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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
2010

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 perceive 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.



Figure. 1 | Lady Gaga (2009) Bad Romance [music video still]

Introduction

I feel a deep sense of uneasiness when I consider what it is to exist as a woman in what has been termed a post feminist society. This unease derives less so from a perceived lack of rights or equality among the sexes, rather from a contradiction, which occurs through a fascination with two discourses, I locate at opposite ends of a continuum: feminist theory and popular culture. ‘Feminism’ now appears to be a term loaded with negative connotations. For young women, the politics of a feminist quest for equality, one that was fought fervently through the latter half of the 20th century seems no longer to be a pressing point of consideration. The popular culture of present day is filled with strong, independent women who appear to have it all, the job, the looks, the figure, and the love life. That young women seem disinterested in feminism as an essential endeavour could be viewed as a credit to the feminists of previous decades. However popular culture is also littered with examples of feminist discourse that appraise gender, the locus of power between the sexes and the role of female in both public and private domains in a manner that is dually symptomatic and inciting of the representations at question. The complacency and absence of acknowledgment that there is still the necessity for a feminist sensibility that actively considers the feminine, is a point of contention I grapple with on a daily basis. I must confess to a complete fascination and infatuation with popular culture in all its forms. Conflictingly, because the majority of the imagery I consume I find disgusting and derogatory towards women, yet will ensure the image I present of myself is a version of the image of desire de jour.

This exegesis seeks to proffer a feminism that embodies the interface between the binary discourses of popular culture and feminist theory, allowing for a feminine sensibility that encourages a new way of looking which is dually aware and embracing of the many and varied representations of ‘femaleness.’ Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin state, “By making feminisms a plural noun, we mean to imply that there is not a single unitary feminism any more than there is a timeless, universal ‘woman’ but rather, that there are varied, multiple unstable constructions of female subjects and their predicaments and situations.” (Reilly & Nochlin, 2007, p11) They extend the feminist cause to consider the broader condition of being woman, accounting for ethnicity, culture, sexuality and politics as they occur for women. The removal of the classification of feminism as a singular entity allows for the exploration of the relationship between not only the male and female, but of the female towards herself.

My creative practice, inclusive works previous to this masters project have been greatly influenced by the feminist performance artists of the 1970’s and 80’s, specifically the work of Hannah Wilke, Orlan and Marina Abramovic. These women engage with their bodies as contested sites, acknowledging in the words of Rebecca Schneider “As a woman she is preceded by her own markings, standing in relation to her body in history as if beside herself.” (Schneider, 1996, 157) providing a dialogue between social/public and personal/private encounters with the body.



Figure. 2 | Hannah Wilke (1978). So Help Me Hannah (Snatch Shot with Ray Guns) [documentation of performance]



Figure. 3 | Marina Abramovic (1975). Art Must Be Beautiful [documentation of performance]

Aligned with the movement away from commodity based art work and in response to the male dominated ‘modern art’ movement positioned feminism and performance art as happy bed fellows (Forte, 1998, p231). Much is said of performance art in the 1970s and 1980s. As a ‘type’ of art, temporal in nature and easily reactive, it was very much at the fore of cultural and political debate. A sub-genre of performance art, feminist performance art held an inherent sense of protest. For women, the lack of heritage and tradition behind this type of work and its ability to, in its oft live enactment, shock its audience, meant that as a means to assert the political and social inequalities of the era, it was highly suitable and effective. The essence of protest inherent within this form of art leant itself to female artists who were also looking to discover a way of subverting the established male dominant art forms in order to find a voice for women that was not prescribed by men.

Feminist theory has long been concerned with the position of woman within the constructions gender, placed as the object ‘other’ to the male subject. Schneider writes of the need to locate oneself in the object/subject conversation and to recognize actions performed are occurring for “a second time, after/in aware of the history of objectification.” (Schneider, 1996, p157) Feminist performance artists of the 1970’s and 1980’s worked against this objectification. Claiming their subject-hood through subversion of expected and accepted treatments of the female form and behaviours deemed ‘feminine’.



Figure. 4 | Orlan (1977). The Artist’s Kiss [photograph]

This project is concerned with the macro and micro performance of self: the public and popular manifestations of what it is to be female and the manner in which these deeply affect personal and private encountering of oneself in the mirror, which is both literal and metaphorical. The language of the mirror frames these concepts and the chapters to follow: ‘The Represented Social Body’, ‘The Reflective Historical Body’ and ‘The Refracted Performing Body’. The history of the mirror encapsulates human natures affinity with that which cannot be explained, loading this smooth, austere object with responsive qualities of other-ness, virtuality and temporality. Marina Warner in *Phantasmagoria*, “In water as in the mirror, or in the lines of the poem and the virtual space it describes, life flickers and leaps, but only in semblance” (Warner, 2006, p170), suggesting that in the act of seeking our reflection we might uncover something otherwise unseen. The mirror is a metaphor for our encounter with ourselves, manifesting itself in many and varied forms; in the slight glimpse of oneself in a shop window, in careful study of ones body in the vanity mirror, in the icons of our zeitgeist plastered across an array of screens. I consider not only practices of looking but also that which colours and distorts our perception of the real.

The music video and the pop diva provide a context for situating my own work and considering the constraints and presentations of femininity within this rapidly evolving facet of popular culture. The conventions of the music video, its duration

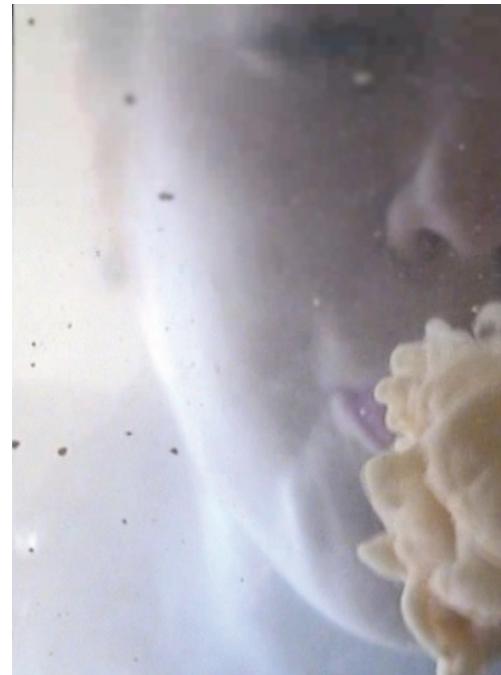


Figure. 5 | Meggan Frauenstein. (2006) Cosmetic [video still]

(approx. 3.30mins) and narrative requirements afford the pop diva the ultimate pleasure and power of multiple representations of herself. In a single video it is a rare occurrence for a pop diva to remain dressed in the same costume. She is represented multiple times over as iterations of herself, the pop diva: as 'man-eater', as 'lady', as 'temptress', as 'girl'. The condensed time allocation of a song's duration releases the pop diva from the necessity to create meaningful characters, affording tactics of excess and a reliance on a common visual language of representations of women to create a narrative and maintain attention.

My creative practice moves between the realms of performance art and design. I refer throughout this document to experiments/explorations/exercises, used to explore and respond to theory. These could be defined as design gestures or 'working drawings'. Their purpose: to critically consider the body within a set of relations, designed to further and respond to theoretical practice. Through embodied research I adopt strategies that explore the representations of femaleness adopted by current young women and the ways these might influence a daily performance of self. As this work is attempting to suggest a feminism that is practical, my aesthetic is pared down, reflective of the less grandiose reality of the individual day to day encounter, comparative to that of the feminine icons of popular culture.



