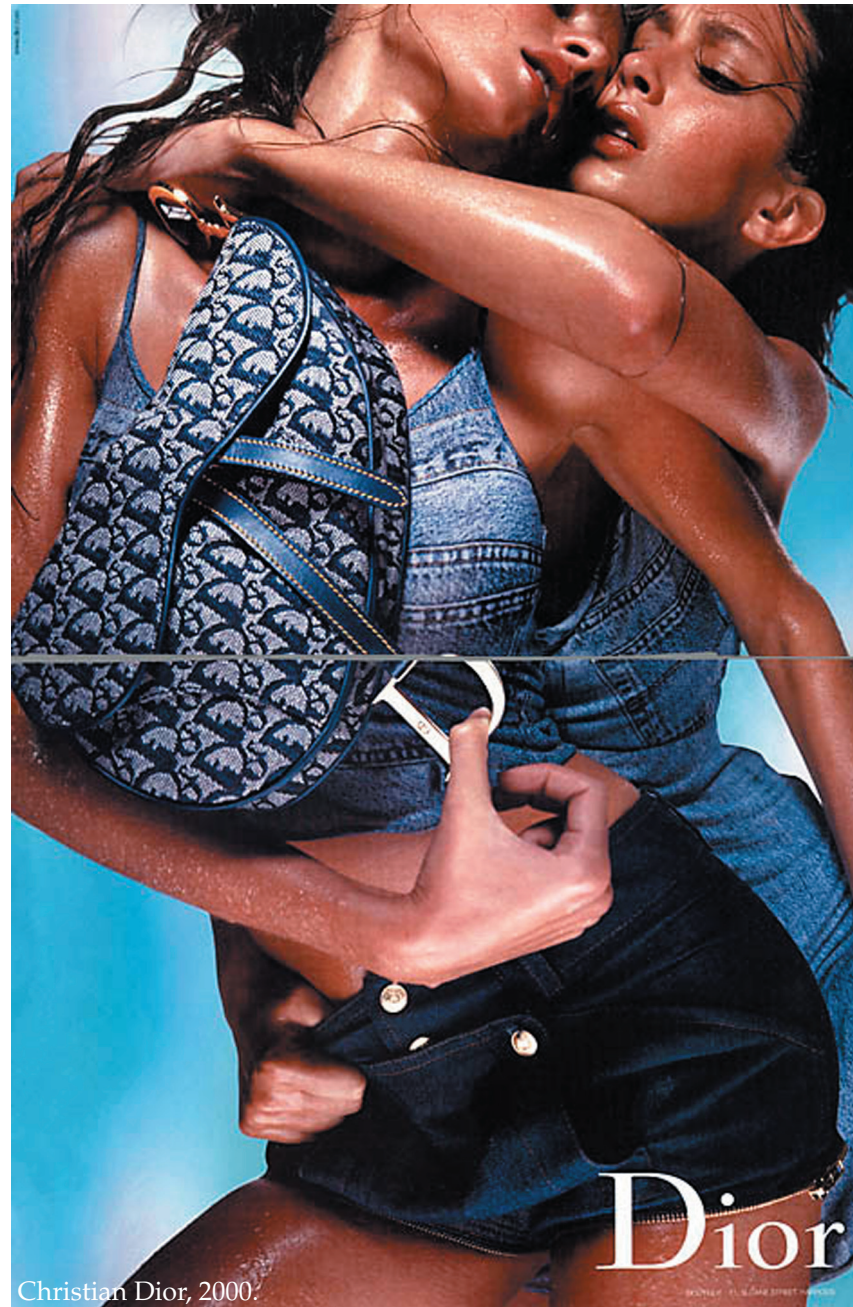
produce one variation of heterosexual desirability. At the same time, however, the representations open up a space for other pleasures and desires, namely for lesbian gazing

and desiring. It can be said that the advertisements invite the readers of the fashion magazines to contest their sense of sexualised identities. In the fashion advertisements this is represented through the concept and visual style of lesbian chic. Even though lesbian chic is part of the logic of fashion which constantly seeks novelties from the margins, it can also be seen as a manifestation of the ambivalence of the politics of gender and sexuality.

