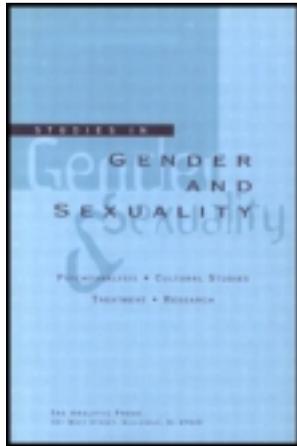


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## Catherine Opie: American Photographer, American Pervert

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In this brief essay, I review Catherine Opie's midcareer retrospective at the Guggenheim focusing on 3 of her self-portraits that elaborate on her leatherdyke identity. Interpreting these works through the scholarship of Ann Cvetkovich and the literature of Dorothy Allison, I read the progression from *Self-Portrait/Cutting* to *Self-Portrait/Pervert* to *Self-Portrait/Nursing* as a photographic argument regarding how sexuality can be generatively constituted through traumatic experience.

From September 2008 through January 2009 the Guggenheim, with the support of the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, mounted the first comprehensive exhibit of Catherine Opie's oeuvre, *Catherine Opie, American Photographer*. Several floors were dedicated to showing the rich and diverse body of work this significant photographer has produced. The exhibit compelled significant media attention (Cottie, 2008), attracted large audiences, and elicited a range of different responses (Schwendener, 2008).

Most of Opie's work explores cultures that congeal around trauma: the pains of exclusion (transgender communities, lesbian domesticity), class injury (American cities, mini-malls), the impact of the AIDS epidemic (Ron Athey's spectacular performances), and the problematic of being an unwilling beneficiary of the American empire's territorial claims (Bush's politics, the invasion of Iraq). Her strikingly beautiful photographs materialize in the interstices of discourses around pride and marginalization, insisting on the representation of sexualities and genders that dominant culture deems abject. Her work extends beyond the act of witnessing (Oliver, 2001) her subjects' pain. Perhaps even more importantly, it labors to articulate and capture photographically the complex *mélange* of how injury mingles with pleasure, how the one may, at times, appropriate the other. Further, in problematizing the tight grip that shame has on those deemed other, Opie boldly documents how community and resignification work through shame's discursive and material grasp.

Pervasive throughout her work, these photographic arguments are at their most powerful when Opie, the first out leatherdyke artist, moves into the more personal territory of recording and exhibiting her own involvement with sadomasochistic sexuality. So, from the wide range of compelling work exhibited I choose to focus on this segment and specifically on Opie's

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"Catherine Opie: American Photographer" was a midcareer retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, September 26, 2008–January 7, 2009. For the images mentioned, the reader may consult the online exhibition: <http://web.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/opie/exhibition.html>.

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self-portraits. This triptych of full-size, close-up autobiographical shots carves new territory in examining the relationship between trauma and sexual subjectivity. I read this original and daring trilogy as chronicling the progression and elaboration of Opie's leatherdyke experience while exploring how trauma can become libidinal game. Opie's work attempts to short-circuit conventional and politically expedient queer notions of sexual orientation as gender based and biologically fixed, to suggest leather as a sexual orientation and to propose that sexuality is mediated, not compromised, by traumatic experience.

## PART I: THE PHOTOGRAPHS

If it is framed it has to be taken seriously. If it were poorly reproduced on cheap paper or between shiny pages in an overpriced magazine . . . it would be something else. It would say something about you . . . [Allison, 2009, p. 268].

Opie's three self-portraits are displayed in a space separated from the remainder of the exhibit, marked by different lighting and wall color (Schwendener, 2008). In this interesting curatorial choice, her self-portraits are purposefully grouped together with *Dyke* (1993), the only photograph not depicting the artist. In *Dyke* we see in close-up the back of a woman's head. Her short haircut exposes her nape where, tattooed in thick, gothic script, is the word *dyke*.