Figure. 6 | Christina Aguilera (2006). Back to Basics
[publicity photograph]



Figure. 7 | Rihanna (2009). Rated R [publicity photograph]

‘The Represented Social Body’ considers images of, specifically, the pop diva as presented through the media and the manner by which they are received by the public (specifically young women). At a macro level, the pop diva serves as a mirror for contemporary culture, recognizing the archetypal placement of women in this position throughout history. ‘The Reflective Historical Body’ considers this position of woman/diva/icon as a collective mirror, exploring the enduring representations of femaleness throughout history. I compare these representations to the strategies of representation employed by feminist performance artists in response to the “imaging of women” (Schneider, 1996, p156). ‘The Refracted Performing Body’ reconciles the screens as mirror and the conventions of video. I consider the performance of her for herself as it occurs in public space, refracted through the camera. Precisely the nature of representation, reflection and refraction is that at the point of perception, the real is lost. The discernibly ‘real’ qualities of an original woman, beyond those that manifest physically, have become impossibly distorted through a multitude of lenses, aptly expressed by Henry Giroux “biographies within which our earliest sense of social contradiction was formed within the juxtaposition of body movements, textures, timbre and clothing. We have lived our lives within and against the grain of very different conjunctions of class, gender and ethnic relations” (Giroux, 2005, p174).



Figure. 8 | Meggan Frauenstein (2009) drawing [ink on paper]

Chapter 1 : The Represented Social Body

Cultural critic Henry Giroux poetically describes the relationship we have with the ‘public’ and ‘private’ experience self-perception. “The human body is not an eternal object, written forever in nature ... for it is really a body that was constructed by history, by societies, by regimes, by ideologies.” (Giroux, 2005, p176) He offers an explanation for the role that culture plays in the defining of our relationship with our embodied self. Giroux calls for greater consideration of popular culture as a discourse of its own. (Giroux, 2005). Popular culture is a major contributor in the formation of visual and verbal language that makes sense of our current milieu. Giroux’s request could be extended to suggest that a discourse of popular culture is essentially one of representation.

Susan Blackmore’s book “The Meme Machine.” (Blackmore 1999) introduces memes. Described as units of cultural transmission, a meme operates in the same way as genes do in biology, as modes of cultural rather than genetic transmission. This transmission can occur both vertically, passed on through generations, and horizontally through social interaction. As the result of an ever-expanding global community and a lesser emphasis on the family unit (in its various iterations), the impact of vertical memetic transmission has dwindled. Therefore, in previous instances where the ‘family unit’ would hold the most influence over self-definition, memetic transmission occurs now at an earlier age along the horizontal axis. This places social and cultural experience and interaction at its most important and prevalent point in history to date.

By nature, popular culture is transformative; Giroux claims, “The concept of popular culture cannot be defined around a set of ideological meanings permanently inscribed in particular cultural forms. Rather, the meanings of cultural forms can only be ascertained through their articulation into a practice and set of historically specific contextual relations that determine their pleasures, politics, meanings” (Giroux, 2005, p174). Each image we create or consume is a representation of the real. It has a history, utilises a shared vocabulary and is informed in reaction to the social, cultural and political climate in which it is produced.

In “Practices of Looking” Sturken and Cartwright state that representation “refers to the use of language and images to create meaning about the world around us” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p12). Through the continual acquisition of skills (linguistic and visual) necessary to describe that which we see, the way we represent our surroundings changes. Defining ‘representation’ as such enables active connotations to be asserted to it. Representation is responsive and changeable; Peggy Phelan’s ‘laws of representation’ further highlight its transitory state. Representation “always conveys more than it intends and it is never totalizing [...] the excess meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant readings possible. Despite this excess, representation produces ruptures and gaps; it fails to reproduce the real exactly” (Phelan, 1993, p2).

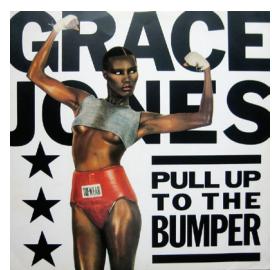
Giroux asks, "How are readers' choices defined and limited by the range of readings made available through the representations mobilized by particular forms of textual authority" (Giroux, 1993, p49). Textual, in this instance, is inclusive of both words and images. To represent infers the act of repetition, presenting for second time, a choice has been made in whichever aspect of the original is manifested in its copy- its representation. Images from popular culture are constructed to promote a certain ideal, sub-consciously informed by historical and social conditions. In short there are no virgin images.

There are icons throughout history that can be accessed to discuss the relationship between popular culture and the 'imaging of women' (Schneider, 1996, p156). These iconic women differ amongst themselves, responsive to the socio-cultural climate of their time. Wartime Marilyn Monroe; wholesome, curvaceous, undoubtedly 'feminine', singing to the troops to remind them of home, in reaction to the more active role women had played in the day to day running of society throughout the war years. Monroe's opposite, the 1960s Twiggy with her doll-like and boyish in frame, sporting a 'mod' mini-skirt, represented a youth who were revolting against the conservative decade previous. Her generation had little, if any recollection of the Second World War, were in the beginnings of the sexual revolution and witnesses of technological advancements, such as space travel.



Figure. 9 | Unattributed (2008) It's All Make Believe, Isn't It? [photograph]

Pop divas of the 1980s grappled with similar questions of variations of ‘femaleness’ and the feminist cause as those of feminist performance artists. As artists in their own right Grace Jones, Annie Lennox and Madonna to name a few, reacted to the popular culture of their time with strategy different from the pop divas of present. Lennox and Jones are known for their androgynous constructions whilst still maintaining seductive qualities. These women used their decided lack of femaleness to question stereotypes of women and the necessity to be more like men, or more pointedly less like women, to assert power and presence. Madonna in contrast, in an act of over sexualisation, enhanced her female qualities to the point of subversion. One of the most famous examples of this, Jean Paul Gautier’s “Cone Bra” (1990) was worn by Madonna on her Blond Ambition tour. Telling in the tour’s title too, Madonna gives her audience little option but to look at her breasts and makes no excuses for constructing a hyper-sexed version of herself.



*Figure. 10 | Grace Jones (1981). Pull Up to the Bumper
[publicity photograph]*



*Figure. 11 | Annie Lennox (1988).
Savage [album cover/photograph]*



*Figure. 12 | Madonna (1990).
Blond Ambition Tour
[documentation of performance]*

Our current milieu is one of saturation. As technology continues to grow exponentially, so too does our exposure to images. The speed at which imagery is produced and consumed is as a result much faster, providing an even less stable point of reference in the formation of identity. We also exist in what has been termed a ‘post-feminist’ society. Of our current milieu, Rosalind Gill recognizes a “knowing and deliberate re-sexualisation and re-commodification of women’s bodies” (Gill, 2003). That in our current ‘retroexist’ (Gill, 2003) culture the re-assertion of women as highly sexed under the guise of post-feminism is to re-place them into their former position of object. Disturbingly in this context, the female is no longer the recipient of sexual objectification but is rather positioned as the knowing sexualized subject, choosing to objectify herself. Gill points out that the notions of power discussed within the context of the subject/object relationship are not overt i.e. that women of past decades dressed as they did only for men. She goes on to ask that if the paradigm has shifted for women, it has not done so to position women as completely autonomous agents because if this was the case the question of why the ‘resulting valued ‘look’ is so similar- hairless body, slim waist, firm buttocks, etc.” (Gill, 2003), would be redundant.

