

THE IMAGE OF
BECOMING:
HEATHER
CASSILS'S
ALLEGORIES
OF TRANS
FORMATION

David J. Getsy

Heather Cassils stages allegories of transformation. In lifeworks involving performance, sculpture, video, and sound, Cassils confronts viewers with the ways in which the human body can be altered, reworked, and crafted. The artist's hyperbolic and strategic works draw on traditions of performance and endurance art as a means to confront viewers with evidence of the body's malleability and with the effects of discipline. In each of Cassils's works, the performing body becomes remade into a new image. The successive transformations in Cassils's performances provide poetic accounts of self-determination and, at the same time, offer a challenge to the gendered visual regimes that govern the ways in which the human body is recognized. Cassils positions their work in relation to the politics and history of transgender experience, launching a wide-ranging critique of binary and dimorphic assumptions about genders, bodies, and their capacities. In this, Cassils directly confronts the ways in which the transgender body, paradoxically, is both an object of voyeuristic fascination and a target of cultural erasure.

A central problem in the history of transgender experience has been that of representation. Transgender representation is caught in a double bind. On the one hand, there is a need to testify to presence and to demand personal, ethical, and political recognition. On the other, the signification of transgender labors under the demand to produce visual evidence of the temporal process of transformation. In the furnishing of such evidence, however, the previous state of personhood or of the body becomes reified. Narrowly, the burden of proof expected of transgender representation compels the present to invoke the past. The departed position thus returns to haunt trans presence in representation, and wider cultural narratives of transgender often obsessively look for visual evidence of transformation and past

states.¹ This scrutiny not only dehumanizes and trivializes the hard-won work of the successive remaking of the self. It also produces erasure of the wide and complex history of transgender experience that refuses to subject itself to such surveillance. Perhaps the central issue for artists working from transgender perspectives has been this question of how to demand recognition without activating those visual regimes that fetishize the trans body or that visualize it only in relation to its past.²

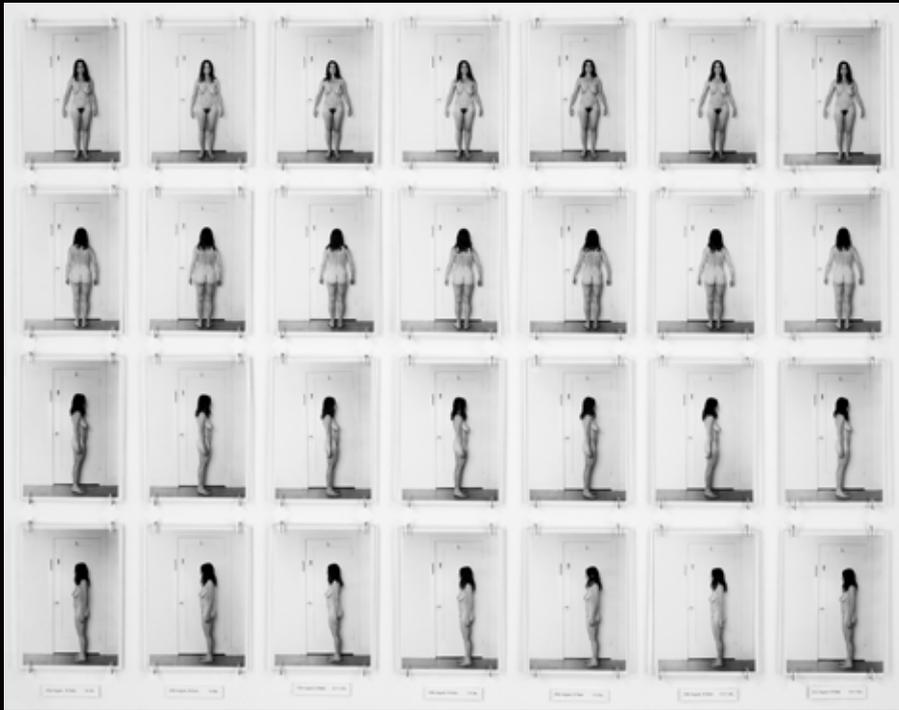
Cassils addresses these challenges by grappling both with the body's capacities for remaking and with the representational codes that inflect our recognitions of the human. A key resource for Cassils's critique has been physical training and bodybuilding, and much of their practice involves extensive preparation and discipline over the course of weeks and months of bodywork. Based on their expertise as a professional physical trainer, Cassils has adapted methods of self-transformation into artistic practice, using exercise, specialized physical education, and nutrition to alter their body and its parameters. A recurring concern for Cassils has been to use these methods in rogue ways. The protocols of such extreme bodybuilding and nutrition are highly gendered, with different methods and goals prescribed

