

Interview with Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz by Antke Engel

A.E.: I first saw your piece „normal work” as part of the exhibition „normal love – precarious sex, precarious work”, which was shown in Berlin in spring 2007. For one thing I was impressed by the fact that it very intelligently captured your curatorial thesis: Thanks to „normal work” one understands your idea that today’s sexual subjectivities are thoroughly intertwined with working life practices and identities, which have developed out of specific modern power relations, and connect to a complex variety of social differences – via practices which you call „sexual labor.” I would like to explore all this during our interview. But apart from this clever way of presenting a thesis that has really stayed with me and which I would also like to share, there are the erotic images of bodies in pleasure and exhibited desires you present in your film: Images citing queer iconography of leather dykes and tranny boys, of SM clubs and drag performances, staged in historical settings of bourgeois culture while performing queer discourses. „Normal work” consists of two parts: historical photographs and a thirteen-minute 16 mm film, presented as a video projection. The background of the film is your interest in the story of Hannah Cullwick und Arthur Munby, a couple in Victorian England who led a rather stunning relationship, transgressing class differences, challenging gender norms, and experimenting with sexuality and desire. Could you tell some more about this relationship and why it became important to you?

R.L.: Hannah Cullwick, the protagonist of our film, cleaned from early in the morning to late in the evening in various London households of the mid nineteenth century. What struck us right away is that she also produced a series of remarkable staged photographs, along with an extensive diary, and letters, which was not at all common for a housemaid of the time. She presented these materials to highlight her strength, her big muscles, and her dirty, red hands – embodiments of her „masculinity” which she was very proud of and which became important features of her sexual life. Paradoxically, her masculine body was directly connected with her working practices, her carrying heavy things, her difficult physical labor in the households, and so on, all of which is usually coded „female.”

P.B.: Moreover, what interested us as starting point for our film is that her photographic portraits and self-portraits not only show her as a domestic servant performing house work. Interestingly, with her photographs she staged crossings of social positions, which we would today call drag performances: They show her in „class drag” as a bourgeois woman, in „gender drag” as a young bourgeois man, or in „ethnic drag” as a male „slave” in blackface.

A.E.: So it’s Hannah Cullwick performing in all these photographs? How did they come about?

P.B.: Most of them were produced between 1855 and 1902 in photo studios which became quite popular at the time. Sometimes Hannah Cullwick ordered the photograph herself, sometimes she went with her lover Arthur Munby.

R.L.: From the background of our former work on the relationship of „sexuality and labor” we were very attentive to the fact that the staged photographs were part of a sadomasochistic relationship that Hannah Cullwick had with Munby, a man from the bourgeois class. And even more interesting, the SM scenario in which both of them participated was that of Hannah Cullwick’s wage labor. The work that she did in the households was, as it were, doubled: she carried out the work that her employer assigned her and for which she earned her wages. But at the same time, she made thorough reports to Munby about this work, she made precise drawings in her diaries, which he read, and he went by the houses of her employers at agreed times to see how she cleaned. Together they also reenacted scenes from her wage labor at his home: When she cleaned for him or licked his boots, one could say that she produced cleanliness as well as a sexual scene.

P.B.: Munby, a lawyer, was an interesting figure himself, since he acted as a kind of an early social scientist. He approached women workers who did hard, dirty, and badly paid work on the street or at their place of work, he asked them to let him photograph them or to be interviewed by him. Sometimes he undertook journeys throughout England and visited fisher women or miners who were wearing trousers. Munby documented these women workers and their work extensively in his diaries, he prepared descriptions and sketches and he collected a very rare photographic archive of hard-working women.

R.L.: So obviously desire was very productive in his scientific approach: He admired the women workers’ muscles; he obsessively described their features, their rough, red hands or their powerful frames.

A.E.: How did you discover the material? Where can it be found?

