

Self-portraits of non-binary people, queer utopias in the studio (and beyond)

Utu-Tuuli Jussila,
Doctoral researcher
Doctoral Programme in Gender, Culture and Society (SKY)
University of Helsinki

I set the photographic studio ready for self-portraits. There is a large softbox facing straight at me and a grey backdrop behind me. When I click the camera's remote control, my likeness appears on the computer screen placed next to the camera. I hand over the remote control to the person next to me and show them how everything works. I ask if they prefer a headshot or a full portrait and adjust the camera accordingly. I tell them that they can choose what kind of self-portrait they want to make. They may decide if they like to be recognizable or remain anonymous. I encourage them to experiment and take all the time they need. They can listen to music if they want. I close the studio door. I stay on the outside and leave the participant alone. I am out of sight but available if they need any help. After the photoshoot, the participant decides if they want to hand over one of their self-portraits to my IN/VISIBILITY -series about gender non-binary and if so, they then choose the final image. The photograph is named "Self-portrait of (participant's chosen name)".

My dissertation project in gender studies, *Extra/ordinary – Utopias And Norms in The Visual Representations of Non-binary Genders*, combines artistic and academic research methods. In the project, non-binary participants make studio self-portraits with my assistance. (Here 'non-binary' functions as an umbrella term for everyone who does not unambiguously identify according to the binary gender norms as a man or a woman.) Later I interview them about the experience of making the image and the meanings the portraits and participation have for them. The objective of the research project is to find out what kind of norms and norm-critical aspects (utopias) occur in the visual representations of gender non-binary. In this paper, I introduce the research method I'm using and present preliminary research findings. I claim that the research method has queer utopian potential.

When fighting for the rights of minorities, photographs are often used for their evidentiary power—that's when making people and phenomena visible takes centre stage. However, otherness is not always visible, or bringing it forth can put the people in the pictures in a vulnerable position. This is why I believe the minorities represented should have an active role in creating the visual evidences of their existence.

This research uses a photographic method centred on self-determination and self-expression. This is a pursuit of utopia because the right to self-determination for non-binary people is rarely realised—they are not recognised legally, nor even in everyday life. In many situations they remain invisible. The objective of the self-portraiture method is to make portraits of non-binary people on their own terms, without an objectifying gaze.

The main focus of this paper will be in discussing the premise and research method. I am still in the process of arranging more photo shoots and conducting the research interviews. Thusly, I will present only preliminary research results. I will share a few reoccurring themes that have come up in the discussions in both the studio and the interviews conducted thus far.

By the end of 2023, over one hundred people have participated in the photoshoots. The self-portraits can be viewed at my website <https://salon.io/jussilautu/in-visibility>. I use the artistic pseudonym 'Jussi Lautu' when presenting this photographic series.

KEYWORDS: self-portrait, gender non-binary, artistic research, queer utopia