About the Artists:

Shasti O'Leary Soudant (b. 1967, New York, NY) is a multi-disciplinary artist whose practice encompasses photography, sculpture, film/video, music and graphic design. Her work currently centers on the socio/psychopolitical ramifications of aging, gender, memory, and corporeal dissolution. She is an MFA candidate in the Department of Visual Studies, University @ Buffalo where she teaches Communication Design.

Cayden Mak (b. 1987, Southfield, MI) is a theorist interested in play and liberation, whose work ranges from computer art to lifehacking to civic participation. His current research engages the development of radical video game aesthetics. He is an MFA candidate in the Department of Media Study, University @ Buffalo, where he teaches critical video game studies.

CAYDEN MAK:

CYBORG THEORY, CYBORG PRACTICE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHASTI O'LEARY SOUDANT

Ô mon corps,
fait toujours de moi un homme
qui s'interroge.

— Frantz Fanon

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I first met Cayden Mak in March of 2009, at a performance of *WoyUbu*, a juxtaposition of two absurdist plays performed simultaneously in two adjoining spaces involving the experimental performance troupe Real Dream Cabaret, the Intermedia Performance Studio, and the Department of Computer Science at Canisius College. The performance spaces were separated by a wall that extending only as far as the audience. The performers and interactive installation invited the audience to either 'watch' or 'play' as they presented Georg Buchner's *Woyzeck*, and Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* to the digital world using virtual reality, performing robots, and surveillance technology.

Having no idea what this was all about, I chose to sit on the 'play' side with my five-year-old daughter, as did Cayden. What followed was the most bizarre and enjoyable theater experience of my life. On our side of the wall, we were invited to jeer, yell, drink beer and soda, eat candy and snacks, throw things and aim toy guns at the performers, in effect, invited to become performers ourselves. Through a video feed, we were also able to watch both plays at once and reflect on their synchronies and dissonances.

The 'watch' side of the audience was relegated to a stark and traditional setting, able to watch their performance of Woyzeck, and through the gap in the wall, glimpse the 'play' side of the audience in our revelry, but unable to participate in the mayhem. The duality was jarring, beautiful, thought-provoking and entertaining. All qualities I now ascribe to Cayden.

It was only fitting that this would be how we would first meet.

— Shasti O'Leary Soudant, Buffalo, N.Y. September 2010

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CAYDEN MAK:

CYBORG THEORY, CYBORG PRACTICE

This talk was presented on February 13, 2010 at Pecha Kucha Buffalo, Western New York Book Arts Center.

I am a game designer, theorist, and hacker. You might say that game design is my artistic practice. But I don't really want to talk about games tonight, because I spend a lot of time talking about them in other venues. Instead, I wanted to take this opportunity to talk about a more personal aspect of my practice, one which is based upon my complex set of social identities — compiled into a single identity that we might call *cyborg identity*. This is the first and foremost way in which I am a hacker.

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We are all cyborgs in a Harawayan sense. We are amalgamations of complicated histories of violence, socialization, and the internalization of the oppression that surrounds us. In her 1989 *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway writes about the ways in which feminism has failed women of color and women in the Global South, but she neglects to mention the group which has been failed most violently by feminism, transgender people.

Feminism has a nasty history of erasing transgender people: denying the humanity and womanhood of trans women, fetishizing and degendering trans men, and rejecting legitimacy of all people who queer gender. This is a topic for another talk entirely — what matters tonight is that Haraway is not trying to squeeze all non-men into a certain framework. She is trying to pull apart the tangle of identity.

The interesting thing about Haraway's exclusion of transgender identities from her discussion of cyborgs is that we are perfect examples of cyborg praxis. By that I mean, we have bodies mediated in complex, meaningful ways by technology which, in many cases must be separated into component parts (and we are often examined as medical curiosities and rarely treated as holistic people); we have a preoccupation with the technologies of writing and language; and regardless of the complex gender identity we claim for ourselves, we represent an embodied experience of dissonance, language-play, Deleuzian multiplicity, and mediation.

Trans people are living rejections of a dualism that separates the mind from the body: by virtue of our trans-ness, we refuse that there is any division at all.

