

Gendernauts

Look who's talking?

Since beginning to make films, I have worked in an area beyond the global entertainment industry; nevertheless, I have also never felt completely at home in the niches of auteur cinema. I enjoy blending genres and switching back and forth between documentaries, dramatic features and experimental films.

Biologically, I am a woman, one who has always had difficulties adapting to the socially-defined female role; a woman who has repeatedly and gladly been “gender confused” and has been only too happy to go along for the ride; the bearer of a German passport who, for the last 15 years, has spent more time in the US, Canada, England, Italy, France, Portugal, and Latin America than in her native land, and who lives where the research is going on and films are being shot and shown; a human being beyond family ties, pension plans and asset accumulation, socially networked via friendships and projects involving the widest possible array of inhabitants of this planet.

My trilogy of documentary films—*Female Misbehavior* (1992), *Didn't Do It For Love* (1997) and *Gendernauts* (1999)—offers, first and foremost, portraits of nonconformist, controversial women who collide with the boundaries of the female role, and/or people who are experimenting with changing identities.¹

Female Misbehavior features Annie Sprinkle, ex-prostitute and now a performance artist; with the help of a whole range of material supplies and social aids, she transforms herself from a nondescript mouse into a sex kitten before the rolling camera; Camille Paglia, the anti-feminist feminist, delivers an eloquent and ironically self-mocking tirade directed at one-dimensional academicians, the occasionally absurd behavioral rules of American *political correctness* and feminists who campaign against pornography; and Max Valerio, formerly a striking lesbian of American Indian descent, takes his first steps into a consciously macho-transsexual future.

In *Didn't Do It For Love* we meet Eva Norvind, a Norwegian woman of Russian-Finnish descent. She worked in France as an erotic dancer, in Mexico as a B-movie star, and then in New York as a photographer and renowned dominatrix; now, having just earned a degree in criminal psychology, she runs her dungeon in midtown Manhattan, gives speeches on sexuality at international symposia, and is writing her autobiography. As a multiple personality, Eva repeatedly switches her country, language, profession, as well as her sexual and social orientation.

Ultimately, in *Gendernauts* the whole idea of gender identity is called into question:



Monika Treut, female and male



Allucquère Rosanne (Sandy) Stone

Stafford, one of the gendernauts in the film, answers the query: “Are you a man or a woman?” with a simple “Yes.”

At the start of the film, Sandy Stone, the “Goddess of Cyberspace,” provides a programmatic formulation of this “journey through the genders” project: “Gender assumes every imaginable form. We believe that there are only two—masculine and feminine—because we have learned to make the others invisible. We have to learn to see them; we have to rediscover awareness.”

From the North American gay movement to the transgender movement

At the beginning of this new millennium, the biochemical, medical, performative and, to some extent, legal preconditions are now in place to enable mankind to revise much of that which has been taken to be a biological given. Indeed, in many places, there is a severe lack of social and political understanding for calling into question one of the fundamental elements of human existence—the binary gender identification of man and woman.

At a time in which the acceptance of homosexuals has taken relatively large strides in the urban centers of the Western world—and in the northwestern hemisphere, the possibility even exists in certain places for those living in homosexual relationships to acquire the same privileges as heterosexual couples—society’s understanding of homosexual preferences is at any rate proving to be increasingly liberal.

The decades-old struggle of gay-lesbian groups, especially in North America, has finally begun to pay off. In short, the pioneers in the fight for social recognition of homosexuality have made significant progress in reaching the goal of full equality.

The next field of combat looming on the road to a society made up of sexually freely determined human beings is that of gender identity. The liberation struggle of homosexual groups has paved the way, and now subsumes under the “queer” label a broad spectrum of nonconformist identities. Currently, the politically correct designation is “l g b t”: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered.

The pioneers of this new movement are Sandy Stone, Susan Stryker, Judith “Jack” Halberstam, Kate Bornstein, Jordy Jones, Jacob Hale, Pat Califia² and many others who are bursting open our limited understanding of gender identity.

The imported gender discussion

I have often been asked why I create portraits of American “transies”³ and don’t stick to Germany instead—and I’ve also been criticized for this. Gender/transgender consciousness in continental Europe, and in Germany above all, is less sharply defined. There is a discussion of these issues—though a less political one generally conducted after about a 5–10 year delay—whereby, for the most part, elements of the Anglo-Saxon gender discussion are simply adopted without critique. Important confrontations among gay communities, transgender communities and factions of American and English academia have taken place in Germany only in very rudimentary fashion. Based on my experience, German transies, above all the “M to Fs” (Male to Female), are rather reserved and prefer not to draw attention to themselves. The German public has a hard time letting transies speak for themselves. A good example of the arrested state of the German-language gender discussion is the issue of the journal *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* that recently came out bearing the rather awkward title “Sex Change.” In it, co-publisher Friedemann Pfäfflin, professor of forensic psychotherapy at the University of Ulm and a specialist in the field of transsexuality, wrote: “Considering the suffering of the few who actually undergo a sex change, one asks oneself why this topic

