



ORLANDO

Based on a Novel by Virginia Woolf

Exhibition Texts in English

These exhibition texts were conceived and written by Aperture,
which is the organiser of this exhibition.



Introducing Orlando

Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* (1928), perhaps the author's most whimsical, begins as a tale of a young nobleman in the age of Queen Elizabeth I. Orlando, improbably, lives for centuries and along the way mysteriously shifts gender, a radical plot point that is rendered – in an even more radical gesture – as a nonevent. During Orlando's journey, he encounters the love of the ancient queen and a broken heart on the frozen Thames, and serves as King Charles's ambassador to Constantinople – there transforming into a woman. She sips tea in drawing rooms with Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, and Jonathan Swift; marries an adventurer; loses and regains her estates; and, in the early twentieth century, delivers both a son and her great poem (the work of over three centuries). After having Orlando traverse time and geographies, Woolf concludes the narrative in her present day, October 1928, on the eve of the book's publication.

In 1992, director Sally Potter adapted the novel for the screen and cast Tilda Swinton in the role of Orlando. The film version, like all translations of a story from one medium to another, takes its liberties, extending Orlando's life decades further, leaving her in the early 1990s. In an effort to secure financing for the film, Potter photographed Swinton in costume as Orlando at Knole, a fourteenth-century English estate, copied the prints, and made one hundred photobooks, which she distributed to industry executives, 'many of whom loved the images but still did not believe we could make the film,' Potter recalls.

Sally Potter, the Film-Maker

(English, b. 1949. Lives and works in London)

Sally Potter (b. 1949, London) began experimenting with 8 mm film while she was still a teenager. At the age of 16 she dropped out of school and went on to train as a dancer and choreographer in London. This training gave her a keen sense of the relationship between the body and the space around it, firmly establishing her visual vocabulary. In the 1970s and 1980s, she worked as a performer and theatre director and made a number of experimental films and shorts, including *Thriller* (1979), in which she tackles the sexist representation of women in popular culture.

Potter made a name for herself in the early 1990s with her film *Orlando*, which is based on Virginia Woolf's novel of the same title. The film is about a young noble, Orlando, played by Tilda Swinton, who inherits a country seat from Queen Elizabeth I. Shortly before the queen's death, Orlando gives her his solemn promise that he will never grow old and die. He then lives through four centuries – from the Elizabethan Age through the Victorian period to the present. The clothes he wears and the social ideas he seeks to fit in with – being combative, for example, and ready to put up a fight – initially introduce Orlando as a manly figure. In the film, things come to a head when Orlando finds himself in the midst of an uprising in Constantinople and is expected to "man up" and confront the enemy. Faced with the sufferings of a supposed adversary, Orlando loses consciousness



and fails to perform as society expects. He falls into a deep sleep only to wake one day as a woman, discriminated against by the patriarchal power structures he had himself once contributed to: Orlando is deprived of any say in society and loses the right to own the estate made over to her by the queen.

Potter's *Orlando* focuses on how a person's character traits are linked in with the gender assigned to them at birth. This is connected, in turn, with gender-specific norms of social behaviour, which are also communicated in the film at the visual level by Sandy Powell's costume design, which won multiple awards. The opulent dresses and long, curly wigs reveal social gender to be a performative act expressing social norms. Repeatedly, over the course of the film, Swinton looks straight into the camera, making us – the film's modern-day audience – complicit in Orlando's thoughts.

Potter's take on the immortal figure of Orlando, who survives for centuries and switches gender, is an adaptation of Woolf's idea of a utopian space of possibility far away from any classical conceptions of gender roles.

Although in thematic terms the film was always topically relevant, for a long time it was difficult for Potter to secure financing for it: a novel like *Orlando* was thought per se to be ill-suited to film adaptation. In Swinton, Potter found an actress who was willing, despite the lack of funding, to collaborate on the film for more than five years inspired by a deep sense of conviction in the value of the project and the topicality of the novel. As part of this process, a photo book was produced, which Potter and Swinton showed to potential backers – this ultimately made it possible for the film project to be completed. It was shot in Uzbekistan, Finland and the UK and had its premiere at the 1992 Venice Film Festival.