Female androgyny can be used as a visual tool in allowing for multiple, or queer, gazing positions. At the same time, however, it functions as a kind of see-through closet, as a way of closeting lesbian identification and desiring behind the mask of chic and trendiness. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), the main characteristics of the Western culture is that it closets all non-heterosexual sexualities. If this is to be believed, then this closeting is particularly at work in advertisements. In the world of advertising, this has a different name: double marketing strategy (Clark 1993). It means that the advertisements have been designed so that as the advertisement addresses the heterosexual consumer, it also addresses the lesbian consumer. The advertisers may, for example, embed such sub-cultural codes in the advertisements that only the reader in the know is capable of reading the message from the ad.

Are There Lesbian Advertisements?

In the process of writing the article on female androgyny I encountered numerous fashion advertisements in which two extremely feminine women were represented in an



Christian Dior, 2000.

intimate encounter. Women were represented as touching and kissing with each other. I was startled: has the time for openly lesbian advertising finally arrived in the mainstream advertising? Or, had we entered the new era of homonormativity, the neo-liberal age of gay mainstream as Lisa Duggan (2002, 175–194) has suggested?

The sudden emergence of kissing women in mainstream – meaning straight – fashion magazines, such as *Vogue*, produced the fourth article, "Why are there no lesbian advertisements?" (2005a). Through the analysis of certain advertisements and the critique of psychoanalytically oriented accounts of gaze and desire, I indicate that these *mise-en-scènes* of female bodily proximity open up space for a kind of lesbian gazing and desiring that has remained largely untheorized within both heterosexual and lesbian feminist accounts of pleasurable looking. I suggest that the advertisements produce possibilities for a legitimate lesbian desire between two feminine women, and transgress the categorical boundaries of gaze and desire which link active looking with masculinity and butchness, and passive looking with femininity and femmeness. I also expose the fallacy of imagining an inevitable continuum between femininity, femmeness, female anatomy and passivity. On the contrary, I identify femininity in terms of agency by relying on the cultural knowledge of lesbian visibility/visuality, especially in terms of butch–femme role-play and femme-to-femme desire. My argument goes against the grain of both straight and lesbian theorizations of gaze and desire. I indicate that attempts to make clear-cut categories of gaze and desire – whether lesbian

or straight, female or male, feminine or masculine – are not a productive starting point.

The effort of queering led me to critical discussions of feminist and lesbian feminist theories of gaze, which have rarely indicated the kind of disruptions in the heteronormative gazing system that would allow for recognition of same-sex possibilities, not to mention to induce women to exercise a gaze that not only identifies with the represented women but also desires them. Only during the 1990s, have feminists started to take cognizance of the codes of lesbian culture, of the lesbian imagery in circulation and of the existing gay and lesbian market in their theorizations about gaze and desire.

In this sense the accounts for lesbian gazing – and especially lesbian feminine gazing – were almost nonexistent. There was no theoretical place for the active feminine looking. Within the context of a women's magazine, the arrangement of two feminine models in physical proximity reveals that both straight and lesbian feminist accounts of gaze and desire have either erased femininity as active gazing and desiring possibility, or tended to figure it as the ground against which other, assumedly more subversive gazing and desiring positions are preferable and more mobile. Femininity is never connected to radical gender politics; it is always connected to assimilationist or reactionist politics (Martin 1996, 71–96). The inability of current theories of gaze to conceptualize femme-to-femme, or femme-nine, desire suggests that theories of gaze are still inherently phallogentric, and that this is also inherent in dominant constructions of lesbian gazing and desiring. It



seems that femininity as subversive gazing still remains under theorised within queer theory. Let me enlighten this with an example.

As I was preparing the article in question to be published in the British journal *Feminist Theory*, I needed to have the copyright permissions for the images I wanted to print in the journal from the fashion companies. One of the analysed images was the product of the esteemed French fashion house Dior. I approached the company with a letter, kindly asking for the permission. After a long silence I received a letter. I was not given the permission to publish the image in the journal. The letter that I received from the PR-person of Dior, Nathalie Morgan, reads as follows:

Madame. Nous avons bien reçu votre courrier et après en avoir parlé à ma Direction, vous ne pouvez malheureusement pas publier cette image dans votre article. Nous ne souhaitons plus communiquer sur nos anciens visuels. Bien cordialement. Nathalie Morgan.

