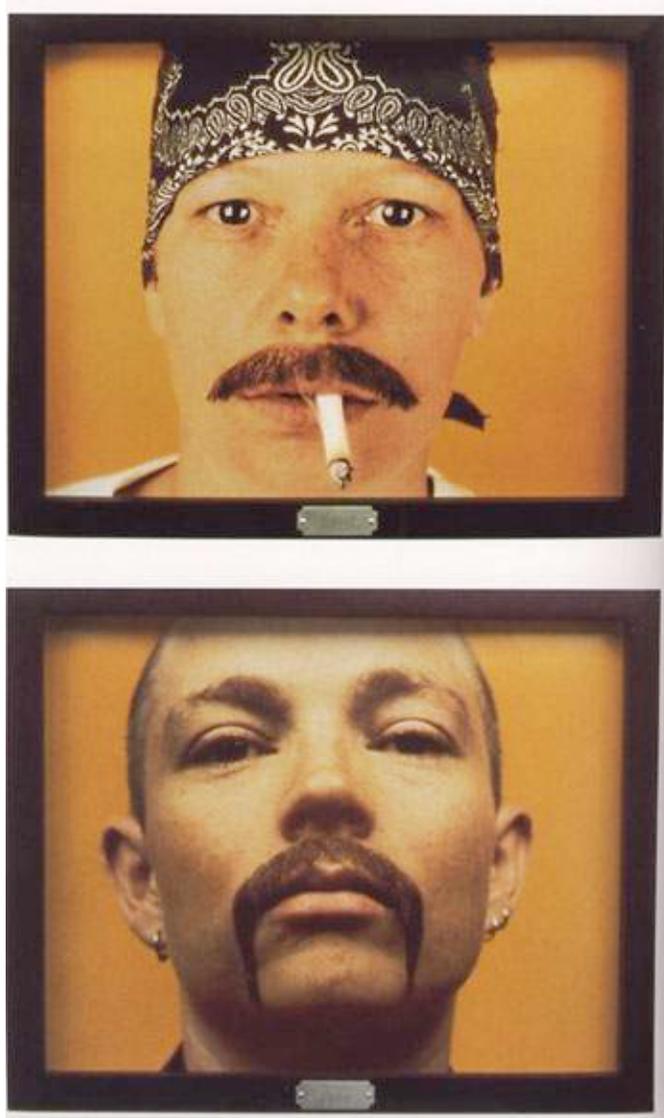


Insert Lesbian Here: Catherine Opie and the L Word



Images from Catherine Opie's Being and Having Series Featured in Opening Credits of the L Word Season 2

The lesbian body of signs, like all minority bodies, is always becoming majority, in a multiplicity of ways. but at the same time, in a multitude of domains across the general cultural field, majority bodies are busy becoming lesbian. (Griggers184)



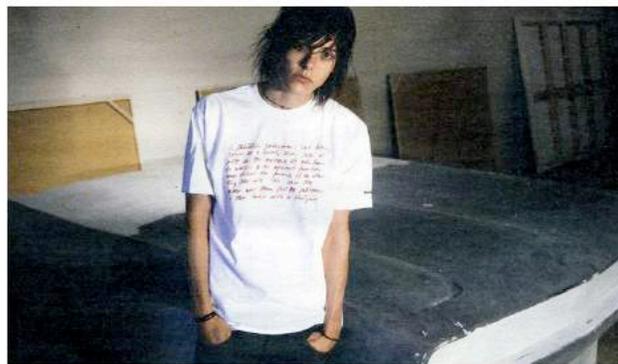
1993 Catherine Opie, *Self Portrait*, 1993



Screenshot: Viewing *Self Portrait* *The L Word* Season 1:13



Catherine Opie's opening at the Bette Porter Gallery (Season 1:11) with Portraits 1993 in the background



