

Juliana Huxtable and Stuart Comer on the new politics of trans visibility in the social media age

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Juliana Huxtable photographed at her studio in Brooklyn, NY.

The artist and downtown 'It Girl' speaks with the MoMA curator about the fine line between transgender visibility and commercial exploitation for Document Spring/Summer 2016.

A regular fixture in New York's nightlife scene, Juliana Huxtable caused a stir at the 2015 New Museum Triennial, where she was both an artist and muse; the 28 year old showcased four of her own pieces, including two self portraits imbued with references from the Nuwaubian Nation, and Frank Benson was so intrigued by Huxtable that he scanned her body for a 3D sculpture of her likeness for the exhibition. Just a few months later, Performa and Stuart Comer, the chief curator of media and performance art at the Museum of Modern Art, selected the transgender artist to be part of the performance art biennial, where she took the audience on a schizophrenic journey that touched on a diverse number of topics, including black samurai, trans-healers in South Africa, and pre colonial globalism. Comer and Huxtable reunited at MoMA earlier this year to discuss the challenges of being a transgender African-American performance artist, the pressures of fame, and the ubiquity of violence.

Stuart Comer—When I first encountered you, you were kind of in the art world but more in the club world. Then gradually you were doing a lot of readings. Then you were doing more performance. Then the New Museum [Triennial] happened with gallery practice. Now you've got a huge arsenal at your disposal. Are you going to try to juggle those different approaches and forms? Where do you feel most comfortable at the moment?

Juliana Huxtable—I'm comfortable where I'm not comfortable. If something has become sedimented, it becomes a turn off. At this point, I am juggling all of them, but I don't have to be as invested in the nightlife. It's a different context. It's not a really pleasant escape.

Stuart—It's a different kind of community.

Juliana—It also doesn't feel as necessary for it to be the primary space I operate in. I'm trying to think of ways to merge the things I do, or think of them as assemblages. The performance combined a lot of them. I'm trying to think of ways in that are not modular where it's like, "I'm a DJ and I'm also an artist and I'm a writer." I'm trying to find how they can exist in tandem with each other.

Stuart—What remains at the core is your voice. Many of the interviews and narratives around your biography focus on Juliana in Texas and her move to New York, which gave you a lot to write about. But now that most of your time is taken up by being a professional: a professional artist, a professional performer. Is that shifting what you're writing about or how you're thinking about language in the work?

Juliana—It's given me a lot more freedom to get outside of it. Those other things were diaristic; that was necessary because of what I was dealing with at the time. It was hard to process the world outside of, "I'm in fear a lot of the time," or "I have a lot of sense of abandonment." Writing is a therapeutic impulse. Oddly enough, with moving into the world of being a professional, it's opened up room for me to get into more of the nuances of how those function in the world. After a reading, it was interesting to hear feedback from people who had this take: "Some of the earlier stuff, it seems you were writing that because you needed to." In some ways it made me uncomfortable because I was thinking, "Is this you being shady?" [Laughs]. Is this you being dismissive of an identity moment during its developmental stage? I'm at a point now where I feel a lot more freedom and flexibility to deal with things that don't necessarily have to come primarily through me and the literal trappings of my body.

Stuart—There are a lot of boxes that people like to put you in, and an enormous pressure when you are expected to represent the entire trans community, the entire trans community of color. I kind of see what you do in the expanded field, both through the club stuff and the communities you build, as well as very personal address to your subjectivity.

Juliana—A lot of the artists I look up to are people I think of as outside. My favorite artist is Coco Fusco. A lot of people of this generation who aren't people of color are approaching her from a canon where they've had to seek her out, and think of her work as pedantic, which is a misreading. How those things can be read in the current context is informing not just me but other artists. As I've also gotten more aware of my place in the world, it's informed the structure of what I'm doing. Like with the performance [at MoMA], it felt necessary for me to take a step back from being so present—as the body being looked at and consumed. It's a totally different set of circumstances with the trans thing, because it functions in a different way than race does. Part of the self awareness I've had to form is because the issue of being trans represents what people perceive to be the margins. On the one hand, I'm being read as this trans artist, and obviously I'm trying to counter that in a lot of ways. But it also becomes symbolic of the way people are consuming this marginality and what that signifies now—the dot-com-article, Tumblr culture, millennial way of rapid consumption of the margin and trying to champion that as mainstream gesture. It's weird because you take something approximating a representation of a trans person, a person of color, or "Black Lives Matter," and it's immediately pushed it into super media attention. It's easy to wipe that off as corny, populist

media obsessed, “I’m critically engaged,” share-culture, Like-culture. That’s a weird place to be in. That’s definitely informing how I position myself in relation to it. I don’t want to be eclipsed into a populist identity politics artist who started from Tumblr and now I’m here.