The effect of this apparent agency on the individual daily performance of her for herself is explored by Cecelia Baldwin in her study “How the Media Shape Young Women’s Perceptions on Self Efficacy, Social Power and Class: Marketing



Figure. 13 | Britney Spears(2001). Video Music Awards [live performance]

Sexuality" (Baldwin, 2006). Baldwin considers the reactions of young women to images within popular culture. The study was conducted using subjects in their final years of high school, across a range of socio-economic and ethnic groups. Subjects were shown images that were rated as having 'high' or 'low' sex qualities. These qualities were determined by the amount of skin shown by the model and the poses in which they were standing. The girls were asked to describe the type person being projected by the model. For example, whether the 'person' was successful, powerful, happy or wealthy. The majority of the subjects assigned the aforementioned qualities to the women in the 'high' sex images. This section of Baldwin's study is a useful example of our sub-conscious perception of the imagery that surrounds us. However, Baldwin's next question provides a far less obvious, seemingly more problematic, outcome. Subjects were then asked whether they would like to be the women in either set of images. Two thirds of the girls declined to be either (Baldwin, 2006). Rosalind Gill states, "This representational practice offers women the promise of power by becoming an object of desire. It endows women with the status of active subjecthood so that they can then 'choose' to become sex objects" (Gill, 2003). It would make sense to consider then, that the problem is less the imagery or for that matter the sense of ignorance about the degree of reality portrayed within them. Rather than as a society we are condoning the idea that power is located within a realm that is essentially indefinable: female sexuality.

Performance artist and photographer Hannah Wilke dealt with the sexualized female image throughout her career. Creating work through the 70s and 80s until her death in 1993 of lymphoma, her work is characterised by an unabashed affinity with her own body. Wilke "Approached her body as a material to be used for underlining personal and cultural statements" (Tierney 1996, p46). She was well known for her physical attractiveness and used her appearance to question the expectations of beauty. For example, "S.O.S.-Starification Object Series" (1974-1975) involved the artist twisting pieces of chewing gum into shapes- "vulva, womb, tiny wounds and then posing in high fashion poses" (Frueh, 1996, p142). Wilke draws comparison between modeling her body and modeling the gum, questioning the aspects of the female positioned as beautiful. Wilke's final work "Intra Venus" (1991-1992), a series of photographs that document the decline of the artist's body as she underwent chemotherapy, are pointed and moving. Wilke appears unapologetic of her disturbing and distorted form, calm resignation apparent in her gaze, "The photographs do not demand a reaction from the viewer...the absence of loaded symbols and wordy explanations turns this documentation into powerful art" (Tierney 1996, p44). These photographs embody Rebecca Schneider's previously discussed notion of a body within history, specifically this body within a history of graphic representations; the final render, a surrendering that invokes ultimate subjectivity and subversion. Wilke positions her body so to be read: as woman – object – patient.



Figure. 14 | Hannh Wilke (1975).
S.O.S.-Starification Object Series (Veil)
[photographic series].



Figure. 15 | Hannah Wilke (1991-1992). Intra-Venus
[photographic series].



For as long as I can remember I dreaded Sunday evening, as this was the weekly hair washing ritual. As a child I had long hair, the full length of my back. The brushing out of my tangled, knotted mess would result in an inevitable outcome of tantrum throwing and tears. At the time I failed to understand the link between femininity and hair. I was brought up in a traditional family where it was natural and expected that as a girl I had long hair. In jest my sisters and I would often threaten to cut our hair, my father's retort; that he would cut us out of his will. This is not an act of defamation towards my father but the seeding of an expectation about femininity that is inherent within society. He may have been acting out of concern, protecting us from the seemingly negative outcome of not being perceived feminine, this would be a kind way to consider his reaction to us. More likely, his own beliefs and those of society's about that which constitutes femaleness drove his reaction.

There is no better example within contemporary culture of the reciprocal relationship between popular culture and representations of femininity than Britney Spears. As a fallen pop diva, she shaved her head in an act of complete desperation or retaliation. The events that followed for Britney are documented as a state of insanity. She was admitted to a rehabilitation centre, gained some weight and exposed her bald vagina to paparazzi. Shamed, Britney's status as a musician/performer fell. However, as a celebrity she was still hounded in the event she

may 'snap' again. It is an unfortunate outcome that Spears remained chased by paparazzi. Her act of protest against the carefully constructed and well-established brand she had become, lost little publicity. Most interestingly when considering Britney, is that she exposed something that was and continues to pervade our communal consciousness- that only a mad woman would voluntarily shave her head. Her actions alienated the fallen pop princess from her counterparts whose reliance on their hair extends further than to enhance their appearance but their movements too. Whether sporting tousled, 'just out of bed' hair (something the younger version of Spears was known for), or tight 'tribal' whip-like dominatrix braids as worn by Beyoncé in "Video-Phone" (Knowles, 2009), Lady Gaga's literal crafting of her hair into a fetishistic bow or Christina Aguilera's long colourful and grungy dreadlocks in "Dirrrty" (Aguilera, 2006), feminine archetypes are visible through examples such as these, utilized to evoke notions of femaleness. The use of head hair as an extension of the body and to emphasize the tossing and shaking that are often configured into the dancing within this genre of music, further highlight its placement as a feminine signifier.

Polish artist Katryza Kozyra grapples with our reactions to hair. In "Olympia" (1996) Kozyra posed in a series of photographs that reference Manet's "Venus Urbino" (1863). At the time she was recovering from cancer, her body was completely hairless. This work begs the question of why as a society we are

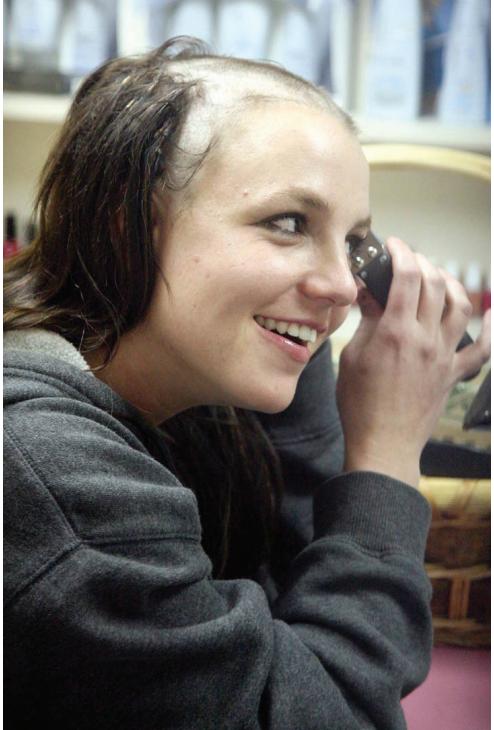


Figure. 16 | Britney Spears

obsessed with the removal of body hair and the maintenance of head hair. Kozyra poses in seductive positions, yet through her shocking baldness appears unattractive. Kozyra may not have intended this reading of her work, however it inspired a series of experimentations titled “Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow”, an exploration into the relationship I have with my own hair, both on my body and my head.

At the time of undertaking these early experiments, I had recently encountered Reilly and Nochlin’s “Global Feminisms” (2007) exhibition catalogue where Kozyra’s work features alongside a combination of female artists, with varying degrees of notoriety, from around the world. Until this point I had attempted no experimentations with my body for this research, and found Kozyra’s work greatly inspiring to begin doing so. I was taken by her bravery to place her body on display while personally having to deal with what I can only imagine to have been an excessively traumatic period. I felt compelled to create some sort of response that was relevant to myself, that used my own body in a way that would physically challenge my relationship with it. These experiments served to initialise or activate a dialogue between my physical body and this body of research in its early stages, to move forward to a space where I could begin to analyse through embodied research perceptions of femaleness beyond myself.



