

*Tracing Trauma* by Kean O'Brien  
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Trauma, a difficult to define, easily-felt, frequent subject for artists, is ever present in the contemporary landscape of the United States. Artists are making work exploring our trauma with increasing urgency, in response to this administration, the realities of the world, and our own lived experiences. For queer and transgender artists, trauma is as much subject as it is daily reality. I am bringing the works of Oli Rodriguez and Zackary Drucker in conversation with my own work here as a way to explore the individual and collective trauma that trans queer bodies face in the contemporary landscape and build a new context for this work to be seen.

I'll begin by anchoring my own projects to build the foundation of an analysis through which I will explore Zackary and Oli's works. My first project, *Mapping a Genocide*, is a series of images documenting the locations of killings of transgender people. In this project, I use Google Maps to create a narrative via the abstraction of geography. These satellite images create a placement for the viewer, and an immediate connection to the trans bodies that took their last breath in these locations. Although transgender people have gained more visibility and representation in the last few years (through TV shows like *Transparent* and *Pose*, public figures like Laverne Cox, and Caitlyn Jenner's incredibly public transition, for example), transgender people, and especially transgender women of color, fall victims to fatal violence with alarming regularity. These deaths amount to a genocide, and this project aims to bring awareness to this reality through subtle images of space.



(Kean O'Brien, *Mapping A Genocide*, 2015-2018)

I began working on *Mapping a Genocide* in 2015. That fall, I attended an event in West Hollywood for *Transgender Day of Remembrance*, held annually on November 20th to memorialize folks who have been murdered as a result of transphobia and remind our cisgender<sup>1</sup> allies of the continued violence endured by the transgender community. At the memorial,

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<sup>1</sup> *Cisgender*, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, means “of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth.”

transgender activists and our cisgender accomplices read the names of those transgender people who were killed that year. I was struck not only with how many names there were to read, but also with how many geographical locations were represented. I began scouring crime and news report to see where these murders were taking place. The answer was... everywhere.

I had expected my research to reveal some theme of space, whether that be rural or urban, alleys or deserted places, to show that there was perhaps a kind of place that posed more danger to a transgender body than others. But these murders happen everywhere — in homes, on doorsteps, in parks, in alleys, river beds, next to police stations, and the list continues. When I looked up these addresses on Google Maps, I was struck with their banality; they were just another street corner, just another backyard, just another piece of pavement. There were no markers to indicate here was a site of great tragedy, and I wanted to create those markers. I began by screen capturing the Google Map satellite depictions of these locations. I then edited all of the text out of the images, and added the name of the person killed and the date of their murder to every image. I thus created an archive spanning 2015-present, documenting every reported transgender murder in the United States. This archive traces trauma on two levels — the individual, by writing the trauma of the person killed onto the physical location of their killing; and the communal, by creating a collective memory of the transgender family we have lost to senseless violence. The project offers an opportunity to mourn for the person and mourn for our society and our lack of accountability for this ongoing genocide.

...abject is fundamental to the maintenance of subjectivity and society, while the condition to be abject is subversive of both formations. Is the abject, then, disruptive of subjective and social orders or foundational of them, a crisis in these orders or a confirmation of them? If subjectivity and society abject the alien within, is abjection not a regulatory operation?<sup>2</sup>

But this is a difficult project. The images operate as mirror abjection — the process by which we separate ourselves from that which threatens our self-identity. Julia Kristeva developed the idea of abjection as a way we separate from an object in order to protect ourselves from dealing with tragedy.<sup>3</sup> In the case of *Mapping a Genocide*, the object itself (the images) help us with the abjection because they are not literal representation of the trauma itself, but rather of the places where the trauma happened without leaving a permanent trace. They remind us without directly confronting us, or perhaps confront us without reminding us (of the horror of trauma).

To further complicate things, there is the question of memorialization as arts practice — why are these images works of art, when the contemporary art world already capitalizes upon identity and trauma and erases intention so often? Is the intended confrontation erased when it intersects with art markets and capitalism? Are these images art or are they tragedy?

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Therefore, the term denotes someone who is not of transgender experience.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cisgender>

<sup>2</sup> Foster, Hal. "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic." *October*, vol. 78, 1996, pp. 107–124. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/778908](http://www.jstor.org/stable/778908).

<sup>3</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 65

Historically, we have analyzed photography, specifically photojournalism, with this very question in mind. And still photojournalism doesn't exist within the confines of the same art world I am referring to, the contemporary and often-appropriative market-based art world that desperately exploits work that examines race, class and gender and is rooted in an unfettered capitalism, oftentimes the antithesis of the work and artists it seeks to market.



