"A Simulacrum of Ambiguity": Luigi Ontani and the Deconstruction of Gender and Sexuality in the Tableau Vivant

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Abstract
Since the early part of the 1960s, the Italian artist Luigi Ontani has been producing various works known as tableaux vivants, or living pictures, which he also calls quadrinon-quadri (paintings-non-paintings). The little previous scholarship on Ontani connects the importance of these works with the revival of the tableau vivant within the Arte Povera and Transvanguardia movements during the 1970s. The focus for my research was on Ontani’s work ranging from 1968 to 1980 with an emphasis on how Ontani’s tableaux vivants, in particular, reveal the artist’s pursuit towards destabilizing conventional expectations regarding gender and sexual identity. In particular, I argue that Ontani’s tableaux vivants deconstruct the binary relationships within gender and sexuality through the artist’s use of photography as a tool for gender transformation and performance. By using the theoretical principles and practices of Deconstruction and Queer Theory, I argue how a deconstruction of gender and sexuality can be observed in Ontani’s work through the recognition of various iconographic attributes as signifiers of homoerotic behavior and an ambiguous gender and sexual identity. Furthermore, I analyze how Ontani’s work alters, and at times, abandons the accustomed performance of gender stereotypes to instead place a greater emphasis on androgyny and non-binary gender, as well as the ability to transform one’s own gender identity through a disassociation of anatomical sex. This study provides evidence of the important contributions of often-overlooked queer artists. In particular, it addresses the frequent rejections of the social constructions of gender and sexuality in art historical analysis.

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“A Simulacrum of Ambiguity:”
Luigi Ontani and the Deconstruction of Gender and Sexuality in the Tableau Vivant

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT
Since the early part of the 1960s, the Italian artist Luigi Ontani has been producing various works known as tableaux vivants, or living pictures, which he also calls quadri-non-quadri (paintings-non-paintings). The little previous scholarship on Ontani connects the importance of these works with the revival of the tableau vivant within the Arte Povera and Transvanguardia movements during the 1970s. The focus for my research was on Ontani’s work ranging from 1968 to 1980 with an emphasis on how Ontani’s tableaux vivants, in particular, reveal the artist’s pursuit towards destabilizing conventional expectations regarding gender and sexual identity. In particular, I argue that Ontani’s tableaux vivants deconstruct the binary relationships within gender and sexuality through the artist’s use of photography as a tool for gender transformation and performance. By using the theoretical principles and practices of Deconstruction and Queer Theory, I argue how a deconstruction of gender and sexuality can be observed in Ontani’s work through the recognition of various iconographic attributes as signifiers of homoerotic behavior and an ambiguous gender and sexual identity. Furthermore, I analyze how Ontani’s work alters, and at times, abandons the accustomed performance of gender stereotypes to instead place a greater emphasis on androgyny and non-binary gender, as well as the ability to transform one’s own gender identity through a disassociation of anatomical sex. This study provides evidence of the important contributions of often-overlooked queer artists. In particular, it addresses the frequent rejections of the social constructions of gender and sexuality in art historical analysis.
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Introduction

The Italian artist Luigi Ontani was born in 1943 into a working class family from a small town called Montovolo di Grizzana, Vergato in Italy.\(^1\) While his artistic career did not begin until the early 1960s, his primary interest in art was established much earlier during his childhood. He describes his early infatuation for art as an “infantile wish for knowledge,” which came from the many novels, art books and encyclopedias he was given as a young child.\(^2\) These travels through literature lead Ontani to gain an initial interest in pursuing a formal artistic education outside of his hometown. In the 1950s, however, an education in the arts was seen by many conventional Italians as a worthless endeavor. Ontani’s father was particularly opposed to the artist’s desire to attend school away from home. When Ontani told him, he took the young artist out to the family’s vegetable garden and showed him the benefit of shoveling soil instead.\(^3\) As a result, Ontani never received formal artistic training. While some scholars suggest that Ontani eventually attended the Accademia di Belle Arti di Bologna, a fine arts academy in Bologna, north of Vergato, I have not found any evidence to support this claim. It is possible therefore that Ontani is primarily a self-taught artist.

Previous scholarship on Ontani connects much of his work to the Arte Povera and Transvanguardia movements during the 1960s and 1970s. These two movements have largely been studied as the two main artistic trends of postwar Italy and are framed as binary opposites. Arte Povera can be characterized by the use of unconventional, everyday materials, in works that call for direct experiences, while Transvanguardia is the

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1 Achille Bonito Oliva and Danilo Eccher, Appearance (Milan: Charta, 2000), 65.
3 Pinto, 210.
use of traditional artistic mediums and the reappropriation of art historical styles and subjects.\textsuperscript{4} Ontani disagrees with both of these classifications of his work, however, and, instead, comments that his artistic practice functions as a “form of mannerism that helps him deal with everyday life.”\textsuperscript{5} This is an important distinction as it sets Ontani’s work in-between these art movements and recognizes it as a deconstructive tool and coping mechanism for the artist’s feelings of anxiety under the weight of binary expectations.

Since the early part of the 1960s, Ontani has been producing a series of works known as \textit{tableaux vivants}, or living pictures, which he also calls \textit{quadri-non-quadri} (paintings non-paintings).\textsuperscript{6} In these elaborate forms of self-portraiture, Ontani makes references to past artworks and artists by portraying many well-known figures from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In addition to these figures, Ontani also portrays several reoccurring characters from literature and mythology, which further allude to the artist’s affinity for the past.

My research associates Ontani’s use of the tableau vivant with a destabilization of the binary constructions of gender and sexuality. I analyze how this destabilization can be identified in Ontani’s work through the recognition of signifers of homoerotic behavior.

\textsuperscript{6} The beginning of Ontani’s artistic career also coincided with two major political events. The first was the sudden transformation of the Italian economy from agrarian to industrial in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The second was the rise of neo-Facism and internal terrorism in the late 1960s. It is likely these and other political events, such as the rise of the Gay Liberation Movement during the 1970s, had a major effect on Ontani’s work. Mecugni, “Elsewhere”, 7.
and an ambiguous gender and sexual identity. In addition, I also argue that Ontani’s work alters, and at times, abandons the accustomed performance of Western gender stereotypes to instead place a greater emphasis on androgyny and non-binary gender, as well as the ability to transform, or change, one’s own gender identity through a disassociation of anatomical sex.

Methodology

The methodology used for this thesis includes a formal visual analysis of Ontani’s tableau vivant photographs as well as various contextual approaches considering the historical and socio-political forces that helped influence these artworks. In order to illustrate how Ontani deconstructs the binary structures found within gender and sexuality, I discuss and utilize Jacques Derrida’s theory of Deconstruction. In a further contextualization, I also use theoretical arguments by other Post-Structuralists and Queer theorists, such as Umberto Eco, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Through this study, I provide evidence of the important contributions of an overlooked queer artist and address his frequent rejections of the social constructions of gender and sexuality in an effort to fill a lacuna in the field of art historical analysis.

Primary Visual Sources

My primary visual evidence for this study consisted of eight of Ontani’s tableau vivant performances, captured through photography. The first work by Ontani is San Sebastiano bel bosco di Calvenzando (d’après Guido Reni) (Saint Sebastian in the Woods)

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7 Homoerotic is defined as “concerning or arousing homosexual desire centered on a person of the same sex.” Oxford Dictionaries. Oxford University Press.
http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/homoerotic
of Calvenzano (after Guido Reni) from 1969. This work is a c-print that is 100 x 79 cm and is part of the Sargentini collection. The second work is entitled Ratto di Arianna d’apres Titian (The Rape of Ariadne after Titian) from the early 1970s. This work is a c-print that is life size and comes from the Groninger Museum collection in Groningen. The third, fourth, and fifth works are from Ontani’s series entitled Olimpo (Olympus), which dates between 1975 and 1976. These works are c-prints and are part of the collection of the artist. The sixth work is entitled Leda e Cigno (Leda and The Swan) taken from Le Ore (The Hours) series, which dates between 1975 and 1976. This work is a photograph on paper that is life size and is part of the Sargentini collection. The seventh work is a diptych entitled MayaGoya Vestito (MayaGoya Clothed) and MayaGoya Desnudo (MayaGoya Nude) from 1970. Both of these works are c-print on paper and measure 100 x 200 cm in size and come from the collection of the artist. The eighth and final work is entitled EvAdamo d’apres Cranach (EvAdamo after Cranach) from 1973. This work is a c-print that is life size and comes from the Sandra and Gerald Fineberg collection.