Original photobook of pre-production images made by Sally Potter to help secure the funding for the film *Orlando*, 1988
Pre-production images, 1988
Courtesy the artist

Virginia Woolf, the Writer

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) grew up in London in a well-off, intellectual milieu. At an early age she became part of a group of writers and artists known as the Bloomsbury Group, whose members included the British author and publisher Leonard Woolf, whom she married in 1912. They started Hogarth Press together, publishing books by T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster and Katherine Mansfield. Woolf began writing as a child, using her work to process her own experiences and observations. She experimented with different narrative forms and applied herself to a variety of topics, including literature (in the form of literary criticism), the position of women in society and political power structures. Based on this, she enjoyed a degree of success as a writer during her lifetime. Today, Woolf is an icon of the women's movement – a woman of letters whose stirring work has an abiding influence. Unable to come to terms with the traumatic events of her childhood, such as the premature deaths, in rapid succession, of her parents and several members of her family, and scarred by the horrors of the two world wars, Woolf suffered from perennial bouts of



depression and made several suicide attempts. She eventually took her own life the day after her husband had taken her, yet again, for medical treatment.

In her literary work, Woolf focused on the realities of life experienced by women of the time and what they were and were not permitted to do, what they did and did not have access to. Her famous prose works *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929) present a powerful account of how women are constantly denied opportunities – to practise a profession, for example, or determine their own lives – on the basis of their gender. Woolf was inspired to write *Orlando* during a trip she took to France in 1928 with the author Vita Sackville-West. The autofictional narrative is loosely based on the British writer's biography. Woolf had a romantic relationship with her and the pair exchanged animated letters with one another. Although Sackville-West came from an aristocratic background, as a woman she was not entitled to inherit the family's stately home in Kent. Woolf weaves the novel *Orlando* around this event, creating a fictional character who struggles with and eventually escapes from the social norms that her friend and partner was governed by.

At the beginning of the book, Orlando is introduced to us as male but then switches gender as the story unfolds over the course of some three centuries. Woolf makes the case for androgyny, a combination of personal characteristics that can be classed as both male and female. Writing in the 1920s, the author's argument is a response to a late Victorian idea of the sexes rooted in a binary concept of gender.

While she borrowed certain key elements from her partner's life, Woolf creates the impression in the book of having constructed a biographical narrative based on a real person. To this end, the novel also includes photographs of Sackville-West and portrait paintings from her family estate in Kent. Woolf claimed that all the pictures were of characters from the book.

The fact that *Orlando* was written in the early part of the 20th century points up the sociopolitical movements of the time. The suffragettes were actively campaigning for women's right to receive education, practise a profession and be involved in the political process. At the same time, doctors started questioning the binary gender order: the realisation that gender can be much more fluid than people had previously imagined went hand in hand with the finding that gender categories have been established not simply as a scientific formulation but also, and to a much greater degree, as a social construct. This anticipated the idea of differentiating between biological and social gender that would play a role in feminist theory in the years following the book's publication. Woolf's work is a reflection on these social developments. By making Orlando immortal – by the end of the book the character has lived for around 300 years – she accentuates the constructedness of historical eras and reveals the extent to which they have been defined and handed down on the basis of a purely male canon.



Mickalene Thomas

(American, b. 1971. Lives and works in Brooklyn)

'I wanted to be Orlando,' says Mickalene Thomas, explaining that in 1992, when Sally Potter's film adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel appeared, experiments in sexuality, gender, and the social role of each were a crucial revelation in modern cinema. What had been rarely shown on the silver screen prior to *Orlando* had been privately felt by many, including Thomas, who desired to see cinematic and worldly expressions outside of prescribed binaries. For her *Orlando*-inspired portraits, Thomas draws on the muse-like relationship between Queen Elizabeth I and Orlando, as well as iconic nineteenth-century paintings by Édouard Manet and Paul Gauguin. Thomas's subjects – her muse and partner, Racquel Chevremont, and the performance artist Zachary Tye Richardson – also embody the spirit and pageantry of the *fa'afafine*, a third-gender community in Samoa of boys who are raised as girls.

From left to right:

Untitled #1 (Orlando Series), Orlando, 2019

Untitled #4 (Orlando Series), Orlando, 2019

Untitled #3 (Orlando Series), Orlando, 2019

Untitled #2 (Orlando Series), Orlando, 2019

Courtesy the artist. Styled by Paris Warren and produced by ROOT STUDIOS

Viviane Sassen

(Dutch, b. 1972. Lives and works in Amsterdam)

The Palace of Versailles has inspired photographers since Eugène Atget first fixed the crumbling statuary of its gardens in his romantic gaze early in the twentieth century. For *Venus & Mercury*, commissioned by the Palace of Versailles, Viviane Sassen has applied her distinctive visual style to the storied location. Over six months, Sassen roamed the empty mirrored halls of the palace, detailing the Rococo chambers and the extravagant gardens, exploring both its most famous attractions and secret spaces inaccessible to the public. In particular, she focused on the palace's statuary to propose new bodily mutations, sometimes hybrid creatures. In the same way that Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* plays with realities and challenges social impossibilities, Sassen's work on Versailles infiltrates historical corridors of power to offer a more universal consideration of the limitless potential of the human condition.

