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[in vain] | *Performing Her for Herself*

A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a degree
of Masters in Design at Massey University, Wellington, NZ

By Meggan Frauenstein
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Dedication

To the women in my life, in our many and varied encounters, in the hope that I might inspire, as you continue to inspire me.

Abstract

I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent... I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to perceived it has to pass through a virtual point which is over there.

*Michel Foucault
"Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias."*

Drawing on the language of the mirror and symbolism conventionally employed to describe the feminine myth, this project explores the daily performance of being 'woman' as influenced by the polemics of feminism and popular culture. "Performing Her for Herself" presents a feminism that interrogates the music video and contemporary 'pop divas', to encourage a feminist sensibility that allows for new ways of seeing, dually aware and embracing of the many and varied representations of 'femaleness'.

The project is structured around the tropes of representation, reflection and refraction: The Represented Social Body, the Reflective Historical Body and the Refracted Performing Body. Judith Butler and Henry Giroux furnish a theoretical context, providing speculative strategies of gender performance, notions of desire and the imaging of women. Embodied research considers not only the relationship between the viewer and the viewed but also the formal qualities of video, the screen envisaged as mirror. What begins as the daily performance of me for myself is refracted to consider the mythological body, temporality, seduction and a desperate vanity of perception in the performance of her for herself.

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Foreword

From an early age I learnt the value of femaleness; as a fluid and changeable concept that could be manipulated, dialed up or down to generate a desired outcome; that as long as I behaved like girl i.e. went to ballet, played house, learnt to sew, I could join my brother outside and play for as long I as pleased. Inherent to this is a certain pleasure of the feminine. I grew to love ballet and excelled at it, I loved dressing up, playing with Barbie dolls, all of which have shaped my behaviors- my performance of self, the person I am today. Critically however is the notion that I could turn femininity on and off to serve an intended outcome, thus creating for myself versions of myself along a spectrum of femaleness. My pre-pubescent self blissfully performed these versions of femaleness, in a state of reverie, ignorant of the limitations of physicality that come as the body reaches maturity. Ignorance was my ultimate power, gradually lost as my mastery of language and imagery, of 'representation' expanded. The consequence and restrictions of femaleness became more obvious as I became more aware of my body, my actions and the way they were perceived. This notion has captivated me throughout my university study. My artist practice has always been in response it. Only now I realise its seeding, long before I had the tools to describe it.