**Literature Review**

This thesis interprets the work of a mostly obscure and eccentric artist who has yet to be considered by art historians as an influential figure in the identity politics that affected and inspired much of the art world between the 1960s and early 1980s. The current state of knowledge on Ontani consists in the form of one dissertation and a few minor art criticisms from his many gallery exhibitions. These critiques have kept the discussion of Ontani’s work to a minimum, only briefly touching on his connection to other postmodern artists who were making similar work during this period, such as Cindy
Sherman, Jeff Wall, and Yasumasu Morimura, among others. Ontani’s oeuvre, however, particularly his use of the tableau vivant, predates many of the works by these celebrated artists. As such, this thesis argues for the importance of Ontani, not only as predecessor to these contemporary artists, but also as a pioneer in his use of the tableaux vivant as an artistic tool for the deconstruction of binary oppositions, particularly those of gender and sexuality.

The Tableau Vivant

According to Monika Elbert, author of Striking a Historical Pose: Antebellum Tableaux Vivants, “Godey’s” Illustrations, and Margaret Fuller’s Heroines, the tableau vivant, or living picture, functioned primarily as a form of parlor entertainment for women during the nineteenth century. Elbert states that the tableau vivant provided an invitation for women to envision themselves in idealized roles such as goddesses, shepherdesses, queens, and sprites.8 She describes the process of the tableau vivant as a often suspenseful and intense experience for both the actress as well as the observers. “Behind a curtain, the actress would strike a pose. Once the curtain rose, she would hold her position for thirty seconds before the curtain dropped again. This process would then be repeated two more times.”9 Elbert rejects other scholar’s assertions of the tableaux vivant as exploitation of women because of its encouragement of the self-fashioning of one’s own personality and identity. She argues that these parlor entertainments “did not simply celebrate true womanhood or inspired motherhood; rather, they presented a

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9 Elbert, 238.
kaleidoscopic vision of woman in the splendid variety of her being — daring, impulsive, rebellious, heroic, introspective.”

Luigi Ontani’s Use of the Tableau Vivant

Anna Mecugni’s dissertation, “I Am Elsewhere”: Luigi Ontani and the Tableau Vivant in Italian Art, 1969-1979 remains the most comprehensive and scholarly of all current literature regarding Ontani’s use of the tableau vivant. Mecugni spent four years writing this dissertation and as a result has produced a detailed description of Ontani’s life and work between 1969 and 1979. While conducting her research, Mecugni was able to conduct seventeen in-person interviews with Ontani. These interviews were not recorded by Mecugni, but are cited in her dissertation, which has assisted me in describing some of Ontani’s life and own personal statements regarding the specific works mentioned in this thesis.

Deconstruction and Queer Theory

The influence of Deconstruction as a theoretical model can be attributed to its founder Jacques Derrida. Derrida was a French philosopher and literary critic who is said to have been heavily influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Martin Heidegger, and Frederick Nietzsche. Derrida introduced Deconstruction in 1967 with the publication of three books: Speech and Phenomena, Writing and Difference, and Of Grammatology. In these books, Derrida illustrated the complicated methods of Deconstruction by comparing his theory against pre-existing Structuralist concepts that

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10 Elbert 256.
surround the idea that language is made up of definitions that are binary, oppositional, and rigidly fixed. Structuralists also view cultural practices as being built on this same system of underlying structures and definitions. These definitions are often common relationships that are seen in daily life such as good and evil, male and female, and heterosexual and homosexual. According to Derrida, there is an obvious hierarchy within these structures; the pairings are not always equal and often one term is valued more over the other, leading to a sense of given superiority created through ethnocentrism within Western society. The Structuralist method identifies the more valuable term within the relationship as the “unmarked” term while the less desirable is considered the “marked” term.

Deconstruction, as introduced by Derrida, opposes this Structuralist concept by stating that individual terms are not fixed and superior to one another, but rather they are ambiguous and interdependent. Derrida does not deny that binary relationships are necessary in order for each individual term to have a logical existence and meaning in relation to each other; however, he does argue against the construction of opposition, as it expresses obvious modes of superiority. Derrida further does not ignore the differences between these individual terms. Instead, he embraces them by stating that their meaning is created through their differences.

To illustrate this important concept, Derrida uses the term *différance* to describe that language is restless and meaning is fluid, thus eliminating the concept of ultimate

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12 Barrett, 159.
truth outlined by structuralists.\footnote{D’Alleva, 138.} \textit{Différance} is used by Derrida to reference his idea that the meaning of individual terms is not identical, but is, instead, dependent on each partner term and is, therefore, expressed through differences and similarities that are subject to change with each reading. Thus, every difference and similarity between individual terms produces a new meaning, making the search for an absolute truth regarding these binary oppositions endless and the content of each term highly ambiguous. Derrida states that even the author of a specific text cannot know all of the full meanings behind its content because “every reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language.”\footnote{D’Alleva, 138.} Meaning is, therefore, always in a constant state of flux based on different interpretations. As such, it is through this method of Deconstruction that culture can be seen as relational rather than oppositional and is interconnected through ambiguous relationships.

Derrida’s introduction of Deconstruction to the unprepared academic community caused immediate controversy and resulted in constant rejection by various literary critics who argued against its unfixed methodology, concepts of ambiguity, and discrediting to the purposeful content created by authors. In his book, \textit{Against Deconstruction}, published in 1989, John M. Ellis identifies these ambiguities by stating that:

It is somewhat characteristic of deconstructive arguments that they claim to seize on unexamined assumptions of all kinds — ethnocentrism being one — in order to explode and transcend them, hoping to enlarge our consciousness of the issues concerned. Indeed, it is easier to see in Derrida’s position here, not a corrective to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Différance} is a French term meaning both “to differ” and “to defer.”
\end{itemize}
ethnocentrism, but instead a determined reassertion of the ethnocentrism that Saussure sought to correct and transcend.\textsuperscript{16}

Ellis’ argument that Derrida maintains unexamined assumptions through deconstructive strategies, suggests that Deconstruction, despite its appearance as a theoretical model, is, in fact, anti-theoretical and reduces the role of theoretical reflection in literary analysis.

Despite these criticisms, however, Deconstruction progressively gained proponents, reaching its peak in the 1980s due to the increased interest in social issues regarding race, class, gender, and sexuality. Scholars during this period often turned to Derrida to deconstruct Western notions of what was perceived as normal or ideal. One of these proponents was Paul de Man, a literary critic and theorist. De Man uses Deconstruction as method of analysis for several works by Frederick Nietzsche. In his essay, \textit{Rhetoric of Tropes}, De Man argues that, “Nietzsche flatly states the necessary subversion of truth by rhetoric as the distinctive feature of all language.”\textsuperscript{17} Thus, through this analysis, De Man applies Derrida’s methods of Deconstruction to Nietzsche’s theories, illustrating that language is a metaphor, but is often taken for granted as both an absolute truth and literal meaning by Western society.

The increased focus and positive acceptance of the use of Deconstruction as a means to eliminate power structures within language caused general interest to grow within other communities such as art and art criticism. Derrida wrote several books on the visual arts and placed a heavy emphasis on its means to challenge the cultural constructions within society. He believed that a work of art has the power to deconstruct


\textsuperscript{17} Thomas Deane Tucker, \textit{Derridada: Duchamp as Readymade Deconstruction} (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2010), 15.
absolute truth and put conceptual meaning into what he referred to as a state of “play.” \(^{18}\)

Artists also began to use methods of Deconstruction within their work to illustrate their dissatisfaction with the power structures that continued to prevail within contemporary society. These structures often included gender, race, class, and sexuality, and while there is a progressive movement to remove the hierarchy within Western society, these structures continue to create opposition today.

Several resistance movements were created throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, which directly responded to the continued existence of these power structures. These movements were created to not only encourage the general acceptance of the often considered subordinate groups of individuals, but to also end binary normalities within Western society. One of the most prevalent of these movements was the Gay Liberation Movement, which encouraged the open expression of same-sex relationships during the early 1970s. \(^{19}\) This began a rise of a new form of radicalism by individuals who did not ascribe to the social construction of heteronormativity. Taking inspiration from the emergence of an increased focus on feminism, this resistance was based on the unequal recognition of homosexual identity. It sought to free gay men and lesbian women from the binary oppositions, which placed homosexuality as subordinate to heterosexuality. \(^{20}\) This increased focus on gay and lesbian politics created not just an increased desire for equal rights of all individuals, but also greatly influenced discussions on human sexuality within the academic community.