Images of L Word Character Shane, Various Seasons

Introduction

Showtime's *The L Word* projects LA Lesbian life around the globe. With five seasons under its belt, the show has solidified itself as both myth-taker¹ and myth-maker of lesbian identity. In order to illustrate this I will focus on the role of the prominent Lesbian photographer Catherine Opie within the context of the show: her photographs of masculine queer females are included as part of the *mise en scène* of the show and she plays herself as a guest on the show. Outside of their inclusion in the context of *The L Word*, Opie's photographs function as highly constructed images of an already staged image – the theatrical performance of butch masculinity. The specific truth claims associated with photography lay an interesting burden on Opie's photos as they enter the televisual *mise en scène*. I first look at the role of Art in interior spaces as a signifier of class and as representational tools in order to better understand the photographs on the set. Once part of the *mise en scène*, Catherine Opie's photographs and her own televisual appearance function much like art in other interiors, symbolizing an ideology that may or may not be otherwise present. My argument necessarily acknowledges the relationship between Opie's photographs and the two dominant but opposing discourses on *The L Word*: that of co modified, limited representation vs. that of prime-time visibility. Art becomes one of the important transmitters of a sub-plot legible only to the queer or in-the-know viewer. This placement of image as the more real purveyor of identity is consistent with Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord's conceptions of hyperrealism and "Society of the Spectacle". For the *L Word* viewer, the show itself becomes a reality as the boundaries between lived and on screen Hollywood queerness overlap. This overlap is evidenced most relevantly by the on-screen guest appearance of Catherine Opie playing herself at her on-screen solo exhibition. As the televisual representation of Butchness mimes that performed in Catherine Opie's photos, a circular equation is completed: the separation of lived L experience and on screen L experience collapses, the TV construction of queerness forms to Opie's images, and these images are representations of a performed construction of individual identity.² Using the case of Catherine Opie and her photographs featured on the show, I will demonstrate how the creation of the lesbian in this space between TV and reality becomes a simulacrum of lesbian identity.

PHOTO AS A DOCUMENT OF THE GENDER PERFORMANCE

The L Word features two principal bodies of Catherine Opie's work: the *Being and Having* images from 1991 and the *Portraits* series from 1993, including the canonical 1993 *Self portrait*. (See images 1, 2, and 3) The *Being and Having* portraits feature thirteen of Opie's lesbian friends all portraying different hyper-masculine identities, "donning theatrical moustaches, goatees, and "masculine" names, (Papa bear, Wolf, and so on)..." (Reilly 2). Each individual is photographed against a vibrant yellow

¹ *The L Word* incorporates pre-existing myths about lesbian identity present in lesbian communities. Additionally, the show incorporates myths present in Catherine Opie's photographs incorporated as part of the show's *mise en scène*.

² The original for the TV representation of Lesbians is both the real and photo image. Lived experience is mediated through *The L Word*, wherein *The L Word* becomes the "original" for lived queer experience.

background. In her article “My Own Two Eyes”, Amanda Vail recounts that these portraits came out of Opie and her friends’ amusement at their own ability to pass as male (Vail). Vail continues to comment on the performance of gender present in the images: “She asked her friends to adopt what they considered a masculine pose - to boldly face the camera, to show disdain, or whatever else they thought looked masculine” (Vail). Judith Butler’s writing on gender supports the assertion that the subject matter of Opie’s *Being and Having* images - butch women - are already a constructed image. She writes, “The gendered body is performative ... it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler).

Similarly theatrical, the Portrait series represents a milieu of marginalized subjects in full costume including cross dressers, Female to male transsexuals, tattooed dominatrices, drag kings, and other body manipulators (Reilly 2). The portraits continue to implement the richly colored background of the *Being and Having* portraits. In her *Art Journal* interview, Maura Reilly describes these images as “lushly colored, sympathetic images of her “marginalized” subjects.” However theatrical, there is a clear intention to document, and through a contextualization as art, engender respect for her subjects. Opie directly affirms this in her interview with Reilly where she says, “I want the sitters, and the S-M community, to be respected.” Opie identifies with the communities –S/M, leather, butch – that she portrays. Opie cites her experience “of being bald, tattooed, and pierced” as one where people were scared of her (Reilly 10). Opie’s empathy and identification with her subjects is further evidenced in the inclusion of her own self-portrait which depicts body mutilation and queer imagery of two women making a household (*Self Portrait 1993*)” In both bodies of work Opie uses the signifier of fine art to re-contextualize the subversive subject matter. (A strategy similar to that of *The L Word*.) Reilly comments in her interview with Opie that “Instead of the wealthy, upper-class sitter in a Holbein portrait, you’re elevating your friends, people from our American “subculture” – transvestites, male to female transsexuals, and so on – to the status of “high art,” as worthy subjects for artistic contemplation (Reilly).