P.B.: Hannah Cullwick’s letters, diaries and photographs were preserved by Arthur Munby. When he died in 1910 some years after Cullwick’s death, he donated his archive (comprising his own diaries) to the Trinity College in Cambridge. To protect his family, Munby, who feared scandal, ordered the archive to be sealed for 50 years. So the archive was not made public until the 1960s. First his diaries were transliterated and published,¹ and then her diaries were discovered by feminists.² A couple of texts have been published since then,³ but we discovered her first together with our friend and colleague Brigitta Kuster, through the book „Imperial Leather” by Anne McClintock.⁴ We noticed, though, that in all the texts published on their life, an examination of their relationship and photographs through a queer perspective was missing: that’s what we tried to formulate in our installation, showing part of their archive in confrontation to our film, which is the reenactment of four photographs of Cullwick.

R.L.: Yes, the film was made to highlight or pursue these queering practices. Therefore, we were especially attentive to the way Hannah Cullwick’s photographs undermine dichotomies of gender, class and race, produce crossings and in-between-ness of these categories, and interrelate them.

A.E.: The story was reworked by you in significant ways. Unlike other interpretations of the historical material, which present Arthur Munby as the one defining the relationship, you present Hannah Cullwick as someone who is a) a subject of her own life, who b) intervenes in social conditions, e.g., she does not accept class or gender relations as something given, but as something to be worked upon, and who c) is effective in producing cultural material: diaries, performances, photographs. What does it mean to you to introduce Hannah Cullwick as a cultural producer?

R.L.: It was important for us to transfer the photographs from their representation in books and their sole examination in socio-historic and cultural historic contexts into an art context. We wanted to focus on Hannah Cullwick as a producer of new images and textual elements, as someone who was able to rework the complex social conditions she was involved in through her visual and textual practices.

A.E.: Could you give an example of how you see her transforming social conditions with her cultural interventions?

R.L.: One of the photographs for instance shows a realistic scene and does not appear to have been created in a studio. It shows Hannah Cullwick on the steps of a doorway that obviously opens directly onto the street or to a pathway. The spectator finds him_ herself as if he_ she were a visitor to the house, before a large, black lacquered door, in front of which Cullwick is kneeling „on all fours.” One feels reminded of the narration of Munby passing by the house and watching Cullwick cleaning the steps. Cullwick is turned toward the spectator with respect to the camera and looks directly at it. It seems as though she was photographed at her daily work, in the middle of cleaning the steps. I understand this photograph against the background of Kaja Silverman’s use of the term „pose.” Silverman introduces this term to mark the meaning of embodiment on the one hand and of visibility and photography on the other hand for the process of subjectivation. A „pose” is what a subject assumes when it is photographed. Taking over a pose, as Silverman argues, puts the subject who assumes it „in the picture.” Embodiment is produced on the background of and „formatted through” a social archive of images. Letting oneself be photographed in the pose of a kind of work – as Cullwick did – which is barely recognized socially, can be then understood as a step toward subjugating oneself to an embodiment as a maid-of-all-work, and at the same time toward attaining subject status through this subjugation. The posing demands perception and recognition in this work. What interests me in Hannah Cullwick’s cultural work is that she was able to smuggle some devices into the photograph that allude to the fact that she is not only undertaking the pose of a house maid but at the same time a pose that can be read in the context of her SM relationship: She is not only throwing a gaze back to the spectator very self-confidently but she also presents her „slave band” almost in the center of the image, a black leather band which was a sign of her position as a „slave” in her relationship with Munby. I would claim that Hannah Cullwick’s sexual posing allows for a kind of queering agency, precisely because it mimetically copied the image of the domestic servant. The photograph becomes a kind of picture puzzle, which allows for the subject to be recognized as much as it appears to indicate a self-authorization in the fields of sexuality and work. In this way, Hannah Cullwick created

representations that double the image of the domestic servant, but that also „disrupt” or „queer” it.

A.E.: I also very much like the confrontation of the historic photographs and the reenactments in the film. Together they become part of a queer heterotopia I am invited to enter when entering the exhibition.