\(^{18}\) D’Alleva, 139.
\(^{19}\) D’Alleva, 69.
\(^{20}\) D’Alleva, 69.
This general interest of the differences between heterosexuality and homosexuality further influenced the creation of several academic disciplines that debated the ways in which sexuality, like language, can also be constructed by cultural conditioning within Western society. One of the most prominent of these disciplines was Queer Theory, which explores the ways in which homosexuality is expressed in various historical and cultural contexts, and how it can differ from the heterosexual lifestyle, which is often placed at the center of Western society. Like Derrida, queer theorists argue that gender identity and sexual orientation are not inherent but instead are constructed by the reliance on binary normalities. As an academic discipline, Queer Theory encourages a change in gay and lesbian scholarship and politics, and examines all forms of gender oppression. The changing acceptance of the word “queer” within the homosexual community further relates to Derrida’s concept that meaning can fluctuate depending on its relationship within language. For queer theorist David Halperin, “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, [and] the dominate.” The dominant in this case being the heteronormative lifestyle outlined within the power dynamics of Western society.

The work of French historian, philosopher, and theorist Michael Foucault greatly influenced the increased development of Queer Theory. In his multi-volume book, *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that homosexuality should be seen as a specific product of a particular society or culture. He disagreed with the nineteenth century categorization of homosexuality as a form of sodomy and, instead, stated that, “The

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21 D’Alleva, 69.
22 D’Alleva, 70.
23 D’Alleva, 71.
sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.”

Although Foucault’s work has often been criticized for its lack of historical specificity, his continued insistence that sexuality was a cultural construct, rather than inherently biological, provided a distinct foundation for the further development and study of human sexuality by various queer theorists.

Judith Butler, a philosopher and gender theorist, is also often associated with Queer Theory and is said to have been directly influenced by the work of Foucault. She argues that gender is performative in the sense that individuals perform a specific gender by wearing certain clothing, engaging in certain rituals, taking certain jobs, and behaving in certain ways that are seen as normative by Western society. For Butler, these performances illustrate that gender is a social construct and, therefore, is not a natural or an innate part of human existence. She identifies two kinds of performance in her work: citation and iteration. Citation is the copying of others through performance while iteration is the repeated performance of a specific act until it becomes a subconscious part of daily behavior. These two kinds of performance often appear in heterosexual communities and are based on expectations created through various binary oppositions, which include man/woman, father/mother, and son/daughter. These forms of gender performance create cultural pressure for homosexual communities by creating a heteronormative lifestyle that is generally accepted by Western society. There is an expectation that if individuals who identify as homosexual hope to receive equal rights, they must conform to what Western society associates with “normal” behavior. This

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24 D’Alleva, 71.
25 D’Alleva, 71.
26 D’Alleva, 71.
“normal” behavior is associated with not only gender performance, but also a cultural construction of masculinity and femininity. In response, Butler states that, “Femininity [and masculinity] thus is not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm.”27 Queer theorists, therefore, often relate this idea of gender performativity to the struggles of gay, lesbian, and transexual individuals by stating that to talk of “male” and “female” is to talk of gender regulation and social norms.

Some of Butler’s critics argue against the performative quality of gender, however, by citing the questions it raises about what “gender might actually mean when the term becomes so attenuated and deliberately imprecise.”28 Butler does not disagree with this criticism, but she seeks to make the point that Western society desires the construction of absolute definitions of terms like gender and sexuality. Whitney Davis, a queer and gender theorist, agrees with Butler and states, “Gender is not a question of difference, but rather of agreement.”29 This statement corresponds to Derrida’s methods of Deconstruction by asserting that binary relationships such as male/female and heterosexual/homosexual should not be compared based on their oppositional differences, but rather on how the two terms cohere to one another and create stability within their communities.

Queer theorists, like Davis, often use Butler’s concepts of gender performativity, as well as Foucault’s early work on human sexuality, to identify heteronormative expectations within society. It becomes useful, therefore, to incorporate Queer Theory as

27 D’Alleva, 71.
29 Hatt and Klonk, 167.
a method to analyze not only the impacts of cultural construction on homosexual communities, but also as a way to identify how individuals express and perform sexuality through the use of different visual forms, such as art, music, and dance. Artists not only reject mainstream ideals of gender and sexuality within their own lives, but also often create works that challenge these cultural constructions, and promote various forms of discourse on these and other social issues within society. Thus, by effectively using Queer Theory and Deconstruction as methods of visual analysis, scholars can observe the ways in which specific artists use themes such as sexual identity, active narration, gender fluidity, and homoeroticism to dismantle pre-existing power dynamics and binary oppositions.

The unequal recognition of interdependence within binary relationships, as well as the continued existence of societal norms, encourages the pertinent need for further research and scholarship within the academic study of human sexuality. An effective method for beginning this kind of research is to use such theories as Deconstruction and Queer Theory and apply their methods of analysis to various art forms. This enables the academic scholar to identify how sexual identity and behavior can be used visually as a means to counteract cultural constructions of binary opposition. As such, by contextualizing Ontani’s specific use of the tableau vivant within the theoretical principles and practices of Deconstruction and Queer Theory found in literature, a clear pattern of the destabilization of gender and sexuality can be observed in his work.

While current scholarship regarding Ontani’s work may have been limited, the discussions surrounding the theoretical principles and practices of Deconstruction and Queer Theory, as well as the history of the tableau vivant are rich in perspective. The
literature surrounding these topics provided copious perceptions and assessments of the need for a deconstruction of the binary oppositions that surround gender and sexuality. Thus, I was given a wide range of scholarship and background to inspire my research and to use as evidence for this study.

**The History of the Tableau Vivant and its Functions**

In his tableau vivant manual published in 1869, the comic pantomimist Tony Denier defines the tableau vivant as a tool to “cultivate a love for the beautiful in art, poetry, and music, and awaken a quicker sense of the grace and elegance of familiar objects, pictures, and statuary.”

Originally, a politically motivated form of entertainment that reached a peak in popularity in the nineteenth century, the tableau vivant uses scenes from painting, sculpture, literature, and history to entertain and influence audiences through the use of live impersonations and performances. It can involve between one and forty performers, generally women, who alternate between poses, gestures, and emotions to impersonate various historical and classical figures. In addition, the tableau vivant is typically performed without movement or sound, which brings greater attention to these elaborate gestures and poses to not only accurately convey the scene in question, but also to effectively communicate visual metaphors and political messages.

There is little research on the history of the tableau vivant. Some scholars suggest its emblematic and allegorical nature recall early medieval theatre and pantomime, as well as Renaissance masques and pageantry, while others argue that, because of its peak

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30 Elbert, 236.
31 Elbert, 238.
in popularity, the tableau vivant did not become a true art form until the later part of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{32} Despite this discourse, however, some of the first documented uses of the tableau vivant can be traced as far back as the fifteenth century in Northern Europe and the Netherlands. During this period, entire municipalities would participate in many elaborate forms of pageantry in order to welcome the reigning monarch on the occasion of his first ceremonial visit to the city. The reason for the monarch’s visit was traditionally for the granting and confirming of privileges for citizens, which often caused the ceremonies to be politically motivated.\textsuperscript{33} For the citizens of these municipalities, not only did these elaborate ceremonies welcome the monarch, they also functioned as a means to visually display controversial and underlying political statements in support of traditional civil liberties.

The tableaux vivants that appeared during these fifteenth century ceremonial events functioned as primary tools to convey underlying political messages. They were predominately performed in the heart of the city, near the Town Hall, which enhanced their political importance and forced all bystanders, as well as the visiting monarch, to actively watch and engage with the performances.\textsuperscript{34} In these performances, individual citizens would pose as historical, biblical, and mythological figures in order to communicate the socio-political agenda and opinions of the city. Since the tableau vivant incorporated a variety of different allegorical influences, the performances were seen by the municipal government as an effective method to tell stories about ideal power.

