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QUEER LINEAGE. A GHOST STORY²



Molly Landreth, *Charlie and Honey* (2005)



Molly Landreth, *Chickadee and Her Family* (2009)

A documentary project by Seattle-based photographer Molly Landreth, *Embodiment: A Portrait of Queer Life in America* provides since 2005 an archive of portraits, statements and video interviews aiming to create “a brave new vision of what it means to be queer in America today.”³ Surprisingly enough, it does not stage a spectacular, hypersexualised body imagery. Most interestingly, it is rooted in the *extraordinary ordinariness* of the queer, pivoting on a dialectics between being “at home” and being “unhomely.” In these portraits and interviews, bodies are set in homely frameworks or in familiar surroundings, and yet they are somehow at odds with the very notion of homeliness and family. I am thinking for instance of exemplary portraits *Charlie*

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² A version of this paper was presented as an introduction to Molly Landreth’s exhibition – *Embodiment: A Portrait of Queer Life in America* – held at the Deutsch-Amerikanisches Institut, Tübingen, 28 May 2009. I’d like to thank Christiane Pyka and the Institut for organizing the series of events that was opened by *Embodiment*, and for awarding me the privilege to introduce the exhibition.

³ See <http://embodimentusa.com> and <http://mollylandreth.com>. Other materials from *Embodiment* may be accessed in social networks such as Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Embodiment-A-Portrait-of-Queer-Life-in-America/58574692825>), Twitter (<http://twitter.com/mollylandreth>), and Instagram (<http://instagram.com/mollylandreth/>).



and Honey (2005) and *Chickadee and Her Family*.⁴ They certainly are family portraits. But while seeming to stick to the family portrait code, something strange stirs them. Something queer. *Charlie and Honey* may seem to provide an easy answer to such queerness, in fact, given the patent lesbian presence, camping things up, along with the tenets of heteronormative family: it is a queer family portrait as it portrays two queers – a butch/femme duo – as “family”. And yet, *Chickadee* counters such perception, providing a far more complex case in point, one that frames the queer beyond the scope of lesbian, gay, etc. sexed identity. Where is the queerness of *Chickadee*? Is it as it proves difficult to assign family roles to the people portrayed? Or is it because of the dog, acting as both the *punctum* and the *studium* (in Barthes’s terms) of the image?⁵ Or again, is it that weird Virgin Mary statuette, completing the visual triangular scheme the image is built upon? Is it those neat, cold colours? Is it the glacial stillness of the bodies? Or is it the combination of opposites – the “home” set against and framed within extreme wilderness – which produces the picture’s eerie, if not actually gothic, flavour? Well, this is not merely the portrait of a family of queers, and not even the portrait of a queer family: it is a *queer (family) portrait*, combining as it does “homely” feelings in a cognitively dissonant pattern.

As a complex embodiment of queerness, Landreth’s project provides the occasion to address the shape of the contemporary queer, as well as to sketch its history and lineage. For the enduring presence – and the present – of the queer, we’ll see, are predicated upon phantasmatic absence – and the past. Landreth’s visual archive was planned to be completed by the end of June 2009, so as to mark and celebrate the fortieth anniversary of a watershed in American social history.⁶ On the night between Friday 27th and Saturday 28th June 1969, a traditional gay venue – the Stonewall Inn in Christopher Street, New York, whose customers had gathered to mourn the recently passed ultimate camp icon, Judy Garland – became the stage of a massive upheaval. As it was rather common for such twilight places, attended by queers and other (literally or metaphorically) homeless people, police regularly rallied the Stonewall Inn as part of a common practice of maintaining queers in a state of fear, in a condition of self-hatred and discredit that was vital to homophobic, heteronormative power structures. For these incursions were not so much meant to delete otherness, as to police its boundaries. All one could do was hide and run, and if caught, try and not react to provocations. One could end up in jail for a little, and then go home, scared and ashamed.

Apparently, the night of 28th June was not different from other nights, as police came to rally the Stonewall Inn. But that night turned out to be just like no other night before. What happened is quite legendary, the story being told in books, as well as in feature and documentary films:⁷ nobody really knows for sure how things got started. Some say that it was a lesbian, others claim that it was a bunch of drag queens that first reacted to the aggression, and appropriately so, by using their handbags as camp weapons. What went down to history, though, is that for the very first time people at the Inn engaged in a battle with the police, and riots ensued for three days. For the first time queers were not just begging for tolerance, as homophile movements such as Mattachine Society had been doing since the 1950s. They were proudly *fighting* for the most fundamental right of citizenship: the right to exist.