P.B.: It is important for us to present these two moments in the installation. The film wasn't conceived or intended to be shown on its own for different reasons. In opposition to traditional historical reenactments, our work doesn't rely on a generally known material. Visitors should be able to discover this amazing original material in the installation. A second reason is that if the pictures weren't exhibited together with the film, the audience could be mistaken and take this whole story for a fake, invented by us for the purpose of the work, which isn't our intention. Also, it was interesting to us, to have the two different historical moments (Victorian times and the present day); two moments relevant for the formation of modern subjectivities meeting each other and producing contradictory references.

A.E.: The film presents a movement of historical figures into the queer culture of the 21st century – a subversion of historical succession, when Cullwick's postures are transfused into the world of drag performances, sexual subcultures, and queer politics. But you also infuse queer culture with labor politics and the work relations. How did this coming together of different times influence your decisions of how to present the historical story?

P.B.: We have collaborated with Werner Hirsch on a couple of projects now. Werner Hirsch comes from the field of minimal performance / choreography, but at the same time he is very influenced by the underground scenes of drag show culture he has been part of in Berlin. In his own work he has been able to bring these two generally separated fields and influences together in a very interesting way. Working with him, it was clear that we didn't want him to „act” Hannah Cullwick. Instead he is performing the task of reenacting the poses of Hannah Cullwick as precisely as possible, following the instructions of the director. But in this case, it's not only the performer who is reenacting the pose, the director too is reenacting the directing. The position of the person behind the camera is marked, she is performing in the film too, which from our perspective disrupts a classical voyeuristic gaze. The interaction between the two allows the performer and the director to give and follow instructions, so they both have an active and passive role, and a relationship of desire is established between the two. – But the position of the performer is made more complex via a third element: a mirror placed not far away from the camera, with which Werner Hirsch keeps a check on his image. This offers a third perspective, putting him in a position that controls the scene by adjusting the pose in the mirror. In this way, he has the ability to compare the copy of his pose to the original of the photograph of Hannah Cullwick. To come back to Kaja Silverman, if we assume that the „original” pose is already a copy – Hannah Cullwick copying „well enough” an image which corresponds to a socially prescribed repertoire of images – we could say that the reenactment by Werner Hirsch is a way to put this thesis into perspective.

A.E.: Isn't this exactly one of the major mechanisms organizing what you call „sexual labor?“

R.L.: Yes. Taking over a pose and reworking this pose from the perspective of sexual labor means not only adopting a position in the social field and learning to perform certain productive tasks. It also means a process of embodiment of gender and sexuality that is always bound to this performance. Everything that is part of the protagonist's labor is also part of the sexual and gendered self-presentation. The subject is continuously asked to take on a certain expenditure in comparing pose and image and this expenditure we call sexual labor.

A.E.: I find it interesting that the film presents stage directions as voice-over; also we can watch how the setting is put up and changed. So, the film does not simply tell a story about work, but actually represents film production as work.

R.L.: This is a nice observation which would mean to see the film itself not only as a reflection on sexual labor but as a product of sexual labor itself.

A.E.: I am curious as to why there is such a lot of auto-eroticism in the film. This really attracted my attention. Erotics and sexuality are not presented as part of an interactive practice – there is no Munby nor an equivalent of him – rather we watch a gentle touch of oneself, a delicate stroke of bare skin, a conscious play of muscles. Or a playfulness, when the performer presents her_himself for an imaginary audience, occupying the image as a desirable subject. Why this form of self-representation and sexualizing one's own body? How does this relate to the sexualization of the working body – the equivocation of working and sexual body?

P.B.: Well I think part of it is auto-erotic, in a very campy and conscious way, subverting the objectifying gaze of the camera: it sends back the image of somebody who plays with, and sometimes dominates the camera, which tries to follow his_her moves in close-ups, showing all the details of the clothes and props of the setting. But I think another important part is that the sexual body or the worker's body in the interactions with these different objects, points out their status as fetishes, referring to the whole series of fetishes that are so present in the relationship of Cullwick and Munby.