\textsuperscript{32} Elbert, 236.
\textsuperscript{34} Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels, 37.
relations and cultivate a new political relationship between the monarch and the municipality without any retribution from the rising absolutist political regime.\textsuperscript{35}

It is important to note that during the mid-fifteenth century, several controlled territories revolted against the rising absolutist monarchy, which led to an increased amount of violence throughout Northern Europe and the Netherlands, and resulted in many citizens losing their rights to civil liberties. The ceremonies that were held for the monarch as he entered the defeated cities were a form of self-subjection for many citizens in the hope of establishing a charter of liberties, which would stipulate that the city could not be divided, that public offices were open only to citizens, and that these citizens would be consulted on coinage of money, on foreign alliances, and on declarations of war.\textsuperscript{36} The majority of citizens that presented political messages within their tableaux vivants did so, therefore, in order to persuade the monarch to grant their requests to earn back their civil liberties and re-establish positive relations between the city and the monarchy.

In order to persuade the visiting monarch to establish the charter of liberties, a set of strict guidelines was formulated for tableau vivant performances. These rules make several connections to the treatise entitled \textit{De Pictura} by Leon Battista Alberti, written in 1435, and the handbook \textit{De Const van Rhetoriken (The Art of Rhetoric)} by Matthijs de Castelein, published in 1555. Despite their separated interests in art and theatre, both of these authors emphasized the importance of \textit{sermo corporis}, or body language, which

\textsuperscript{35} Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels, 40.
was a major aspect of the construction of the tableau vivant, particularly during this important bridge between the Late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance.\textsuperscript{37}

In his treatise, Alberti outlines the classical conventions of gesture by stating, “Those who are angry have their eyes wide open and their faces are red, since their feelings are stirred up by anger. All the gestures of their bodily parts are violent and stormy due to fury.”\textsuperscript{38} In his turn, de Castelein suggests how an actor would portray this same kind of anger on stage by “the raising of the arm, and . . . the stamping of the feet.”\textsuperscript{39} While these two authors were primarily focused on the use of \textit{sermo corporalis} in art and theatre, many of these same guidelines can be applied to tableaux vivants, as they also emphasized a similar notion of accurate clarity, as well as a capacity to depict the emotional expressiveness of the human figure.

The guidelines outlined by Alberti and de Castelein helped to distinguish the tableau vivant as a tool to compliment theatrical performances and influence the visual arts. An example can be found in the morality plays of the fifteenth century. These plays functioned as an allegory in which a central character is met by various personifications of moral attributes, which encourage the resistance of worldly temptations.\textsuperscript{40} At the end of these plays, a tableau vivant was often revealed to the audience in order to express visual metaphors and provide the central character with religious and moral insight. These tableaux vivants specifically reduced “movement, sound, and machinery,” and communicated only by the means of expressive gestures and body language.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{37} Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels, 41.
\textsuperscript{38} Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels, 41.
\textsuperscript{39} Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels, 41.
\textsuperscript{40} Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels, 39.
\textsuperscript{41} Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels, 43.
In contrast to reductions in the use of movement, sound, and machinery, many early tableau vivants were performed outside of the theatre under the frames of elaborate triumphal arches (Figure 1). The use of an arch as a frame for the tableau vivant provided a setting for the scene and, in turn, created a visual relationship between the art and architecture of the time. In addition to providing a large frame and space for performances, the triumphal arch also created visual contrast between the expressive poses of the tableau vivant and the sculptural and decorative elements found on the arches themselves. Some of the visual elements of these arches included various grotesques, animal masks, and reliefs of human figures holding fruit and vegetable garlands.\(^\text{42}\) The decorative elements found on the triumphal arches can be associated with the already popular, and equally as elaborate, Roman monument of the same name. These particular monuments commemorated the numerous victories and achievements of past Roman emperors and essentially functioned as political propaganda. By incorporating the triumphal arch into the tableau vivant, citizens attached even clearer political significance to the living picture.\(^\text{43}\) As such, the tableau vivant became an integral part of the monarch’s visiting ceremony and functioned as a primary way to convey the city’s political agenda and opinions during these visits.

From the second half of the sixteenth century on, the tableau vivant lost much of its significance and the practice was eventually discontinued. This was due, in large part, to the drastic changes that occurred in both theatre and painting brought in by the Renaissance.\(^\text{44}\) Despite this shift in cultural practices, however, the use of the tableau

\(^{42}\) Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels, 43.

\(^{43}\) Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels, 38.

\(^{44}\) Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels, 38.
vivant during the fifteenth century was paramount to assisting lower class citizens to gain back their civil liberties. As such, for its specific use as both an artistic and political tool, I suggest that it should be recognized as an early form of social activism.

After a long period of decline, the tableau vivant reemerged and became highly appealing to women during the nineteenth century. For women who were stuck under the weight of conventional home-bound expectations, the tableau vivant became a popular form of parlor entertainment, which these women could perform together in their homes. By participating in these tableau vivant performances, women gained the opportunity to enter the public sphere and reject many of the traditional expectations of nineteenth century society. As such, the tableau vivant provided women with contradictions against the rising bourgeoisie social class, as well as the opportunity to explore the differences between what was acceptable and what could be imagined in the context of a largely free and feminine identity.\textsuperscript{45}

The tableaux vivants of the nineteenth century differed from those of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in a variety of ways. The most primary of which were caused by the development of several new conditions for the construction of tableau vivant scenes. These new conditions allowed the tableau vivant to not only function as a theatrical method but also resemble, as closely as possible, a work of art.\textsuperscript{46} To ensure the aesthetic importance of the tableau vivant, special attention was given to the various performance devices found within each scene. These devices included such formal visual elements as grouping, attitude, light, and color, and instructions for their use were documented in various kinds of manuals and handbooks that were published and sold during this period.

\textsuperscript{45} Elbert, 250.
\textsuperscript{46} Elbert, 238.
Some of the most common instructions found in these manuals included: descriptions for the scenes, costume and casting requirements, and also suggestions for the lighting and musical accompaniment for the most popular and frequently performed tableaux of the period. In addition, several manuals and handbooks also promised readers a “humble means of developing a love of the beautiful” through the construction and performance of these tableaux. One can assume through these descriptions, therefore, that the tableau vivant asserts the importance of various ideal and constructed values as a means in which to develop a love and appreciation for the beautiful in art, poetry, and music.

An example can found in William F. Gill’s manual entitled *Home Recreations*, published in 1875. In this manual, Gill contributes to Monika Elbert’s description of the process of the tableau vivant by suggesting how an entire evening might be constructed around these various designs, or scenes:

> A programme for an evening’s entertainment should consist of from five to ten designs, including varied selections of classical and domestic, serious and comic tableaux. Music, both vocal and instrumental if possible, should be given between the different representations to afford time for the necessary preparations and prevent any delay, which too frequently occurs, and detracts from the interest of the performance by wearing the audience.

From Gill’s meticulous outline, one can surmise that, unlike the socio-political tableaux of the fifteenth century, the tableaux vivants of the nineteenth century were important elements to the popular culture of the rising bourgeois society of this period. It is important to note, however, that with titles such as *Contentment, Innocence*, and

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48 Chapman, 25.
49 Elbert, 238.
Consolation, many tableaux still suggested a range of ideal moral values to these middle class audiences, despite claiming to be used only as a type of parlor entertainment, rather than political metaphor.⁵⁰

Other manuals, such as Godey’s Lady Book, published in 1839, and James Head’s Home Pastimes, Or Tableaux Vivants, published in 1860, emphasized the importance of the female performer or figure in the construction of a tableau scene.⁵¹ While both men and women portrayed figures in the tableau vivant during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the male role was significantly reduced during this period. In particular, many of the descriptions found in tableau vivant manuals predominately focused on the heroine, rather than the hero. A main female performer would impersonate and pose as the heroine, while other female performers would pose as her maidens in attendance or other minor roles. The male performer, if mentioned at all, would usually play a subversive role to the central female personage and function as a voyeur, dreamer, or observer of the scene.⁵² The voyeuristic nature of the male role in these scenes suggests the intended gaze and behavior of the men in the audience as well. The men viewing these scenes were allowed to receive a rare opportunity to observe women in dress and postures generally more provocative than was allowed in usual circumstances. The tableau vivant thus becomes a form of erotic spectacle for these men.

While some scholars argue that the presence of a voyeuristic male gaze places the tableau vivant within the confines of a society too focused on male-dominated art and art-making, I agree with Elbert’s argument that the tableau vivant also offered women the

⁵⁰ Chapman, 25.
⁵¹ Elbert, 239.
⁵² Chapman, 27.
opportunity and freedom to explore their personal identity by performing as various strong female role models. These role models included such prominent female figures as Queen Victoria, the Madonna, Venus, The Three Graces, Florence Nightingale, and Joan of Arc. Thus, despite their semi-erotic nature, the tableau vivant allowed the nineteenth century woman to escape patriarchal society and become these important figures, if only for a brief moment. The men in the audience, like the male role in the scene, are simply the quiet observers of this event. The male does not play a character in these scenes, but instead, attends to the woman figure who has become the center of attention and a dominate force among the docile and subversive male viewer. As such, the opportunity to perform this variety of personality traits through the tableau vivant provided nineteenth century women with the ability to experience a multifaceted public identity in a patriarchal society, which was not yet ready to allow them that kind of freedom.