Figure. 17 | Lady Gaga (n.d.) Untitled
[photograph]



Figure. 18 | Christina Aguilera (2006) Dirrty [music video still]

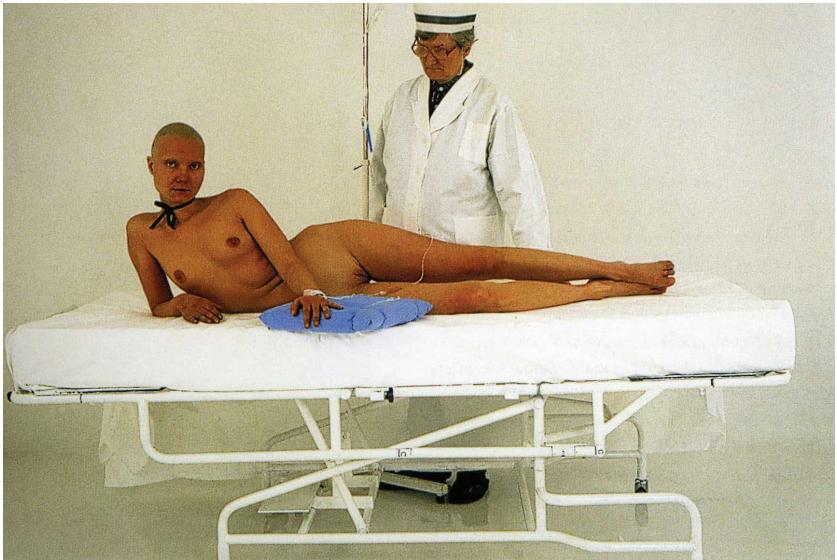


Figure. 19 | Katarzyna Kozyra (1996). Olympia [photograph]



Figure. 20 | Edouard Manet (1863). Olympia [oil on canvas]

The first piece in this series, ‘untitled #1’ was the documentation and representation of me waxing my pubic region. (Refer to disc, inside rear cover, ‘untitled one’)*. I felt exhilarated by the possibilities of this first experiment; its inherent shock value was seductive to me to begin with, for my association with performance artists I have mentioned, whom I admire deeply. However, after re-presenting the documentation I found myself in a position difficult to move forward from. As a society we are accustomed to viewing sexualized imagery of women who apparently choose their sexualised image. The image of my pubic region should not seem so glaringly out of place, the practice of removing all hair from this area is commonplace, especially amongst young women. It may seem an over simplification of an area that is influenced by a broad range of religious, social and political aspects. This acknowledged however, does not remove questions around the construction of the ‘sexual’ within contemporary popular culture that can be considered at this most basic/natural level. Were I to have presented this documentation 20 years ago, I feel the reaction would have been different due to the difference in the breadth of imagery available and the socio-political climate. My documentation simply illustrated this point as opposed to ‘through design and making’; further the theoretical context in which this project is situated.

The second piece in the series “untitled #2” is documentation of me shaving my own head, capturing the arc of emotion I encountered through the experience

(refer to disc). The process begins as a delightful game where I happily hacked my hair off, enjoying the control or rather lack of control I was demonstrating. As the piece continues, I grow increasingly disillusioned with my appearance until at one point I am close to tears. I read this first as a reaction to my dissatisfaction with my appearance. However, after reflecting on the process, my reaction was based more so on how others would perceive me, not how I perceived myself. Rosalind Gill speaks of a shift from object to objectified subject, “entails [is] a move from an external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze” (Gill, 2003). Through this act of defiance of the female expectation, I removed, by choice, one of my tools to control my perceived femaleness. In a position that I can only hold with hindsight, I will never shave my head again. The experience was not constantly traumatic, but I have come to realise that (although I have worn my hair short for years) I relied on the ability to style my hair as part of a greater ‘styling’ exercise, an enactment of the power to choose my daily performance of self. The notion that as women we become proficient in adornment, gather a set of skills to access different modes of representing ourselves, lends itself in some way to explain why head hair is held in such high regard. Highlighted further that when through illness hair is lost, the hairless head signifies braveness, with no allusion to being unattractive/unfeminine. However, my point in this case is that when, not through illness but through choice, a woman shaves her head it is read as a damning of femininity as prescribed by popular culture (not just this current iteration of it). I was initially

* All disc references in same location, as titled.

excited by the possibility of questioning how deeply attached to hair I was and feel somewhat ashamed of the ‘superficial reaction’ because this self-inflicted state was in no way final; my hair could and grown back.

“Untitled #3” was created in reaction to Kozyra’s presentation of a bald body as the product of disease rather than contemporary culture’s idealization of hairlessness (refer to disc). This work comprised various amalgamations of footage from the previous two explorations. In the first representation of it, I showed still images of the waxing footage. A trio of photographs that documented before, directly after, and the placement of the waxing strip with my pubic hair attached over my newly bald vagina. The second iteration of this work was a video in extreme close-up of my raw, inflamed skin, documenting the area as a landscape, traversing skin imperfections, missed hairs and remnants of wax. My choice to re-present this footage in this manner was to highlight the painful and grotesque element of this commonly practiced tool of ‘beautification’. I created numerous videos, splicing the footage of my head shave with that of the waxing, splitting the screen and repeating the footage. I found these to be lacking in context or purpose as pieces to explore further in that form.

There is joy to be found in the construction of self as much as there is pain, disgust or anguish. “Feminist theory has assumed there is an existing identity-classified



Figure. 21 | Meggan Frauenstein (2009) Untitled #3, extreme close-up
[video still]

woman- this constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued” (Butler, 1998, p27). Judith Butler’s “Selections from Gender Trouble” (Butler, 1998) provides a series of strategies employed in the study of gender. She quotes Simone de Beauvoir “If one is woman that is surely not all one is” (Butler, 1998, p29). Reilly and Nochlin appear to be echoing a similar strand of thought, yet Butler takes this a step further to consider that gender, being different from sex, is a construction of culture. Butler provides no conclusion to her theory. As she rightly points out, there is nothing to conclude, “these limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality” (Butler, 1998, p31). I agree with Butler because as it relates to gender, what we too consider as normal is already within a condition of its own. This will always limit the discussions and possibilities of gender analysis. A binary structure, stringent creates degrees of female-ness and male-ness and it seems the unfortunate outcome of our culture that these degrees of gender are value judged. I felt unnervingly conscious of my body when I presented this first series of experiments to other people. For myself, in presenting the videos, the screen is a mirror and I am simultaneously real and connected, unreal and absent. I found myself uncomfortable with much of the imagery I produced in the early stages of this masters; I had removed an element of the superficial pop-culture body to mask myself with. At this point in the process the dis-ease I experienced is precisely the reason I felt compelled to produce pieces such as these at the outset,

where I am forced to question my reaction to myself. In this early stage I had not reconciled my position as maker and made. I had chosen, for reasons of ethics, that in instructing or performing these experiments on another body it would be read as inflicting something harmful to said person. As this research progressed, my decision became deeply rooted in my need to assert my own agency. It would seem that to further the discussion of the projections of gender, ‘what it is to be woman’ is more about a rigorous questioning of the ‘condition’ rather than its symptoms. As it pertains to the use of one’s own body in creative practice, Elizabeth Mangini referencing video-installation artist Pipilotti Rist’s work, “a symbiotic connection between authority and artist illustrates a transgression in art that can feed the politics of feminism into various apparatuses of male dominated social order” (Mangini, 2001, p1). Feminism should be a way of being, losing relevance when it is abstracted beyond daily practice. The feminine sensibility manifests itself in the rigorous critique of our reactions to the abject.



a



b

Figure. 22, a - d | Meggan Frauenstein (2009) Untitled #2 [video still]



c



d

Chapter 2 : The Reflective Historical Body

Vain! As a child, my first encounter with the term was my mother declaring that I was vain because every mirror I encountered, I looked into. Naïve and intrigued by my reflection, I spent a great deal of my childhood examining my mirrored self. Memories of looking at myself are not coloured by critical analysis of a body, rather of delight in seeing myself reacting to me. The relationship with my reflection changed as I got older. What began as simply another playmate in my world of make-believe and dress-ups became the omnipotent eye, the looking glass that would reveal a cold reality. I now have a strange relationship with the mirror, hours spent examining my body in private are possibly the result of the shame of vanity, where a glance in the mirror is a glance stolen. It is a tool of self-examination that reveals to oneself that which you can't see yourself, considered in this sense the space the mirror creates is dually expansive and limiting.