Immediately next to it and taken in the same year is *Self-Portrait/Cutting (Cutting)*. Here, it is Opie who is positioned with her back to us. The artist is facing away from the viewer and her back, fully bare, takes up most of the photograph. Cut into her flesh with a scalpel is a stick figure drawing of a lesbian family: two women stand in front of a house holding hands. Instantly referencing—and talking back to—ordinary childhood drawings, Opie's choice of stick figures as the artistic medium serves to highlight how early in life heterosexual unions are established as the norm (Ferguson, 2007). Where the skin parts, droplets of blood engorge. The image is as magnetic as it can be unsettling.

Opie describes having taken this photograph following a devastating breakup that punctured her hopes that an especially meaningful romantic relationship might have led to a family (Ferguson, 1996). The design carved into her skin eloquently captures how deeply pain cuts when one loses a partner and one's dreams for a shared life. Referencing the continuities between psychic and physical pain, this photograph also invites an identificatory response: the pangs of painful separations are felt across the hetero/homosexual divide. Reminding us that heartbreak pierces gay and straight relationships alike, Opie shows that as relational beings we are all vulnerable to interpersonal disasters.

*Self-Portrait/Pervert (Pervert)* is taken a year later. In it, the artist is seated facing the camera. Naked from the waist up and exposed to our gaze, she wears a black leather hood that hides her face while an additional piece of leather covers her eyes, obstructing them too from our view. Her arms, placed on her lap, are symmetrically pierced by dozens of needles. Moments before the picture was taken the word *pervert* has been calligraphically sliced across her chest. The stark contrast between the beautiful penmanship and its bloody ink delivers a shocking effect. Museum visitors approach closely in disbelief—is this real blood? Congregating around it, this photograph commands more interest than any single other.

Opie describes *Pervert* as a “very angry piece” (Blessing, 2008, p. 16) made to protest how, despite widespread recognition, she has never been embraced by the lesbian community due to her leather sexuality (Ferguson, 2000). Aiming to critique homonormative exclusions of gay

leatherfolk, *Pervert* protests how “mainstream gays and lesbians were calling themselves ‘normal’” by “push[ing] out . . . a lot of communities” (as quoted in Blessing, 2008, p. 16). “That really bothered me . . . what did that make everyone else? . . . I think I was just ‘Come on! Why is . . . Ellen DeGeneres [the paradigmatic lesbian]?’” (Ferguson, 2007, p. 258). Opie explains her decision to cut *pervert* into her skin as an attempt to resignify how naming had collapsed into name-calling (Bronski, 2002b).

Last in the trilogy, taken 10 years later, is *Self-Portrait/Nursing (Nursing)*. In this close-up, Opie, who is naked from the waist up, is holding and nursing her son Oliver. Mother and son gaze into each other’s eyes in a moment at once intimate and intense. This photograph departs from customary depictions of nursing images that excise female sexuality once a woman enters the register of the maternal (Sheehy, 2011). Above *this* maternal breast sexuality and wound merge. The cut that reads *pervert* insists on visibility rather than being disciplined into the closet. Opie’s photograph insolently disturbs the idealized, and thus oppressive, innocence and bliss commonly evoked by the canonical “Madonna and child” tropes. Instead, the artist’s unconventional sexuality is on display, etched on her body.

## PART II: PHOTOGRAPHIC OBJECTIVES

I hope you only do those things in leather bars. If I saw women doing SM in a lesbian bar . . . I’d want to beat them up [anonymous, as quoted in Califia, 2000, p. 168].

This section of Opie’s work imports leather sexuality from the catacombs<sup>1</sup> of erotic heresy to the majority art culture of the Guggenheim. As the first accomplished out leatherdyke artist, Opie gives voice to lesbian sadomasochistic experience as it exists within both the heteronormative and the homonormative worlds. In *Dyke* and *Cutting*, the women defiantly turn their backs to the camera in a doubly symbolic act: the dominant discourse has turned its back to lesbian subject and, now, the marginalized subject follows suit while defiantly exhibiting her otherness (Schwendener, 2008).

