

INDISCERNIBLE THRESHOLDS, ESCAPED VEILLANCES

Since 2009, International Transgender Day of Visibility has been celebrated every March 31st, recognizing the accomplishments of trans people and raising awareness of persistent anti-trans discrimination. The emergence of this event has come to represent an inclusionary neoliberal politic through which transness is engaged in the mainstream, conflating representation with empowerment. Undoubtedly, there are important political gains to be made through the realm of visibility and representational politics, but thinkers like Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton have called attention to how representation falls short of its promises to remedy social crises, instead often translating to endangering exposure for trans people or to the extractive treatment of transness and trans culture for public consumption.¹ Visibility is paraded out in service of institutions performing progressive values, but rarely results in improved material conditions for trans people.

Indiscernible thresholds, escaped veillances considers the invisible, the illegible, and the opaque as productive alternatives to contemporary trans hypervisibility, a circumstance wherein the realm of the representational risks becoming all that is offered to trans people. This exhibition brings together five artists who anticipate a cis voyeurism, but rather than welcome an inclusionary neoliberal co-optation of their work's transness, they opt to withhold, disguise, mislead, or obscure in the face of these forces. Taking into account histories of surveillance, fetishization, and exploitation inflicted against trans people, the works included here offer experiments in and interventions against visibility in order to bypass an easily consumable transness.

In his book *Poetics of Relation*, Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant calls for “the right to opacity for everyone,” asserting that opacity subverts the extractive dimensions of knowing the other.² Taking up this premise, the featured artists test the possibilities of opacity to negotiate presentations of transness, especially in relation to the archive. Responding to institutional and state archives as sites of surveillance and control, this exhibition wrestles with desires for access to a record of trans lives while simultaneously seeking alternatives to the archive's imposing demands for trans legibility. *Indiscernible thresholds, escaped veillances* revels in the ineffable and unindexable qualities of transness, allowing disappearance to take on an unexpected political power, possessing a very different type of agency than visibility.

Lucas LaRochelle's *Sometimes I forget what feeling felt like because I was never there when it happened* (2024) is a video co-produced by an artificial intelligence trained to generate speculative trans and queer experiences. These experiences are derived from the dataset of *Queering the Map*, LaRochelle's annotatable, community-sourced counter-mapping platform. A series of fractured, fictionalized, and intentionally incoherent experiences manifest alongside glitched imagery speaking to failure and dissociation, revealing an AI unable to convincingly replicate the materials that comprise its dataset. Responding to a history in which surveillance is the dominant mode through which states produce documentation of transness and queerness, LaRochelle employs a practice of data opacity, whereby their platform collects as little data as possible to protect contributors. Frameworks of narrative incoherency and data opacity implement a strategic invisibility as a form of self-protection for trans and queer people, placing LaRochelle's work within a tradition of understanding the unlocatable as holding the simultaneous power of being uncontrollable.

In his performance *Hiding* (2007–2010), Joshua Schwebel published advertisements in the classifieds sections of newspapers, sharing a specific date, time, and area in which he would be hiding. Schwebel's subsequent acts of concealing himself are gestures that circumvent visibility, suggesting discourses around passing, demands

for disclosure, and accusations of deceptiveness directed against trans people. Here Schwebel's work manifests as a series of documentary traces related to this performance: the newspapers in which his advertisements were originally published, a Freedom of Information document, and envelopes featuring images of his hiding places. An unruly assemblage of accumulated mail suggests a receiver who is unreachable or unlocatable, while the envelope as a structure emphasizes ideas of trans interiority and the controlled imperceptibility at the core of this performance. Capitalizing on the absence inherent to the documentation and exhibition of performance work, Schwebel's own absence in these images signals an escape from the biopolitical regimes of surveillance that govern trans lives.

Lan “Florence” Yee's photographic textile works respond to a fraught desire to see oneself within official archives while considering the simultaneous problematics of becoming possessed by a space that has historically enacted violence against racialized trans people, a space that produces documentation that is reductive, ethnographic, and surveillant. Their textiles hang between varied grids of wooden studs, simulating structures of domestic privacy—curtains between an inside and an outside. Fabric printed with images of glass bricks performs a barrier to access, critically negotiating the reductive legibility demanded by the archive and the reparative potentials of archival inclusion for racialized trans subjects. Repeated across Yee's textile series *Lucky / Empty* (2024) is a Cantonese character for good luck, used superstitiously as a euphemism for empty. Here, 吉 at once represents a yearning for what might be missing from the archive and a proposal to sit comfortably in absence and trans unrecordability.

Chelsea Thompto's *Fog Lights* (2023) investigates fog as a motif that figures prominently in the genre of horror and an atmospheric condition capable of hindering military vision. Appropriating the visual language of a device meant to aid visibility when driving, her procedurally generated video sculptures put forward a pastiche of text to consider the usefulness of trans opacity, proposing that fog be taken up as an aspirational mode for trans embodiment and resistance.³ Thompto's second work, *Productive Bodies* (2019),

brings together archival audio and visual materials documenting the industrialization of the Mississippi River with representations of trans bodies in the medical field, drawing connections between how technologies of visualization are enacted on bodies of water as well as the bodies of trans people. The procedural generation techniques used in these media works enable a nonlinear archival narrative to emerge, undermining expectations of trans legibility and illuminating invisibility as a potentiated mode with particular significance to trans artists.

Finally, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's *WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT/blacktransarchive.com* (2020–2022) seeks to negotiate the archival erasure of Blackness and transness while refusing to be complicit in the consumability of Black trans trauma. Her video game functions as an interactive counter-archive for Black trans lives, experiences, and embodiments. In order to play this game, players must disclose their own positionality, which then informs their particular experience and access to the game's storyline. A negotiation of access and the artist's experimentation with distorted sounds and images combine to facilitate a participatory engagement with Glissant's concept of opacity, turning focus to the viewer's responsibilities in relation to Brathwaite-Shirley's archive. This emphasis on relation and opacity does not allow for passive viewership for non-Black and non-trans players. Brathwaite-Shirley's use of fiction and world-building troubles impeding notions of universality and archival completeness through access to particular storylines.

If exhibitions seek to expose and display, *Indiscernible thresholds, escaped veillances* grapples with the contradiction of its medium. Illegibility and opacity are offered up as a way of shifting exposure to a more interstitial space, calling on other tenors of relation between viewer and artwork. Rather than approaching visibility as an issue to be resolved, these artists consider the potentials of retreating from view, framing opacity as a protective act, archival illegibility as an escape.

Dallas Fellini

¹ Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2022), xv-xvi.

² Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 194.

³ “Chelsea Thompto: The Fog,” San José Museum of Art, 2023, <https://sjmusart.org/digital-projects/chelsea-thompto>.