In addition to escaping the various power structures found in the patriarchal nineteenth century society, Elbert states that the tableau vivant also provided women with the opportunity to present themselves in the “splendid variety of [their] being” and explore their own personal identity. The women who performed these scenes were given the freedom to indulge in their fantasies by performing in elaborately staged tableaux, often in various states of undress, where they would submit themselves to the gaze of their peers. Like the scenes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, many of the themes in these nineteenth century tableaux were derived from mythology, allegory, history, and the contemporary literature of the time, all of which functioned as a metaphor for the social status and moral values of the nineteenth century woman. Thus,

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53 Elbert, 264.
54 Elbert, 256.
by performing as prominent female figures, the women who chose to participate in these tableaux were given the opportunity to present and objectify themselves as a means in which to reclaim their own feminine identity and address the reoccurring presence of gender inequality.

According to Mary Chapman, the strong emphasis on feminine roles and values within these scenes also helped to reject the traditional notion and depiction of the “powerless woman,” a narrative theme present in many nineteenth and early twentieth century artworks. In this regard, the tableau vivant became an artistic tool and political weapon for many of the women of the nineteenth century as well. These women were able to use the tableau vivant to combat against this and other kinds of sex-based discrimination that were continuously occurring throughout the United States and Europe during this time. In particular, the tableau vivant became particularly significant to many women’s rights activists, who used it as a tool to symbolically convey their rejection of traditional values and establish powerful symbols for women to follow. In 1913, for example, several members of the National American Woman’s Suffrage Association presented a series of tableaux on the steps of the Treasury Building in Washington, D.C. to campaign for women’s rights to vote (Figure 2). This specific focus on the tableau vivant as a tool for socio-political protest not only creates the simultaneous promotion of free womanhood and femininity, but also the deconstruction of many of the traditional gender roles and expectations that various women faced during this period.

After the 1920s, the tableau vivant lost much of its appeal and was gradually replaced by an increased interest in the development of melodramas and silent films.

55 Chapman, 27.
which incorporated the same emphasis on poses and gestures. Despite this loss in interest, the tableaux vivants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided many women with a unique and functional tool in which to explore their own personal identity. Thus, by trying on various roles and consciously objectifying themselves as a form of silent protest, women were able to gain strength and like-minded support from others. This led to the forming of various community action groups, like the National American Woman’s Suffrage Association in 1869. These action groups were used to further combat many of the traditional gender expectations that were becoming increasingly oppressive during the early twentieth century. Although the full strength of these early activists would not be felt until several decades later, the specific use of the tableau vivant by these women allowed for its continued application as a tool for political and social discourse in subsequent modes of artistic expression, especially regarding personal identity. It is no surprise, therefore, that Luigi Ontani incorporated this same method in his work to deconstruct the binary oppositions that surround gender and sexuality.

Deconstruction of Gender and Sexual Identity in the Tableau Vivant

Based on this understanding of the history and functions of the tableau vivant, it is important to then contextualize Ontani’s use of this tool within the theoretical principles and practices of Deconstruction and Queer Theory. Although Derrida wrote primarily about philosophical and literary texts, his deconstruction of language and fixed

oppositions can be applied to Ontani’s work, as it also disrupts traditional assumptions and social conventions. Derrida calls such disruptive works, or marks, as “undecidable,” which he defines as, “… that [which] can no longer be included in philosophical (binary) opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical (binary) opposition, resisting and disorganizing it.” In this regard, Ontani’s tableaux vivants can be seen as symbols of a deconstructive resistance to the limitations set forth by the binary oppositions that surround conventional notions of gender and sexuality.

I first identify the pattern of iconographic attributes that Ontani repeatedly uses to deconstruct gender and sexuality, including the natural homosexual archetype, androgyny, and phallic imagery. By situating these attributes in Ontani’s tableaux vivants, I show that these act as signifiers of homoerotic behavior and an ambiguous gender and sexuality. In addition, I also examine his works that take androgyny a step further in order to create a new, non-binary gender and then, eventually, a full gender transformation. By emphasizing these consistent patterns in Ontani’s work, it gives significant insight into the personal and artistic practices that Ontani was engaged with at the time, and it becomes evident that his primary interest was in a deconstruction of gender and sexual identity. Thus, I show the important relationship between Ontani’s work and the encouragement of a liberation from binary oppositions and traditional expectations, specifically those regarding gender and sexuality.

Homoerotic Imagery and Sexual Ambiguity

A consistent visual pattern of androgyny and homoerotic imagery can be observed in Ontani’s work to deconstruct gender and sexual identity. This pattern can be seen in his specific use of the various iconographic attributes that identify many of the figures that he portrays. These attributes serve as signifiers of homoerotic pleasure and sexual ambiguity, and can be recognized by Ontani’s reference to the natural homosexual archetype, androgyny, and phallic imagery.

An example of this pattern can be found in his tableau vivant photograph entitled San Sebastianio nel bosco di Calvenzano (d’apres Guido Reni) (Saint Sebastian in the Woods of Calvenzano (after Guido Reni), produced between 1970-1973 (Figure 3). This tableau was created in collaboration with Giorgio Gramantieri, a commercial photographer.59 In this photo, Ontani impersonated the figure of Saint Sebastian, a Christian saint and martyr, after the painting San Sebastiano (Saint Sebastian) by the Baroque painter Guido Reni (Figure 4). Reni is considered to be one of the main representatives of the Bolognese school of Bologna, Italy, a city near Ontani’s hometown, and is perhaps most well-known for his plethora of large scale portraits of Saint Sebastian.60 Over the course of thirty years, between 1610 and 1640, Reni painted multiple versions of the same three compositions of Saint Sebastian. It is important to note that of these three compositions, Ontani specifically chose to impersonate the one that does not feature any arrows piercing the body of the martyr.

60 Mecugni, “Elsewhere” 130.
The story of Saint Sebastian was first popularized in the thirteenth century by Jacobus de Voragine in his collection of hagiographies, entitled *Legenda Aurea*, or the *Golden Legend*. According to Voragine, Sebastian was an archer and a favorite of the Roman Emperor Diocletian. At the time, Christianity was outlawed and Sebastian’s consistent prayers to Christ for the emperor’s salvation and good estate of the Roman Empire brought about his death sentence. Diocletian condemned his favorite archer to death by arrows, to be inflicted by his fellow soldiers, but Sebastian did not die of arrows and, as a result, was forcibly beaten with cudgels instead until he finally died. 61

This account of Saint Sebastian’s struggle for survival against his fellow soldiers gained the attention of several artists during the mid-fourteenth century when the Black Death was devastating Europe. During this period, he was often depicted as a handsome and sensual male youth, wearing a loincloth who is tied to a tree and pierced by arrows. This typical depiction of Saint Sebastian tied to a tree and pierced by arrows became his main iconographic attributes as he became increasingly popular as a patron saint and a symbol of a resistance to pain and death. 62

The lack of arrows in both Reni’s and Ontani’s works are important details because they allude to a lack of pain and suffering by the Christian martyr, who vehemently defended his religious position even in the face of a looming death sentence. Mecugni points out that in comparison to Reni’s portrait, Ontani’s version takes the subject matter “one step further away from pain.” 63 In Reni’s painting, Sebastian is

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shown wearing a loincloth and tied to a tree. He also appears to be struggling while fearfully gazing up to heaven, as if bargaining with God. In Ontani’s work, however, the artist is featured relaxing against a tree, with one leg straight while the other is bent, his gaze is turned upwards, and his arms are carefully placed behind his back – all suggesting a pleasant atmosphere of inactivity rather than a struggle. There is no fear in Ontani’s work, but rather has an air of ironic confidence, which is elicited by the use of warm colors and bright sunlight that is filtered through the lush vegetation of the woods. By contrast, the atmosphere in Reni’s portrait is dominated by a dark and cloudy sky that looms over the figure, who appears to be isolated in a sparse landscape. The pink loincloth that the artist wears around his waist also further accentuates the atmosphere of pleasure in Ontani’s work.