R.L.: We pointed out these fetishes such as dirt, muscles, and hands since they seem so important for Hannah Cullwick to accomplish transfers between the field of labor and the field of sexuality and in order to gain recognition. Her fetishes were chosen so that they always referred, „at first glance,“ to sexuality / gendering as well as to labor. For example, muscles and dirt – which is highlighted in the film extensively – can give rise to ideas of feminine masculinity as well as to labor, the slave band refers both to the sexual relationship of dominance and submission as well as to labor, and the hands could stand for sexual touching as well as for manual labor.

P.B.: And, very importantly: there is a voice behind the camera giving commands which is very present in the film. This voice appears to be feminine, so I think we could say that Munby is there, but transformed into a lesbian subject.

R.L.: And their relationship is complex: Most of the time the person behind the camera gives commands. But sometimes it changes: The protagonist asks the person behind the camera to put a boot into the scene. Or she_he demands another backdrop.

A.E.: Yes, maybe the backdrops are also very important for the way sexual relations are established in the film. In fact, one could say that they play an active role in the scenario. Could you describe the backdrops and tell us why you chose them?

P.B.: At the time, Hannah Cullwick used to go to different photo studios in London. The time when she started to have her portraits made, the 1860s, corresponds to the first moment in history where photography was becoming available and affordable to people. We chose two very different backdrops for our film. One is a landscape painting from the 19th century, referring to the kind of paintings that were used in the photographers' studios at that time. People posed in front of a big painting of a landscape, a setting that was used in the photographs to control the light, the depth of field and to allow for the necessary duration of the pose. We like the idea to have on the one hand the landscape, as a 19th century romantic representation of „nature”, which is in fact an artifact and an important photo-studio-device in strong opposition to the second backdrop, a leather sex scene, which is a photograph from Del LaGrace Volcano („Daddy Boy Dykes”, 1991). Through Del's photograph, we wanted to have a reference to photography as a genre. We also wanted to make a direct link to queer contemporary approaches to photography.

R.L.: And the queer representations of gender and sexuality in Del's photograph interfered with the complex gender performance of the different restagings of the Hannah Cullwick persona. Through the performance in front of the backdrops it becomes possible to involve the protagonist in the potential for sexual relations – for example a performer of unclear gender performing nearly perfectly as a bourgeois male or a bourgeois female but showing the traces of a dirty maid, flirts with the picture of two leather boys with beards and – apparently female – breasts.

A.E.: Maybe self-eroticization is not contrary to the interaction with the setting and the backdrops at all. I just remember the scene with the masculine persona, the young bourgeois guy, who poses amongst the leather boy couple, while the sculpture of a panther stands at his side. His self-eroticization is fetishistic: He caresses his gloves, a button of his vest, a handkerchief. Is this a specific gender performance? Interestingly, all other personae prefer to fetishize their bodies and skin. Or do you particularly relate to the connection between sexual fetishism and commodity fetishism?

R.L.: I would see this pointing towards fetishes as visibility strategies that establish the connection between gender / sexuality and labor / economy. While the film shows the details of her_his bourgeois dress, it simultaneously exhibits her_his dirty fingernails. Thus it is possible to represent the dirty labor and the position as maid even in the perfect embodiment of bourgeois masculinity. This also points to the importance of the negotiation of dirt and cleanliness as a hinge between sexuality / gender binaries and

labor. Anne McClintock argues that nothing is inherently dirty: dirt expresses a relationship to social value and social disorder.

A.E.: Yes, now you mention it: These hands are very noticeable, conspicuous in the film. So they not only stand in for fetishes but also for social crossings?

R.L.: Yes, I think so. The transfers that can be accomplished through fetishes seem to allow a certain control over social conditions, but on the other hand they also mark the contradictions which one has to cope with by crossing different social positions all the time: Hannah Cullwick who also undertook travels with Munby in her daily life as bourgeois lady for instance had to hide her dirty red hands which gave her recognition as a hard working maid in order to be recognized as a lady.

