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Hissy Fits and a Cream Pie to the Face.

Comedy and Contemporary Feminism in Art

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the post-graduate degree of

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Abstract.

NOTE: Please watch the videos first because nothing is funny after being explained in this many words.

This thesis examines the dynamic of humour in contemporary feminisms, investigating social conventions and the absurdity of human existence. It articulates through a suite of performative videos with a low-fi aesthetic how humour can be employed to reconfigure our understanding of subjectivity and sexuality, and argues for the necessity of rethinking feminist art language to ensure its contemporary viability as a political project.

This body of work explores the language of comedy as a device for political and social communication, as a potential agent in undermining cultural hierarchies and as a disarming strategy to deal with serious issues through pleasure, happiness and recreation. In particular, it examines the physical humour of slapstick and marginalised women's comedy to redefine notions of canonical beauty, sexuality and social etiquette in terms of the self-consciousness and fallibility of the human self.

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Introduction.

Sleepless nights of questioning, and brain crippling days of pouring over texts in an attempt to define and locate myself within feminism have left me soaked in frustrated ambivalence. So, with the purpose of clarification, rather than generalisation, I set out to compose a list of what I perceived to be personal feminism related experiences and stories that justified my drive, and then a list of works I had created in response. I poured out my heart, my anger, my frustration, my heartbreak.

I read over it the following day, and I couldn't help but hear my words relayed to me in the slushy British accent of Tracy Emin, or the teary American husk of a Courtney Love televised outburst. Perhaps it was my sleep deprived, oversaturated mind, or perhaps it was the unsilenceable voice of the whiney victim I thought I had locked securely in my locker at high school. Rather than looking like a basis for intelligent feminist discourse, it looked like a hissy fit.

Hissy Fit: A sudden outburst of temper, often used to describe female anger at something trivial. Thought to originate from contraction of "hysterical fit" (Hissy Fit, 2010).

Hysteria: 1. a medical condition thought to be particular to women and caused by disturbances of the uterus (from the Greek "hystera" = uterus) **2.** an uncontrollable outburst of emotion or fear, often characterized by irrationality, laughter, weeping, etc (Hysteria,2010). **Note:** In the mid to late 19th century, Doctors cured "hysteria" (irrational emotional outbursts in women) by massaging their genetalia , like, hey you're a bit upset and too emotional for my man-ness to comprehend, ummm.. have an orgasm.

I have heard it said that laughter is the intellectual equivalent of an orgasm, but also it seems, a symptom of hysteria. Somewhere throughout the year, this Hissy Fit of mine transformed, mutated, taking on the form of a straight faced, dry, emotionless slapstick character.

In order to pay respect to this character's self control, to emphasise her lady-like poise and etiquette, and not let her be claimed by the evil of female emotions, confessional art, or victim art - as this attempt to define the need for feminism threatened to do - I will tell you the story of a fictional character named Ginger Carrington.

Ginger .

Ginger Carrington was a sweet girl really. She began this year however, an angry, bitter woman. She was a woman on a quest, driven and distressed, about the situation of women in the world. Her self-appointed mission; the burden of rethinking feminism and uncovering its relevance in her world. Ginger's drive was fuelled mostly by a kind of aggression.

Maybe this anger was generalised, based on the state of the world, and its oppression of innocent people. Or maybe it was more personal for her, a series of events that dwelled inside her, bubbling away like a potion of poison.

Maybe it began when Ginger, the hopeless romantic, saved her precious flower for a man she loved, whom she realised after spending a year together, he would rather secretly make love to pornography and Facebook pictures of random girls, than her. Perhaps it came from sharing a home with an incredible woman who was scarred from a childhood in a misogynistic religious cult. A

women who, years later, as a free adult, confided in Ginger, the unwelcome, secret fear and distress she experienced when finding out her unborn baby was a girl.

Maybe it came from the time Ginger spent in India teaching screen printing to women who had been sold, trafficked, and forced into prostitution. Maybe it was the years of her late teens Ginger spent in community youth work with tween-age punk-goth girls looking for love in all the wrong places. Maybe it was through experiencing Christianity and oppressing her natural, passionate sexual desires to a dangerous extreme, and hiding her secret despising of the imposed gender roles and hierarchy.

Maybe it was the boy Ginger tried flirting with at a party when she was fourteen who recounted the experience to her mutual friend as Ginger being "ew, yuck" while she could overhear. Maybe it was meeting a beautiful young woman who was brain damaged after an attempted rape by a

friend of her boyfriend. Maybe it was after a fling with a man in Europe who replied when Ginger asked him why he dated her "have you ever just kicked and empty can up the street? Why? Because you can."