1 See the important discussions of this issue in Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

2 I discuss some of these issues further in a forthcoming interview: "Appearing Differently: Abstraction's Transgender and Queer Capacities," William Simmons, interviewer, in Christiane Erharder, Dietmar Schwärzler, Ruby Sircar, Hans Scheir, eds., *Pink Labour on Golden Streets. Form Meets Politics* (Vienna: Schriftenreihe of the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, and Sternberg Press, forthcoming 2015). See also Julian B. Carter, David J. Getsy, and Trish Salah, "Introduction: Trans Cultural Production," in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1.4 (2014): 469-81.

along strict binary gender lines. Cassils remixes these methods as a means to demonstrate the potential for bodily transformation and to remake the sexed body according to self-determination rather than existing codes of dimorphism.

These themes were central to one of Cassils's first major bodies of work, titled *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011), which replayed the canonical feminist work by Eleanor Antin, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*.³ In 1972, Antin underwent a process of extreme diet to lose 10 pounds over the course of 37 days. During this period, she documented her body in the manner of medical photography, daily producing a record of her arduous approximation of the cultural ideal of



³ See Eleanor Antin, "Carving: A Traditional Sculpture," *High Performance* 4.4 (Winter 1981-1982): 62.

the attractive female body. In Cassils's reinterpretation of this work, they instead spent 23 weeks adding 23 pounds of muscle through intense training and nutrition. The aim for this durational performance was to transform Cassils's body into popular culture's idealized male body.⁴ In related works in the series, Cassils complicated the idea of this ideal, as with the video work *Fast Twitch // Slow Twitch* (2011). This two-channel work featured, on one side, documentation of Cassils's transformation cycling on a loop. On the other, there was elaborate and stylized footage of the requirements of physical training and nutrition, with images of Cassils straining to lift weights and consuming mass amounts of protein. Interrupting these images, however, is a middle section that features a slow pan over Cassils as an odalisque wearing mixed attributes of hyperbolic gender performance such as a jock strap and a blown-out blonde wig. This moment of absurd and clichéd gender performance destabilizes viewers' expectations of stable binary divisions and of the singular or one-directional transformations of them. In addition to Antin, Cassils also channeled Lynda Benglis and her infamous 1974 *Artforum* advertisement in which the artist mixed signs of sexual difference in the photograph of her naked except for sunglasses and a double-ended dildo as a phallus. For Cassils's reinterpretation, the 2011 *Advertisement (Homage to Benglis)*, they similarly played with a collision of visual signs of presumed binary genders and sexual difference, letting this image go viral on

⁴ It should be noted that, in this regard, *Cuts* could be understood as relating to an earlier work that critiqued the normative female ideal body image as propagated by Vanessa Beecroft. Cassils, as part of the collective Toxic Titties, infiltrated one of Beecroft's performances. See Julia Steinmetz, Heather Cassils, and Cloverly Leary, "Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate Vanessa Beecroft," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31.3 (2006): 753-83.



the web to produce an analogous effect to Benglis's revolutionary image.⁵ Across the various manifestations of *Cuts*, Cassils's central concern was the enabling production of visual images as allegories of gender self-determination and transformation combined with a critique of the conventional cultural narratives through which both sexual difference and transgender experience is often represented.

