

Refracting the Paradox of Visibility: Looking through Vidisha-Fadescha's Lens

Shaunak Mahbubani

In May 2014, *TIME* magazine boldly proclaimed we have reached 'The Transgender Tipping Point' next to an image of actress Laverne Cox, the first trans* person to be featured on their coveted cover. The same year, the Supreme Court of India delivered its historic NALSA judgement, emphasizing self-determination of gender and reservations for trans* people. Seven years on, trans* actors and performers have gained greater visibility in international mainstream media through television shows such as *Pose*, *Legendary* and Instagram influencer culture. However, the community remains among the most vulnerable demographics in the world, still regularly subject to violent attacks and social and economic discrimination.

The past few decades have shown that visibility does not have a direct correlation to increased safety for all. Instead, it often triggers more aggression through retaliation. How then do we understand the fraught relationship between visibility, access and agency? In this essay, I look at the intersections between lens-based practice and performance in the works of Vidisha-Fadescha to discuss how they throw light on obscured facets of this paradoxical equation. From the early stages of their career, Fadescha's art has embodied their fluid and non-conformist gender identity, constantly placing it in relation to their other personal positions on caste, class, sexuality and political ideology. Over 13 years of practice, one finds a consistent integrity in the artist acting from their own positions, which allow the works to reflect a rooted sociological understanding of the milieu in which they live.

Fadescha's early art was grounded in the genre of subjective photography, unlike most other photography of the time which followed the social documentary format. This included a photo series called *Unvoiced* that captured the lives of Indian queer youth across 2009, the same year that saw the Delhi High Court first pass a judgement against Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. The series eschewed the conventional mode of portraiture, instead capturing lived realities through a continued interest in spatiality and object-oriented ontology. The series went on to win the 'Most Promising Talent in Photography' award from Toto Funds the Arts in association with Tasveer in 2011, bringing new fame and visibility to Fadescha. However, along with applause and appreciation came an incisive questioning of

the artist's gender and sexuality that seemed to challenge all conventionally accepted labels of the time.



Fig. 1. Photograph of a Behrupiya dressed as Tesu from Vidisha-Fadescha's *Pratibimb* series, 2010–2011. Courtesy Vidisha-Fadescha.

In their personal life, Fadescha was criticized for championing the notion of queerness which was seen as a western import that corrupted the sanctity of Indian heritage. This charge fuelled the artist's next set of works, *Pratibimb*, created between 2010–2011, which sought embodiments of a fluid multiplicity within the Indian cultural environment (figure 1). The research around lived manifestations of multiplicity took Fadescha to lesser-known communities of performing artists hailing from the subcontinent's nomadic tribes. A familiarity and bond was found in the fluid identities of masquerading performers such as the Behrupiyas. The Behrupiyas take on the visage of various characters from popular culture and mythology, across gender as well as outside the human form. They assume roles as local informers and messengers, drawing on characters from contemporary media to disseminate news and awareness across the villages and towns they travel to. Some shift appearances to match relevant themes across locations and time, while others hone one character act over their entire careers. In capturing this plethora of mutable identities, Fadescha's lens focused on the embodied character instead of reaching for an illusionary glimpse of the person beneath the costume. This acknowledged the ability of an outside gaze to apprehend and consume the image of only the performative body. The approach also drew attention to the limitations of lens-based media when viewed in the context of the unequal power relations between the subject and the photographer. This series became a crucial moment in contemporary India photography, landing the artist their first solo exhibition at the Matthieu Foss Gallery in Mumbai in 2011. Fadescha concurrently developed another exploration of performative portraiture which looked at circus performers just before their entry or just after their exit from the ring. In doing so, the artist pushed for a critical understanding of multiplicity that factored time as much as embodied appearance, highlighting the uncapturable transience of identity.

Having dealt with the oppressive forces of casteism and patriarchy from a young age, Fadescha felt alienated from images or behaviours propagated by Brahminism as a part of mainstream Indian culture. The access to authorship and dissemination further spurred in the artist what performance studies scholar José Esteban Munoz has called disidentification: 'survival strategies the minority subject practises in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship'. These strategies are apparent in

Fadescha's choice of forming artistic relationships with those who fall under the greater gamut of queerness and stand outside the normative worlds of caste, sexuality and gender in South Asia. This disidentification was accelerated when Fadescha went to pursue an MFA in Photography and Media at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) from 2011 to 2013. In California's diverse ethnic landscape, Fadescha's brownness was ambiguously coded and viewed as a part of the larger Latinx population. This gave them the space to develop a voice that could engage with multiple subjects without being boxed into the South-Asian origin category. However, Fadescha continued to engage with the political events unfolding in India at that time. The distance allowed for creative interventions that sought to enact what Munoz describes as 'permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance'.



Fig. 2. Vidischa-Fadescha's performance in *Used To It* from the *Speak Evil* series, 2013–2014. Courtesy Vidisha-Fadescha.