Ginger felt an irrepressible desire to do something. To explode. To cry. To never shave. To stomp her feet. What was she to do with this internalised anger, hurt and frustration? Was she to find a personal catharsis in following in the steps of artists like Tracey Emin? Put it all on display, shock audiences, produce self confessional art? Was she to draw crude cartoons of rape at gunpoint like Sue Williams? Was she to cry into a camera claiming she was too sad to tell you, like Bas Jan Ader? Would this have integrity, honesty, beauty? Would it sit well in a society so fascinated with confession and victim culture? Would the world understand?

Or would she be accused of "presenting herself as a victim as a way to short-circuit any criticism

of herself as an artist" (Goldberg, L.). Should she make nothing sacred, bear all, like a Courtney Love chemical-fueled confessional tantrum. After all, "In 1995, the most beloved figure in all of England, Princess Diana, gave an interview with Martin Bashir in which she revealed that the discovery that her husband was having an affair was 'devastating', bringing on 'rampant' bulimia and attempts to injure herself" (Goldberg, L.). If Diana was to tell the world her pain so should she. Surely other women must feel the same. She could represent angry women everywhere. Should she make art, and be the angry, hurt, hysterical feminist this victim-and-drama-obsessed world expects? Or has the novelty of the female-confessional genre worn off? ¹

And that is how Ginger began, ranting about her vagina being defined as a sheath for a sword, reading about transgender discrimination and rape statistics. Becoming far too overwhelmed and upset. And then, something happened. Something had to crack. Ginger Carrington just lightened the fuck up. She had her heart broken and dealt with it through chewing up pink paper petals and spitting them at the camera. She laughed. Manically

at first. She accepted all these things that were beyond her control. And proceeded to mock the crap out of them.

Ginger chose to emphasise this hysteria through imitation-suppression of it. Rather than baring it all, she emphasised her precise mastery of self control. Don't get me wrong, Ginger appreciates and loves the drama of self-confessional art. She believes in its integrity as much as its self indulgence. To be honest she probably wouldn't have the balls for it. She simply decided it was not the best choice for her current lifestyle. She did not think that yet another perpetuation of the hysteria fad was what the world wanted to hear about - that they would give her two minutes of attention before yawning and rolling their eyes, dismissing her alongside every upset reality TV star.

No, what Ginger instead chose to explore, was the subversive tactics of marginalist comedy, rejecting this vulnerable exhibitionist confessional art while simultaneously paying respect. Humanity, Ginger mused, particularly women in this context, try to suppress all of this emotion, that is in no way trivial, and the beauty of the slapstick nature

of life is that they fail in doing so; and it is their pointlessness that is so loveable.

Following this realisation, Ginger proceeded to carry out a variety of actions. She made a snow angel amongst a sea of pink lacy Barbie dresses. She repetitively exited situations following a list of instructions devised by a blog complaining about celebrity underwear flashing while exiting vehicles. She got all sexy to a web cam then shoved food up her nose. She planned a swimsuit photoshoot amongst gorse flowers. She melted a popsicle under her arm for half an hour and then had a very tender burn for three days. She made a giant, glittery, taped-together cardboard star costume and attempted to climb and cling to scaffolding in it. In its absurdity, all of this made perfect sense to Ginger as a reaction to the above issues. The following document may help explain that to you.

¹. Several ideas in these two paragraphs are borrowed from Lina Goldberg's article *Artist as Victim, Artist as Celebrity*.

Feminisms: part one.

Ginger's story is intended - in a way akin to the conscious-raising groups of early second wave feminism- to present a personal view and advocate the contemporary need for feminism. From romance and imposed expectations and norms of society such as ingrained values of women's self image, beauty and sexuality, to religion and imposed gender roles, to pornography, misogyny, prostitution, insecurity and general social inequality based on sex. I feel in this case, this has more strength in presenting a need for feminism today, than a general textbook discussion of feminist terms would.

Black theorist and writer Bell Hooks contends in her book *Feminism is for Everybody*, "feminist politics is losing momentum because feminist movement has lost clear definitions." She defines feminism as simply "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (Hooks, 2000, p.1). Sexism is still evident in society, individually and institutionally, in women as well as men.

Feminism is a contested term, and is perhaps better defined as Feminisms. The two main strains of feminism present today are Postfeminism and Third Wave Feminism. Throughout much of the discussion on feminism both terms seem to be used inconsistently or misused, and are the subjects of much heated debate. The "post" is often argued to suggest we have moved on from feminism and sexism is no longer an issue. Whereas the "third wave" definition as a continuation of the second wave proposes we have moved far enough from the social issues that propelled the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s to be able to suggest that there is a new wave. As Alison Piepmeier of the Electronic Book Review puts it; "While the Third Wave says, 'We've got a hell of a lot of work to do!' Postfeminism says, 'Go buy some Manolo Blahniks [designer high heels] and stop your whining'" (Piepmeier, 2006).