I suggest that this depiction of pleasurable inactivity by Ontani can be read as a homoerotic sign of the natural homosexual archetype, which is defined by Hal Fischer in his essay, *Gay Semiotics: A Photographic Study of Visual Coding Among Homosexual Men*, published in 1977. In this essay, Fischer introduces various homosexual archetypes in the context of photography. He explains that the natural homosexual archetype originated from American folk tradition and the arts. He says this can be easily recognized in photography when a male model is photographed outdoors, usually in a forest or field environment with natural lighting. According to Fischer, this archetype, like classical myths, carries positive connotations. These connotations include, “Virility,

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simplicity, and, most importantly, freedom from any type of social structure.”65 This liberation from social structures, provided by the natural homosexual archetype, is important to reading Ontani’s work. It denotes an association with the practices and theoretical principles of Deconstruction, which regard the resistance and disorganization of binary structures and oppositions. The natural homosexual archetype can be clearly identified in Ontani’s impersonation of Saint Sebastian through his depiction of a male figure that is engaging in a form of pleasurable inactivity within a natural forest environment. Thus, this tableau vivant photograph by Ontani functions as reference to the artist’s interest in liberation and freedom from social structures and limitations, particularly those regarding gender and sexual identity, and therefore, serves as a form of homoerotic imagery.

Like Reni, the figure of Saint Sebastian is a frequent subject for Ontani. In the second half of the 1970s and then again in the 1980s and 1990s, Ontani posed as the Christian martyr for over ten tableaux vivants staged in Italy, India, and New York City.66 In San Sebastianio nel bosco di Calvenzano (d’après Guido Reni) (Saint Sebastian in the Woods of Calvenzano (after Guido Reni), Ontani asked his photographer Gramantieri to take photos of him from his “particular point of view, unlike the traditional photographic portrait of the artist in his exceptional everyday reality . . .”67 Thus, for Ontani, his Saint Sebastian pose also functions as a self-portrait of deconstructive resistance to not only conventional notions of photographic technique, but also to traditional kinds of portraiture found in both photography and painting. He said

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65 Fischer, 2.
these photos are, “An image of [his] own story, like a self-portrait,” in the sense that they express his own personality, but also his origins. More importantly, Ontani also states that he was drawn so often to the figure of Saint Sebastian because it represented for him “a simulacrum of ambiguity;” meaning, the ambiguous representation of androgynous beauty, as in a male youth, and the ambiguity of art itself. Given the homosexual visual qualities of his version of Saint Sebastian, it becomes evident, therefore, that Ontani’s tableau after Reni’s painting functioned as both a coming out for the artist and as a platform for future representations of queer ambiguity in his work.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that after Ontani exhibited *San Sebastianio nel bosco di Calvenzano (d’apres Guido Reni)* (*Saint Sebastian in the Woods of Calvenzano (after Guido Reni)*), he wrote and published in *Flash Art*, a contemporary art magazine based in Milan, what he described as, “A declaration of the aims of [his] being.” In this text, Ontani writes of himself, “I am absolutely present: — Ange infidel [unfaithful angel], androgyne, ephebe, hermaphrodite, hybrid, Sagittarius . . .” This statement functions as both a manifesto and, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick has described, as a “coming out” for Ontani. This is seen especially in his declaration of himself as androgynous and without anatomical sex. The artist is careful to note in a later interview, however, that if he had to write this statement again, he would take into consideration “an outlook that allows for the possibility of being aware of art and life in their totality, while maintaining a desire for mirages that go beyond the constrictions of commonplaces or

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69 Mecugni, “Elsewhere,” 133.
70 Pinto, 208-216.
utopias.” This addendum by Ontani directly references the theoretical principles and practices of Deconstruction by clearly illustrating the artist’s values at the time and his interest in creating a kind of art that breaches conventional ideals and binary structures.

Another character that Ontani frequently portrayed in his work to deconstruct gender and sexual identity from the early part of the 1970s was Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and fertility. This figure is clearly seen in Ontani’s work entitled *Ratto di Arianna d’apres Titian* (*Rape of Ariadne after Titian*) (Figure 5). In this tableau vivant photograph, Ontani is shown impersonating Bacchus after the work entitled *Bacchus and Ariadne* by the Venetian painter Titian (Figure 6). Ontani as Bacchus is standing nude in the middle of a grassy knoll, partially enveloped by folded, pink drapery, and is crowned with a laurel wreath. Titian, who produced the majority of his works during the first half of the sixteenth century, is considered by some scholars to be one of the greatest painters of the Italian Renaissance and the father of modern painting. He is best known for his portraiture and large scale group compositions, like *Bacchus and Ariadne* which measures just over 5’9” x 6’3”. Out of all the characters featured in this large-scale work, however, Ontani only impersonates Bacchus, as if it was a photographic detail, which draws similarities to the traditional tableaux vivants performed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This work by Ontani draws several homoerotic comparisons to his *San Sebastianio nel bosco di Calvenzano (d’apres Guido Reni)* (*Saint Sebastian in the Woods of Calvenzano (after Guido Reni)*). In particular, the artist once again is shown depicting a figure drawn from past painting as a natural homosexual archetype in pleasurable

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73 Pinto, 208-216.
inactivity in nature. According to Fischer, this archetype functions as a homosexual signifier because of its relationship to the larger cultural romance with nature myths. This communion with nature can be recognized in both Ontani’s poses of Saint Sebastian and Bacchus and functions not only as an idea, but also as a solution to escape from the weight of traditional expectations. References to a communion with nature can be seen throughout Ontani’s tableaux vivants. Thus, for Ontani, the natural homosexual archetype functioned as a means in which to escape many of the rules and regulations regarding gender and sexual identity in Western society. Therefore, Ontani’s use of the natural homosexual archetype and sexual ambiguity in *Ratto di Arianna d’apres Titian (Rape of Ariadne after Titian)* serves as a clear signifier of homoeroticism, particularly homoerotic pleasure.

Moreover, Ontani also uses various forms of phallic imagery as iconographic attributes in order to deconstruct many of the traditional assumptions and social conventions that surround orthodox notions of gender and sexuality. These iconographic attributes seen with many of the characters that Ontani impersonates provide underlying homoerotic intentions as well. This suggests a reference to the performance of sexual identity; both the sexual identity of the figure and the sexual identity of the artist himself. The use of clear homoerotic imagery can be seen in Ontani’s series of tableaux vivants entitled *Olimpo (Olympus)*, produced between 1975 and 1976. This series consists of eleven individual photographs that are arranged in a horizontal line, adjacent to one another. In each of these photographs, Ontani is depicted impersonating a figure from Greco-Roman mythology. The figures include Pan, Diana, Mercury, Saturn, Vulcan.

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75 Fischer, 2.
Apollo, Jupiter, Neptune, Mars, Venus, and Cupid. In all eleven photographs, Ontani is posed in front of a white wall. In addition, a projection of blue sky and clouds is cast onto the artist’s body, which functions as a theatrical backdrop for this tableau vivant series.

For his impersonations in this series, Ontani used a variety of different found materials to create a unique mix of props, which function as the iconographic attributes of each of the eleven gods and goddesses. Some of these attributes are more complex, such as the trident for Neptune and the gladiator helmet for Mars. For the most part, however, Ontani uses some form of kitsch material to make the attribute, such as cotton balls used for Saturn’s beard, and a child’s bow and arrow for Cupid. Even the use of the blue sky and cloud projection as a background for these photographs can be considered a kitsch element in the series. Three photographs from this series that specifically illustrate Ontani’s use of iconographic attributes as phallic and homoerotic symbols are Mars, Cupid, and Venus (Figure 7).

In Mars, Ontani impersonates the god of war. He is turned in profile, facing the right side of the series. He wears an elaborate gladiator helmet and holds a small toy sword in his right hand that he points horizontally to the right. In comparison, Ontani is nude in his impersonation of Cupid, the god of desire and erotic love. He wears a small toy crown on his head and a pair of wings strapped to his back. He is crouched with one knee down, and, like Mars, he also holds a toy weapon in his hand. He is turned in profile, this time facing the left side of the series. In Venus, Ontani impersonates the goddess of love. He is turned in rear profile from the viewer with his buttocks exposed.

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76 Ontani, Weiermair, and Alinovi, 23.
There are no props used in this photo, Ontani’s buttocks, therefore, functions as the goddess’ only attribute.