enjoys such great interest in the media. Only very seldom is the stage the right place to find one's way to oneself. Some of those who had hoped to gain support by going public later regretted not having proceeded along their path in silence. In light of the findings presented in a number of relevant biographies, one recoils from politicizing these issues."⁴ Pfäfflin sees the transies' only chance in complete assimilation into the so-called opposite sex. He acknowledges only two genders and still proceeds under the assumption that every person has a "true gender," and this is absolutely serious—without play, eroticism, masquerade or theatricality—and ought to be constituted in secret.

Fortunately, there are also critical European voices such as Foucault, whose late work, the history of the sexual dispositive, dealt with the case of Barbin—the diary entries of the unfortunate hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin who lived as a girl in a monastery school and taught there as a young woman until her/his ambivalent sexual identity became too dangerous for the surroundings. Because the social environment could not bear her/his ambiguity, Herculine committed suicide in Paris in 1868 at the age of 30. Foucault's essay first appeared in 1978 in the US and in 1980 in France; the German translation came out in 1998—thus, after a delay of 20 (!) years. Here, Foucault emphasizes two points: first, he attacks the conception of a "true gender," which has been sought and specified in Europe since the 18th century. The problem inherent in dealing with hermaphrodites and recognizing them as such is the presumption that there exists behind the hermaphrodite an actual, "true" gender that is either female or male; second, there is the connection established between this strictly stipulated gender identity and the concept of the psychic, emotional and social unity of the subject.⁵ We still see traces present 130 years later of the standardization of gender identity within the two categories of male and female. Self-confident, politicized public action on the part of transies in Germany has not yet occurred. The gender discussion here is largely dominated by uninvolved academicians who have simply adopted unfiltered portions of the Anglo-Saxon academic discourse. There is little talk in this country of the pioneers of the transgender movement. The inspirational writings of Sandy Stone have been translated into Finnish, Portuguese and Italian, for example, but not into German. Are the lands in which German is spoken still firmly in the grip of the centuries-old tradition of a singular identity?

San Francisco, a "queer utopia"?

A leap across the ocean and an entire continent, to the west coast of the US: to San Francisco. This city has been attracting adventurers and outsiders since the 1849 gold rush at the very latest, and over the course of many decades this has given rise to a social and political climate of great tolerance toward the "other." Susan Stryker, transsexual historian and co-author of the book *Gay by the Bay*, formulates it in *Gender-nauts* as follows: "I have long been interested in why San Francisco has become a 'queer' Mecca. It was always a place of highly diverse groups and an outpost far-removed from conventional society." Writer Armistead Maupin wrote of San Francisco in the foreword to *Gay by the Bay*: "Here stood the cradle of cultural changes in America: the subcultures of the bohemians, the beatniks, the hippies, and the hackers originated in this city. Probably for that reason, it was predestined to lead the last great struggle for human rights in the US in the 20th century."⁶

This last great battle is that of the "queer nation" for the recognition of sexual minorities: lesbians and gay men, drag queens and kings, transvestites, crossdressers, transsexuals and transgender people. During the '90s, the barriers separating these groups finally collapsed, and we can see them along with many others parading together

down Market Street in what is still the world's largest Gay Pride March each June. In 1995, a municipal law was enacted forbidding discrimination against transgender people; shortly thereafter, the city's Tom Waddell Clinic began to offer free once-a-week counseling and support for transies. This clinic provides health care services and—after thorough consultation—also prescribes hormones.

Thus, with political struggles that have been going on over decades, there has developed a social and cultural climate which enabled subcultural scenes to become linked up with and superimposed upon one another in a unique fashion—scenes encompassing different genders and sexual orientations, as well as those of different ethnic and class backgrounds.

The portraits of the gendernauts in my film are to be seen before the backdrop of this uniquely supportive environment. Most of those who are portrayed in the film—Stafford, Texas Tomboy, Hida Vilario, Jordy Jones—moved intentionally to this city in order to live their lives free from fear. They live in a privileged place, integrated within a lively cultural scene that accommodates their wish for free self-expression. They are an avant-garde, the “happy transies.” Many pursue independent professions like web designer, multimedia artist, filmmaker and videomaker, academician, and writer. They are not “typical” transies to be sure. Unfortunately, there is still a tremendous amount of misunderstanding, hate, persecution and violence toward transies. The general public was recently made aware of one of these sad cases by the films *Boys Don't Cry* and *The Brandon Teena Story*. These films are based upon the horrible fate of Brandon Teena, a biological woman who lived socially and sexually as a man, and who was murdered in Nebraska because of his/her transgenderism.