All images *Venus & Mercury*, 2019

Courtesy the artist and Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg. All sculptures belong to Musée du Louvre, Paris, and Château de Versailles



Collier Schorr

(American, b. 1963. Lives and works in New York)

Collier Schorr has long been interested in how a body changes. For several years, she followed a model named Casil McArthur, who transitions over the course of Schorr's project *Untitled (Casil)* from boyish girl to girlish boy, from artist's muse to Bowie-like chameleon. Schorr remembers meeting Casil just as Casil had begun to start modeling as a young man rather than as a young woman. When Casil first began to transition, he worried about his future as a model. But the partnership with Schorr was perfectly legible within the fashion world, with fashions moving away from his/her clothing and toward the concept of they/them. Schorr explains that Casil's fantasmatic appeal may have changed as he transitioned, but the mystery and the enigmatic quality that a model must project remained constant. The images are playful at times, melancholic at others, crossing and blurring lines as Schorr's photo-archive offers a slow reveal.

The accompanying video, the first in series of dance collaborations with performers, features musician Melissa Livaudais playing Schorr's telecaster guitar made by sculptor Daniel Oates.

All images *Untitled (Casil)*, 2015–18
On floor:
Top Solo #1 (M.L.), 2019
Courtesy the artist and 303 Gallery, New York

Elle Pérez

(American, b. 1987. Lives and works in New York)

Elle Pérez makes photographs that are records of life, presentations of friendships and desires. Channeling Virginia Woolf's devotion to her lover Vita Sackville-West, for whom *Orlando* was written, Pérez's recent portraits read as love letters to fellow artists. They resist the limitations of narrative even as they invite them; they are images to be read carefully. They are moments in time, but also moments to slow down in front of because of their formal intricacy and beauty. In Pérez's work, we are given the sense of collaboration between photographer and (not subject, but) agent. And a sense of the wider, changing world – invited in, held off.

Left and right:
Nicole, 2019
t, 2019
Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York



Jamal Nxedlana

(South African, b. 1985. Lives and works in Johannesburg)

A photographer, artist, and creative director of the South African-based platform Bubblegum Club, Jamal Nxedlana is fascinated by the intersections of fashion and street culture in Johannesburg. For his collaboration with FAKA – known as Fela Gucci and Desire Marea – he took the interdisciplinary artist duo to Times Square in Yeoville, a neighborhood in Johannesburg known to some as an ‘intergalactic spiritual portal.’ Nxedlana styled FAKA for their urban odyssey with spectacular dresses that reference Brenda Fassie, the South African singer and queer icon. Not unlike the title character in *Orlando*, FAKA’s looks transcend gender, race, and class binaries using uncategorized clothing, makeup, and hairstyles. Together, they escape the confines of linearity as figures from the ongoing past, becoming somehow all genders, all ages, all times, all at once.

All images *FAKA Portraits*, 2019
Courtesy the artist

Zackary Drucker

(American, b. 1983. Lives and works in Los Angeles)

Rosalynne Blumenstein didn’t invent the word *transgender*, but she popularized it through her life and work. Born in Brooklyn, she transitioned at sixteen and later became director of the Gender Identity Project at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in New York, which included an HIV-prevention program for trans people. Since she moved to Southern California, Blumenstein has been a muse and mentor to LA-based trans multimedia artist Zackary Drucker, who regards Blumenstein as one of her legendary foremothers – an iconically feminine, decidedly binary-gendered incarnation of Botticelli’s Venus. Drucker’s recent photographs of Blumenstein embody the fantasy of the fierce, street-smart trans girl who survives into empowered womanhood – a lived reality attested to by Blumenstein’s own compelling photographic archive. For Drucker, Blumenstein’s trans experience is about the art of living, about roaming open territories beyond identity, and about realizing the fantasy of limitlessness.