The homoerotic significance of this series is evident in the juxtaposition of these three photographs. *Venus* is the second to the last in the series and is placed between *Mars* and *Cupid*. Thus, when arranged in order, these three works form a homoerotic triptych. *Mars*, on the left, points his phallic-like sword at *Venus*, while *Cupid*, on the right, prepares to shoot an arrow of erotic attraction at the couple, which is also a phallic symbol. Therefore, Ontani’s specific use of phallic imagery in these three photographs serves as a clear signifier of homoerotic behavior.

**Non-Binary Gender**

In addition to incorporating clear patterns of iconographic attributes as signifiers of homoerotic behavior and sexual ambiguity in his work, the use of color signification also predominately informed Ontani’s artistic practice. By specifically using color photography for the majority of his tableaux vivants, Ontani was able to create his own unique set of reoccurring iconographic attributes. These original iconographic attributes can be seen in Ontani’s consistent use of three colors of drapery: pink, blue, and yellow. For Ontani, these three colors function as signifiers for the male, the female, and a union of the two, or the androgynous respectively.\(^{77}\) I suggest that by combining these three signifiers together, Ontani was able to portray a figure whose gender is neither male, female, or androgynous, but rather, completely non-binary. As such, the consistent

\(^{77}\) Mecugni, “Elsewhere,” 162.
presence of these three colors of drapery in Ontani’s work assist in a further contextualization of the artist’s deconstruction of gender and sexuality.

Ontani’s use of these three colors of drapery can be clearly seen in his series of tableau vivant photographs entitled Le Ore (The Hours), photographed between 1975 and 1976. This series of twenty-four photographs features the artist in a variety of different poses. In all of these works, he is depicted nude and partially wrapped in folded, pink, blue, and yellow drapery. In addition, he also poses with various embalmed animals and holds an iconographic attribute of the original work, artist, or figure that he is portraying.

In the photograph entitled Leda e Cigno (Leda and The Swan) from the Le Ore (The Hours) series, Ontani is depicted nude while reclining nude on the pink, blue, and yellow drapery (Figure 8). His head is thrown back in ecstasy, while a large embalmed swan stands between the artist’s open legs, hiding his genitals, and appearing to kiss the artist on the lips. In addition to his title, the motif Ontani used in this work assists in understanding its subject matter. In Greek mythology, Leda was a mortal woman and the queen of Sparta, who was seduced by Zeus, the god of the sky and thunder. Zeus was known to have various love affairs with mortals and often disguised himself as an animal in order to avoid being identified. In this story, he appears to Leda in the form of a swan and sexually violates her. Thus, I suggest that the title of Ontani’s work suggests a direct reference to this story.

During the Baroque period, this subject emerged as a popular theme for many artists, primarily due to the paradox that it was more acceptable to depict a woman

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engaged in sexual acts with an animal than it was with a man. While Ontani does not state in his title that *Leda e Cigno* was after a specific artist, as many of his other works were, I have found that it bears a striking resemblance to the work *Leda and The Swan (after Michelangelo)* by the Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens (Figure 9). Rubens completed most of his early training as an artist by copying the techniques of Italian Renaissance master painters, in particular, the works of Michelangelo. In this work, Rubens depicts Leda fully nude. The figure’s left leg is lifted and her buttocks and left breast are exposed. The swan is embracing her with its head and neck supported between her breasts. Several of these iconographic attributes found in Ruben’s painting can also be identified in Ontani’s tableau vivant. One, in particular, is the positions of Ontani’s body. For example, in Ontani’s version, his right leg is lifted in a similar way to the figure of Leda in Ruben’s painting. His buttocks and the right side of his chest are also exposed. In addition, the head of the swan in relation to Ontani is strikingly similar to the relationship between the two figures in Ruben’s work. As such, there is a clear relationship between these two works.

While both works depict unquestionable eroticism, Ontani’s version suggests a clear deconstruction of gender through his impersonation of Leda, a female figure, and his use of the three colors of drapery, which signify an individual whose gender is neither male, female, or androgynous, but completely non-binary. In addition, Ontani also suggests a deconstruction of heterosexual identity by depicting himself engaged in a perceived sexual act with Zeus, who is considered by most scholars to engage in sexual

80 Bull, 168.
behavior with both genders, male and female.\textsuperscript{82} It becomes evident, therefore, that Ontani is attempting to impersonate a figure that exists completely without gender and sexuality. Thus, by specifically impersonating a figure whose gender and sexuality is completely non-binary, I suggest that this work, as a self-portrait of Ontani, implies a clear deconstruction of gender and sexual identity.

Full Transformation of Gender

In many of his tableaux vivants, Ontani takes androgyny and non-binary identity a step further by impersonating various female figures with his genitals fully exposed to the viewer. It is evident from these impersonations that Ontani clearly rejects the notion of anatomical sex as a signifier for gender. This rejection by Ontani reveals his continuous effort to destabilize conventional limitations on gender and sexuality, in particular, the distinctions between sex and gender, both anatomical sex and performed gender. For Ontani, the impersonation of past figures from religion and mythology constitutes a freedom from the social limitations of gender and sexuality found in contemporary society. He contends that these structural oppositions are the foundation of social inequalities and labor exploitation. Thus, his response to these forms of limitations is to actively transform his identity in order to welcome, what he considers, the “wonderful possibility of being at the same time . . . masculine and feminine.”\textsuperscript{83}

As seen in my interpretation of the works above, this ambiguous play of gender and sexuality is present in the majority of Ontani’s tableaux vivants. His notion of “being at the same time,” however, can be specifically seen in two diptychs produced during the

\textsuperscript{82} Bull, 171.
\textsuperscript{83} Mecugini, “Elsewhere,” 138.
first half of the 1970s. In both of these works, Ontani’s consistent portrayal of androgyny implies a full transformation of gender identity.

In the first work entitled *MayaGoya Vestito (MayaGoya Clothed)* and *MayaGoya Desnudo (MayaGoya Nude)*, produced around 1970, Ontani impersonated the figure from the diptych *Le Maja Vestita (The Clothed Maja)* and *Le Maja Desnuda (The Nude Maja)* by the Romantic painter Francisco Goya (Figures 10 and 11). Goya’s work was seen as shocking by many people during the late half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and even brought the painter before the Spanish Inquisition for its explicit depiction of female nudity without any mythological or religious narrative.84 In the works by Goya, he depicts a woman reclining on a bed of pillows. In the first image, entitled *Le Maja vestida (The Clothed Maja)*, she is shown fully clothed, with her arms raised behind her head. She has a faint smile, rosy cheeks, and her gaze is straightforward at the viewer. In the second image, entitled *Le Maja desnuda (The Nude Maja)*, the same figure is shown. She is fully nude, in the same posture, with her arms raised behind her head, a faint smile, rosy cheeks, and a bold gaze, which again, pierces out of the composition and back at the viewer.

In *MayaGoya*, Ontani imitates the same pose of the figure seen in Goya’s work by appearing to recline on a sofa with his arms bent and raised behind his head; however, he does not appropriate her iconographic attributes, such as her dress and gaze, like he does with many of his other works. In *MayaGoya Vestito (MayaGoya Clothed)*, Ontani is fully clothed wearing magenta socks and high-heeled boots. In *MayaGoya Desnudo (MayaGoya Nude)*, he maintains the same figural pose, but is photographed nude with his

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genitals fully exposed. In both photos, Ontani’s gaze is turned to the side, away from the viewer, unlike in Goya’s work, where the two figures gaze out directly at the viewer. Ontani’s body is also in the same line as the picture plane, rather than at a diagonal seen in Goya’s paintings. The sofa appears too small for Ontani, which causes him to appear unnaturally twisted to assume the same figural pose. In Goya’s two paintings, there is an excess of space surrounding the figures, but by contrast, in Ontani’s diptych the space appears flat and constricted, where his whole body is stretched to fill the entire composition.