“A lot of these historical figures have tragic endings. I don’t know if it’s literally the case, but sometimes I think: ‘Were they literally consumed to death?’” —Juliana Huxtable

Stuart—In the piece you did for MoMA there was an implicit violence throughout. One could argue in the last year two things really dovetailed in a major way: violence against people of color in police brutality, and a growing awareness that trans people of color are some of the biggest victims of that violence. Is that inclination to representation of violence coming from that place?

Juliana—For me, whether verbal or physical, the threat of violence has always been imminent in my life. Growing up in an abusive Southern Baptist home, it was not talked about as abuse, but “discipline.” When I moved to New York, I experienced violence specifically as someone who was visibly read as trans. Living in black and Spanish communities wasn’t the starting point for my ideas of violence. What I like to try and do is show the ubiquity of the violence. If violence is cut off—“This is an example of violence that speaks to the experience of a black, trans woman”—it is presented as something that is ethical or framed moralistically, I’m trying to avoid that. At this point, I don’t really experience that much violence directly related to my transness. Online, obviously there are trolls.

Stuart—Going in a separate direction, I’ve been obsessed with this video that Bernie Sanders just released, the “Together” campaign. But it’s problematic. It’s a nice pipe dream, but the reality is you can’t just cut and paste everyone together.

Juliana—It doesn’t function that way.

Stuart—In a multicultural society—I can’t think of a better term than that—your difference is accepted, because you’re expected to assimilate into one big thing; that goes against the grain of a number of histories of race, queerness, any manner of transgressive humanities or behaviors. Arguably your identity draws on things that couldn’t be assimilated before; they were way outside of the mainstream. With those messages getting thrown around increasingly at the height of the presidential elections—and also against the backdrop of legalization of gay marriage—there is this pressure on a lot of us to be absorbed. As an artist, a person who could be in a position to resist, how do you want to position yourself?

Juliana—It sort of engenders this desire to lash out in response. It’s changing the more that I’m consciously dictating everything that I do. Whether it’s deciding what not to do, like not doing a photo shoot because I don’t want to reinforce this idea of “Top 100.” If I indulge this image production and circulation, it wouldn’t matter what my work was; I would already be eclipsed by that, regardless. I feel like a lot of that is partially a question of me having to consciously refuse or be a bit antagonistic. What I’m doing right now—and where I want my work to go—is researching the parameters within which I function. What am I angry at? How does that manifest? What structures are allowing me to function in this PR, trans, it-girl world?

But at the same time there are white male artists producing work that is able to eclipse that, solely by virtue of the fact that they don't participate in that; they don't have a social media account, even if their work and how they function in the world signifies the same sort of thing that people are trying to get at when they come for me under that guise. We can talk about "I function in the art world." But that is a specific statement. There are specific social worlds I function in, whether the defacto social networks, the way I'm writing, the galleries I end up hanging out at, the functions—or that people are now interested in writing about me and how they approach me. I need to know more about the historical context within which I'm functioning so I can direct my growing rage at those things.

Stuart—Without wanting to be overly romantic or nostalgic for the "underground," you're important here [in New York]. At a moment when a gallery like Hauser & Wirth is opening this mega space in Los Angeles with a show drawing on a history which once would have been called "radical feminism." A major, blue chip gallery claiming that history for its opening show. Andy Warhol was participating in the underground and the highest echelons of society; it's nothing new. But how do you navigate all of that right now?

Juliana—I think that's where looking to historical figures comes in. Oftentimes, whatever the identity moment that's happening, it's not uncommon for an artist—whether they be a feminist artist, a younger black artist, a nightlife border artist—once they find a sort of attention, many people look to them as an example to champion. You're immediately forced to straddle. Two years ago I was doing whatever the fuck. Tying men up in my basement and whipping them for money! Selling molly. Shortly after you're forced into this position, and you don't necessarily have time to understand what that means. A lot of these historical figures have tragic endings. I don't know if it's literally the case, but sometimes I think: "Were they literally consumed to death?" How do you straddle questions of cultural and subcultural legitimacy when your visibility has totally grown at a pace that you weren't really prepared for? If I was 19 years old and looking at what was happening, I would be so excited. That desire also can create critical oversight—if you're perceived to be consumed, or pushed by, or exploiting of. These questions come up the second it enters into your work: Are you participating in or are you exploiting your perceived legitimacy by participating in nightlife and an alignment with the community for your own personal gain? I don't feel that way at all; this is a community that I've grown up in.

So it's also about how I position my work in relation to this, where I'm not seen as someone who is able to get in and stepped outside and exploited this legitimacy.