A.E.: There is one scene that is obviously characterized by interaction in front of the camera. It is the one that negotiates the racist relations of colonialism and proposes a reworking of these power relations. This scene, too, starts with stroking hands, a black hand caressing a black shoulder, only then a close-up of the face, and finally a long-shot of a young slave sitting cross-legged on the ground, snapping his fingers commandingly, ordering somebody to enter the scene. Following this, we watch a big black leather boot entering the picture from the right. Why did you decide to represent the intersection of sexuality and power through a slavery scenario?

P.B.: Hannah Cullwick's photograph as a slave is quite ambivalent. The black-facing of her body is related to one of her usual practices at her work place: she cleaned the chimney and came out of it with ash all over her body. She repeated this black-facing in the SM scenarios that she and Munby were practicing at his home. At the same time it of course refers to a repertoire of racist images that come from slavery – 1860 is only 30 years after slavery was abolished in England. At this time minstrel shows were very fashionable. They were comic shows executed for white people by white people in blackface, which portrayed and lampooned blacks in stereotypical and racist ways. What interested us for the film is that this photograph especially makes clear how the different categories interrelate: this representation of Hannah Cullwick as black is also related to her exoticization as a woman from the working class. For somebody like Munby, who came from the higher bourgeoisie, the working-class women were exotic. This is very visible in a series of drawings he made where you see women from the working class with very masculine traits, very big hands and a black skin. When he shows himself in comparison, he appears as feminine and white. This underlines how the construction of whiteness in colonial England was related to class and gender: A lady for example established her social status by possessing a body that was exempt from traces of work, which also secured her femininity.

R.L.: I think that the power differences bound to racism can still be understood nowadays – intellectually as well as affectively. Other power differences – for instance that it was really a breaking of taboo at Hannah Cullwick's time for a house maid to wear bourgeois clothes – are not part of our negotiations of power and dominance anymore. In our economy it is now possible and even required – if not for everyone in the same way – to cross class and even gender positions. Therefore the „slave“ scene is very

important from my perspective to point out the violent, coercive and restrictive elements of the hierarchies involved.

P.B.: In the original slave photograph, you can actually see a remaining part of a foot which obviously is Munby's down on the right-hand side, the rest of his body having been cut off. From today's perspective it seems a classic SM-scene, the submissive position and the fetish of the boot. It is interesting how Hannah Cullwick in the figure of a slave connects the position of social subordination with desire. She also accomplished a quite sophisticated gender play, since she was half naked performing as a male, her_his breasts disguised in the shadow – not far from the staging and photographic techniques that for instance Del LaGrace Volcano uses. Therefore Hannah Cullwick's photograph invites a connection with a performance which deals with the many different relations of power and desire involved.

A.E.: I very much like the complexity of the scene, and how impressive it is to experience the simple turn-around of the power relation due to the authoritative command, while at the same time the threat of the attendant's boot cannot be forgotten about – even though it is laden with desire.

R.L.: But to come back to your claim that this scene is the only one dealing with power relations, I would say that power is also negotiated in the other stagings or drag settings of the film, even when the protagonist is showing a kind of upward mobility. I like Homi Bhabha's concept of „mimicry” to understand for instance the reenactment of the bourgeois positions. As Bhabha argues, the bourgeois white class of colonial England presented itself as an ideal, inviting others to copy it. Thus the colonized become „white” and imitate the colonizers. I like this concept since it also deals with the „affective” or seemingly voluntary and collaborative parts of acting under dominance. The colonized produce slippages in this performative act of mimicry, which are marked by Bhabha as acts of resistance. We are very interested in the special subjectivity, an ambivalent subjectivity as Bhabha calls it, or a subjectivity that has to cross the limits of the different class, gender, and racial positions all the time. Obviously a problem of setting up of borders is handled here resulting from the reproduction and coercively achieved fixed positions and hierarchies on the one hand and their mobilizing which takes place simultaneously on the other hand. All subjects – although they may not have the same amount of agency and act differently – take part in the negotiations of those hierarchies and borders. I think that our film may also highlight to which extent desire and fantasies are part of an undermining and reworking of clear power differences.