Rather than suggest I am of the authority to clearly define the terms, I will discuss several key ideas of each in relation to my work. I feel, as a female artist, working with the very issues of human interaction with society, and the absurdities of human existence, that it is very important to

endeavour to locate where one sits within a contemporary and historical feminist context. I created this body of work while exploring my relationship to feminism but being uncertain of it, and the feminist themes evident are made as a subconscious reaction to my experiences and viewpoints, which I will now clarify.

A main aspect of Postfeminism is that it is critical of any view of women as vulnerable and not able to control their own lives. There is a belief that feminism has bred an image of victimhood for women by drawing attention to abuse and sexual violence within a patriarchal system. That rather than empowering women, it again makes them look vulnerable. (Gamble, 2001, p. 44, 46.)

In looking back over the year, it seems that the way my work has developed is of pseudo Postfeminist stance, with a sarcastic, satirical tone. Postfeminism tends to repudiate the victim status. (Gamble, 2001, p. 54). My process, in a way, has adopted this Postfeminist anti-victim mentality with which I have been raised in society, particularly as a girl growing up with a chronic physical disability, yet in a way that protests it, and the pressure I have felt from it. The

videos I have made this year have enacted my attempts to reject the victim image, to continue to conform, to pursue, to achieve, but never quite succeeding - while looking dorky in the process.

Satire is employed as a strategic device - the videos advocate the opposite of what I wish to promote, but in this way protest the pressure put on individuals by social conventions. At the same time, the videos pay tribute and respect to the human quality of persistence, and celebrate the beauty of this. It is contradictory in this sense, and also rejects the pressure for beauty, but Ginger is still somewhat conventionally attractive in the process. This is an inherent contradiction in my work as well as others of this time; fighting for rights and equality and the female image, but still secretly wanting to be smoking hot.

In their very promotion of the ideal, the videos seem to reject the cosmopolitan woman lifestyle ideal that, in my view, Postfeminism seems to promote. This is an image of femininity I have grown up with, being sold to me in various forms in the media since I was a tween. "Postfeminism is a term very much in vogue", Sarah Gamble writes, in the beginning of her chapter on Postfemi-

nism in *The Routledge companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. Gamble mentions the likes of The Spice Girls and Madonna in the context of Postfeminism in popular culture, as "women dressing like bimbos, yet claiming male privileges and attitudes" (Gamble, 2001, p.43). Germaine Greer believes Postfeminism to be a market-led phenomenon, claiming that women can "have it all"; career, beauty, motherhood, and a great sex life. Greer states that this in fact only promotes women to buy into the market and consume the likes of "pills, paint, potions, cosmetic surgery, fashion and convenience foods" (Gamble, 2001, p 51).

Gamble states that the Postfeminist phenomenon has reached a dead-end, of which no coherent situation can be developed. She suggests the idea of a Third Wave of feminism has developed perhaps as a way for feminism to accommodate itself to changing times, the term itself advocating both continuity and change. (Gamble, 2001, p 52.)

Hooks is predominantly linked to the Third Wave movement, and argues that feminism should be seen as a political commitment, rather

than a lifestyle choice – a lifestyle choice is perhaps what contemporary popular Postfeminism could be described as. She states that lifestyle feminism contributed to the act of politics being removed from feminism, (Hooks, 2000, p.5) and proposes that feminism should be "advocated" rather than assumed.

"A phrase like "I advocate" does not imply the absolutism that is suggested by "I am". . . It implies that a choice has been made, that commitment to feminism is an act of will. It does not suggest that by committing oneself to feminism, the possibility of supporting other political movements is negated." (Hooks, cited in Gamble, 2001, p 53.)

Although I tend to side more with Third Wave ideas, and tend to inherently reject a lot of Post-feminist ideas, I am still aware of what appear to be contradictions in my work; the simultaneous embracing and rejecting values of both. Therefore I am uncomfortable with aligning myself with any particular movement, and I prefer to use the term Feminisms, acknowledging the feminist art movement as an "ideology of shifting criteria" (Butler, 2007, p.15).

Feminisms: part two.

Each new strand or wave of feminism is a reaction to what has gone on in the past; victories that have been won, as well as criticising the way things were fought. To generalise targets; the later nineteenth and early twentieth century movement fought for the right to vote, the nineteen sixties to gain equality, the nineteen nineties for a focus on diversity (Joyce, L, 2006).

The contradictory nature of my work and acceptance of my ambivalent feelings towards definitions of feminism, also align my practice more with the third wave. Third Wave feminists are comfortable with contradictions, as a result of being raised amongst competing feminist structures.

Editors of *Third Wave Agenda*, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake state this acceptance of inherent contradictions to be the primary difference between third and second wave feminism. Third Wave feminists acknowledge, that what oppresses one person may not be the same for another, and that each person can contribute to the oppression of others through things they participate in. They recognise that different strands of feminism are often in direct contradiction with one another, but can all be part of the Third Wave; “beasts of such

a hybrid kind that perhaps we need a different name all together” (Gamble, 2001, p 52).