This theatrical presentation of gender is contextualized as real in these images, which draw heavily on their legibility as social documentary. In an interview published in *Art Journal*, Opie and her interviewer Maura Reilly discussed the influences of Opie’s work as “pictures in a social documentary vein that explored issues of community and identity” (Reilly 8). In this same interview, Opie notes that “since a very young age I’ve had this drive to describe...to document.” Whether Opie is documenting the S/M community or butch Daddies, her images are documenting – making real – constructions of identity. In other words, these images operate parallel to Judith Butler’s claim that what is real *is* the very performance or theatricality of gender.³

³ Judith Butler writes in *Gender Troubles*: “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity (174).”

PHOTOGRAPHY'S TRUTH CLAIMS INSIDE FILM

The L Word viewer is trained to view photographs as a connection to a higher truth vis-à-vis *The L Word* character Bette. Bette's character is the local authority on art, communicated by her prominent positions as gallery director, director of the CAC art museum, and head of the School of the Arts.⁴ In the episode entitled "Longing" (season 1:3), we are privy to a scene where Bette is emotionally unraveled in the presence of a photographic image of a female nude. In this scene the viewer is shown that photography is both powerful and transcendent. This scene supports the authority of the photograph inside *The L Word*, embedding the connotation of power in the photographs featured on-set. This significance flags Opie's photograph as significant and transcendent messengers.

Aside from the on-screen training from Bette, the plethora of writing on the truth claims of the photographic medium aid in understanding how Catherine Opie's photos function on *The L Word*. The specific mechanical and technical operations of the photograph engender it with a connotation that the contents of the image are real. Roland Barthes writes about this type of connotation as myth. Read through this myth, Opie's images are an outpost of authenticity in an otherwise highly constructed Hollywood narrative.⁵ Though the truth claims of photography are ever more tenuous with digital manipulation, the photograph is still tied to indexicality and the myth of truth. Among other authors covering the topic, Roland Barthes discusses, in his book *Camera Lucida*, the irrevocable link between the photograph and reality (or at least what truthfully existed or occurred during the moment the photograph was taken). He comments on the photograph's ability to capture what really happened to a degree that surpasses the human eye. Susan Sontag expands on the truth claim of the photograph in *The Pain of Others*. She writes that the photograph is "both a faithful copy or transcription of an actual moment of reality and an interpretation of that reality (p. 26)" In this statement Sontag attests to the photos ability to reproduce reality, but also notes its inherent subjectivity.

⁴ Art History major at Yale, Director of the Bette Porter Gallery (1:13 flashback), Art Museum Director(1.01 - 2.13), Unemployed (3.01-3.12), Dean of School of Arts (4.01-4.12)

⁵ As a full length series running on a commercial cable network, it is not secret that *The L Word* is a highly produced fabrication. Additionally, much writing has conclusively described the televisual as a necessarily constructed space.



Opening credits of the *L Word* featuring Catherine Opie's *Being and Having* photographs: Season 2-5

Opie's *Being and Having* images, which begin every episode (post season 1) function inside the show in both of the capacities that Sontag describes. The images stand in as photographic evidence, documentation that a butch queerness as depicted in the *Being and Having* images does (or has) in fact existed in reality. Unlike the televisual, where we are trained to understand the set as constructed and the scenes as scripted, the historical relationship between the photograph and the real event gives the images a superior claim as real – i.e. images of the real queer.⁶ However, given Sontag's reading of the photographic image as a subjective creation of the artist, in this case Catherine Opie, the images also read as produced representation. The images therefore read as a produced image (subjective photograph) of a produced image (the production of butch identity/representation) but still stand in as a representation of the real queer within their position as part of the *mise en scène* of *The L Word* based on a signified myth of the photo as truth.⁷ The photos as perceivers of truth are themselves images of images, with no specific original.

ART IN INTERIORS; PLACING THESE PHOTOS

To understand the context of Opie's photographs inside the set of *The L Word*, it is helpful to more broadly examine the symbolic nature of art placed within the TV set as an interior through the lens of David Halle's book *Inside Culture* (where he addresses the role of art in interiors). Halle discusses the ways Art (with a capital A) has traditionally symbolized upper-class status. He continues by noting that though photography is much more present in middle and working class homes than its predecessor, the painted portrait, photography that is classified as art still maintains

⁶ This notion is highly complicated and undermined by the collapse of the real lived experience and on screen experience.