P.B.: Considering the „blackface” scene as mimicry, it was important for us that in the film it is the only scene where Werner Hirsch doesn't perform a perfect passing. The process of mimicry is presented. Werner's make-up is shown unfinished, one finger is white, or she_he shows the blond hair under the headscarf.

A.E.: Yes. But I think there's another scene where the passing is not perfect: The most explicit connection to today's working conditions is stated by a young bourgeois woman who tells us about her various jobs and precarious sources of income, ranging from furniture remover to university teacher. Since facial expression, gesture and voice clash

with her Victorian costume the scenario becomes quite ironic, though the irony carries some cynicism, if we realize the precariousness in the story she presents. The scenario becomes more complex when the Victorian woman enters the leather and latex setting of a sex club, and for a short moment we get the impression that she'll flirt with the guys of Del's photograph. But then she only changes the slave band, the one Cullwick presented on all the photographs as well as to all her employers, from one wrist to the other. What is the meaning of this scenario, this gesture of the interweaving of historical and today's time? Do we become part of a fantasy scenario, do we experience the importance of fantasy scenarios in general, for the development of modern and late modern social subjectivities, which interweave or even equivocate sexuality and work?

R.L.: Yes. We think that the negotiations of social boundaries and the crossings of different social positions that Hannah Cullwick performed in her photographs as well as in her everyday life are a kind of prototype for current neoliberal conditions. The possibility to leave a coherent social position does indeed on the one hand carry the promise of being able to abolish the lifelong ties to the social restrictions that go along with belonging to a certain class and gender. So it may be possible for a woman to leave the position of a secretary and a heterosexual wife, but on the other hand she may find herself in the situation where she has to deal with different interpellations and demands addressing her simultaneously as (male) boss, as secretary (who prepares the coffee anyway), as a lesbian community member and as a mother. Or someone has to apply for an academic job and show all the required features and has – on the next day – to apply for social welfare. Thus, at the same time, it is clear that it is a matter here of a new, very violent deployment of power, precisely bound to the precariousness of the positions, which draws its strength from confronting the subject with contradictory and simultaneous interpellations and demands. After some years of „crossings“ Hannah Cullwick refused to accompany Munby as a bourgeois woman on his trips anymore, which was leading to raging, hurtful fights and to a break that led to Munby sending her out of his house. Such a deployment, a set up of power relations, which not only makes mobility possible and instills it with desire, but at the same time pronounces threats if it should not succeed, seems to have become lastingly lodged into the field of labor.

P.B.: The photographs and their reenactment can be understood as a technology to control these crossings, or to reflect on the great efforts and constant deliberation that were connected to them.

2008

Notes:

1 Hudson, Derek (1972): *Munby, Man of Two Worlds. The Life and Diaries of Arthur J Munby 1828-1910*, London.

2 First feminist publication: Stanley, Liz (1984): *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick. Victorian Maidservant*, London.

3 Atkinson, Diane (2003): *Love and Dirt: The Marriage of Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick*, London.
Davidofi, Leonore (1995): *Worlds Between. Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class*, New York.
Dawkins, Heather (1987): *The Diaries and Photographs of Hannah Cullwick*, in: *Art History* 10:2, S. 154-187.
Hiley, Michael (1979): *Victorian Working Women. Portraits from Life*, London und Bedford.
Reay, Barry (2002): *Watching Hannah – Sexuality, Horror and Bodily De-formation in Victorian England*, London.
Schülting, Sabine (2001): *Dichter und Bäuerin. Inszenierungen des ungleichen Paares in den Texten von Arthur J. Munby und Hannah Cullwick*, in: Annegret Heitmann (Hg.), *Bi-Textualität. Inszenierungen des Paares*, Berlin, S. 179-195.

4 McClintock, Anne (1995): *Imperial Leather. Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, New York.