The best explanation we can often offer to cis people about our justification for our "deviant" behavior and our need for medical care is that our minds don't match our bodies. But that's crazy talk. Of course one's mind matches one's body. They are inseparable. When we consider that we think as much with our bodies as we do with our minds — that our bodies are what draw lines between what is known and what is possible — it seems ridiculous to say that there is a separation. (Which is to say nothing of the philosophical untenability of dualism.) When we consider that queer identities are not explicable via genetics, or neuroscience, or sociology, or psychology alone, we must recognize that the roots of identity are deep and complex, too complex for the disjointed work of "experts."
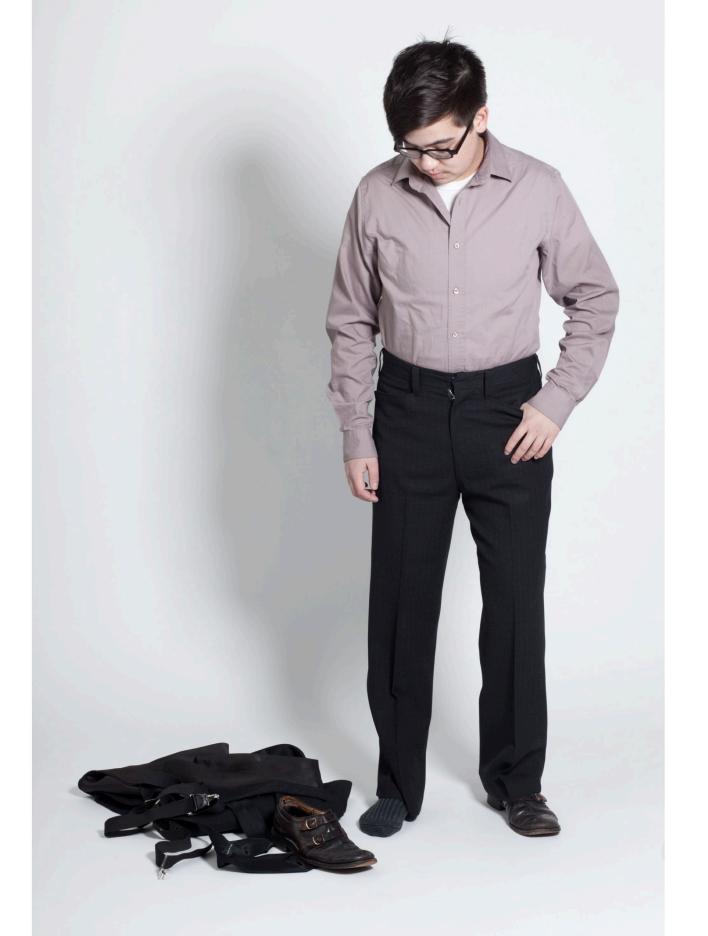
This lack of a separation is most boldly exemplified in experimental self care and medical care. I have been this kind of a hacker for the past six or seven years. For me, hacking started with so-called "crossdressing." A suit and tie, the layers of binding which hide the body underneath. The adoption of an androgynous name — first as a nickname, then as a legal fact. The negotiations of doctors and gatekeepers. Testosterone therapy. Confusing people on the street, in shops, restaurants, and positions of authority. When I went to get my New York State driver license, the DMV officials argued amongst themselves if my driver license should carry an F for female, or an M for male.