Stephanie Montez October 21, 2017

(Kean O'Brien, Mapping A Genocide, 2017)

This is a particularly challenging position for transgender artists. For many of us, trauma is such an intrinsic part of how we experience the world it necessarily makes its way into our art. Living in a world built by and for cisgender people, we experience violence daily, both large and small. Consider, for example, that most of us in the United States still do not have the right to use the bathroom our gender aligns with (in 2018, states introduced at least ten pieces of anti-trans legislation regulating restroom use<sup>4</sup>. Early in 2018, this administration's Education Department confirmed it is no longer investigating complaints from transgender students who experience discrimination around which bathrooms they are allowed to use at school). Or that, according to the *National Transgender Discrimination Survey*<sup>5</sup>, transgender people are three times more likely to be unemployed than cisgender people, that 30% of transgender people reported experiencing homelessness, and that ninety percent of folks surveyed reported experiencing discrimination or harassment in the workforce, and these numbers are likely higher for transgender women of color. If to be transgender in the United States is to live with constant trauma, then to make art is to often engage with trauma. And when the art world programs and

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<sup>4</sup> From The National Center of Transgender Equality, <https://transequality.org/action-center>

<sup>5</sup> *National U.S. Transgender Survey*, 2015. <http://www.ustranssurvey.org/reports#USTS>

shows our work, it is capitalizing on our trauma. This is a dynamic I am personally constantly analyzing and attempting to dismantle for myself.

I am engaging with *Mapping a Genocide* through a similar lens Jose Esteban Munoz employs to write about queerness and its relationship to evidence. “Ephemera as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor.”<sup>6</sup> These images are sites of evidence, so this work is more than the art it is positioned as... it is a memorial.

With the understanding that this project almost exclusively represents the loss of transgender women of color, as they are most at risk for violence in our contemporary society, I stand humbled at my own identity within this context, and continue to search for ways to discuss my own intersectional identities, and to find a space where I can investigate personal trauma through my own practice. This is how I arrived at *Distance*, a project that holds space for the way trauma traces upon the body, upon my own body. Using sculptures and photos, I create an index of the trauma that is both positive and negative. It does not insist on a presence; it insists an absence. Just like for a photograph a negative must first be made to get a positive.



(Kean O'Brien, *Distance*, 2018)

The glove is an index for the trauma. I am creating traces of a medical glove and then, through the casting process, I am marking the fading of this trace. It is possible to hold open a space between the index and its object by acknowledging the index as a species of sign, and so,

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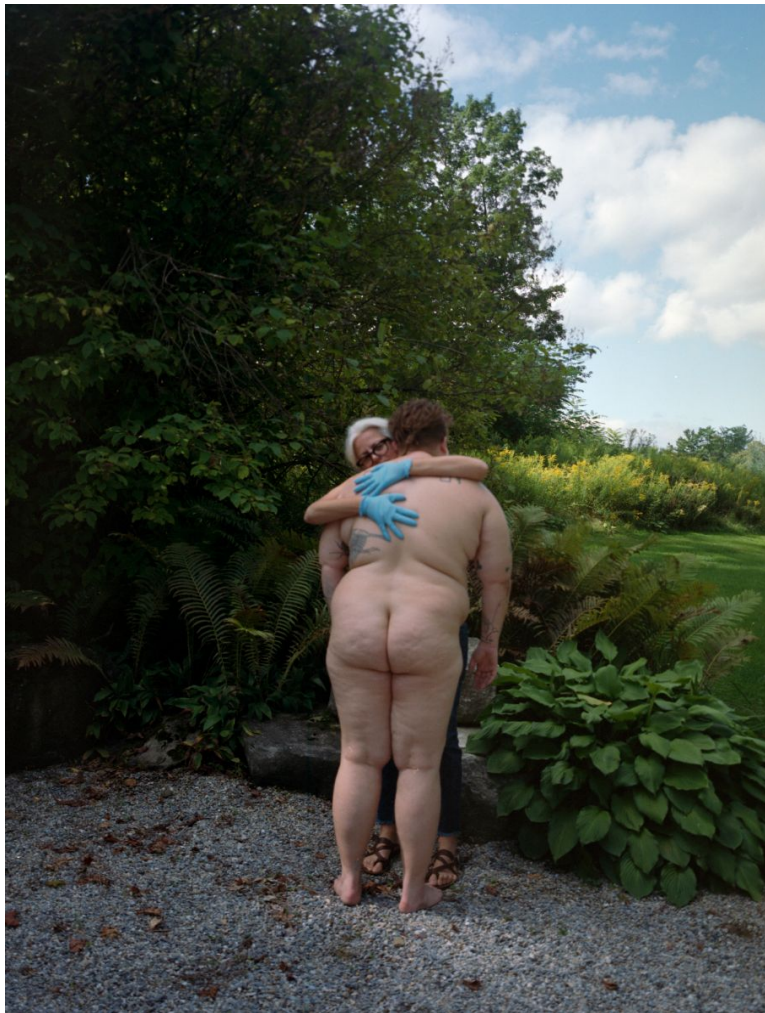
<sup>6</sup> Muñoz José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity.*, New York University Press, 2009, p. 65. Print.