⁷ This paper has already addressed how the real –as in living- subject of Opie's *Being and Having* photographs are highly constructed representations of gender.

the same class connotation. Opie's photographs are clearly positioned as art through their contextualization in the art gallery, hung on the traditional white walls, and discussed within the show as art objects during the episode featuring Opie's opening at Bette's gallery. In the way that Rosalind Krauss writes about the gallery becoming a signifier of art, the photo in this setting is a classifier of art, or upper class. (Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces")

Halle continues to discuss Art as a classed commodity, noting that art functions as economic capital and that "much art is purchased as an investment" (Halle 5) In L terms, this notion becomes interesting as economic commodity turns into cultural commodity. Halle suggests individuals are hesitant to admit to subscribing to their purchases as status symbols (Halle 6). In contrast, the television set is an intentionally fabricated collection of visual symbols and is unburdened by any guilt the individual may face in ownership.⁸ The set is intended to be populated with items that represent the status – class, race, personality, sexuality, etc – of the character's space. In the transparently symbolic Art direction and design of the *mise en scène*, Opie's photographs reference a specific decision to represent the class and culture of the L characters.

To continue to probe the relationship between Halle's discussion of Art in the Interior and Opie's Photographs, I position her photos in relation to Halle's discussion of tribal art as signifiers of culture and capital. Are the photos of Opie's butchness symbolic totem poles to the other lesbian not present, similar to the way that David Halle talks about the honorific placement of African tribal art in white-suburban neighborhoods that are notably racially segregated?(Halle 3). These relics of the other pay homage to a more primitive past where authenticity was more apparent than in picket-fence suburbia. In the same way, do Opie's portraits pay homage to a more authentic and primitive lesbian? Or, in the same way that primitive art functions in the home Does the placement of the portraits construct the working class butch portrayed in Opie's *Being and Having* photos as the primitive other? In contrast to the more normative representation of female queerness represented by the characters within the show this would seem to be the case.

QUEER REPRESENTATION: SUBVERSIVE SUBJECT MATTER OF OPIE'S IMAGES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE QUEER CONSTRUCTED ON *THE L WORD*

Catherine Opie plays two central roles within the context of *The L Word*: her photographs of masculine queer females are included as part of the *mise en scène* of the show and she plays herself as a guest on the show. To understand the role Opie's images play within and in relation to the L word, I will briefly describe its approach to radicalization and representation as engaging the two dominant

⁸ Halle comments that the equation of Art to status is scandalously unsupported as a sociological proposition. He justifies this by suggesting that perhaps this is because the repressive nature of individuals in admitting to subscribing their purchases as status symbols (Halle 6).

discourses around the L word - that of visibility and that of limited representation. Champions of the show rave about the positive visibility the program has produced for the lesbian community and justify its downfalls in diverse representation as part and parcel of the first show focusing on lesbian characters. Susan Warn, founder and editor of the prominent lesbian media site AfterEllen.com asserts that "If the series had been packaged to more accurately represent the lesbian community in all its glorious gender bending variety, we would have enjoyed it for a few weeks – only to see it yanked from the schedule or limited to a one-season run because it didn't draw a big enough audience (Akass 4)." This assessment reflects the opinion that the safe diversity portrayed in *The L Word* is what has allowed the program to continue to represent lesbian life at all. The visible representation of counter-culture identity is reliant on the means of the mass-culture. To solely portray gender and sexuality outside the discourse of mass culture is not productive.⁹ The L word's approach functions, as Stephanie Theobald writes in the *Guardian*, like the political approach of the Trojan horse, wherein *The L Word* sneaks "through the paddock doors of the 'men upstairs' using the "dressed up lesbianism." All of this is to say, that by playing within the rules of mainstream television ideology – what the "men upstairs" believe will produce ratings – *The L Word* manages to slip in references to the more radical and diverse queerness that exists outside its televisual representation. Opie's photographs function as one means by which a more radical representation of gender and sexuality are interjected.