These interventions are all enabled by technology — weaving, sewing, medicine, language, writing, synthetic materials, the automobile. The transgender experience is deeply mediated, as is the experience of all. But what sets the mediation of transgender selves apart is the intentional use of technology to change our being-in-the-world, and the lack of obvious alternatives. I would even go so far as to say that we appropriate the technology of our oppressors — we hack not just our selves but our society; we hack not just our society but our oppression.
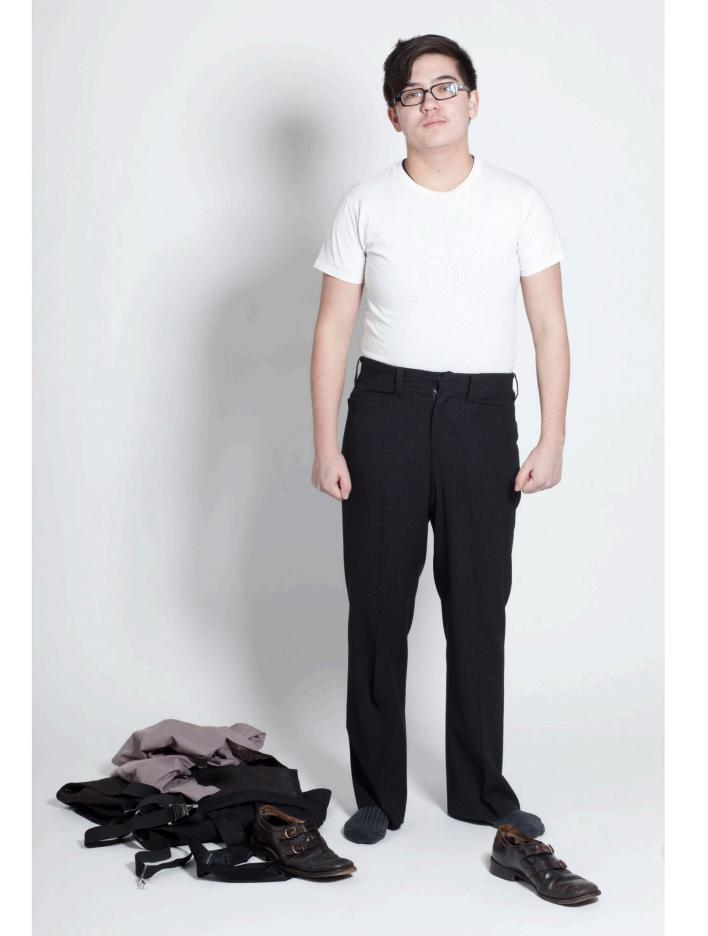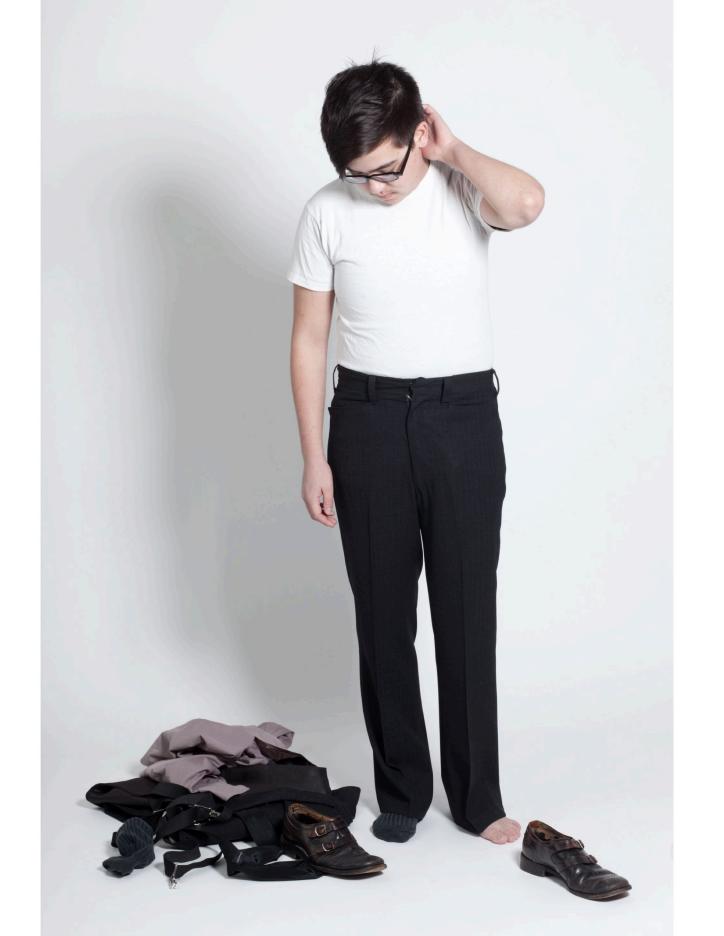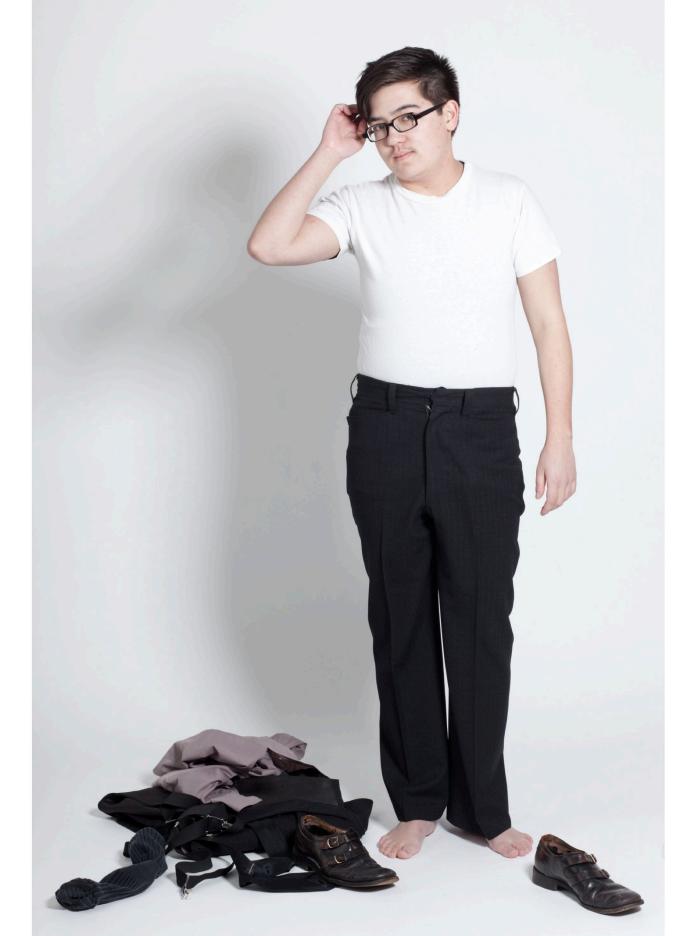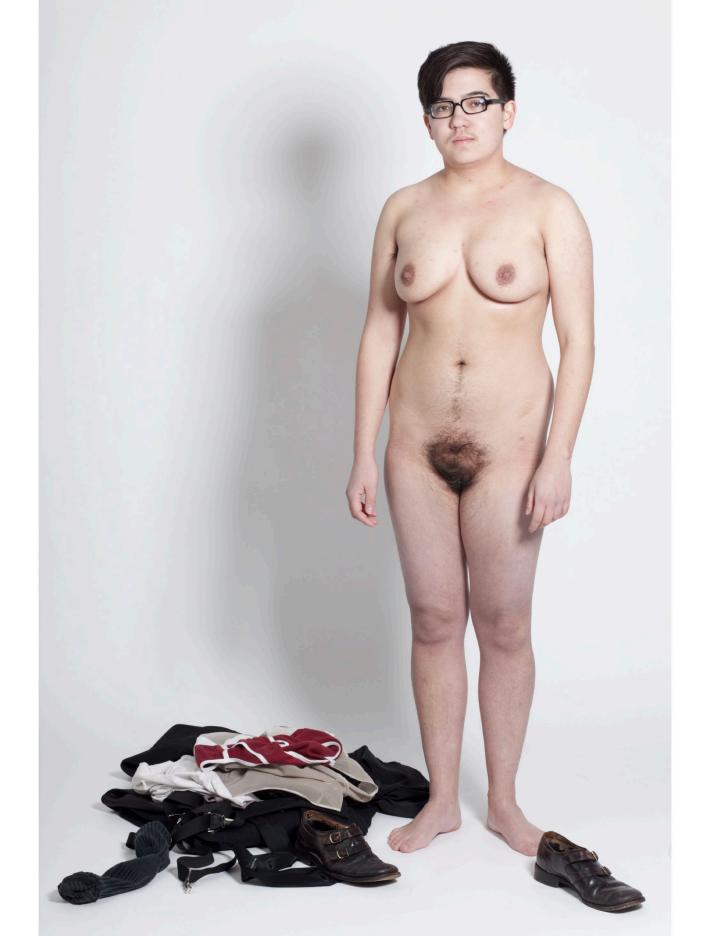
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In the Manifesto, Haraway explains that "Writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs, etched surfaces of the late twentieth century. Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism." And, no, there is no perfect way to speak about transgender identities. Because my trans-ness is a fusion of human, animal and machine, something profound and profane, I cannot describe accurately what it is I am, what it is I am doing. It's what's so difficult when we have conversations about the rights of transgender people: the lack of clear parallel makes us an easy Other, and the best intentions often become the most dangerous hurdles.