Cassils's *Tiresias* (2010-12) also problematized visibility and the ideal image. A four-to-five hour durational performance, *Tiresias* involved the slow melting of an ice cast of a torso resembling a fragment from Ancient Greece or Rome. As with Cassils's other appropriations from art history, the connotations of the source image were important. The symmetrical and muscular torso has functioned as the

5 There is much commentary on this. See, in particular, Susan Richmond, "Sizing up the Dildo: Lynda Benglis' 1974 Artforum Advertisement as a Feminist Icon," *n.paradoxa* 15 (2005): 24-34; Susan Richmond, *Lynda Benglis: Beyond Process* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013); Richard Meyer, "Bone of Contention," *Artforum* 43.3 (2004): 73-74, 249-50; and Franck Gautherot, Caroline Hancock, and Seungduk Kim, eds., *Lynda Benglis* (Dijon, France: Les presses du réel and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 2009).

image of Classical ideality, becoming an object of desire and admiration — even when incomplete, as with the *Belvedere Torso*.⁶ Such fragments were able to function as ideal images precisely because they were incomplete, with the viewer's imaginative completion of the work fueling conviction in its perfection. Cassils inhabited the fragmented ice body, literally, as their own torso is pressed against its backside. As a result, the ice melted over the slow progression of the performance.⁷ The reciprocal relation between Cassils's body heat and the frozen ideal blends the two together. The consequence of this endurance performance was that the visual distinction between the two (not too dissimilar) musculatures collapsed. In other words, *Tiresias* renders transformation not as a binary crossing over, but as a slow process of embodying an ideal or aspirational image and seeing the image itself react to its inhabitation. Visual discernment and taxonomies fail when confronted with Cassils's *Tiresias*, as attempts to read sex or gender from the conjoined torsos falls short. One is visible through the other in a process of every narrowing difference between the two as they visually meld together. *Tiresias*, after all, was a blind clairvoyant, able to see not with the eye but with the mind, and Cassils capitalizes on these connotations to prompt us to question the ways in which we assume that visual information from a body necessarily tells us about the gender that person chooses to be. Not coincidentally, the myths of *Tiresias* also center on his seven-year sex change at the hands of the goddess Hera, and he has been understood as an allegory for

6 See the important discussion of the historical and historiographic impact of this desire in Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994).

7 For an account of the performance, see Maurya Wickstrom, "Desire and Kairos: Cassils' *Tiresias*," *TDR: The Drama Review* 58.4 (Winter 2014): 46-55.

in-betweenness or liminality. In their endurance performance that cites these myths, Cassils engaged with the canonical authority of the Greek ideal while also using its own mythology to complicate it. The result is a work that is a display of determination and endurance at the work of transformation as well as a challenge to the assumptions about the ways in which gender is visually assigned and read. Fittingly, the performance ended with the final shattering of the ice torso as Cassils's own body heat burned through the ideal to the other side.

Cassils's next major body of work, *Becoming an Image* (2012-15), was also directly engaged with problems of transgender visibility and recognition. Initially commissioned in relation to the ONE Archives in Los Angeles, Cassils chose to draw not on the archives themselves but on the absences in them. There is a long history of the appropriation or suppression of the presence of transfolk in and by lesbian, gay, and queer histories, and Cassils sought to speak to the ways in which nonascribed genders and gender variance were either misconstrued or inadequately represented by archives and histories based on sexuality. Consequently, they decided to produce a performance that problematized documentation and visibility itself. Confronting a 2000-pound block of modeling clay, Cassils hit and kicked this geometric form until its surface bore the evidence of that contact.⁸ The entire performance occurred, however, in

8 For a discussion of the sculptural aspects of *Becoming an Image*, see the analysis of the performance and of the resulting monument *The Resilience of the 20%* in David J. Getsy, *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, forthcoming 2015).