*Cutting*, though, is unlike *Dyke*. In *Cutting*, it is not only the otherness of homosexuality that is represented and protested. Surreptitiously, *Dyke* introduces also sadomasochism. The stick-figure depiction of a lesbian family takes precedence here by disrupting familiar familial expectations and in so doing accentuates our heteronormative assumptions. Yet, its medium, a cut onto the flesh, is treated as an artistic vehicle that references the wounds of heteronormative exclusion. This photograph does not claim cutting as an erotic practice. Rather, desexualized, cutting’s erotic underpinnings remain unarticulated, subordinated to the political statement regarding homosexuality that Opie is explicitly making. Questioning heteronormativity becomes the politically expedient Trojan horse that sneaks leather sexuality into the discourse. Denuded of its sexual signifier, sadomasochism is made more palatable.

It is not until *Pervert* that Opie explicitly tackles sadomasochism. *Pervert* is an alarming image. The discomfort it arouses, though, cannot be attributed to cutting or the needles per se. Physical pain has already been introduced in *Cutting* where it has, perhaps, evoked a more sympathetic rather than judgmental response. *Pervert* is chilling because it is now openly and unapologetically about sex and about pleasure. Opie impenitently announces herself to be a pervert disavowing the

<sup>1</sup>In sadomasochism historiography, the Catacombs was the first club where gay sadomasochists gathered for sexual play (Rubin, 1991).

protections of homonormative political gestures. Instead, she displays the form that her perversion takes: a leather hood, piercings, a cutting. *Pervert* written across her chest is a Butlerian (1990) move, the marginalized subject resignifying an identity discursively hailed as spoiled (Goffman, 1963). By grouping *Dyke* together with *Cutting* and *Pervert* Opie, as I understand her, not only implies that sadomasochism is as much about sexual orientation as her unnamed subject's homosexuality (in *Dyke*) but also argues that exclusionary practices presently applied toward leathersex share some key features with those that have historically marked the gay subject.

I want to focus for a moment on a particular aspect of this photograph, Opie's leather hood. How do we understand the contradiction between the vociferous statement made by Opie's courageous photographic pose in full sadomasochistic regalia and the covering of her face? Is the hood protecting *her* from the normative gaze, the disapproval of which she actively refuses to engage? Does it tell a different story from that of identity's triumphant reappropriation? Is the attempt at sovereign self-definition perhaps at once successful and impotent?

Structurally, Baer (2002) argues, photography follows traumatic experience. The camera memorializes that which, when the shutter clicks, is unknown to both artist and subject. If what is photographed becomes legible retrospectively, if it can become infused with meaning after the fact (Laplanche, 1999), might we view the positioning of the subjects with their backs to the lens in *Dyke* and *Cutting* as subject to more layered, overdetermined interpretations? Might this choice be multivalent, not only about defiance but also about shame? Or is perhaps Opie telling us something about how marginalization, humiliation, and exclusion can themselves be appropriated to bend desire's shape in order to produce differently tinged erotics?

In the time between *Pervert* and *Nursing*, Opie's twin identities as lesbian and sadomasochist have matured for over a decade. In *Nursing*, Opie owns and inhabits the emotional and physical scars of her marginalized identity. Motherhood and a successful career may allow her privileged inroads to normativity but Opie persists in announcing the immutability of her otherness. It is at this point, when "the disjunctions between academic feminism and lived experience" (Blessing, 2008, p. 11) are problematized, that Opie takes off the hood and can be seen, facing and being faced by the normative order.

### PART III: FROM SHAMEFUL SEXUALITY TO SEXUAL SHAME

Two or three things I know for sure, but this is the one I am not supposed to talk about, how it comes together—sex and violence . . . I am not supposed to put them in the context of sexual desire [Allison, 1996, pp. 45–47].