Those events had a top symbolic meaning, for they confronted the queer underground with the necessity to access full and righteous visibility, to come out of the sheets and get into the streets, as Dave Williams would say. The Gay Liberation Front is generally said to have been born after Stonewall, along with the whole gay

⁴ These two images were used in invitations and posters for the 2009 Tübingen exhibition.

⁵ See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (1980, translated by Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

⁶ This is also true of the events – “Forty Years After Stonewall” – opened by the *Embodiment* exhibition in Tübingen, along with a seminar on queer theory by Judith Halberstam, a seminar on camp theory by myself, and an international conference on “Queer Spaces” held at Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen at the end of May 2009. It was a queer ball indeed.

⁷ See Martin Duberman’s seminal book, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993), Nigel Finch’s feature film of the same title (1995), Greta Schiller and Robert Rosenberg’s 1984 and John Scagliotti’s 1999 documentary films, respectively titled *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community* and *After Stonewall*.



rights movement and identity politics season of the 1970s. The very idea of “gay”, positive and confrontational as it is, may in fact be claimed to be an outcome of those events. So, in a way, Stonewall is the symbolic event marking the shift from *queer* to *gay & lesbian etc.*: from an ashamed, self-loathing, unstable, discredited identity to a positive, public, self-defining and rights-claiming identity. By rebelling and fighting back, the queer had died, in Stonewall Inn, giving way to its gay offspring, the children of the sexual revolution.⁸

But if the queer died in 1969, why are we still so familiar with her today, and why is it so appropriate and interesting to assemble an archive of contemporary queer life in America? And when was the queer born, as a matter of fact? Addressing queer lineage, in fact, implies addressing its linguistic roots as twisted line and geometrical metaphor. Of German origins (*quer* meaning “traverse”, “twisted”, “bent”), up to the end of the nineteenth century *queer* meant something dubious, puzzling, inauthentic, at odds, not in a normal condition, out of order and out of place.⁹ It was – again, in linear terms – the opposite of *straight*, and as such, unsettling. As a sign, the queer signalled undecidability, that incessant wavering which makes it impossible to find semantic rest and stability. The queer, in other words, was an uncanny sign, partaking of the cognitive uncertainty that Freud would later discuss in terms of the *Unheimlich*, the Uncanny, with its eerie homely/unhomely dialectics.¹⁰ The Uncanny is what defies interpretation, and prevents knowledge as closure. What is striking is that the modern meaning of *queer* as a hate word for “homosexual” could not be found in the nineteenth century. That’s no surprise, though, if we assume, after Michel Foucault, that the homosexual was a creature of the late nineteenth century, one that was fostered by German sexual science from 1869 – exactly one hundred years before the Stonewall riots.¹¹ That modern meaning could not be found because the queer-as-stigmatized-homosexual did not exist yet.

The nineteenth-century queer body was a strange body indeed, providing no actual truth to be decoded. It meant negativity, resisting interpretation and representation. It was only with the spectacular Wilde trials in 1895 – the trials that brought him to prison for acts of gross indecency – that the homosexual found a face, and a body.¹² Not only did the Wilde trials bring Oscar Wilde to prison: they turned his dandy, queer, inauthentic body into a monstrous body that *did* hold a truth to be detected, after all: you just had to interpret its visible signs. The homosexual had been theorized as a female soul within a male body, and there you had an explanation for Wilde’s effeminacy: his female soul betrayed him. So, the Wilde trials produced a spectacular embodiment for the queer, providing at last the queer sign with a stable (if monstrous) meaning. The queer was strange – “bent” – because it implied sexual deviation. Such embodiment, as a matter of fact, tried to kill away the uncanny quality of the queer, by turning it into a readable, interpretable sign. Queerness was turned into a homely sign, into something that could be detected and decoded in a stigma-shaped body. The Wilde trials are yet another watershed in cultural history, and a case showing the semiotic policing of boundaries (such as feminine / masculine, homo / heterosexual). They gave birth to the queer-as-sexual

⁸ Queer historiography has been quite rich for some years now. See for instance Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston: South End, 1984), Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Jr. (eds.), *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: New American Library, 1989), and Neil Miller, *Out of the Past: Gay and Lesbian History from 1869 to the Present* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

⁹ See the *Oxford English Dictionary* on the historical meanings of *queer*.

¹⁰ See Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., edited by James Strachey et al., London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74, vol. 17 (*An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*), pp. 217-56.

¹¹ This famous claim, of course, can be found in Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality vol. 1: An Introduction* (1976, translated by Robert Hurley, London: Allen Lane, 1978).