Julia Kristeva describing the abject, “Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects... and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself” (Kristeva, 2002, p231). Kristeva defines the abject as the location of the ‘other’ within oneself. Manifesting itself where there is a disturbance of identity, in considering that the reflection of oneself in the mirror describes more than our tangible physicality, it too functions to reveal the abject. A precondition of narcissism, as Kristeva refers to it, the abject occurs prior to Lacan’s ‘mirror phase’, which is essentially the creation of an ego, where a child recognises their reflection as ‘I

before the establishment of a language to describe this ‘I’. “Abjection is therefore a kind of narcissistic crisis” (Martinsson, 1996, p92), where one is forced to conceive that “I abject myself within the same motion through which I claim to establish myself.” (Kristeva, 2002, p231) .

Physically embodying two creatures, mermaids and sirens personify the binary nature of the abject/other and the desire/self. Film theorist Susan Felleman describes mermaids “beautiful and monstrous, seductive and deadly, she stands at once for women’s indissoluble association with nature and for the supernatural forces of myth” (Felleman, 2006, p100). The transient qualities expressed in the hybrid form of the mermaid and the possibility of existence in the ocean and on land represent the temporality of the feminine myth. The mythology of the mermaid is located in her predecessor, the siren “These mythical hybrids, in the form of the ancient Greek and Roman sirens... endowed with beautiful voices and musical talents, they challenged the Muses to a fateful contest, whereupon their feathers were plucked... Vanquished and featherless, the Sirens abandoned the airy realm and threw themselves into the ocean, becoming mermaids” (Olalquiaga, 1999, p240). These early representations of femininity shape the duality inherent within variations of femaleness establishing a format through which feminine archetypes could be seen to be continually evolving.



Figure. 23 | Gustav Klimt (1889). The Siren [oil on canvas]

Lady Gaga is an example of a modern day mermaid, reflective of both the “beautiful and monstrous” (Felleman, 2006, p100) representations of femininity. Her most recently released album “The Fame Monster” (Lady Gaga, 2009) is a critique or rather a comment on the media and its fostering of superstars. The music videos that accompany it are, unashamedly, exercises in excess. I use the term comment because although Gaga may be seeking to critique the influence of the phenomena of popular culture within our zeitgeist, her actions foster its continued growth. Her message is to be oneself and to be at ease with being ‘different’ to the expected ideal (Lady Gaga, 2009). However her popularity has bred a fan-base that has adopted her style of dress, her head pieces and sunglasses that have become representations of popular culture. There is another side to this argument that repositions the music videos and styling of ‘Lady Gaga’ in a manner that becomes much more a critique of popular culture and its history of objectifying women.

Gaga claims not to have a feminist agenda but produces work that is unquestionably challenging to popular culture’s assignation of gender expectations. Her costuming both in her music videos and public appearances moves beyond typical representations of femaleness utilised by her pop diva peers. Lady Gaga perverts these representations. A brand of femininity in her own right, the overly constructed, masked and unnatural image of ‘Gaga’ appears often as grotesque. She adheres in part to the conventions of other pop divas’ videos, is heavily cos-

tumed, lavishly changing numerous times throughout the course of a song. As an example to illustrate her manipulation of the female form that is not beyond attempting to create sex appeal but suggestive of a willingness to question its definition, I refer to “Bad Romance” (Lady Gaga, 2009). To begin, at one point Lady Gaga is wearing a pair of shoes designed by Alexander McQueen, 12 inches high that curl down and around the front of her foot, rendering her feet hoof-like in shape. Referencing a McQueen autumn/winter collection “dangerous females were superwomen, so exceptional that they were almost beyond gender, their power to terrify lay precisely in the distance between their purely biological femininity and their trans-gender actions” (Evans, 2003, p152). The same could be said of Lady Gaga’s costuming in “Bad Romance.” Performers emerge from coffin-shaped boxes wearing white PVC body suits that extend beyond their necks, up across their faces, exposing only their mouths. The form of these women is obviously female (their body shape exposed) and sexualized, asserting connotations of bondage (a commonly repeated motif of femaleness). However, through the disguising of their faces and the type of coverage of their bodies, the performers are rendered gender obsolete.

Traditional feminist readings of mermaids posit them as patriarchal constructions, “Like rocks or mirrors, which transmit energy or give reflection but have no direct capacity for action, mermaids act as a vehicle for somebody else’s desire” (Olalquiaga, 1999, p251).



Figure. 24 | Lady Gaga (2009) Bad Romance [music video still]



Figure. 25 | Lady Gaga (2009) Bad Romance [music video still]

A pop diva example of this represented version of femininity: Beyonce, in “Halo” (Knowles, 2008) with lyrics “you know you’re my saving grace” a song about her concession (or realisation) that she is reliant on her male counterpart, pictures the pop diva immersed in water. Fully clothed, the gossamer fabric of her garments float, entwined with her long hair mirroring depictions of mermaids, their cascading locks trailing their slender tails, extensions of their pelagic form. The immersion into water could be read as a re-birth or re-entry into normal societal constructions. Lady Gaga emerges from a swimming pool in the opening sequence of *Pokerface* (Lady Gaga, 2008) removing her kaleidoscopic mirrored mask, she joins the poker game. Celeste Olalquiaga describes, “in turn, water and particularly ocean water, responds directly to the changes of the Moon, ruler of the tides and menstrual cycles, psychic phenomena and the unconscious. Both water and the Moon are metaphorically condensed in the mirror that, along with a comb, usually accompanies mermaid depictions, and that, although loaded with symbolic meaning, is often reduced to signify feminine vanity” (Olalquiaga, 1999, p284).

My body failed me. With age came hips, breasts and thighs. In turn with my romantically described feminine curves, came the realization of a cold reality that I needed to extend my cosmetic finesse to continue my performance of femaleness and gain mastery of my body, my reflection. The space surrounding the mirror, ‘the vanity’ evolved into a site to become skilled in adornment.



Figure. 26 | Beyonce Knowles (2009) Halo [music video stills]

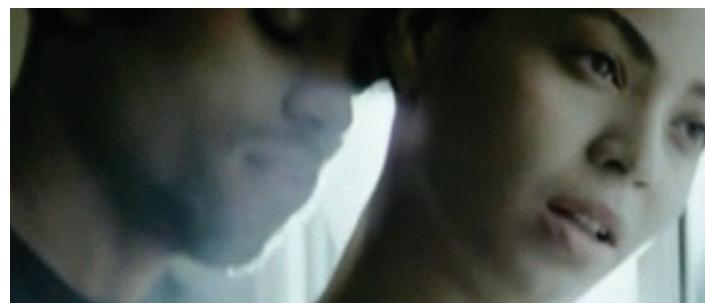


Figure. 27 | Beyonce Knowles (2009) Halo [music video stills]

The ‘pop diva’ presented semi clad, delicately studying and preening herself in a state of reverie is a reoccurring motif in music videos. Rihanna’s “I hate that I love you” (Rihanna, 2007) alluding to her having more than one romantic interest at a time, is pictured laying on a bed in 1950s inspired under-garments, with Marilyn Monroe-esque curls. Her counterpart in this story (it seems unnecessary to point out that he is a male, which is interesting in itself), full clothed he walks the streets. He moves purposely through the frames whereas Rihanna is in a space where time appears suspended. This too, is a commonly occurring image. It seems that the most seductive and beautified domains are outside of day-to-day existence and forceful of fantasy that reads incoherent in daily, public self-performance.

I conducted a series of works that utilized cosmetic tools that occupy the vanity to manipulate the mirror, which in turn manipulated my ability to see myself. The experiments included applying make-up to my reflection, where I crafted my image to one different to a pure physical reflection of myself. These experiments did not engage with the video as a form, however they lead me to the realization of the loneliness of a single reflection that relied on the repeated overlay of more and more cosmetics to arouse a change in appearance.