9 On *Becoming an Image* in relation to photography theory, see Eliza Steinbock, "Photographic Flashes: On Imaging Trans Violence in Heather Cassils' Durational Art," *Photography & Culture* 7.3 (November 2014): 253-68.

the dark, and the viewers of it only experienced brief glimpses of this conflict as the photographer's flash went off.⁹ The darkness was filled, however, with the sounds of Cassils's exertions, and the work as a whole spoke to transgender presence by blocking visibility, aurally testifying to determination and work, and refusing to allow the scrutiny of the transgender body (without, however, avoiding it entirely). With its title *Becoming an Image*, the performance thematized the difficulties of visually manifesting transgender presence. Whereas in *Cuts* (and, in particular, *Fast Twitch // Slow Twitch*), Cassils performed hyperbolic signifiers of gender to befuddle conventional taxonomies of the sexed body, *Becoming an Image* — and, indeed, Cassils's subsequent work — placed emphasis on ways to allegorize transformation itself and to problematize the visual consumption of the image of the transgender body. *Becoming an Image* does this through its deployment of darkness, with the viewers' images of Cassils's exertion only able to be captured as retinal burn or, later, as the self-consciously partial documentation in the form of an action photograph. In either mode, the viewer is made conscious of all that cannot be seen and all that is missed. This is exacerbated in subsequent presentations of parts of the performance, such as the soundwork *Ghost* that represents the sounds of Cassils's straining combat. *Cuts* dealt directly with questions of gender transformation and hybridity, but *Becoming an Image* made a bigger claim by using the perspective of transgender experience to examine, more broadly, questions of presence, history, and representation. This is made manifest in the resulting sculpture from the performance, *The Resilience of the 20%*, which is a monument to the survivors of transphobic violence. The transformations enacted by Cassils in this body of work are motivated by the politics of transgender experience, using blindness and abstraction as modes to frustrate

the surveillance of the trans body even as the work is a testament to struggle and endurance.

Cassils's newest piece, the major performance and video installation Inextinguishable Fire, recedes even further from the display of the body as it, however, heightens the risk and commitment required. Over the space of a twenty-eight minute video, we see fourteen seconds of footage of Cassils undergoing a controlled head-to-toe immersive burn. The fourteen-second experience of the fire has been drawn out to twenty-eight minutes in a forward and backward loop (each themselves fourteen minutes). In this slowed-down presentation of that intense moment, the engulfing fire has become slow and smooth; its tongues licking and curling around Cassils's sheathed form. The visual information is seductive and spectacular, making it hard to avoid the lurid fascination this image of immolation incites. As with Cassils's other works, the drama of transformation is the starting point, though here it is in the combustion that overtakes Cassils's body. The title is borrowed from Harun Farocki's 1969 film protesting napalm production during the U.S. war on Vietnam. Famously, Farocki said in the first minutes of the film: "When we show you pictures of napalm victims, you'll shut your eyes. You'll close your eyes to the pictures. Then you'll close them to the memory. And then you'll close your eyes to the facts." Cassils adapted this idea to produce a visually lush image of engulfing flame, inciting fascination in viewers as they forget the very real danger in which Cassils put themselves in order to produce this engrossing image.

At its most basic level, Inextinguishable Fire strategically presents an aestheticization of trauma in its slow rendering of a moment — a moment of real peril and determination. The viewers of Inextinguishable Fire can become caught in their fascination, unable to see clearly what is directly in front of them. That is, the