I will say this — I exist outside the totalities that society expects me to conform to. I do this with intention, with a Harawayan sense of irony. I am playing with the bits I'm supposed to have and the bits I'm not, but can get. This play is deadly serious. My very motion through social space is a challenge, a subversion of heterosexual (and even homosexual) desires. Because I am not a man. I am not a woman. (But what are you, you might ask?) There are not words to describe what I am, so I must invent them. They come piecemeal from a variety of traditions and languages, from a fragmentary consciousness of a fragmented body.
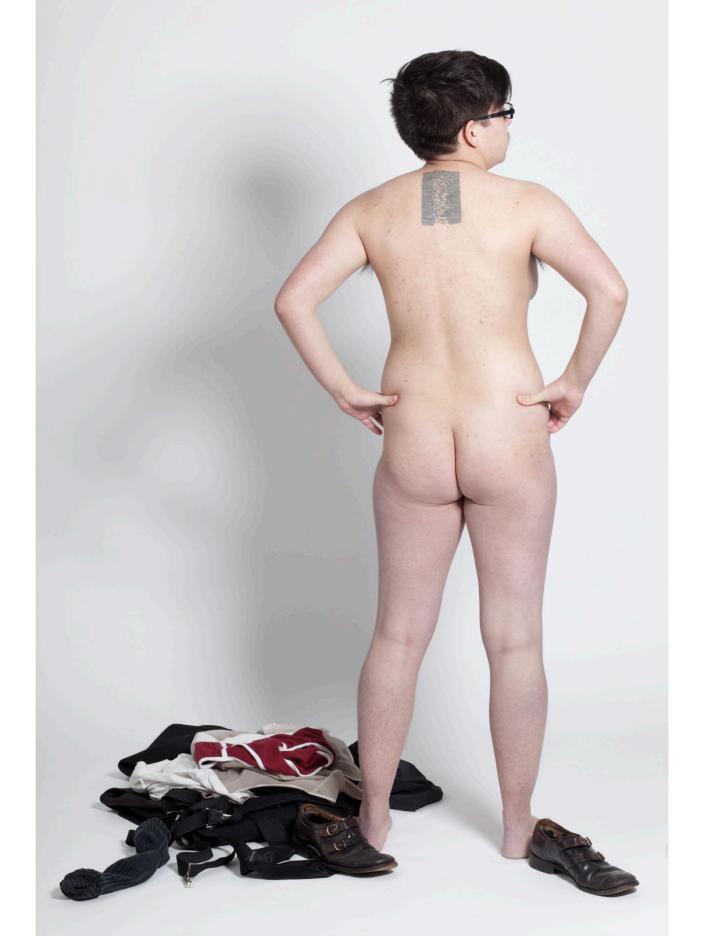
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"The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self," says Haraway. To take apart the gender that has been imposed upon you, to make alterations to it, remove constituent parts which are unsuitable and add new ones entirely, this what it is to be transgender. It's not that I am learning to be a man. I am unlearning — not to achieve some essential state of nature, but to become singular. And so the self becomes art and artifact, the product of intellectual effort, medicine, pageantry, inspiration, and nonbinary logic.

There will be no return to nature. The state of nature is an anachronism, for not only is it impossible for us to renounce our technological augmentation, by embracing it we acknowledge the state of nature as a tool of oppression. To live a cyborg is to liberate oneself from this onerous fantasy. There is no state of nature. There is no original sin. There are people, traces and pieces, littered all over the world.

I am no more complicated than anyone else. It's just that I've spent a good long time sitting with my complexity, looking it dead in its many eyes. And if there is one thing I have learned it is that we ought not settle for the status quo. We have every right as cyborgs to demand more, to move forward joyously demanding no less than justice for all. We gain nothing by pretending at simplicity, at circumscribing categories onto ourselves, and denying that our whole selves are cultural and artistic artifacts. We stand to reclaim our autonomy by hacking our bodies, our society, and our oppressions.