At this point in my process I realized that all of my work had taken place in the bathroom, behind closed doors. In response to this acknowledgement I created “On

Repeat” that considers not only the obvious performances that might occur within this excessively private space but the types of movement that constitute these private performances. The piece involved me dancing to a song I often dance to when in private “Like This” (Rowland, 2007). The camera is positioned out of shot, capturing my body from the waist down, creating the perspective for the viewer that they might gain through dancing with another person. Although I found this work far more engaging, there was still the element of singularity within the work. Michel Foucault, in describing our encounter with our reflection, states “I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real and connected with all the space that surrounds it and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through a virtual point, which is over there” (Foucault 1967). My performance at this point was of ‘me for myself’ lacking the necessary audience to test and consider the idea that this performance has a cast of many.

Peggy Phelan asks in “On Seeing the Invisible: Marina Abramovic. The House with an Ocean View” (Phelan, 2004), an article discussing the titled artists work, “How can the relationship between the artist and her own body serve as a mirror for the broader drama of the relationship between the individual and social body?”(Phelan, 2004, p16) Phelan is referencing one of Abramovic’s earlier works, a performance piece titled “Rhythm 0” (1974). In the work Abramovic presented her audience with a series of 72 objects including a loaded gun, a whip, a rose and

requested they use them on her body as they chose. Abramovic is asking of her audience to consider their behavior in relation to their membership of a group (in this case 'the audience') and how social expectations might change or dictate their actions, the piece was stopped by a concerned audience member. Phelan and Abramovic both highlight the manner in which we alter our performance of self between the stages of private and public space. The private/public conversation that Abramovic's work evoked was one that, although vital to this project, was missing from my work. The necessity to remove myself from private space and perform in public to, in effect refract my performance of self, appeared the most appropriate strategy to solicit a dialogue of my own



Figure. 28 | Marina Abramovic (1974) Rhythm O [documentation of live performance]

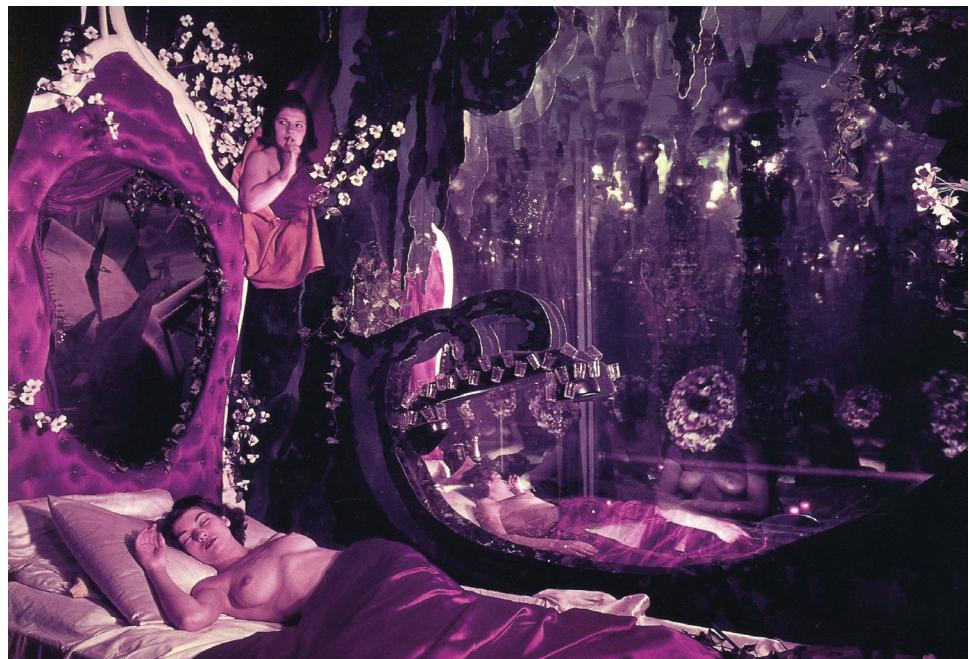


Figure. 29 | Salvador Dali (1939) The Surrealist Funhouse [photograph]



Figure. 30 | Salvador Dali (1939) The Surrealist Funhouse [photograph]

Chapter 3 : The Refracted Performing Body

I have a ritual. Each morning after I have showered, I assess my body in the mirror. I begin with my face, centimetres from the mirror and tracing with my fingers I appraise the imperfections of my skin. I step back, turn to profile and place, palms facing inward, one hand to the small of my back and the other over my belly button. I am evaluating my waistline. These incremental performances in their frequency evidence little change in my figure. Nor do they impact those changes that do occur; of this I am painfully aware. However, every morning I repeat [in vain] this performance to myself.

Writing in 1967 Michel Foucault defines heterotopias as spaces that have the “curious property of being in relation with all other sites” (Foucault, 1967). Amongst Foucault’s examples of heterotopic sites are ships, prisons and cemeteries. These sites are placeless places. A ship exists as a vessel that moves between ports, made real by those who encounter it on arrival at its destination. A prison is heterotopic, holding inmates in suspended time, where there is reference to a world existing out- side of its walls, yet no agency of participation or effect is available to the prisoners. The cemetery functions as a symbol for the space between the living and the dead. It exists because of each of these conditions, yet as with prisons, has no effect on their existence. Rosalind Krauss discussing the conventions video, references it as a ‘medium’ an in between point, capable of “simultaneous reception and projection of an image; and the human psyche is

used as conduit” (Krauss, 1976, p277). If one considers the action/movement of video, it becomes a heterotopic site. That which is being filmed relies on the camera to film it for this image to be viewed. The ‘filmed space’ is removed from its original condition and represented on the screen. “The body is therefore as it were centred between two machines that are the opening and closing parenthesis” (Krauss, 1976, p277). The virtual space between these parentheses is heterotopic. Foucault describes the mirror as heterotopic space. In looking into the mirror “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” (Foucault 1967). Removing the performance to myself from private space to public space and positioning the screen as a mirror, through this refraction I am able to create a heterotopic space in which to “suspect, neutralise or invent a set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect” (Foucault, 1967).

Returning to Elizabeth Mangini, “The woman artist must be seen both as subject and object, a splitting [...] to view the system of patriarchy with a critical eye and simultaneously to envision a new concept of woman as the subject of representation” (Mangini, 2001, p1). The use of video as mechanism to create such a collision is demonstrated again by the work of Pipilotti Rist, who deals with the dual relationship of artist/subject and artist/object. “Ever Is Over All” (Rist, 1997) where she is pictured walking through a street holding a giant flower,

dreamlike and playful, the viewer's expectation of this female imagery is questioned when the artist wields the flower at a car, smashing its window. In utilizing the feminine signifier of a flower in a manner that is unexpected, Rist sets in motion questions of subjectivity. "When the sign no longer signifies what we expect it to, the symbolic system begins to breakdown." (Mangini, 2001, p4). By subverting expectation Rist has repositioned the female as subject, maker of meaning. Although Rist is not filming the action, she is 'director' of the footage we are shown in final piece. The footage is of the artist, constructed by her, and represented to us in the manner she chooses, providing the woman (Rist) we watch on screen with a further layer of agency.

Before deciding on the vitrine as a site to work in, I conducted a series of textural explorations with nylon pantyhose. I used skin-coloured pantyhose, normally worn to disguise imperfections on a woman's legs or to enhance their colour. Filling a large fish tank with water, I documented the changes in colour and texture as I stepped into it (wearing the pantyhose). Following this, I removed the tights, and filmed them floating in the water. Although inanimate, these faux skins, floating, had characteristics connotative of an embryo in utero. The explorations were the first I had done where my body was not present in the documentation. Watching the tights, like skins shed, floating in vitro, lead me to consider how the 'action' of shedding them might further comment on the regimes of beautification and



Figure. 31 | Pipilotti Rist (1997) Ever Is Over All [video, audio, installation]

preparation performed by women daily. As daily rituals, putting on a face of make-up, doing one's hair, selecting an outfit, only to un-do these actions before retiring for the day, to begin again the next in perpetual repetition of this performance.