presentation of the burn performance begins in such a way so that the viewer is slowly drawn into a state of wonderment at the spectacle of the flames. Over the slow pan out from these flames, what encroaches into the frame is the realization that these are not just flames but flames engulfing a human being. This slow and beautiful image is revealed to the viewer as the result of Cassils's endurance and facing of the danger that comes with this moment of radical molecular transformation and immolation. Much like Farocki's exhortation to his viewers that they refuse to see the real political situation, Cassils's looping video holds its viewers in suspension between aestheticizing distance and the slow proposal of a possibility for empathetic identification. The flames are beautiful at first, and then we realize — in our recognition of a person at the heart of this spectacle — their danger and heat. Looking into Cassils's eyes during those times when they are visible, the viewer must eventually confront the fact that this is no mere spectacle but a human event — the defiant endurance of peril. We become reminded of the actual danger of the scenario when, in the middle of the video, the slow pan out reveals the soundstage, artificial backdrop, and stage lights. It is only in the act of extinguishing during this middle period that the viewer fully realizes that this is no special effect or trick of Hollywood visual magic, but a real fire consuming a real person. The narrative arc of Inextinguishable Fire takes the viewer through a process whereby their mere visual fascination of the tongues of flame slowly shifts to the identificatory realization that an individual human being is at the heart of the image they had been consuming. It is important that the entire video is preceded by the sound of a short intake of breath — Cassils's last breath before undergoing the burn. During such a stunt, one cannot breathe in because the flames will burn the inside

of one's lungs, and Cassils's held breath is stretched from fourteen seconds to minutes after minutes as the viewer, themselves, finds their own breath somatically activated as they gaze anticipatorily and anxiously at this feat.

Inextinguishable Fire thematizes the politics of transgender representation while, however, denying full visual access to the transgender body. It amplifies and distills the viewer's fascination with the pain and discipline required to change state and takes the viewer through a narrative of transition from spectacle to commitment to endurance to a phoenix-like rebirth. It is in this way that *Inextinguishable Fire* critiques the power dynamics of transgender representation's double-bind without, however, relinquishing transgender body to surveillance and scrutiny. It implicates the viewer by compelling them to look Cassils in the eye and to recognize a subject undertaking hard-won commitment that the viewer had previously looked at merely with dispassionate and aesthetic fascination. Cassils does not let the viewer merely marvel at the flame, but rather makes them question the slowness with which they realized the human determination required to become what the viewer had previously only considered a spectacular image.

About the author

David J. Getsy is the Goldabelle McComb Finn Distinguished Professor of Art History at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His forthcoming book *Abstract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender* (2015) contains a discussion of Cassils's *Becoming an Image*. His other books include *Rodin: Sex and the Making of Modern Sculpture* (2010), *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877-1905* (2004), and, as editor, *Scott Burton: Collected Writings on Art and Performance, 1965-1975* (2012). He co-organized a special issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* on "Trans Cultural Production" in 2014 and is a member of the editorial board of *The Art Bulletin*. Appearing in 2016 will be his edited anthology *Queer* for the Whitechapel Gallery's *Documents of Contemporary Art* book series.

IMAGE CREDITS

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Post Performance of Becoming An Image, a collaborative portrait, (London), 2013
Photo by Heather Cassils and Manuel Vason

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Eleanor Antin
Carving: A Traditional Sculpture, 1972
Detail of last seven days: 28 black and white photographs and seven date labels. 148 black and white photographs in complete piece.
Photographs: 7 x 5 inches each
Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

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© Lynda Benglis
Benglis Ad, Artforum, november 1974
c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2015

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Hard Times, Pre Performance Still
Movement Research Festival, 2010
Photo by Heather Cassils with Luke Gilford

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Movement Research Festival, 2010
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Kuopio, Finland. Artwork © Heather Cassils.
Photo by Pekka Mäkinen

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Fast Twitch // Slow Twitch, video still from 2 channel installation. Part of the six month duration performance Cuts: A traditional Sculpture
Video still by Alison Kelly

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c-print, 60 x 40 inches
Photo by Heather Cassils

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Time Lapse (Back, Left), 2011
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Photo paper, razor etching, burning, gouache
17 x 11 inches

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Pin Up from the Magazine Lady Face Man Body, No.5, 2011
c-print, 18 x 14 1/8 inches
Photo by Heather Cassils with Robin Black