¹² On the Wilde trials as pivotal in the modern homosexual construction see in particular Ed Cohen’s *Talk on the Wilde Side: Toward a Genealogy of Discourses on Male Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and Alan Sinfield’s *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassell, 1994). I have sketched this process in my “Queering the Camp: An Introduction”, in Fabio Cleto (ed.), *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999, pp. 1-42; I have also dealt at length with this issue in my *Percorsi del dissenso nel secondo Ottocento britannico* (Genoa: ECIG, 2001).



deviant, i.e., to the body politic that will provide the uneasy space of existence to non-straight, to less-than-humans, for the first seventy years of the twentieth century. Up to Stonewall, that is to say, when the queer-as-sexual-deviant committed suicide by embracing revolt, by fighting back. By reshaping itself into gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people, parading in the streets to win the right of citizenry.

Despite this double death, the queer's unsettling of gender and epistemic boundaries never really disappeared. It did not disappear with the Wilde trials and the alleged death of the uncanny queer, in fact. The tamed, post-Wildean queer never gave up its potentially destabilizing power. It was policed for seventy years, but then it erupted and exploded, back in 1969. After her symbolic suicide in the Stonewall upheaval, the uncanny queer did not disappear either, and by the mid-Eighties activist groups were forced to embrace the stigmatized queer body again, to replace identity politics (an example of boundary policing in itself) with the tactical, subversive mode of the queer. In short, the uncanny queer never vanished altogether: its twisted lineage kept existing – and returning – in the shape of a *ghostly presence*.

The queer, in fact, has always been inscribed in negativity, and embodied in representation: her bodily existence relies on the *spectrum*.¹³ When Wilde was made to signify the queer-as-sexual-deviant, his body was made into a sign itself, carrying the always visible, always legible mark of monstrosity: he provided a face to a strangely fascinating monster, and his postures and campy attitudes kept “coming back” in culture, as *revenants* obsessing the very heteronormative institutions that had killed him off. And we well know that both monsters and spectres do exist in *showing* – in fact, *monster* etymologically stems from *monstrare*, “to show”. They exist in representation, and require the failure of representation and naming (our cultural history is replete with images of monsters – from Mr Hyde to the Alien – that turn out to be the more terrifying the less fully we can represent them.) Queer negativity is rooted in visibility both as a trap and as a tool: the tension inherent to the queer, in other words, is related to agency – how to become *a means and a subject* of representation, and not just a (stable and tamed) *object* of representation.

This finally brings us back to the Molly Landreth embodiment project, to her affective archive of queer domestic life in America, telling “an untold story about love and the process of growing into one’s self” as the photographer’s website recites,¹⁴ showing the queerness that lies at the very heart of America. For these images are not only “portraits of queer life,” as they claim. Landreth’s project is not just another freak show, sporting a number of queer subjects in a parade of maladjusted identities. They are a queer show, in a sense both familiar and unfamiliar: in a sense providing another setting for the uncanny, cognitive dissonance of the Unheimlich. In their very unfamiliar quality, they are portraits of familiarity, of proximity, of ordinary daily life. And the photographic technique itself inscribes them in the realm of familiarity. One may spot some inheritance from Diane Arbus, of course, but filiations from the camp imaginary are also there – James Bidgood, Pierre & Gilles, David LaChapelle and the likes. Little trace of speculation is to be found: that is precisely what makes them uncanny. There is no easy spectacle, and yet no mere banality, for the camera eye manages to represent daily life in its strange, queer aspects. Proximity and strangeness meet in these queer embodiments, in these bodies as pictorial representations. And Landreth’s pictures may well act as mirrors for us today: by looking at these portraits of American Life, by experiencing their cognitive dissonance, at once unsettling and fascinating, by being interpellated into their queerness, we can find much of ourselves in them. And they may well remind us, many years after Stonewall, how much is still to be done, how many fights will still be fought, before the queer spectres may finally rest in peace. Before ghostly embodiments may leave space to actual bodies, and to persons.

Postscript. *While Landreth’s project was meant to be completed in June 2009, five years later Embodiment is still progressing and widening its boundaries. It embodied itself elsewhere in the United States, it moved to*

¹³ See again Roland Barthes, *op. cit.* On the queer as negation, see Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) and Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ See <http://mollylandreth.com> (accessed May 2009; this phrase no longer appears in September 2014).



England, and started to be seen at marriages – queer marriages indeed – too. The specters and spectra of queer bodies are still out there, quite uneasy.