inevitably caught up in a network of signs that you can't see yourself out of. "The index harbors a fullness, an excessiveness of detail that is always supplemental to meaning or intention."<sup>7</sup>

The trace seeks to fascinate, to make us look back... It seems through offering an apparent plenitude of origins, to overcome detachment and distance, even plurality.<sup>8</sup>

Photographer Alexis Ruiseco says "...my skin is a border that fucking feels."<sup>9</sup> The skin in these images can be read as a landscape and the glove a subject/object. The photographs are literal investigations, and places of formality that exist as a means to erase the traces of trauma through nurture.



(Kean O'Brien, Distance, 2018)

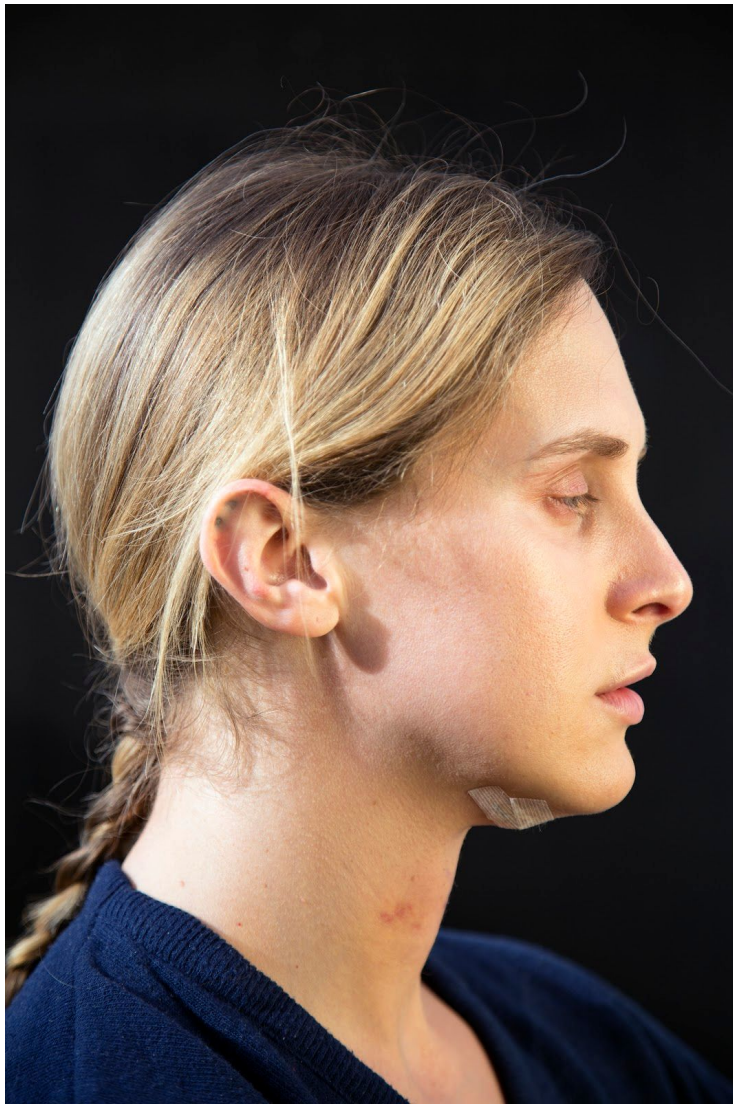
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<sup>7</sup> Mary Ann Doane. *Indexicality: Trace & Sign: Introduction*, Differences, Indexicality: Trace and Trauma. Duke University Press, 2007. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Iverson, Margaret. *Photography, Trace, and Trauma*. University of Chicago Press, 2017. Pgs. 85-86.

<sup>9</sup> From a conversation with Alexis Ruiseco in August 2018 at Marble House Projects in Vermont.