Maybe that's my paranoia. What does it mean when someone is writing about this in this context? The most frustrating example of that is a derisive, dismissive, Juliana as a product of the "Like," and in some ways that's kind of racist. Enjoying and wanting that person to be pushed to the point of that visibility, because once you get to that point you can eclipse them from the nuances or critical questions about art, artistic production—how it functions in terms of identities. You can almost remove them from that equation, and it becomes this way of sustaining this pseudo left in the art world that's very white and very German. So as one of the few people of color, you're trying to navigate your career and you're immediately pushed into this other sphere. It's kind of a racist impulse—I don't know if that makes sense?

Stuart—You could argue there are two, if not role models, precedents: RuPaul and Vaginal Davis.

Juliana—Vaginal Davis, definitely.

Stuart—Not that you're necessarily drawing on their work per se, but just in terms of a black, trans artist who has achieved a certain degree of visibility. Vag does almost everything; everything is designed to almost defeat success.

Juliana—I've been thinking about figures, artists who position themselves based on an extreme, critical self awareness about how their role, identity, and work function in relation to potential commodification. Maybe in a very general sense, a German, Marxist way. I kept thinking of Vaginal Davis because there is this moment when you're in critical straitjacket and you have to perform; everything you do is performing its own failure. You have to do that to prevent the risk of what any sort of aspirational gesture might possess. Even if it's just in terms of labor, being perceived as putting too much labor into your work is seen as aspirational, which is seen as a desire for a certain type of validation. I think what Vaginal has done is really interesting in that sense.

Stuart—Also after decades of being the star of the Los Angeles punk underground, she could not make ends meet. L.A., by American standards, is still relatively affordable. So she moves to Berlin, partly because it has a rich cabaret culture she could tap into and have a regular gig. But needless to say, it's the heart of white Germany. And she plays with that.

I don't necessarily associate you with RuPaul at all, because I think that is such a different trajectory. But those are kind of book ends. There are not a lot of people that you would be able to look to. That's why a lot of people are "Liking" you, because you represent something that does not exist.

Juliana—It's weird because it's like do I have to be this performing failure? Performing this flatulent act. There's these flaccid, self defeatist gestures. Is that the only way to not just be consumed? I've been thinking about that lately too. I don't think that's true, and maybe at a certain point it takes certain people thinking something about what you're doing. For me, I could not be where I'm at and perform failure to make a joke.

Stuart—This comes to this odious claim that trans has gone mainstream. But you are either left with having a critical practice which will most likely reach a limited number of people who are intellectuals, or you can have the option now of being a RuPaul or being associated with a television program like *Transparent*, which reaches a huge audience. For you, which is more important? Having access to that mass cultural voice, and you can effect change through that? Or would you rather maintain a radical position and refuse all of that?

Juliana—In the last year, I've consciously chosen to not indulge a lot of that publicity, media, hyper-visibility moment. That's not what I want to do. I wouldn't have time to do the work I want to. I already don't sleep that often! A breaking point for me in terms of different trajectories was

at this video shoot with Hari Nef a year and a half ago. Hari said, “I love all of this attention.” And I was like, “It’s OK, but I don’t think I want to do this anymore. There’s no real value in me.” Hari is also an actress, but she is like, “I want to be a celebrity.” Being a celebrity signifies something important in me. In a weird way, that’s become the new thing: if you are trans and you have some sort of visibility, the presumed path way is glamazon. Who knows what you do, but you’re at a function in the Givenchy dress. I don’t think there needs to be another pretty trans girl in a dress where that’s their thing; that’s not what I see for myself.

I think it’s important to have a legacy of what having a critical aggressive practice is. That will ultimately make me happy. In the long run that’s more impactful, and a lot of the things I do will continue to get less hysterical attention. I’m constantly getting written by black girls, cis, or trans girls: “I’m at RISD and I kind of feel really out here. And it’s really nice to be able to see someone who is consciously making a sort of decision to navigate a career.”

Stuart—Things are a struggle. All these indicators of success and failure: the Givenchy dress versus a bruised, damaged, scarred trans body—which yours ends up being after some of these performances. I don’t locate you in either one of those categories somehow. You radiate a kind of success, but not one scripted by Hollywood, the mass media, or an expectation to look like a supermodel. It has a little bit more intellectual cred.

Juliana—In my own terms of willingness to be productive, crises work well for me: extreme deadlines and pressure. Once the crisis is happening, I can calm down, and it all comes out. For me, in my head I’m like, “I should probably get it together.” Little things that sometimes create these crises are probably resistance to being hyper productive. I think I need a different system for creating crises, but I try and find these ways of doing that to eclipse the publicity moment.