It goes without saying that this tactic comes at a cost to representation. The parallel discourse accurately points out that the result of commodifying the diversity of lesbians portrayed by the central characters is in fact a narrowing of lesbian identity into the "dressed-up lesbian." In this case, the "dressed-up lesbian" refers to the fact that the central characters are of middle class means and above and that there are no butch characters. The show's closest attempt at Butchness (or of non-normative gender presentation of any kind) for a central character prior to season three (i.e. not guest appearances or temporary characters like Ivan) is the character Shane. Her character is written about as a pseudo-butch or butch-lite by the authorities on the topic.¹⁰ Shane has an androgynous body and name, and takes on many stereotypes of caricatured male sexual behavior such as an inability to commit and promiscuity. However, the actress cast as Shane (Kate Moenig) is no Ugly Betty, having put in time as a model in addition to her acting. Having already measured up as attractive to the commercial heteronormative standards of modeling, Shane still reads as unilaterally attractive while parading the most butch persona and costumery of any permanent L character.

⁹ Relying on Althusser's theory on the interdependence of the dominant and subversive, institutional vs. grass roots, the option of going outside the mass-culture means is not a viable option. Specifically, Althusser describes the dependence of the superstructure (in this case the commercial cable network) and infrastructure (Lesbian community). (AIT 954).

¹⁰ Candace Moore and Kristen Schilt write about Shane in their article "Is She Man Enough," coining the term butch-lite. All other authors in this anthology (*Reading the L Word: Outing Contemporary TV*) concur or don't mention the topic.

The first time we see Opie's *Being and Having* images are in the introductory credits to the second season. These photographs continue to be featured this way all of the successive seasons. Three of the images of butch women against yellow backgrounds are shown on a white wall that appears to be a gallery. Unlike the other photographs shown as part of the set, these images are focused on long enough so that the image is recognizable.¹¹ These butch representations are the closest thing to a non-femme character the show presents – this side of a contemporary drag-king character named Ivan – for at least another season. It isn't until season three that the show introduces the character Max/Moira, the butch lesbian in the process of transitioning to being male. The placement of Opie's photos of masculine women is the most subversive representation of queerness present on the show, but not only for the deviation from normative female gender representation, but also the radical references to S/M and working class communities. The subversive content of the *Being and Having* images contrasts the more normative representation of gender enacted by the permanent characters.

THE L WORD'S USE OF META-NARRATIVE: PHOTOGRAPHS AS INSIDER JOKE



Screen shot of 4x5 photo shoot, L Word Season 1

¹¹ Recognizable is being determined by the following: degree of focus, distance of camera to the images (i.e. zoom), time spent on screen and overall legibility of the artwork. In the introduction to the second season many black and white images adorn the interior but their content is not distinguishable. This trend continues inside the episodes themselves.



Screen shot Introduction Credits Showing filming of Mark's Documentary on lesbian life: *L Word* Season 2

One way the show mediates the limiting effects of presenting a non-diverse, privileged lesbian identity – the “dressed up lesbian” - is by posing a constant sub-narrative aimed at reaching the more marginalized audience. In their article “*Invisible Lesbian: Anxieties of representation in the L Word*,” Susan Wolf and Lee Ann Roripaugh address this. They note that the “moments of meta-narrative serve to complicate and implicate acts of representation, acts of performance, and acts of consuming/viewing, thereby creating a self reflexive commentary on the anxieties of lesbian identity and representation that is, ultimately, quite nuanced and rich” (47). Meta-narrative is established as a standard m.o. by the second season of *The L Word* and is used in some form in every episode (Akass 19).¹² One prime example includes an introduction scene to the first season that depicts an artist’s photo shoot, glorifying the photographic process of operating a 4x5.¹³ By the second season, the meta-narrative becomes far more blatant as we watch a would-be-documentary about lesbians being made inside the context of *The L Word* as a TV show about Lesbians. We are even shown the “recording” message as we watch footage through the camera. This focus on the apparatus functions within a structuralist history¹⁴ as an attempt to break the 4th wall (suspension of disbelief) and let us into the production. Additionally, this blatant meta-focus alerts the viewer – the *in* viewer that is – to keep looking, keep posted for more meta-lesbian bits, where the real queer will turn up. I read the Opie photographs in this context; as a meta-note to the educated viewer

¹² m.o. signifies modus operandi

¹³ season one, episode three: “Longing”

¹⁴ A la Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*

saying, here is a more radical queerness we can't show within the context of our episode.

