

# Laughing about N.O.Body

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'N.O. Body' is a borrowed title. N.O. Body was the pseudonym of an author who published a book in 1907 entitled 'Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren' (*Memoirs of a Man's Maiden Years*). It is the autobiography of a person, born with ambiguous sex, who spent childhood and youth as a girl, and then altered his gender and led an adult life as a man. The first letter N. stands for the protagonist's two first names, Nora and then Norbert. As such, N.O. Body is both a name and not a name. We like the fact that it marks the identity of *somebody* who at the same time refuses all identity as a *nobody*. Furthermore, it refers to a body that cannot only be addressed as nobody. The sex researcher Magnus Hirschfeld, who later would found the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin, wrote the afterword to this book. In this text he proposed that doctors be required to register newborns whose gender could not be determined as "of undetermined sex" rather than simply assigning one or the other sex to the baby. Hirschfeld – despite his attempts to examine scientifically the masculinity or femininity of bodies – was of the opinion that every person should have the basic right to be able freely to choose their gender. The demand for "equal rights for all," as Hirschfeld says in his text, is not based on the equality of all persons, but instead on their diversity. Every person must have the same opportunities to live out their differences. This demand has still not been met legally, nor has it been introduced in the medical field for newborns with ambiguous sex.

## Book burning

In 1933, the Institute for Sexual Science directed by Hirschfeld, was destroyed by the book burning carried out by the Nazis. Since it was the only private library to be destroyed – the others books were taken from public libraries – it seems obvious that not only the institute, but Hirschfeld himself, would be persecuted. Not only was he Jewish and homosexual, but he was publicly demanding equal rights for „different bodies“ (even if he had not completely left behind nineteenth century degeneracy theories).

## Sexology, photographs

The film and installation 'N.O. Body' are the products of our research on Magnus Hirschfeld's sex theory, the so-called 'transition theory' ('Zwischenstufentheorie'). Hirschfeld assumed that masculinity and femininity were only ideals, unachievable by anyone, and that all individual bodies could be placed somewhere between these two ideals. Using a formula, he calculated all possible variations of gender characteristics, arriving at the immense figures of 43,046,721, which surprisingly corresponds to no less than one fortieth of humanity. However, says Hirschfeld, "with more careful reflection, it becomes not only comprehensible, but must be seen as too small, since we notice that no human being is exactly like any other" (Hirschfeld 1926).

We found it remarkable that Magnus Hirschfeld published another, larger volume along with his book on sexology: 'Sexology, Pictures' (published in 1930). In more than 800 pages, this book focuses on photographs and drawings of people in drag, crossdressers who 'pass' as the other gender, fetishists and SM scenarios, gender ambiguity and the clothing that goes along with it, uniform fetishes, same-sex

couples, or even 'intersex' ('Zwitter') animals. Magnus Hirschfeld used all these images as visual records of his theory on gender. Photographs assumed great value for him in communicating his theories and their evidence. In the lobby of his institute, for instance, there was a display on which the variety of gender and sexual categories were demonstrated through photographs. Hirschfeld's scholarly lectures were also usually accompanied by a slide presentation.

There is no index to the illustrations in 'Sexology, Pictures.' We can only guess at the obviously extremely varied sources of the photographs. It seems that Hirschfeld collected photographs on his travels, uncovered historical photographs, or took illustrations from erotic literature and calendars. In some of the illustrations backgrounds have been retouched and images have been cropped. Most images have captions for clarification, such as, for instance, under an image of a person with a beard and masculine clothing: "Woman in male clothing (with false beard)." It is not stated who wrote the captions (Hirschfeld himself?) and where this person got the pertinent information. Even with the captions, it cannot always be determined whether the subject always wore masculine clothing and lived as a man or whether this clothing was donned for a sexual scenario or a party. Additional photographs were produced in Hirschfeld's institute, often showing genitals, body parts, or pieces of clothing that are meant to make ambiguous gender visible. Sometimes if a body or body part is photographed naked, the face is covered. A sign that in other photographs in Hirschfeld's collection, indicates the controlled loss of control in a sadomasochistic scenario. Scientific objectivity and neutrality, which are supposed to be guaranteed and made anonymous through the masked body, and the desire that is directed at these masked and anonymous bodies in a sexual scenario, are made visible through one and the same sign.

Contextualization through gender theory and assignment of scientific terms and categories, however, cannot displace the reference to a rich subcultural life. Bars, sexual fetishes, and SM scenarios can be attributed to the images as easily as can the pathologizing of bodies in medicine and the social pressures that were (and still are) associated with deviation from hetero - sexual and binary-gender norms. The sheer number of categories that Hirschfeld found, incorporating the "bearded lady" as well as the "waist fetishist," would seem to push the organizing function of categorization to its limits.

### **The photographs of Annie Jones**

We liked the 'bearded ladies' most of all. Masculinity and femininity are exhibited at one and the same time in the photographs of the 'bearded ladies' without shifting a body clearly in one direction or the other. It is also striking that the bearded ladies look proudly into the camera and do not in any way seem to conform to an objectifying gaze.

We chose a photograph of Annie Jones as the starting point of our work. In the photograph, along with a long beard, she has long hair, reaching down to her knee. Annie Jones lived in the USA between 1865 and 1902 and was one of the most famous bearded ladies of her time. Her face was already covered with hair when she was only nine months old, when she was put under contract by the Barnum Circus and presented in a museum as a 'freak.' For her family and later herself, she received a sizable income. She toured throughout the USA and all over Europe, first with the circus and then later with her own show.