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Before, Clay Bash/Performance Remnant
Rhubarb Festival, Buddies In Bad Times Theater, Toronto, 2014
Photo by Heather Cassils with Alejandro Santiago

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Becoming An Image Performance Still No. 1 (Edgy Woman Festival, Montreal), 2013
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Photo by Heather Cassils with Alejandro Santiago

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Becoming An Image Performance Still No. 5 (National Theater Studio, SPILL Festival, London), 2013. c-print, 22 x 30 inches
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Harun Farocki
Inextinguishable Fire, 1969
Still image of film
Original title: Nicht lösbares Feuer
Format 16mm, b/w, 1:1,37 Length 25 min.

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Photo by Heather Cassils with Clover Leary

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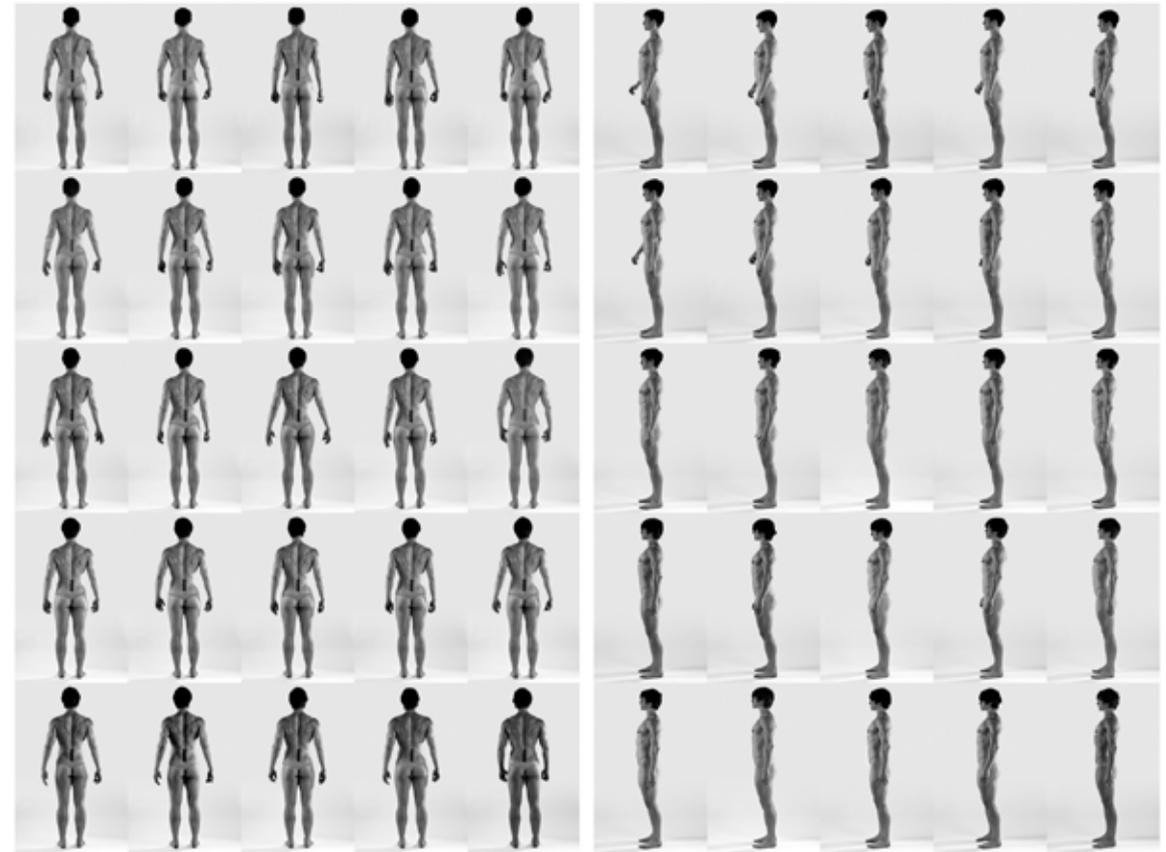
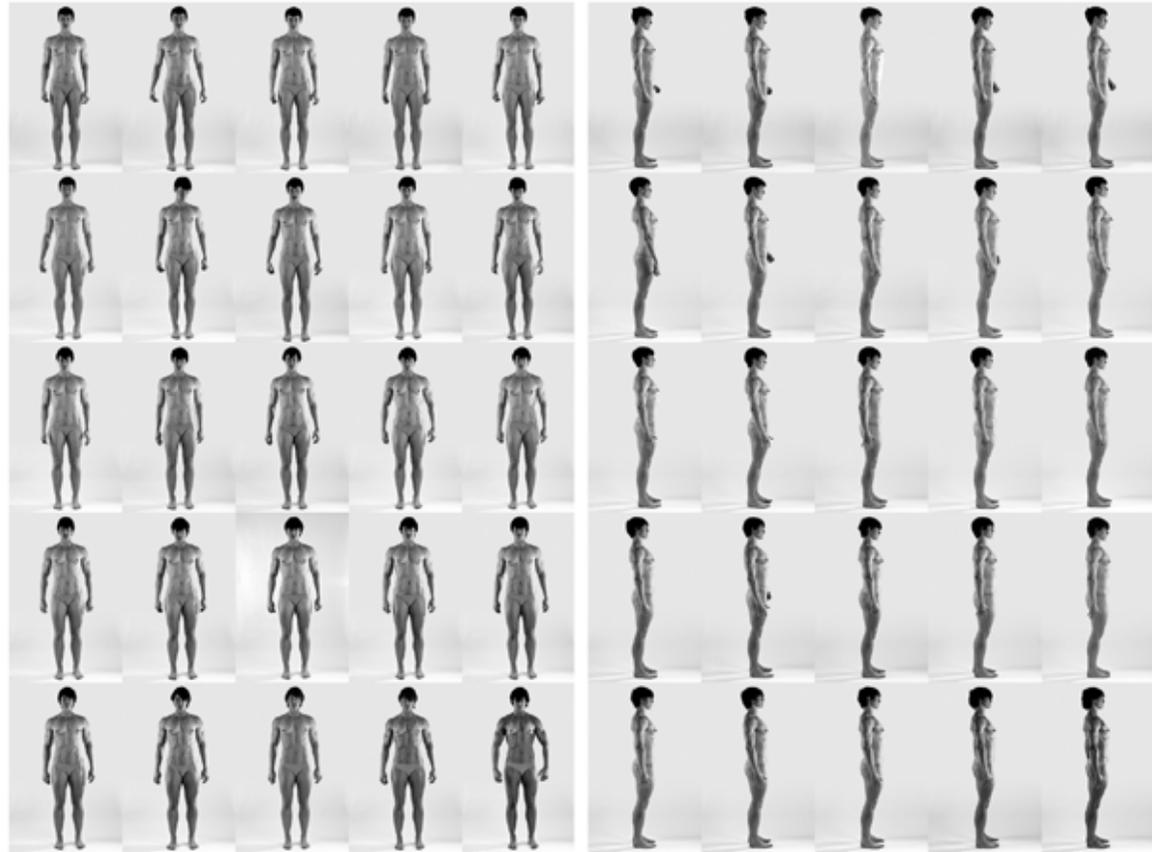
Incendiary installation at MU, Eindhoven, 2015
Photos by Hanneke Wetzer

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Photos by Heather Cassils with Rem van den Bosch

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Becoming an Image Performance stills with audience at *Incendiary* installation at MU, Eindhoven, 2015
Photos by Heather Cassils with Rem van den Bosch











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Note to the reader:

At the request of the artist at the time of writing, this essay incorporated a previously-used name which had to that point served as their public name / trademark. Any future citations and discussions should avoid any such usages.