By depicting so many clear differences in this work, I argue that MayaGoya Vestito (MayaGoya Clothed) and MayaGoya Desnudo (MayaGoya Nude) function as one of the few tableaux vivants in which Ontani was able to fully transform his gender in order to create a new queer and homoerotic context for the original painting and subject matter. This diptych combines Ontani’s male anatomical sex with the female gender of the original character that is being performed. When viewed together, these two photos bring attention to the conventional signifiers of gender, such as clothing and posture, and the anatomical sex that exists underneath traditional “masculine” and “feminine” expectations. In this work, Ontani deconstructs the concept of gender and confuses the viewer by displacing anatomical sex as a signifier for gender. This heightens the ambiguity and androgyny of this work, and results in a full transformation of gender identity for Ontani. Thus, by displacing sex, clothing, and posture, as signifiers of gender, Ontani’s diptych destabilizes conventional notions of what it means to be male, female, and androgynous in Western society.
A similar state of confusion for the viewer can be observed in Ontani’s second diptych entitled *EvAdamo d’apres Cranach* (*EvAdamo after Cranach*), produced between 1973 and 1975. In this work, Ontani impersonates both Eve and Adam from the Book of Genesis in the Bible in two separate tableau vivant photographs (Figure 12). According to Mecugni, this diptych was inspired by the painting entitled *Adam and Eve* by the Renaissance painter Lucas Cranach the Younger, which dates around 1528 (Figure 13). In Ontani’s diptych, the artist is photographed standing nude in two separate panels against a dark background. In the left photograph, Ontani impersonates Eve, and on the right, he impersonates Adam. For Eve, Ontani’s body is frontal, while he holds the traditional bitten apple in one hand and a small fig branch in the other, with which he attempts to cover his genitals, albeit unsuccessfully. For Adam, Ontani’s body is turned in profile and his left hand holds an apple behind his back. The use of exaggerated light on the figures set against the dark background is particularly evident in this work, which helps the characters become indistinguishable from each other as well. The title of the work, the positions of the figures, and the iconography of the bitten apple, all suggest that the figure on the left is Eve; however, Ontani appears to make little to no effort to hide his phallus, which he has consistently done in all of his other works selected for this study. Thus, I argue that this blatant display of Ontani’s male anatomical sex as Eve with her apple, in contrast to the iconographic evidence presented by Cranach’s work for Eve’s depiction, once again confuses the viewer and works to destabilize the notion of anatomical sex as a signifier for gender. Adam has become Eve. As such, this results in a

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full transformation of gender by Ontani, once again deconstructing the binary oppositions regarding gender and sexuality.

**Conclusion**

There were four primary objectives to this study. The first was to illustrate the history of the tableau vivant, particularly with respect to its compositional components as tools for a resistance to socio-political inequalities. The history of the tableau vivant shows that it has consistently provided a way for individuals to escape and resist the power structures prevalent in contemporary society. In addition, the tableau vivant also provides the opportunity to explore personal gender and sexual identity through a participation in theatrical and artistic practices. Prior to the popularity of photography and silent film, the majority of tableaux vivants were performed by women as parlor and stage entertainments. These women impersonated powerful feminine role models drawn from painting, sculpture, literature, and history, in order to experiment and try on alternative identities. This adoption of new and powerful identities contrasted against the traditional values constructed by the established patriarchal society, which had kept women powerless during this period. Therefore, through the resistance of these traditional values, the tableaux vivant as a political tool to combat against social inequalities and gender oppositions is confirmed.

The second objective was to conduct a detailed interpretation and analysis of the photographic record of Luigi Ontani’s tableau vivant photographs dated between 1968 and 1980. This interpretation and analysis of Ontani’s works reveals that the artist pioneered a revival of the tableau vivant in contemporary art through his performance and citation of alternative identities drawn primarily from painting and mythology as a
political tool to combat against social inequalities concerning gender and sexuality. A particular quality that distinguishes Ontani’s use of the tableau vivant from nineteenth and early twentieth century examples, however, is his application of ambiguity, particularly his work as a simulacrum of ambiguity, both the ambiguity of androgynous beauty and the ambiguity of art itself. His work predates several of the later artists who incorporated the tableau vivant into their own artistic practices. As such, for his body of work produced during this period, Ontani should, therefore, be considered a pioneer of the “postmodern revival of the tableau vivant.”

The third objective was to contextualize the visual materials of Ontani’s photographs, particularly the iconography of past paintings and characters, within the broader frameworks of the theoretical principles and practices of Deconstruction and Queer Theory. This contextualization of Ontani’s photographs shows that the iconographic attributes of many of the figures function as elaborate signifiers of homoerotic behavior and an ambiguous gender and sexuality. The majority of the figures and characters that Ontani impersonated in the first half of the 1970s are male and inscribed with homoerotic desire and pleasure through the application of the natural homosexual archetype, which denotes a freedom from conventional social structures. In addition, the specific use of phallic imagery in many of Ontani’s photographs functions to deconstruct the traditional assumptions and social conventions that surround orthodox notions of gender and sexuality. As such, this emphasizes the use of homoerotic signifiers as part of the principles and practices of Deconstruction and Queer Theory in Ontani’s work.

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By considering additional visual evidence, such as the significance of Ontani’s use of color photography and the three colors of drapery, indicating a gender that is neither masculine, feminine, or androgynous, but rather, completely non-binary, the practice of a deconstruction of binary oppositions is further substantiated. In addition, by considering Ontani’s clear rejection of anatomical sex as a signifier for gender, the potential to fully transform one’s own gender identity in order to destabilize the conventional limitations on gender and sexuality is demonstrated. It is evident, therefore, that the consistent iconological pattern of signifiers throughout Ontani’s oeuvre reveals the artist’s specific interest in a deconstruction of gender and sexuality.

The fourth objective was to further contextualize Ontani’s deconstruction of gender and sexuality, particularly with respect to his own personal identity and artistic motivations. This contextual study of Ontani’s tableau vivant photographs, particularly his consistent portrayal of androgynous figures, sheds light on the artist’s own personal identity as an influence on his work. By publicly declaring his identity as an androgynous hermaphrodite, Ontani aligned himself with the tenants of binary liberation and the growing acceptance of non-normative sexuality, play, and pleasure, which were becoming increasingly prominent during the 1970s. Therefore, by contextualizing Ontani’s work within the sphere of historical and political concerns regarding gender and sexuality, it is evident that personal aspirations bear a direct influence on his use of the tableau vivant. Thus, when considered within the larger frameworks of the theoretical principles and practices of Deconstruction and Queer Theory, the motives and impetus of Ontani’s use of the tableau vivant as a tool for the deconstruction of gender and sexuality is revealed.
FIGURES
Figure 1: Frame of Triumphal Arch from *Pompa Introitus Honoti Ferdinandi Austriaci (Entry of Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand into Antwerp, 1635)* by Peter Paul Rubens, Jan Caspar Gevaerts, Jacob Neeffs, and Theodoor van Thulden, c. 1642

Figure 2: German actress Hedwig Reicher wearing costume of "Columbia" with other suffrage pageant participants standing in background in front of the Treasury Building, 1913, Washington, D.C.

Source: George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress.  
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97510759/
Figure 3: Luigi Ontani, *San Sebastianio nel bosco di Calvenzano (d’apres Guido Reni)* (Saint Sebastian in the Woods of Calvenzano (after Guido Reni)), 1969-1970, c-print, 100 x 79 cm, Sargentini collection.

Figure 4: Guido Reni, *San Sebastiano (Saint Sebastian)*, 1640-1642, oil on canvas

Figure 5: Luigi Ontani, *Ratto di Arianna d’après Titian (Rape of Ariadne after Titian)*, early 1970s, c-print, life-size, Groninger Museum collection, Groningen

Figure 6: Titian, *Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1520-1523, oil on canvas

Figure 7: Luigi Ontani, Mars, Venus, and Cupid, from the Olimpo (Olympus) series, 1975-1976, c-print, collection of the artist.

Figure 8: Luigi Ontani, *Leda e Cigno (Leda and The Swan)*, from the *Le Ore (The Hours)* series, 1975-1976, photograph on paper, life-size, Sargentini collection

Figure 9: Peter Paul Rubens, *Leda and The Swan (after Michelangelo)*, 1601-1602, oil on panel

http://www.wga.hu/html_m/r/rubens/21mythol/01mytho.html
Figure 10: Luigi Ontani, *MayaGoya Vestito (Maya Goya Clothed)* and *MayaGoya Desnudo (MayaGoya Nude)*, 1970, c-print on paper, 100 x 200 cm, collection of the artist

Figure 11: Francisco Goya, *Le Maja vestida (The Clothed Maja)* and *Le Maja desnuda (The Nude Maja)*, c.1797-1800, oil on canvas

Figure 12: Luigi Ontani, *EvAdamo d’après Cranach (EvAdamo after Cranach)*, 1973, c-print, life-size, Sandra and Gerald Fineberg collection

Figure 13: Lucas Cranach the Younger, *Adam and Eve*, 1528, oil on panel

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