How does a non-transi come to make a film about transis?

Relations between transies and non-transies can get rather awkward if they are not based upon respect, understanding and insight. For this reason, Jacob Hale, F-to-M transsexual and university lecturer in Los Angeles, has issued 12 rules for non-transies who are writing about transies.⁷

It was relatively simple for me to immerse myself into San Francisco's trans scene. As early as the late '80s, members of Annie Sprinkle's support group introduced me to New York's M-to-F transsexual scene, and I made friends with some of its members. Later, I made the short film *Max*, the portrait of Max Valerio, whom I revisited seven years later in *Gendernauts*. This was one of the first portraits of an F-to-M transsexual; it was widely circulated (above all in the US), provoked discussions, and was also used by transie groups in their work.

Mutual friends, my transcontinental lifestyle, and diverse relationships to the queer subculture made contact to Jordy, Stafford, and Texas, to their scene, and to the other gendernauts in San Francisco virtually unavoidable. We got to know each other better, spent a lot of time with one another and became friends. I was especially excited about Stafford and Jordy's “Club Confidential,” a club in which a wide variety of gender expressions mix and mingle without any particular variety being excluded. I felt at home in gender utopia. Jordy, Stafford, Max, Texas, Hida, and Susan integrated me into their world. Without their trust, the film could not have come to fruition. On the other hand, they knew that I would allow them and their identities—which were constantly in a state of transition—to speak for themselves, that I would not judge, classify or categorize them, but rather would provide the audience with the opportunity to observe them and to accompany them on their journey between and beyond the poles of masculine and feminine.

My desire is changing as I change (Jordy Jones)

Transies are not homosexuals, according to Mark Freeman, staff member of the transgender clinic in San Francisco. Most transsexuals have a great deal of socialization experience in both of the conventional genders, and that's where it gets complicated. Sandy Stone notes: "It's an interesting situation when two transsexuals fall in love, because they have multiple sexual identities. Thus, constant shifting between the two poles of traditional gender experience can occur. Sometimes it's homosexual love, sometimes heterosexual, sometimes reversed homosexual or reversed heterosexual love, sometimes neither of them, and one has no idea of which categories one should use, or if there should even be categories."⁸ Sexual desire also changes in conjunction with the evolution of gender identity. Jordy reports that the more his own identity changes—through the injection of male sex hormones, through his own perception of self, and through experience with others who perceive him as a "trans-boy"—the more he has felt attracted to, first, other transsexuals, and then increasingly to gay biological men. It is no longer possible to categorize the structure of desire in conventional terms. Has Jordy, who was born a woman, now, if he desires gay men, reverted to heterosexuality, or, since he certainly looks like a gay man and frequently feels like one, is he therefore a homosexual, or both? This extremely complicated situation can also lead to feelings of insecurity on the part of non-transsexuals, since, in addition to the uncertainty regarding gender identity, a complicated, confusing game involving multi-layered and constantly evolving sexual identity is being played out as well. As Sandy put it: "As gendernauts, we're swimming through the ocean of desire." Gendernauts invites us "to see ourselves as a boat in an ocean of different identities, and all we have to do is to pull up our anchor and let the current take us." As Sandy, our esteemed companion on this journey, formulates the invitation: "Join in the identity party. Share in the excitement and the terrible fear of playing with the boundaries of identity."

Endnotes

- 1 More information on the films is available at the www.hyenafilms.com.
- 2 Cf. above all Kate Bornstein: *Gender Outlaw*, New York and London 1994; and, by the same author, *My Gender Workbook*, New York and London, 1998; Judith "Jack" Halberstam: *Female Masculinity*, Duke University Press, 1998; Pat Califia: *Sex Changes*, San Francisco 1997. Allucquere Rosanne (Sandy) Stone: *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, Boston 1996; and, by the same author, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in: *Body Guards*, New York and London 1991. Also see www.FTM-Intl.org, a very informative website with links to related information.
- 3 Transies is a general term used by Sandy Stone to subsume transsexuals, transgender-crossdressers and transvestites, which I will adopt and use in this sense. These terms are in a state of flux and are undergoing continual change.
- 4 F. Pfäfflin: "Facetten der Geschlechtsumwandlung", in: *Zeitschrift für Semiotik*, Vol. 21, Issue 3–4 (1999), p. 298.
- 5 Cf. W. Schäffner, J. Vogel (Eds.): *Über Hermaphroditismus. Herculine Barbin, Michel Foucault*, Frankfurt/Main 1998.
- 6 A. Maupin: "Foreword," in: Susan Stryker, Jim Van Buskirk: *Gay by the Bay*, San Francisco 1996, p. 3.
- 7 Available at Sandy Stone's homepage www.sandystone.com, which contains (among other things) numerous links to sites dealing with transgender topics.
- 8 Ibid, unabridged interview with Mondo 2000.