

The artists using gender as a tool and a weapon

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Text Miss Rosen



"Untitled" from Community Action Center by A.K. Burns + A.L. Steiner, 2010. Digital video Photography A.L. Steiner

As the New Museum opens a stellar new exhibition, we survey those using gender to embrace, reject, and subvert the status quo



Beyond the binary lays a world of infinite possibility, a space of total freedom and fluidity. 'Male' and 'female' are the space where we begin, and when we liberate ourselves from the paradigm of 'either/or' a vast wealth of gender expression begins to reveal itself.

Invariably, not everyone is comfortable within this extraordinary space. Many hold fast to simplistic, reductive thinking that diminishes the complexities and nuances of human experience and may resist enlightenment. Others understand the necessity of expansive and inclusive ideas, conversations and art – and it's here that *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* takes off.

Curated by Johanna Burton, *Trigger* is a major exhibition featuring the work of more than 40 artists from all walks of life, which will be on view at the New Museum, New York this month and [catalogued in a book of the same name](#) on November 21.

By positioning gender at the intersection of race, class, sexuality and disability, *Trigger* exposes deep ambiguities, curious contradictions and fundamental questions at the heart of life on earth. The artists featured here offer ways to use gender to construct and dismantle culture, building new spaces and refurbishing the old. We speak with Burton about the importance of the show, and profile the work of six artists using gender as a weapon and a tool to embrace, reject and subvert the status quo.

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Why is gender so triggering for so many people?

Johanna Burton: Assuming that one could walk away from a gender binary, that destabilisation means you have to think about everything, and when we talk about relationships to power, that kind of destabilisation has a huge impact.

I admire that you're putting out contradictory information, because people are so desperate to get to the solution before they go through the process. How does art have the power transform our ideas?

Johanna Burton: It seems to me that we've moved into an unfortunate moment in general about consumption: that one goes into a museum to feel good or to feel confirmed in their ideas. My experience of art is that its function is to make you feel not uncomfortable in a bad way, but to make you question your assumptions.

That brings it back to what I think of as the purpose of art: to depict the profound, complex differences (between us) and also the universality of human experience.

Johanna Burton: The question of universal humanity is one people are debating heavily right now as we talk about experience, and who can represent what. There are a lot of questions that are making people question if we can experience the same thing at all. At the same time, it feels like we're able to acknowledge our differences and still have conversations that are hard and unresolved – and that's a way of connecting.

A.K. BURNS & A.L. STEINER

*A.K. Burns & A.L. Steiner created the classic video **Community Action Center** (2010), which toured the United States before being acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The 69-minute work upends porn tropes and reimagines them to represent queer erotic idioms. What's more, the creators require the work to be viewed communally, rather than privately, as most people choose to to porn. The Museum will also restage **Room for Cream**, a lesbian soap opera, performed between 2008–2010.*

Johanna Burton: *Community Action Center* is one of the more historical pieces in the show. Having it return gives us a place to talk with the artists about how much has changed in a decade. A.K. and Steiner are just going to screen the movie once and have a discussion. We're thinking about what it means to have history that is built so quickly. *Room for Cream* is a great example: not all of the original cast identifies as lesbians any longer. What does it mean to account for those kinds of shifts within the longer legacy around art history and collaborative practice?