Fiercely critical of how definitions of "sexual orientation" have tended to privilege gender over particular activities or body parts, Sedgwick (1990) writes,

It is a rather amazing fact that of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another . . . precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged . . . and has remained as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of "sexual orientation" [p. 8].

With increasing frequency, sexually variant individuals are demanding a space for eroticism that engages the body and sexual fantasy in infinitely more intricate ways than are conventionally deemed to legitimately belong to the sexual arena (e.g., Bronski, 1991, 2002a; Califia, 1997;

Antoniou, 2004; Wolf, 2009) and that allows room for what Gayle Rubin (1975) called *benign human variation*. David Stein, founding member of Gay Male SM Activists, described an experience that has significant points of convergence with how gay men and women used to recount battling feelings around their homosexuality:

I started tying myself up before I was eight. By the time I was 27, I had purged myself of collected SM porn and bondage equipment at least three times. Each time I had vowed to give up such “sick” stuff and go straight, or *at least stick to ordinary homosexuality* [1991, p. 142; italics added].

Stein meets Opie here as he highlights the privileged position that *ordinary* homosexuality holds amidst atypical sexualities whose otherness may or not hinge on gender. Implicating in libidinal makeup the shame, longing, loss, and pain of homonormative exclusion, I read Opie as showing us how sexual desire, and along with it leather sexual orientations, may *also* be shaped through experience. Rather than struggle with questions about health versus pathology, what about thinking of trauma as becoming embedded into the fabric of one’s sexual being in ways that call not for the therapeutics of “restoring” normality but for a reconfiguration of our notions on the nature of pleasure?<sup>2</sup> Serano, a trans leatherwoman writes, “When I was a child I was sexually assaulted . . . not by any particular person . . . [but [but by] my culture . . . [it left a] scar that marks the spot where my self-esteem was ripped right out of me . . . [what’s] left is a submissive streak as wide and as deep as the Grand Canyon” (2007, p. 273).

It is tempting to relate to these kinds of historical and discursive wounds as categories of experience that can be eliminated through activism or cleansed through language. For those inhabiting atypical identities and for whom subjectivity is constituted through trauma, the promise of dignity offered by visibility and pride are seductive antidotes to shame (Love, 2009). Instead, Opie literally etches her perversity on her chest. At work on her identity as a leatherdyke for several years, by the time she shoots *Nursing*, she is, perhaps, speaking to how shame has shaped her personhood and to how sexuality has become a site for its elaboration. Instead of dissociated, shame is best acknowledged, owned, and at times enlisted.

#### PART IV: TRAUMA’S UNUSUAL SEXUAL ARCHIVE: SADOMASOCHISM<sup>3</sup>

If there is one thing that marks us as queer . . . [it is] our relationship to the body . . . in our expressions of not only intimacy, love, and lust but also . . . shame, contempt, despair, and hate . . . [it forces us] to become relatively self-aware about what we are doing when we fuck [Reid-Pharr, 2001, p. 85].

Opie’s work addresses the pain of normativizing pressures but stops short of addressing explicitly more personal traumata.<sup>4</sup> In her semiautobiographical writing (1993, 1996, 2002),

<sup>2</sup>On racial trauma see also Scott (2010).

<sup>3</sup>My thinking in this section is heavily influenced by Cvetkovich’s (2003) *An Archive of Feelings* and her proposition that trauma requires unusual archives.

<sup>4</sup>These connections are tentatively addressed in a photo-text piece entitled “Violence: It’s a Personal Thing,” where she alluded to familial violence against children (Opie, as cited in Blessing, 2008).

Allison picks up on these themes. She takes on the politically expedient yet important task of exploring how her sadomasochistic preferences developed in response to having been sexually abused.<sup>5</sup> Caught in a web of shame, lust, fear, rage, and longing she notes that the feelings that derive from her experience of having been violated both torture her and fuel her erotic passions. “I couldn’t stop him from beating me,” Allison writes with relentless honesty referencing her abuse, “but *I* was the one who masturbated . . . I hated being beaten but still masturbated to the story I told myself about it” (1996, p. 113).