The ongoing meta-narrative creates a dualizing effect that Paula Graham writes about as the “window effect”, and is the most common means by which this insider knowledge is communicated. Graham defines this effect as a “postmodern technique developed to allow advertisers to reach gay and lesbian markets without alienating heterosexuals: (Graham citing Danae Clark) [Gays] and lesbians can read into an ad certain sub-textual elements that correspond to experiences with or without representations of gay/lesbian subculture. If heterosexual consumers do not notice these subtexts or sub-cultural modes, then advertisers are able to reach the homosexual market along with the heterosexual market without ever revealing their aim (Akass 19).” In other words, queers get the subtle nods the show makes to the more subversive elements of lesbian culture, but hetero-ratings are not affected – no harm, no foul¹⁵. These inside jokes come in the form of slang, music, and art, all functioning on their ability to be recognized as queer.



Catherine Opie's opening featuring heterosexual couple mentioned below and Portraits images: The L Word Season 1:11

Catherine Opie's photographs – positioned as Art to the heterosexual audience and butch visibility to the queer audience– function in this dual capacity.¹⁶ The viewer first

¹⁵ The scope of this paper does not allow it, but I might problematize the marginalizing effect of this tactic.

¹⁶ The categories of heterosexual and queer are more nuanced. In the context of this statement queer includes queer-educated or friendly. Additionally, there are endless perversions of this

introduced to Opie's photographs as the featured work of the Bette Porter gallery (inside *The L Word* Season 1:11). The narrator of this scene instructs the viewer that this is the opening of Catherine Opie's solo exhibition at the gallery. The scene pans across a packed gallery showing many of Opie's images from the early 90's. A straight, white, male patron introduced as an art connoisseur states his interest in purchasing one of the pieces. He rhetorically asks "how do you think Catherine would feel if we blew that one up?" The man symbolically illustrates for the (not queer savvy/those that relate to this character's privileged identity) that as art objects within a gallery these images of queerness are acceptable. In his book on art in interiors, David Halle suggests a model of ready-made art consumption wherein "The audience supposedly does little more than respond to the process, "intelligently" or otherwise...provide pre-packaged meaning to a one-dimensionally conceived, even caricatured audience" (Halle 5). In this way, it is easy to pass over the less-normative content of Opie's images under the influence of the pre-packaged response that we are trained to see by the viewers in Episode eleven – that of validation.

Recognition of the *Being and Having* and the *Portraits* photographs as authored by prominent lesbian photographer Catherine Opie functions as an affirmation of art fluency and queer fluency. Opie's celebrity in both categories ensures that viewers familiar with either ought to recognize her work.

In her interview with Catherine Opie, Reilly confirms Opie's iconic status by comparing her to Robert Mapplethorpe and stating that "I think of you as being the first artist to aestheticize not only the gay male community, but the lesbian and transgender ones, as well" (Reilly). The art director of *The L Word* did not pick just any lesbian photographer, or any LA Art photographer. Given Opie's iconic status in both the queer and fine-art arenas, her images are easier and more quickly identifiable as both. This allows the images to function more efficiently in signifying queer and Art. In short, Opie's iconic status and corresponding mythology as both Art Icon and Lesbian Icon allow the knowing *L Word* viewer to apply the mythology of both (art and lesbian) into their perception of the photographs.

Catherine Opie's photographs function as a nod not only to the queer-educated viewer, but also as a nod to the viewer of a particular socio-economic background. David Halle references the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Paul DiMaggio in describing the phenomena of art as a commodity of cultural capital (Halle 7-8). The fluency in viewing art is a class-based ability, acting as a segregating meter reinforcing class structure. In this way, Art functions similarly to the insider queer joke, wherein the educated viewer understands that the more radical art pieces fly over the mainstream viewers' radar in order to signify an exclusive kind of art and therefore class.¹⁷

statement wherein the lesbian might read the photographs solely as art, etc. This statement is intended to speak to the majority of cases.

¹⁷ This claim is substantiated by Bourdieu and DiMaggio's association of dominant class to popular culture.

Catherine Opie's photographic images are symbolically given prominence as real – more real - than the televisual through placement in the meta-narrative.¹⁸ The meta-narrative is constructed to signify the portion of the show where the authentic queer experience is conveyed to those educated enough to decipher the cues. Catherine Opie's photographs are given prominence in this meta-discourse by being positioned prominently in the opening vignette of each episode post season 1, and in to their positioning as Art featured in a Solo exhibition. Once legible as Art, and art authored by a famous lesbian photographer, the myth of authenticity is strengthened. As part of the meta-narrative constructing the real and diverse queer identity, the photographs signify as more real than the televisual. This phenomena, wherein within the frame of the television, the images are more real than the people, is a construction of the hyperreal inside the TV.

