About the Cover

The intersex look

Arthur Tress, American, 1940. Hermaphrodite, East Hampton, 1973. Gelatin silver print (printed 1995), 19 x 18-3/4 in. (483 x 476 mm). Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of Steve Rifkin and Carol Stephens Rifkin. 97.185.21 ©Arthur Tress. All rights reserved. Photo: Minneapolis Institute of Art.

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1 Adams (1996, 123). Recognition is at stake in Del LaGrace Volcano's ongoing photographic project, in collaboration with intersex activists, ironically entitled 'Visibly Intersex' (<http://www.dellagracevolcano.com/gallery/visibly-intersex-35548944>). The subjects in these photographs – clothed, and without genitalia on display – are not in fact 'visibly' intersex. These images thus disrupt the expectations that we are primed to have as a result of the iconographic and medical traditions of representing hermaphroditism because they ask: what is it about our bodies that you recognize as intersex? what is it about our bodies that you don't recognize as human? In any case, don't you know that intersex is not always visible on the body?.

2 On Nadar's 9 photographs, see Blume (2005).

A young person of about 20 stands pale and naked before us in the awkward pose of the Archaic Greek kouros, their arms by their sides. They are in the middle of a wide garden alley that is lined by classical statues on plinths. In contrast to the young person, the statues are in the naturalistic *contrapposto* stance (weight resting on one leg, the other leg relaxed), in drapery that reveals the body. This person's torso is male, its musculature referring to a classical norm of maleness that echoes the torso of the stone god on their left. But this person has no visible genitalia. Only a triangle of pubic hair at the top of the thighs. Are they male or female? Sexual ambiguity, now and in the past, provokes first surprise, then confusion, and then – all too often – fear and hostility. The sexually ambiguous body is unrecognizable: we do not know its sex or its gender, or its place in space or time. For, to adapt and resituate Parveen Adams' comment about Della Grace's photograph of three unrecognizable women 'The Three Graces,' it is 'within the space of recognition' that the representation of the intersex body is played out.¹

The subject of Arthur Tress's photograph looks out at us from the middle of the frame, holding our gaze without apology or defense. Unlike the intersex person whose body is the subject of a medical gaze in the famous 1861 series of nine photographs (some only of the genitalia) by the French photographer Nadar [Gaspard-Félix Tournachon], Tress's figure solicits our recognition of their humanness: this is what I am.² But what are they? Their body is paradoxically both castrated and phallic, in its nakedness and uprightness. The disorienting nature of this castrated yet phallic body touches on the register of sexual difference, which is the register in which castration matters. If the term 'intersex' implies a bodily identity that lies in between dichotomous gender, insofar as gender is written on the body, then the logic of Tress's image suggests a different logic of gender and the body. And if the role of the phallus is to cover over lack by veiling it, then this indeterminately-sexed body puts on display that the phallic order is less than all (Adams, 1996, 55): to be human is to be organized around lack. Castrated and phallic, this body speaks back to the anxieties of those surgeons that desire to restore an imaginary wholeness to the body of the intersex infant.

Tress's title 'Hermaphrodite,' though now offensive to most intersex persons,³ evokes both classical and medieval terminology and iconography, recalling other histories and other places. The damp hair and naked body of Tress's subject suggest that, like Ovid's Hermaphroditus, they have just emerged from the pool of Salmacis, the nymph that wove herself around the beautiful youth in the water until 'the bodies of boy and girl were merged and melded in one' [mixta duorum corporum iunguntur] (Ovid, 2004, 149; Anderson, 1998, 116). Tress's Hermaphroditus stands between their stone parents, Venus (Aphrodite) and Mercury (Hermes), a 'child of the god of boundary-stones and the goddess of sexuality' (as M.W. Bychowski describes them in this issue). But while the father

looks on, the mother looks away. Their gazes mime the gaze on the intersex body, then and now. We look away from what we want to disavow, but we also look because of our fascination, not to say obsession, with (infant) genital appearance, with penile length and clitoris size, with displacement, misplacement, and the non-apprehension of the organ (Morland, 2001), just as surgeons look first to gauge a child's gender at birth, and look again, post-surgery, to see if the child will pass muster as either a girl or a boy. As Iain Morland observes in his 'Afterword' to this issue, there's a long history of 'how intersex bodies have been read as likenesses of female and male anatomies,' one that leads 'to the contemporary medical assertion that such bodies can be made to look more female or male – and less like both – by surgical interventions.' And the placing of Tress's subject in the front and middle of the picture plane, not on the boundaries, as in the Hereford *mappa mundi* or in Hilary Malatino's waiting-room (Bychowski in this issue) or in either 'the prelapsarian paradise' or 'the postresurrection afterlife' (DeVun), disrupts the spatial and temporal narratives of intersex, then and now. The intersex person today is a palimpsest, an accumulation of texts that have been largely effaced to make room for new writing, but which still – as in Tress's haunting photograph – bears visible traces of its earlier forms.

3 See the Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome Support Group (AISSG) website: http://www.aissg.org/21_OVERVIEW.HTM#Terminology.

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