The idea that *perversion*<sup>6</sup> derives from early trauma is not new. It recalls facile classical and postclassical psychoanalytic ideas that reflexively equate sexual nonnormativity to psychic injury<sup>7</sup> (Freud, 1919; Kernberg, 1998; Holtzman and Kulish, 2012). These theories aphoristically brand atypical sexualities as pathetic, doomed-to-fail attempts to master past trauma through reenactment. The indiscriminate treatment of perversion as repetition compulsion, however, ignores the important fact that enactive repetition is the property of all trauma (Reis, 2009), not only of its unprocessed variants. Clinical experience shows that a focus on whether it is the overcoming rather than its retraumatizing reliving is central to a generative recycling of trauma (Ferenczi, 1938). Active repetitions, Loewald (1971) proposed—compared with passive ones, which are rote mechanical renditions of endured trauma—are fresh creations that open up psychic space to novel configurations. For some trauma survivors, sexual variation is one possible, productive path to libidinal constitution.

Allison’s work, in fact, strives to achieve an exquisitely delicate balance. For her, awareness of how childhood abuse bears on sexuality’s fingerprint can exist side by side with enjoyment. Allison does not advocate for trauma’s repair. Rather, she rejects the chimeras of conventional notions around “healing” that often result in the deployment of soft (and, at times, harder) dissociative mechanisms. Instead, she insists that absorbing and processing psychic pain will neither rinse suffering from the psyche nor will a process of working through reconfigure sexual cravings to normativity. Trauma that enters one through the body becomes encoded and lives *in* the body. Such trauma both demands a verbal archive and exceeds it. Traumata of this kind sometimes require an archive that resides in intersubjective relation. Trauma that is inscribed in the body always already exceeds representation and cannot be fully gathered into language (Reis, 2009).

There are dangers to making explicit connections between trauma and nonnormative experience. The risk is that in positing links between variation and injury, variation will be collapsed into symptom. Psychoanalytic ideas that construe alternative sexualities as compulsive

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<sup>5</sup>While these ideas explore how traumatic experience becomes recruited into eroticism and sexual pleasure, they should not be read as implying a general theory of sexual constitution. Human sexuality, especially in its non-normative variants, is complexly sutured and idiosyncratically assembled (Harris, 2005) and, as such, not by any means exclusively mediated through trauma.

<sup>6</sup>I purposefully retain this term, with the awareness that it is often conflated with pathology and the use of which has been rightly challenged (see Dimen, 2003, for a critique from a psychoanalytic perspective; Califia, 2002, from a sex positive perspective; Rubin, 1984, for an anthropological angle). I insist on its use, however, not so much for its resignification value (e.g., Brame, Brame, & Jacobs, 1993) but because I believe that sanitized versions of the term compromise how it is the very transgressiveness of the perverse act that helps build traction toward the psychic labor that perversion makes possible. Space limitations do not permit me to go further into this idea here.

<sup>7</sup>For notable exceptions see psychoanalytic writers Dimen (2001, 2003), Strenger (2002), and Weille (2002) and queer theorists Halperin (1995), Piontek (2006), and Thurer (2005).

repetitions of trauma, as pathetic efforts to master it by actively orchestrating its execution, bolster that fear (Freud, 1920; Bach, 1994). Repetition compulsion is a covert moral agent that diagnoses and condemns, the canary in sexuality's coal mine. The pressure to retire questions about etiology in variant sexualities that are not extended to heterosexuality is, thus, tremendous (Corbett, 1997). It is, however, precisely *because* trauma defies representation, *because* it resists accurate recollection and exceeds language, that it cannot be captured by the archive of feelings to which we routinely turn to make sense of other experience. Rather, trauma demands "new forms of expression . . . new forms of monuments, rituals and performances. . . . It demands an unusual archive" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7). What Opie's work invites us to do is take seriously the possibility that, for some people, leather sexuality may be a site where such psychic work becomes possible.

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