While in California, the influence of mentors such as Chicano scholar and artist Harry Gamboa Jr. cemented Fadescha's desire to combine art and activism, pushing their practice into the intersections of performance and image-making that it straddles today. Gamboa's involvement in the Chicano movement, especially with the Los Angeles-based Asco collective, motivated his students to recognize the importance of everyday actions as important sites of protest. CalArt's long legacy of Conceptualism also helped strengthen the avant-garde element that was already intuitively present in Fadescha's practice. One of the primary motifs they deployed in their conceptual performance works was the figuration of the zebra. The motif first entered their performances in the series, *Speak Evil*, that

responded to the insensitive remarks on rape made by Indian ministers and public figures in 2013–2014 (figure 2). The remarks involved bizarre justifications such as suggesting that consumption of fast food and chowmein caused hormonal imbalances that lead to rape. In the script of another performance in 2013, Fadescha described the use of zebra stripes in relation to their ‘tactic of being ungraspable, [and] impossible to prescribe’. The motif continued to be brought up at other renditions of *Speak Evil* in Los Angeles, as well as at Ambedkar University Delhi (2015) and Kolkata International Performance Art Festival (2015). In each instance, Fadescha deployed the zebra stripes upon their own body and that of their cohort as a way to refract the gaze of the viewer, bestowing upon the figure of the performer a hybridity that could occupy multiple positions and challenge easy identification. In doing so, they pushed the viewer towards a practice of everyday queerness, engaging with the other, and by extension with the self, in a manner that allowed for multiplicity, change and contradiction.



Fig. 3. Vidisha-Fadescha re-enacts the role of a Femen movement protestor in front of London City Hall on August 2, 2012, based on a photograph by Paul Hackett, Reuters. Courtesy Vidisha-Fadescha.

Fadescha also posits the motif of the zebra, a form of dazzle camouflage, as a strategy for the protesting body. They expand upon this by writing, 'Protests are formed by solidarities and unison; the bodies could all appear and look like one single mass. This single mass stands for each other. When the single mass is in a single color as an urban guerrilla tactic, it is still possible to place that mass. But if the mass uses this form of camouflage, the skin of distraction, the skin of absorption, one can't place a finger on the mass.'

Fadescha's involvement with art and activism grew even stronger with the rise of fascist tendencies in India after the 2014 national elections and frequent confrontations between citizens and the police and state-sponsored mobs. The artist examined the power relations between protester and state authority in a performance-photography workshop held in 2016. The re-enactments isolated individual figures from famous media images of protests including the London protests of 2012 (figure 3) and the Black Lives Matter movement in 2016 that hit out against police atrocities. They dissected the virality of the images in the case of each figure while making visible the unequal dynamic between the state and its citizens. The re-enactment was done by holding on to the pose of each figure for a significant duration, apprehending within the performer's body a fragment of the corporeal-emotional state of that figure. State authorities often resort to aggression and extreme violence in the name of protection and upholding law and order, implicitly leaving the imprints of trauma within their own bodies. Acting within such a deeply unequal distribution of power, trans* individuals can be thought of as constantly in a mode of protest against a social order which remains firmly rooted in the colonial gender binary. The existence of trans* and intersex people continuously transgresses the fixed binary of man and woman, exposing the inherent lie of this system, and attracting the violent pushback of those who benefit from its propagation. In a manner similar to the omnipresent trauma that the state keeps inflicting on itself, the gender binary restricts the true freedom for all peoples. Fadescha's provocations continue to prod the audience to think about the abolition of gender in collusion with carceral and other forms of abolition as the only road towards liberation.



Fig. 4. Vidisha-Fadescha's three-channel video, *Burn All The Books That Call You The Unknown*, 2020. Courtesy Vidisha-Fadescha.



Fig. 5. Exhibition view of *Burn All The Books That Call You The Unknown* at Riverside Theatre, Parramatta, Greater Western Sydney, 2020. Courtesy Vidisha-Fadescha.

With the exponential rise of social media in the last two decades, trans* people as well as those sidelined by traditional media platforms and dominant systems of race and caste have found new means to allow their voices to travel beyond physical limitations. This acceleration of agency has resulted in new formations of community and has impacted policy-making within institutions. However, on the flipside, those who use social media to work towards social justice goals also make themselves all the more vulnerable to public trolling and suffer from mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and alienation. In a lecture in 2013, filmmaker and performance artist Hito Steyerl mentioned how images are no longer just capturing the world around us but come with inhabitants that crash through the multiple screens they find themselves on, re-entering the world in varying states of injury. In this world composed of ubiquitous screens, what do we make of the very process of projecting oneself and being seen? In 2019–2020, Fadescha created a three-channel video titled *Burn All The Books That Call You The Unknown*, first shown at the eponymous exhibition held in Parramatta, Greater Western Sydney (figure 4). For the video, the artist worked with multiple trans* and queer figures, creating a space for their bodies to move freely and share the archives of their lived experiences. Notable among the performances is that of Jyotsna Siddharth, actor, writer and anti-caste activist. In the video, Jyostna is seen battling with a long piece of thread that constrains their body at multiple points, symbolic of the janeu or Brahminical sacred thread that is worn by privileged males in the subcontinental caste system. Jyostna, Fadescha, and the other performers all find space to confront the intersectional oppressions that have tried to hold them down.

In the exhibition, Fadescha carefully creates the context for this important video to be seen, contextualizing it alongside their work *Qworkoholics Anonymous* (Meeting with Joey Cannizzaro), *Queer Futures Archive* by After Party Collective, and a robust public programme, within a pleasant setting with comfortable seating, the cooling effect of multiple plants and low serene lighting (figure 5). This contextualization, a running thread in the artist's practice, is often overlooked when showing the works by and picturing marginalized peoples. Perhaps, this idea can help us understand the complexities of visibility, reminding us to look at not only how and by whom images are captured, but also the hospitality of the contexts within which their light falls, facilitating a secure landing.