"A glass case, used to display specimens or objects of art." * The vitrine became my life-size test tube. By inserting a 'live' body into the cabinet a new 'set of relations' are established and the site becomes heterotopic. "25 Pairs" was my first experiment in the vitrine. Drawing on the historical implications of the 'display case' I position my body and invoke the labeling of it- specimen, freak, curio. There are manifestations of these throughout mainstream contemporary culture. Artists such as Pink, Missy Elliot and Gossip who represent a type of woman that is scorned, marked as butch, unfeminine and ultimately 'conventionally unattractive'. Positioning these women as abject is to ignore that many versions of femaleness exist and to deny that the abject and its other, desire, are inextricably linked.

This new space of containment and display reactivated feelings of self-consciousness about my body, as with the footage I presented of the waxing of my pubic region, I realised that I was actively exposing something of myself. However in this instance I was also relinquishing power to an extent, closed inside the cabinet, I would be less able to direct audience interaction and reaction. I heated the space by repeatedly boiling a jug, creating condensation. The condensation rendered the

vitrine womb-like, still in the stages of formulating the necessary action to invoke my desired response (myself in utero), together we sweated.

I methodically put on 25 pairs of tights, one on top of the other(refer to disc). I then repeated the exercise in reverse. As I suspected the action was insistent, the meditation banal. This confirmation serviced two areas of concern in my research. Firstly addressing the broader context of this study, the continuous repetition of an action that has no foreseeable end or guaranteed outcome, is pointless. A point of contention, the continued mimicry by, in particular, young women, of pop cultural icons who represent an unattainable ideal could be couched in the same manner. In a constant state of flux, this ideal is reliant on perception, problematic when regarded as a stable point of reference. Secondly, that in subverting this cosmetic product I question the concept of what is natural and the use of a cosmetic 'prosthesis' to create something that is regarded as natural (skin-coloured tights). The first point raised is not useful in forming a feminist sensibility as it is passive. It simply points out a condition, offering no strategy for existing within the given condition, it merely reflects and concedes. The second point is an active analysis of perception and reception. My body was distorted through the layers of pantyhose, losing definition; my legs became doll-like and foreign.

* *vitrine*, n. A glass show-case for specimens or for objects of art. (Also attrib. in *vitrine table*.) Oxford English Dictionary online, retrieved 20 January, 2010, from <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

Performance artist Orlan's work considers social and cultural questions similar to my own, her most well known piece a series of surgical operations "The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan" (1990). Tanya Augsberg, "Orlan has gradually deformed herself in the process of carving into her body an ideal composite auto-portrait by surgically appropriating various renowned facial features from the history of Western Art" (Augsberg, 1998, p290). Orlan utilises the surgery as a site for performance, filming its duration, streaming this to other countries and finally exhibiting the surgical equipment and lipo-suctioned fat as documented artefacts. The artist is concerned with the idea that "Ideal representations of women have little if anything to do with nature, yet they have been naturalized to the point of becoming normative if not regulatory, for our culture" (Augsburg, 1998, p290). Orlan's work points out our skewed perception of that which is bodily and truly natural. For example, in re-exhibiting "An abject substance (fat) that, for our weight-conscious culture, evokes not only repulsion but real terror especially for women" (Orlan, 1998, p303). The reaction of fear towards this substance of the body is not rooted in its physical appearance but in what it represents, an unattained ideal. Orlan's engagement with the masks of femininity highlight the manner in which these fluidly change and with that the projected version of 'ideal beauty'.

The visceral qualities of Orlan's work are at opposites to the depictions of the pop diva in a constructed 'natural' state. Beyonce's "If I Were a Boy" (Knowles, 2008)



Figure. 32 | Beth Ditto (2007) Gossip, live performance
[documentation of performance]

begins with her ‘un-made’, apparently wearing no make-up or costume (she is naked). Attempting to evoke feelings of the pop diva baring all, in this case literally, they show her as vulnerable and sharing ‘truths’ of herself. However the constructed nature of this renders her sexualised, sensualised beyond the normal experience of nudity and intimacy for the everyday person. The adage that women ‘do not sweat, they glow’ seems a pertinent way to describe the unwillingness of the pop diva and popular culture in general to engage with the body in its genuinely natural state. The omission of the body’s natural excretions and the unwillingness to depict it in its wholly natural form is a place of departure for my work. The pieces I created in the vitrine attempt to grapple with less beautiful or, as influenced by culture, attractive elements of the body. I do this in trying to re-contextualise expectations of femininity, to be read not first as an attractive object for the pleasure of another person, rather than as Orlan’s work asserts, the prejudices of women towards their own bodies, my engagement with the body’s shamed textures, might serve as a point of re-connection with the body with a view towards an acceptance of the truly natural female form. Through the duration of this experiment I became more uncomfortable, the space continued to heat up and with each pair of tights, more sweaty and red. The outcome of this exploration had none of the qualities of pleasure that derive –in spite of the desperate reflection of cultural expectation from the performance of self. I found the enduring corporeality of sweat engaging.



Figure. 33 | Pink (2006) Pink Jewish? WTF
[publicity photograph]



a



b



c



d

Figure. 34, a - d | Lans Hansen (2009) 25 pairs [documentation of research performance]



a



b



c



d

Figure. 35, a - d | Meggan Frauenstein (2009) re-presenting the vitrine [video stills]

In an attempt to work in the site further and reinsert the pleasure aspect of my work, I had to reconsider my choice of action, challenging myself to maintain movement that would cause me to sweat. I returned to earlier research gestures of dancing in front of the mirror.

My next cycle of embodied research “Kelly Rowland ft. Eve...and Meg” involved me dancing in the vitrine (refer to disc). Plugged into my ‘iPod’, once again I danced to the songs I would when at home alone. The camera was placed in fixed position in front of the vitrine, with no change of shot throughout the experiment. Although the screen is a mirror, the camera is not. This experiment differed from the first dancing series as I was unable to see my reflection as I was filming, therefore as the experiment developed I became less aware of its (the camera) presence, my movements became more natural and uninhibited. At the most basic level, the music video is obvious in its intent, to put images with music and lyrics. The videos of pop divas by nature, follow a similar model in their construction. Elements of ‘story’ are spliced with dance sequences (Paparazzi (Lady Gaga, 2009), Womaniser (Spears, 2009), Disturbia (Rihanna, 2008)), or the entire video itself is a series of choreographed pieces (Single Ladies (Knowles, 2008)). The obvious exception to this are the songs set at a slower tempo that are not intended to be danced to by listeners (Halo (Knowles, 2009), If I Were a Boy (Knowles, 2008), Unfaithful (Rihanna, 2001)). The way in which we move to music, especially that of a pop

nature is influenced, as all behaviour is, by what we see. These music videos of pop divas demonstrate a certain way of dancing to the song. The mimicry of these dances by the average person is a much less elegant performance than that of the pop diva. The cult following of Beyonce’s “Single Ladies” (Knowles, 2008) video resulted in mass postings of ‘re-makes’ of the video by fans and foes alike. These amateur versions, in all their humorous intent, are awkward reflections of the perfected performance given by, in this case, Beyonce.