TV AS REALITY – SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

The hyperreal construction inside the show wherein the *mise en scène* photographs are more real than the characters' "real" lives echoes and is echoed by the hyperreality of the TV show itself.

Reflecting on France's consumer culture in his *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord wrote about life experienced completely through the mediated image. The saturation of *The L Word* experience into the lived experience, wherein their boundaries are faint, exemplifies his polemic. This is the society of the L Spectacle. The lived L experience is mediated by the image of L life portrayed on the television. In *Reading the L Word: Outing Contemporary Television*, Dianne Anderson-Minshall comments on this as a televisual phenomena: "I developed these intense relationships with fictional heroes of the small screen because television as a medium interjects itself into our lives with such a sense of immediate intimacy that children (heck, even some adults) aren't often able to distinguish where the box stops and real life begins ... the stories we witness on TV become the foundation of our shared collective experience" (Minshall 11) Sarah Warn elaborates on the interactivity between the lived experience and the television image of queer life: "For many, consuming *The L Word* is as much about discussing, analyzing and re-enacting the series with friends and other viewers as it is actually watching the episodes." The fan banter does not stop at web-blogs or communal gatherings. The lesbian community treats the hyperreal televisual L community as if it is in fact real. A LA Craigslist Woman4Woman post reads "I'm looking for a "Shane" type" as if the character and her type might show up at the LA Girlbar.¹⁹

As if to confirm the fluidity of the lived queer and televisual queer experience the narrative of the *L Word* interacts with events in real life. The show acknowledges the induction of Shane as a Type of lesbian to seek out in real life with a billboard campaign inside *L Word* featuring the tagline "You are looking very Shane today." In

¹⁸ I will support this claim further into this paper.

¹⁹ As opposed to the remarkably similar L word She Bar

an interview, L cast members play the “Who-would-you-sleep-with? game” regarding other characters on the show. When lesbians (not featured on the show) play this game regarding the characters featured on the show, there is a conflation of reality and the televisual. This collapse is heightened when the actresses themselves engage in the same game, not recognizing the difference (their own subject position) between actor and character.

This cross-bred construction of queer doesn't stop with sexual interest, it carries into art. Within the domain of online chat boards, fans of the show chat about what pieces of art that are shown on the set. One blogger writes that after seeing Opie's *Self Portrait 1993*, she now wants one too. Another woman connects Opie's images as *mise en scène* to work she recently saw at the Whitney Biennial. The blog discussion started surrounding Opie's photographs stirs writers to exchange other commentary about art: other artists they like, bits of theory, and the usual banter one might hear at a real life Art opening. For these viewers, the *mise en scène* art opening of Catherine Opie may as well be a real life opening.

PLAYING HERSELF





Catherine Opie playing herself at her gallery opening at the Bette Porter gallery: The L Word Season 1:11 (Top and Bottom Image)

In Season one, Episode eleven, Catherine Opie appears as herself. This exemplifies the cross-pollination of reality and TV discussed through the concepts of Debord and Baudrillard. The act of portraying oneself in a media production is complex. In the first place, it suggests that the real world and TV world narratives have become similar enough that the real-life personas of the person playing themselves and the fabricated plot of the TV reality have intersected. The conflation of documentary vs. fictional narrative is complicated further by the in-show filming of a documentary about lesbians. In the second season, Mark (male character) spends a good part of the season “documenting” lesbian life vis-à-vis the characters on the show. The television program’s overlap with the real in instances such as Catherine Opie playing herself at an in TV art opening supports this complication. The fabricated and the real are close enough that they can shake hands vis-à-vis the person acting as themselves on the TV show: Catherine Opie.

