

Burns, A.K. *Artists and Identity*, Artforum, Summer Issue, 2016, pg. 291, print.

ARTFORUM

ARTISTS AND IDENTITY



A. K. Burns, *A Smearly Spot*, 2015, four-channel video installation (channels 1–3: HD video, color, 53 minutes 13 seconds; channel 4: digital video, black-and-white, silent, 4 minutes), dimensions variable. Marcelo Gutierrez.

A. K. BURNS

IN A HYPERACCESSIBLE WORLD, cultural margins can shift rapidly. Historically crucial social and safe spaces such as cruising spots and dyke bars have been reconfigured or dissolved entirely. A generation has emerged for which identity appears to be fluid and multiplex: Gender cyborgs now assert the singular *they*, bringing it into everyday use—resulting in the pronoun becoming the American Dialect Society’s 2015 word of the year. As the rate of change accelerates, is postidentity what we are building one *they* at a time?

Post-, defined as “after,” is a semantic device that champions newness at the expense of the word that it qualifies. This device, which structurally cannibalizes the word to which it is affixed, not only generates new rhetoric on which to capitalize but, with regard to “postidentity,” proposes that the burden of identity is resolved only when differences cease to exist. While declaring something as past may provide space for visionary alternatives to begin to take shape, what is the value of jettisoning identity when it is still visibly present? Those who latch on to the new at the expense of the old are often acting from a position of privilege—one that allows them to remain blind to stark inequities, the persistence of which is made all too clear by the recent anti-LGBT law in North Carolina, the fascist demands to erect a migrant obstacle course on the US-Mexico border, and the long-standing institutional abuses that brought about the Black Lives Matter protest movement.

Society includes what it can identify with. In the case of trans citizens, having their experiences articulated through the spectacle of popular culture offers visibility by demarcating their personhood. Yet while visibility may be a step toward shifting perceptions, it's far from resolving the persistent issue of violence against difference. With the mass marketing of these branded bodies comes a new set of presumptions that I encounter regularly: that as gender nonconforming, I identify like I look (trans-male), or that I use the all-accommodating pronoun *they*. While the introduction of this third category challenges the fixity of the s/he binary every time *they* is uttered, it simultaneously introduces another frame to fit into. I'm personally not interested in being accommodated or accommodating. What feels politically critical for me is to situate myself next to *she*, but without an interest in participating in the performance of *her*. I may not look or even feel like *her*, but I am in conversation with *her* past and future.

Through self-segregation or separatism, identity-based movements use their prescribed "difference" as a uniting force, building coalitions based on shared experiences to cultivate the language and agency necessary to produce social change. While these are old tactics, they are still in use because identity is a superstructure that we can't dismantle simply by declaring its "post"-ness. Certainly much changes: We have a black president and black principal ballerina as well as trans visibility in sitcoms and reality shows. But *new* is what capitalism feeds on, and such surges of assimilation are about as permanent as the run of a TV series. This kind of change starts to look a lot more like spinning in circles than moving forward. After we acknowledge that the Ouroboros of newness has nothing more to offer us, we might make space for unassimilated difference, a safe space for the strangers that we all are.

In somatic therapy, the patient can't change or remove their trauma. They can only slowly reshape trauma-based patterns until those patterns evolve into a healthier set of behaviors. This process is slow, and it hinges on a plural, rather than a reformed or "cured," understanding of oneself. If systemic change is not a revolution but a slow dance with the perpetrator, I wonder what other language we could create to acknowledge social change as a continuum—an ongoing process—as opposed to terminal cycles of inscription.

A. K. Burns is an artist based in Brooklyn, NY.