Roland Barthes on the art of striptease, “the décor, the props and the stereotypes intervene to contradict the initially provocative intention and eventually bury it in insignificance” (Barthes, 1993, p84). Although Barthes is referencing the striptease as it pertains to this research there are interesting similarities. In their mastery of the movement, the constructed environment in which they perform and edited version we as audience view, the pop divas effectively remove the personal element of themselves ‘flaws and all’ from their performance. As the opposite of this, Barthes goes on to say “beginners undress without resorting or resorting very clumsily to magic, which unquestionably restores to the spectacle its erotic power” (Barthes, 1993, p86). There is a delightful proposition housed in this. If considered as a metaphor for the daily public performance of self, dancing for oneself repositions the erotic as something not derived from the interaction with another person (female towards male for male to gain pleasure) but purely from

oneself- from her- self “erotic sovereignty” (Desmond, date, p438), is a strategy that is both exciting and empowering.

Until this point, my experimentations had found their other in the mirror, whether literal or figurative. Yet spatially I had only engaged with a singular narrative. Where, for example in my dance, beginning happily and ending tired and distressed, the end point is negative. The same scenario in reverse, would end at its opposite point. In effect, instead of moving between the polemics I have identified (feminist theory and popular culture), I was returning to a divisive point at one end or the other. The vitrine is partitioned through the middle. I was always aware of this and the implication that, when viewed in real time, my body could not be in two places at once. In an attempt to grapple with this I placed the footage from “25 pairs” and “Kelly Rowland ft Eve...and Meg” beside each other on screen, playing them simultaneously (refer to disc). Although the footage differs, the actions in their difference did not engage with each other. Despite the fact it was my body in both circumstances, the experiments were disparate in intention and read as such when I placed them beside each other.

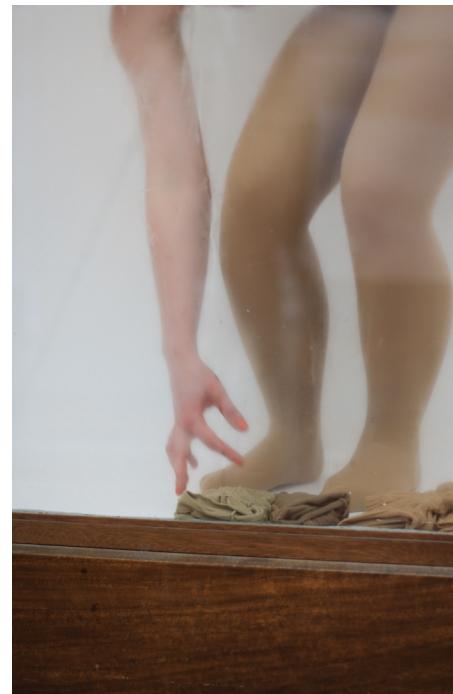


Figure. 36 | Lans Hansen (2009) 25 pairs
[documentation of research performance]



Figure. 38 | Meggan Frauenstein (2009)
Make - up and Sweat Experiment [photograph]

Conclusion

The suggestion of an “erotic sovereignty” (Desmond, 1995, p438) is useful because it describes something of the feminist sensibility I have been seeking to suggest. As sovereign, the line between freedom and responsibility is one reconciled and declared. Whereby inevitable participation in popular culture is countered by active consideration of not simply representation, but the broader context in which the many and varied are formed. My final exploration will attempt to resolve the singular narrative present throughout my earlier research gestures. By engaging with the vitrine as a dual-sided space where the action on either side is in relation to the other, I work to invoke the simultaneity of pain and pleasure in the daily performance of self. Set to a soundtrack of songs by the pop divas referred to throughout this research, spliced with the sound of my self singing along and my breathing, I will perform two sets of gestural exercises to be re-presented through video on either side of the vitrine. The first to be represented on one side, coated in make-up and fake tanning lotion I will dance until I sweat, marking my glass surroundings with my body. The opposite will be an exercise in dilated time; what I envisage to be the methodical act of cleaning the dirtied (by my previous performance) vitrine until it is spotless, to begin the performance again.

In formulating a concluding statement to this study I am aware that research concerned with temporality and performance, will always be considering a moment that has past. Coupled with the popular culture of our zeitgeist, itself rapidly

morphing in response to wide-ranging conditions provides few points of stability to end on. It seems out of place to say that at this stage my study has concluded, or that the feminism I suggest, is concrete and absolute. This research has sought not provide 'an answer' but through embodied research make visible the predicament of representation, and the role this plays in the daily performance of self. To suggest a strategy to digest and filter that which shapes the culture we exist in, mindful and critical of this culture is the most suitable conclusion at this moment, to what I view as a point continuation within my creative practice.

This research spanned a broad spectrum of discourses. Dipping into sociological, cultural and philosophical realms as they pertain to feminist theory, feminist performance art and popular culture there is a considerable amount I have been unable to discuss. Most obviously, the reciprocal to this research is the performance of him for himself, an area that demands study in its own right. With regards to the music video and the pop diva my study has concerned itself predominantly with the imagery of this aspect of contemporary culture. To consider that which we hear would also demand a study in and of itself that questions linguistic representation and determination.

I began this masters recognizing a contradiction in my fascination with the polemics, feminist theory and popular culture. I found this to be problematic as concur-

rent participation in both rendered my participation at all: superficial. I stated that I sought to suggest a feminism that was dually aware and embracing of the many and varied versions of female-ness, a feminist sensibility. As a young woman I notice an aversion to 'feminism' by my peers. The version of feminism they reference is a stereo-typical iteration that assumes that greater sense of equality between the sexes, comparative to decades past, asserts a feminist approach redundant and outdated. The feminism I suggest seeks to be relevant to young women, so that it is a practical strategy to employ in the continual construction and daily performance of self.

The mirror serves as metaphor for our experience of the 'real'. Representation, reflection and refraction provided a framework to consider the macro/public and micro/private constructions of female-ness. The language of the mirror has shaped this research, not only in the written aspect of it but within my creative practice too. Representation as the over-riding concept explored versions of female-ness and the manner in which popular culture influences their occurrence. As I have established, representation is not totalizing, subject to and coloured by perception. It remains inconstant, the cumulative effect being infinite experiences of the 'real' and the seemingly desperate and futile task of emulating its representation. Responsive to our breadth of exposure to social and cultural experience, representation encapsulates the ideas of reflection and refraction. As a concept it shapes the terrain of visual and linguistic determination we traverse. The pop diva, a presence with in

popular culture has serviced this investigation as my example of a collective mirror. She is a contemporary reflection of the feminine archetypes/versions of female-ness that have occurred throughout history. The space of the mirror as site for performance shaped my artist practice. Lead by the private space of the bathroom or the intimate space of the vanity my experimentation worked to question these discreet sites and that which informs the actions performed within them.

Jean-Paul Sartre “The body is a part of every perception. It is the immediate past in so far as it still emerges in the present that flees away from it. This means that it is at one and the same time a point of view and a point of departure, that I am and that I also go beyond as I move off towards what I must become” (Vergine, 2000, p15). That in locating oneself amongst the interface between popular culture and feminist theory is not to cement oneself there. History dictates that ‘woman’ will continue to imbue and make manifest the dualistic qualities of desire and the abject, as will representations of these continue to move fluidly in response to a wider socio-cultural context. However, active questioning, critical analysis of and participation in the discussion, and embodying of this interface, is to have a feminist sensibility: one that derives its pleasures not from relationship between ‘man and woman’ but between the self and representation, the performance of her for herself.

Epilogue

Over the past year I began having my body tattooed. I started with a small leaf on the nape of my neck, extending this down my back in the months that followed, each leaf progressively less detailed to create a set of four. Most recently work has begun on a full-sleeve. The question of why has been asked numerous times over by those who were aware of my area study, commenting that it is interesting that I have chosen to indefinitely inscribe my body. I think about this often. Where I will continue to critique myself in the mirror, to manipulate my body in reflection of my surroundings with skills I have carefully honed, my tattoos are permanent; beyond my capability to change.

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