All images *Rosalynne*, 2019
Courtesy the artist and Luis De Jesus Los Angeles
Photographs from the collection of Rosalynne Blumenstein, ca. 1977–82
Courtesy Rosalynne Blumenstein LCSW



Walter Pfeiffer

(Swiss, b. 1946. Lives and works in Zurich)

Walter Pfeiffer's subjects are typically in their late teens to mid-twenties, the period of life that speaks to a central concern of *Orlando*: gender fluidity and transformation. But during photo shoots, Pfeiffer never discusses issues of masculinity and femininity with his models; each pose and prop he suggests is simply a collaborative experiment with the goal of making an image 'that works.' In some cases, this allows typically macho boys to reveal their softer sides. The works here span the length of Pfeiffer's career, from black-and-white images taken in the 1970s to the picture of the flowers and the hand from 2019. The photographs of boys wearing silk and flowers have an obvious affinity with the visual language of *Orlando*, yet one remains a curious outlier – the image of two masculine boys with matching Virgin Mary tattoos. But in Pfeiffer's indirect way, this picture gets to the heart of the matter, a literal and humorous illustration of gender symmetry.

All images *Untitled*, 1974–2019
Courtesy the artist and Art + Commerce

Carmen Winant

(American, b. 1983. Lives and works in Columbus, Ohio)

Carmen Winant's recent works layer two images like implausible lovers, sliding together their disparate subjects, purposes, and historical moments. The underlying photographs, all made in 2002, when Winant was a young student, show her bare chest streaked with red lines, self-inflicted scratches made in the shower. On top of these, Winant has carefully taped a second set of pictures, including some of the 'portraits' Woolf originally included in her novel, which depict Orlando and various love interests over the centuries. Woolf's photographs were themselves constructed objects, with Vita Sackville-West playing the part of Orlando and members of her close circle assisting in the project. The title of Winant's series references a moment toward the beginning of the book when Orlando falls madly in love with an androgynous Russian princess, whom he struggles to characterize. As a third layer, Winant also lifted images from a pamphlet about a technique for perpetually reworking clay instead of firing it – inspired by the novel's themes of limitlessness, transience, and self-discovery.

All images *A Melon, a Pineapple, an Olive Tree, an Emerald, a Fox in the Snow*, 2019
Courtesy the artist and Fortnight Institute, New York



Paul Mpagi Sepuya

(American, b. 1982. Lives and works in Los Angeles)

On the first page of *Orlando*, the title character plays with a shrunken-head trophy of an unnamed colonial campaign in Africa, suspended from the attic rafters of his ancestral home. This shocking image sparked these photographs by Paul Mpagi Sepuya, all of which feature the artist at his most elusive, hiding behind his camera in a reflection or shadow. The Moor was already on his mind, as was Woolf's novel, which Sepuya calls 'one of the most influential writings for me on the nature of portraiture.' Sepuya made these photographs in Florida, while participating in a residency sponsored by the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. The Florida sun dissipates the morbid atmosphere of that opening paragraph, but Woolf goes on to describe the light streaming through the coat of arms decorating the room's stained-glass window and coloring Orlando's hand 'like a butterfly's wing.' Sepuya achieves a stained-glass effect by taping Orientalist images of Moors to the windowpanes and watching the light suffuse and all but erase them.

All images *Untitled*, 2019

Courtesy the artist and Team Gallery, New York and Los Angeles

Lynn Hershman Leeson

(American, b. 1941. Lives and works in San Francisco and New York)

To say that Lynn Hershman Leeson was ahead of her time would be an understatement. A pioneer in performance, video, and multimedia art who throughout her life has probed the connections between technology and society, she recently converted her collected works into synthetic DNA. Her series *Hero Sandwich* crosses the negatives of publicity photographs of celebrities, often cross-pollinating male/female stars. In 1972, Hershman Leeson began a multiyear performance piece called *Roberta Breitmore*. Roberta, Hershman Leeson's fictitious alter-ego, rode buses around San Francisco, went to a psychiatrist, and had her own credit card. At the end of nearly a decade, Hershman Leeson ended *Roberta* with an exorcism in a crypt in Ferrara, Italy. 'She was meant not only to demolish the barriers of definitions of theater, literature, and photography,' Hershman Leeson says, 'but also to blur the very nature of reality set as a simulation in real time.'

From left to right:

Bowie/Hepburn, 1983, from the series *Hero Sandwich*

Rowlands/Bogart (Female Dominant), 1982, from the series *Hero Sandwich*, 1978

Roberta's Body Language Chart, 1976

Roberta Getting Ready to Go to Work, 1975

Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York