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Göttingen Centre for Gender Studies
Project Office
Georg-August-Universität Göttingen
Centrum für Geschlechterforschung
Platz der Göttinger Sieben 7 • D - 37073 Göttingen
Germany

genderedthoughts@uni-goettingen.de | www.gendered-thoughts.uni-goettingen.de

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Getting the Opie We Deserve

William J. Simmons[1]
[1] California State University, Sacramento, USA; wjsimmonsoffice@gmail.com
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Abstract

This essay jumps off from two canonical texts in its reading of recent work by the queer-feminist contemporary photographer Catherine Opie: "Wide Open Spaces" by the American country band The Chicks and "Getting the Warhol We Deserve: Cultural Studies and Queer Culture" by Douglas Crimp. Part experimental nonfiction, part art history, part queer theory, "Getting the Opie We Deserve" invites projection and over-reading. It is as much about Opie's work as it is about the queer project of hysterical investment and juxtaposition. Following the example of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, José Esteban Muñoz, Maggie Nelson, and Anne Carson, the present work is another pole in the ongoing project of decentering established modes of critique.

Keywords
Catherine Opie; contemporary art; queer formalism; Andy Warhol; Charlotte Brontë

Many precede and many will follow
A young girl's dreams no longer hollow
It takes the shape of a place out west
But what it holds for her, she hasn't yet guessed

The Chicks, "Wide Open Spaces" (1998)

It is true that Catherine Opie is a queer artist, or an artist who is queer, or an artist who has been interpolated into a queer/feminist art history in response to a paucity of representation. So, when she presents to us with photographs that do not contain queer bodies or discernable markers of queer subcultures, the impulse must be to "queer" the already queer genres of landscape, the road trip, modernist architecture, leaving home and becoming someone else who is free of life's everyday traumas, getting everything you ever wanted and not having it be enough because you must, at times, walk beside blue streams alone, etc. To fail to queer Opie's genres outside of portraiture, we worry, might mean that we are allowing a queer artist or ourselves to engage in universalism, which by nature is not oppositional, political, deconstruc-

tive, or progressive. Above all, universality is kitsch. It is a problematic relic of erasure that forms the core of activism for moderate liberals, or even the golden desolation of Joan Didion's account of the West (for to allow women to speak universally would be too great a post-modern sin). How could we reconcile Opie's sublime windows and mirrors and mirror-like bodies of water as being akin to the masculine, Romantic grandiosity of, say, Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) or the quintessentially English nostalgia of John Constable's *The Hay Wain* (1821)? How can we argue sincerely for such a comparison when the prevailing tendency is still to equate queer artists with straight ones so that queerness might have art historical, formalist import outside of a set of erotic practices? Equally, kitsch is the notion that things need to be queered, since we know that everything is already queer (admittedly its own appeal to universality). Opie's later work, awash in archetypally wide-open spaces, offers us a look at freedom, which is certainly a political category, but it is also an emotional arrangement outside and within the specificity of otherness or so-called subcultures. It is the stuff of a country song or a novel. It is a need for a sense of humanity that perhaps only exists in Romantic reverie, or a daydream undertaken while a cool breeze alights on your skin.

In an essay about Andy Warhol, but more squarely about destructive in-fighting on the Left, the late Douglas Crimp (Opie's photographic subject and collaborator) wrote in 1999: "Perhaps a lasting Warhol effect has been to make possible expansive approaches to contemporary art more generally, or at least to those contemporary art practices that insist upon their articulation with broader social practices" (Crimp 1999: 50). The same could be said of Opie, her expansion of contemporary art itself a landscape. Still, when Crimp was writing this essay and into the present moment, social engagement has been made to oscillate between hyper-individual over-identification with otherness and a pervasive sentiment that the visual culture of otherness is insufficient, requiring us to compare the work of queer artists to canonical non-queer artists.

Art historian Hal Foster, cited in Crimp's essay, argues spitefully against a political/social/sympathetic Warhol, the sad and gay Warhol so desperately needed by many of us (Foster 1996: 130). Foster concludes that "this reading of Warhol as empathetic, even engagé, is a projection" (ibid.). Art, however, and not just queer art, is *only* a projection. In Opie's photography, windows, mirrors, horizon lines, gleaming abstractions, and horses (we should never neglect horse girls in art historical discourse) are the ultimate sites of projection because they remind us melodramatically that there is something further, farther, out there to which we can look forward. And we deserve that because we deserve to want life. Optimism might be the ur-projection, but without it, there is only death and no gloaming or swans, no finding ourselves, our queer and non-queer selves, in a chemical emulsion upon paper.

In the same period as our male Romanticists Friedrich and Constable, Emily Brontë wrote a poem called "Stars," which the late Ingrid Sischy lovingly quoted in reference to Opie's work:

> *Thought followed thought—star followed star,*
> *Through boundless regions on;*
> *While one sweet influence, near and far,*
> *Thrilled through, and proved us one!*
> *(Brontë 2018: 538)*

Yes, there are binary colonial metaphors of nearness and farness here that are also endemic to photography (and Didion and country music). But, for Opie, movement is always a moving-with and not moving-to. That oneness – that image of beautiful, crying teens proclaiming their distanced love under the light of the same star – is Opie's medium. For wandering, following in search of something beyond and in addition to subcultural specificity is our mandate, and it cannot be a reluctant one. It is not a matter of queering everything, for who is to say if Opie's use of a certain medium or genre is

queerer than any other deployment thereof, since queer bodies and the queer identity of the artist cannot be, forensically, the only signs of queerness.

For example, one might recall that the widely influential queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's dissertation and first book, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, was on Gothic literature (including the Brontës) and only became "about" the ghosts of the AIDS crisis in the revised 1986 version. Sedgwick and Opie are and have been queer all along, but it is also important to maintain that our icons need only be queer when they want to be, just as throwing open the dusty curtains of your ghost-filled mansion might reveal a storm or sunshine. We might see a girl who remains patriarchally confined or that same girl riding through the moors into a new life. Sedgwick calls revisiting her past work an instance of the "palpableness of individual and of institutional…representation" (Sedgwick 1986: v.), and if Opie's recent work is maybe a recent, edited retrospective of a certain modality outside of what is expected from her, we could say the same of her photography. Opie feels the tissue between and among one and many, an empathetic gesture, and in so doing asks us to touch and feel where we, as queer people, may wish to appeal to the sometimes cold and hard flesh of universality. For a mirror reflects everything before it, be it one or a multitude, and so, too, does the camera.

William J. Simmons
Los Angeles, California, 2023

William J. Simmons is the author of *Queer Formalism: The Return* and *Love and Degradation: Excessive Desires in Queer-Feminist Art*.

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