In her photograph, *Self Portrait*, Zackary Drucker traces trauma upon her trans body through documenting her transition and gender-affirmation surgeries. The medical procedures that many transgender people go through as a means to align their bodies with their gender are simultaneously freeing *and* traumatizing. In *Self Portrait*, Zackary faces away from the viewer, gazing down, creating passivity for us but not passivity for her. Her vulnerability is direct, intentional and powerful, and she positions us as voyeurs to her trauma by holding back and not engaging with us directly.



(Zackary Drucker, *Self Portrait*, 2018)

Perhaps the trauma that trans bodies endure is so embedded before we even begin to transition, that there is no real way to account for all of it. In my project, *Distance*, my chronically sick trans body is subject, just like Zackary's body is subject in her photograph. Similar to my blue glove, the band aid on Zackary's chin and the bruise on her neck function as index. Once these wounds heal, we are left with an invisible trauma, invisibly traced upon the body.

*Everywhere that trans people appear in the law, a heavy reliance on medical evidence to establish gender identity is noticeable. Try to get your birth certificate amended to change your sex designation, and you will be asked to show evidence of the surgical procedures you have undergone to change your sex. Try to change your name to a name typically associated with the “other gender,” and in many places you will be told to resubmit your petition with evidence of the medical procedures you have completed. Try to get your driver’s license sex designation changed, and again you will be required to present medical evidence. If you are trans or gender transgressive, even your ability to use a gendered bathroom without getting harassed or arrested may be dependent on your ability to produce identification of your gender, which will only indicate your new gender if you have successfully submitted medical evidence to the right authorities.<sup>10</sup>*

Transphobia is an unrelenting trauma, written on trans bodies. The constant demand for transgender people to reveal our trans identities and then defend them is a daily negotiation. The process of passing (or, reading as cisgender to the cisgender world) is difficult and inaccessible to many because it requires hormone therapy and other gender-affirmation procedures that are often cost-prohibitive and inaccessible to most transgender people. This leaves many of those who do not pass at risk, compounded with the facts of poverty, homelessness, job discrimination and other realities discussed above. The trace of their trans identities is not hidden, but rather lays on the surface every minute of every day.

This trauma lives on the body, in the landscape, and at the intersection of the two. Oli Rodriguez investigates this intersection in his work, *The Papi Project*. Through archive images of his gay father, who died of AIDS, and landscape images of cruising spaces, Oli looks at his own relationship to intergenerational trauma, but also a collective trauma the queer community experienced with the loss of these cruising spaces and the community that came with them. Oli also attempts to find and connect with his father through tracing. He explores his relationship with his father after his death through the internet — using the web to find men who had sex with his father in the ‘70s and ‘80s, looking to find common ground with these men that would connect him more deeply with his father.



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<sup>10</sup> Spade, Dean. “Resisting Medicine, Re/modeling Gender”. Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law and Justice. Volume 18. Issue 1. 2003. Pgs. 15-16. Print.





(Oli Rodriguez, *The Papi Project*)

Oli Rodriguez's landscapes of cruising spaces are sites of trauma. These images document spaces of historic resistance to a dominant culture, created out of necessity for queer people who had no other places to exist and inhabit their queerness. The trauma lives on the bodies that needed to hide in vacant public spaces to experience queer intimacy, queer family, queer sexuality. Shame and fear drove these bodies out of sight, but so did a violent state policy that intentionally and repeatedly erased the realities of HIV and AIDS as consequences of this shaming and repressive society. With few to no resources to support one another, sexually, health-wise, emotionally, queers fashioned cruising landscapes into sites of community building.

The photographs I have created in *Distance* arrange the flesh and gloves as interchangeable subjects and objects. Similarly, Rodriguez's cruising landscapes point to the presence *and* absence of those who frequented them. The subjects are visibly missing from Oli's landscapes, but it is in that absence that the trauma is traced. Both projects hold space for invisible trauma. The glove is an index for trauma, just as the absence of people is where the index lies in *The Papi Project*. Further, both hold invisible traces of trauma that mirror the erasure of bodies and lives in *Mapping A Genocide*.

Society has had a hand in the erasure of the bodies traced in all four projects: through the invisible genocide of transgender people, the invisible trauma written onto disabled bodies, the invisible medical surgeries that help us align ourselves to who we are, and the forgotten lives of gay men who died from AIDS at a time when the state refused to allocate any resources to deal with the epidemic. As transgender artists, all three of us are negotiating our own lived trauma through our visible and invisible wounds, creating a space for memorialization, witnessing and, perhaps one day, healing.