Of course, this was odd – not the least because the advertisements clearly tried to rejuvenate the image of the old fashion house, and to make it hipper and trendier in the eyes of the becoming Dior clientele. Also, the ad is freely to be viewed in the Internet, on the pages of for example Commercial Closet (<http://www.commercialcloset.org/cgi-bin/iowa/portrayals.html?record=948>). More importantly: what does this denial to publish mean? At least it is indicative of the sovereign power of the closet. When two identical women are represented in a physical proximity, it may be possible to read the image as an example of

sisterly affection and intimacy to which sexual connotations belong only rarely. In the world of fashion imagery this kind of closeting also has a name: twinning (Lewis & Rolley 1996, 178–190).

Queering Home

The last case study “Nainen, ruoka koti. Pirjetta Branderin ja Heidi Romon teokset vikuroivina naiseuden esityksinä” (2005b) [Woman, Food, Home. Queering Femininity through Pirjetta Brander’s and Heidi Romo’s Works] analyses the production and the queering of heteronormative femininity through two Finnish artists’ Pirjetta Brander’s (b. 1970) and Heidi Romo’s (b. 1970) art works. The article also discusses how the concept of queer has been translated into Finnish.

The analysis of Romo’s and Brander’s works queers the cultural idea according to which femininity, food and home are unquestionably or naturally linked to the production of heterosexual femininity. For example, Pirjetta Brander’s home installation *The Panic Room* (2003) exposes how naturalised heterosexual family life is produced through visual representations. Brander’s installation, where the family is not present, opens up the concept of family and makes room to see it from a queer perspective. In the installation, the pictures on the walls of the room, the kitchen, the living room and the bedroom can also be seen as depictions of a possible setting for lesbian relationships and thereby refer to a family model outside the hetero-ideology. The panic in the name of the installation queers the normalcy



From the series *Keittiö ja pukuhuone* by Heidi Romo, 2003. With the permission by the artist.

of family and represents lesbian panic (Smith 1997). The article argues that the loss of the sense of what is normal always has its queer moments as the heterosexual family idyll is revealed to be a failed copy to begin with. There is no reason to assume that home should necessarily be a breeding ground for the heterosexual core family only. Merely the fact that we are used to thinking like this detains us from seeing other possibilities.

From Grotesque to Queer: Queering Visual Culture

The research shows that the queering of visual representations is very much needed in order to widen the scope of vision and make a more tolerable future for those who fall outside the heteronormative gender system. This means that we must direct our gaze to discourses and institutional practices that produce normative identities, and of these all forms of visual representing is a part. Queering, or *vikurointi* in Finnish, therefore defines centrally the researcher's active attitude. The research must continue to make trouble and bring forth readings and interpretations that resist normative ways of seeing.

In this sense the research forms a conceptual arch from grotesque to queer. These are both concepts that provide tools for seeking expressions to experiences, bodies and desires that do not belong to the familiar world. It remains debatable, whether grotesque is a moment of transition from old through a period of confusion, to a new paradigm, as Harpham (1982, 14–18) has defined the term. Queer, on the other hand, may operate as a tool in creating alternative future to the status quo. At the same time, both of these concepts can function as tools of social control of the dominant culture. Deviancy is often needed to produce the ideally gendered and sexualised bodies.

In its entirety, the research is part of a larger project and analyses what visual representations tell about our world view, people and our culture. Martin Heidegger writes in his essay "Maailmankuvan aika" [The Age of the World Picture] (1938/2000, 9–49) that it is typical of modernity



to think about world view. World view to Heidegger is a picture of the world, which forces being into a representational form. It situates the human in the middle of the picture, as if she were on a public stage. Bearing this in mind, one must ask what kind of a human one wants to become after having constructed oneself as the center of the world. I propose that we must continue the discussion on our world view and humanity – and especially on what these concepts leave out of the world picture.

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Panic Room by Pirjetta Brander, 2003. With the permission by the artist.

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1. In Finnish the lead reads as follows: ”Jos esitämme väitteen, että melko voimakkaasti maskuliinisia piirteitä omaava kaunis nainen herättää miehissä hyvin monissa tapauksissa enemmän mielenkiintoa ja mieltymystä kuin hypernaisellinen olento, pidetään tällaista mielipidettä vähintään paradoksaalisena jos ei vallan jopa perverssinä. Yhtä hyvin voidaan - - väittää, että vastaavasti olemukseltaan - - feminiinisiä kauneus- tai miellyttämisarvoja omaava mies saattaa sangen usein olla naisten parissa suosittu puhtaasti maskuliinista urosta.”
2. Discussion on gay sexualities and desires, on the other hand, has been more lively. See, for example Kalha 2005 and Tihinen 2002.

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