This “act” also becomes an interesting site for returning to the discussion of the performance of self. By equating the scripted guest appearance of Catherine with the artist herself, this denotes that *The L Word* LA lesbian scene has intersected with the real for at least the duration of one episode. Vail describes the effect of seeing Catherine Opie in person: “It was startling to realize the woman standing behind the lectern was the internationally famous lesbian-and-leather photographer. She certainly didn't look the part. She was, in fact, incredibly normal - however you may define “normal.” (Vail) Vail is noting the normalizing effect Opie’s appearance has on the content of Opie’s photographs. I assert that Opie’s presence on the L Word functions in a similar fashion, normalizing and connecting the image to the lived experience.

TV EMULATES THE Photographic IMAGE OF LESBIAN IDENTITY



L Word Character Ivan A. Cock, Season 1:
Clockwise Starting with upper-left: In drag, out of drag (woman on right), in drag, out of drag, in drag

It is not just through employing the real life lesbian artist Catherine Opie that the show ventures closer towards reality. The television show models its representations of masculinity on the portrayal of masculinity shown in her images – particularly *Being and Having*. In season 1, the show features a drag king character Ivan A. Cock.²⁰ The viewer sees this character both un-costumed as a blond with long hair who appears similar to the gender representations of the other Ls, but mostly in the character's dominant presence as a drag-king. The constructed masculinity Ivan embodies visually references the subjects of Opie's *Being and Having*. Both Ivan and Opie's subjects illustrate caricatures of masculine hair, stylized mustaches, and other masculine costumery typical of the drag king. The viewer is instructed that the Opie-emulating drag is this character's preferred and more common identification.

²⁰ Ivan makes a few sporadic re-appearances in the successive seasons.



“Opie-fication” Of Shane for Hugo Boss Billboard Season 4:4

Season four, episodes four and six, focus on a Billboard advertising campaign where Shane is featured as the model for Hugo Boss men’s underwear. In an attempt to subvert the billboard, Shane and another accomplice alter Shane’s “butch-lite” image by spray painting it into an image that again harkens back to the *Being and Having* butches. First the mustache is sprayed on, then the caricature of masculine hair, and finally just to make the point clear a larger than life penis is added to Shane’s image. The modification (“Opie-fication”) of both Ivan and Shane’s images to look more like the images of butch identity portrayed by Catherine Opie’s *Being and Having* photographs demonstrates these images as source material, the originals.

CONCLUSION

In concluding I still have many questions. The main premise of this investigation is that Catherine Opie’s photographs as featured in the *mise en scène* of *The L Word* are the most real representations of lesbian identity available, but that these images themselves have no “original.” In discussing the photos as the “most real” I cite the myth of truth engendered by photography, their totem- like placement as part of an interior, and their positioning as a meta-symbol of the real queer. I note the complete conflation of the lived experience with the televisual L. Finally, I note the show’s emulation of Catherine Opie’s photographs. In sum, the living breathing L is conflated with the image of L life on the television, which is emulating the image portrayed by Opie, which in turn is a representation of the constructed identity of self.

My biggest question still lies with the original, the constructed self-identity of the L featured in Opie's photos. It seems that even at this level there is no original self, that the image of the self is a performance. (Butler)

Before the presence of any permanent butch characters, the L Word audience is simultaneously introduced to Catherine Opie and her portraits of butch women. The scene begins to set the stage for how her images will operate as signifiers within the show. Though *The L Word* has been heavily criticized for its unrealistic representation of lesbian life (class, race, etc.) her presence shows that – at least for those who can recognize Catherine as a lesbian art star, i.e. those already educated, etc. – TV and reality are one and the same. However, at the same time the images show a queerness not present on screen but that is – photo as record – present in real life. It is the sum of representations – the direct representation of characters and the insider-only representation of queerness that is being equated to reality. As masculine representations on the L Word continue to mimic the image of butchness shown in Opie's *Being and Having* images, these photos within the mise en scène – the images within an image – become the original.

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Web blog conversation involving Catherine Opie's work.

SHANE AS MODEL : SEASON 4 episode 4 and 6

Clip of Alice and Shane Spray painting Shane for Hugo Billboard

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rW-hpd727AE>

Clip of Shane as It girl

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3JE2zG1dw8>

Shane Photo shoot

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2T5leG885c>

<http://wowone.100megsfree5.com/1gueststars.htm>

SCREEN SHOTS OF GUEST STARS

Kate On girls running around looking like shane

http://miamiherald.typepad.com/the_1_words/2007/02/kate_moennig_sa.html

Banner showing Ilene Chaiken as one of the characters

http://www.thelwordonline.com/4_2.html