We decided to work with this photograph of Annie Jones because it crosses two different contexts. This illustration of a body travelled from the freak show in the

circus, where she was presented to the public for a fee as a 'wonder' to the medical theater, where she was shown in Hirschfeld's book as a potential 'patient.' This transformation from 'wonder' to medical objectification indicates the increasing significance of modernity and enlightenment. The photograph moved from freak discourse into the medical discourse, bringing along with it the story of a historical transformation in the representation and evaluation of difference and of the practices associated with it.

Freak shows such as the famous Barnum Circus presented all kinds of peculiar bodies, including 'giants' or 'dwarves,' extremely heavy or extremely thin people, people without arms or legs, people who presumably came from exotic lands, sword swallows, and snake charmers. All these peculiarities are based on theatricality and exaggeration. The appearance of 'freaks' in the show was set up by a narrative, that included their biographies and their special bodies and capabilities. These narratives were usually invented or at least represented a gross exaggeration of the real life stories as well as of the body measurements. These introductions were called 'lectures,' the person that gave them, 'the professor.' Photographs of the freaks were a significant part of the overall show. Visitors could purchase them afterwards and, for an additional fee, could get them autographed. The photographs were taken in the studio by professional photographers, and their selling points were often carefully enhanced by backdrops and props. So Annie Jones presents her masculine beard and her long hair and wears – to dramatize the meeting of masculinity and femininity – a proper, feminine Victorian dress.

When the photographs turned up anew in Hirschfeld's book, they landed in a context that, in the search of scientific objectivity, increasingly obscured the fact that they were already products of cultural constructions that cannot easily be separated from the historically specific conditions of prurience, desire, and the representation of difference.

### **Freak, c'est chic**

We would like once again to take up and investigate the figure of the 'freak' in the context of contemporary queer politics. For this was a single figure referring to any body that was seen as somehow 'unusual.' Not only the 'bearded lady' and the 'man from New Guinea,' but also sword swallows were seen as freaks. Barnum's freak show defined the differences between the audience and the freaks and allowed the spectators to understand themselves in this arrangement as 'normal,' American, and able-bodied. But at the same time, using the term 'freak' at all opens up a space for difference. Some of the performers, like Annie Jones, were 'freak celebrities,' they were quite popular, publicly visible, and earned a good living. Difference was – at least in the context of the shows – celebrated and marvelled at, rather than being worked against through normalization and assimilation.

Rosemary Garland-Thomson links the cultural and political strategies of a normalization of bodies with the historical changes in the field of production and work. Wage work with its organization of time and standardized demands, as well as work on machines, demanded bodies that were not only disciplined, but also 'the same.' 'Freak' then could also become a term for those who developed social practices that contradicted the demands of wage work. Many hippies in the 1970s, for instance, referred to themselves as 'freaks.' The figure of the 'freak' is as much linked to a history of constraints on and the deprivileging of bodies as it is to a history of resistance, of the active presentation and proud assertion of difference.

'N.O. Body' is conceived as a freak. Even if he does not necessarily present himself as a figure to be identified with, he does open up the question of whether freak status, the diversity associated with it, and the embodiments and practices that go along with it can also be idealized and desired.

## Staring

A freak becomes a freak because he gets stared at. Rosemary Garland-Thomson introduces the term 'staring' and distinguishes it from the term 'gaze,' a term that feminist scholars, borrowing from Lacan, have highly theorized as the dominant visual relation. Using historically developed codes, gazing organizes the comprehensibility of what is visible in the first place. Staring, according to Garland-Thomson, differs from the gaze in producing a particular visual choreography between the starrer and the staree. 'Staring' produces a perception of difference for the starrers and requires the starees to accept that they embody difference. A power dynamic thus arises between 'normal' and 'able-bodied' and 'deviant' or 'disabled.' Gazing is also distinguished from staring in that it includes the entire body, even as it objectifies that body. Staring on the other hand is specifically directed at a specific visual signifier of difference. Nowadays staring is considered rude. This does not, of course, mean that no one stares anymore, but now staring is supposed to be secret and discreet. So the body of the freak, as Garland-Thomson formulates, becomes a visual paradox. It is a body that is at once to-be-looked-at and not-to-be-looked-at. Photography in this paradox can then be understood as an authorization to stare. It is a mode that makes staring possible without it being perceived as impolite.

## Laughing

*"Laughing speaks the unofficial truth, and this is in a system that stabilizes – through differentiation, opposition, and hierarchy – the ambivalence of things in part produced by it, but also disguised by it. Laughing resides in the margins and border regions of a social apparatus of power by reintroducing the rejected and the taboo." (Linda Hentschel)*

The freak is a figure that acts and meddles in the practices of staring, knowledge production, and constellations of power and desire. Laughing then takes the place of a spoken statement, but unlike language, it does not produce a reproducible meaning based on social conventions. In the end it is not possible to understand or fix the precise meaning of laughing. This ambiguity makes it possible for laughing to undermine the opposition between seriousness and frivolity. For knowledge depends on convincing others, on being 'taken seriously.' Freaks or queers, on the contrary, were and are repeatedly in the position of having to prove their seriousness. They are in a situation in which their authority in the production of knowledge is precarious. The setting of the film 'N.O. Body' is a nineteenth century lecture hall in which the possible positions of the production of knowledge are spatially organized – the central position of 'the professor,' the large table, which introduces the object of interest, the blackboard, on which knowledge is recorded, and the listeners, sitting in tiered rows of seats facing the display of knowledge. But what happens in the production of normality and deviance, asks the film N.O. Body, if the 'object of knowledge' assumes the position of the producer of knowledge and opens up the history of knowledge production once again? This freak then appropriates the practices of visualizing, such as staring and laughing. The image of an empty auditorium also assigns a position to the potential audience: N.O.Bodies.