Critically, each new wave of feminism has accused its predecessor of perceived contradictions and absences in their beliefs and actions; from racism to classism to being exclusionary (Joyce, L, 2006). Feminisms now react to what they believe was the second wave’s essentialist way of thinking about femininity in which many people were left out due to such things as race, class, trans-sexuality, the ambiguity of gender, and disability.

A beautiful yet mocking reference to this, serving to remind us of the relevance of this ingrained essentialist view present today, was in a play called *Minge*. *Minge* was a hilarious and moving production, performed and directed by Wellington feminists. At the beginning of the show, one of the cast proudly claimed their intention was to represent ALL women, only to have the MC proceed to (lovingly) ridicule and point out the ludicrous nature of this statement.

She directed the entire cast to stand in a line and step forward if any of a series of characteristics applied to them. To step forward if they were white, if they were able bodied, if they completed

high school, if they had a decent income, if when they were young they were told they could be anything they wanted to be, if they had never been persecuted for race or religious beliefs, and so on.

Most of the women stepped forward for most of these things, performing their steps forward in a fabulously comical way, the comedy of the situation celebrating differences and banishing notions left behind by the perceived exclusionism of second wave feminism. By doing this, the actresses made fun of themselves as being “privileged”, and still possessing a first class save-the-world mentality, while acknowledging the differences of humanity, and not claiming to be able to represent or understand what it is like for others. It rejected the exclusionism of second wave feminism, not claiming to be able to do any better as far as more inclusive representation, but rather in their acknowledgment of others.

It is interesting to note at this point, in a way similar to *Minge* rejecting the perceived exclusionism of second wave feminism, as contemporary feminisms do, my videos have become noticeably less gendered as the year has progressed.

This is particularly evident in the Star and Popsicle pieces. Perhaps this is a subconscious realisation that my representation of feminism should not just be about my personal expression of femininity, and that somehow that issue has become less important to me personally along the process. The fact that I am female is still obvious and still brings feminist readings into the work, but the work’s content and purpose itself is not explicitly feminist.

The *Minge* example is important to my work as it is an example of feminists using humour in a contemporary sense to discuss feminism in a public forum, as will be discussed further in this thesis. But, rather than it relating to the messages my work directly conveys, it relates more specifically to my personal position towards feminism. I am, as is Ginger, from a “privileged” white background, and would have stepped forward to most of the things on the Minge list. But it is important to accept the pluralism, and hybridity present, and what Gamble states as the Third Wave’s “understanding that no account of oppression is true for all women in all situations all of the time.” (Gamble, 2001, p 52).

Feminisms: part three.

What are Feminists fighting for now?

"Your nads in a jar, my good sir."

"To beat you with their heels."

"to have more rights than men"

"world domination."

"they're not fighting anymore, now they're just whining"

"societal belief that women = good; man = bad;"

"the right to sit around all day, whine, blame everyone else, not shave, and get paid for it. Well, now that I've written that, I can see why they're still fighting for it." (Yahoo Answers, 2010, Yahoo Answers UK and Ireland, 2010).

When conducting a quick internet search the question "what are feminists fighting for now?" the majority of answers that immediately spring up are uneducated, anti feminist remarks that seem to come from the stereotype of feminists being man hating and angry. As Bell Hooks sates, this misunderstanding reflects that most people learn about feminism through patriarchal mass media (Hooks, 2000, p.1).

Since the battleground is hidden, in comparison to that of second wave feminism in the 70's, it is common for people to make the assumption that the fight for gender equality has been won. There is a backlash against feminism that affects the women of my generation, and it is often considered a dirty word a young woman would not wish to associate herself with if she wishes to be accepted in our society. This itself, as Hooks reaffirms, seems to reinforce the idea that we still live in a world that understands things from a patriarchal forum. A world formed on patriarchal social constructs. In discussions with women immediately around me about gender equality, it is often difficult to locate and articulate exactly what it is that upsets them. It is difficult to justify this

desire to continue to campaign and not settle for anything less.

As Ginger's story has highlighted, many of us have battles in which gender or sexism comes into it that affect our lives negatively. These issues are variable and this makes contemporary feminist problems difficult to generalise. It is a murky situation, but there is evidently still a lot of prejudice and inequality. As Naomi Wolf puts it in regards to our society, "The affluent, educated liberated women of the First World, who can enjoy the freedoms unavailable to any women ever before, do not feel as free as they want to." (Wolf, 1991).

As I quoted Bell Hooks earlier, she defines the point of feminism as being to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. This definition does not imply men, or anyone for that matter as being the problem, but rather it is all sexist thinking and action that is the enemy (Hooks, 2000, p.1). Wisecracks, a blog on feminist comedy also puts their definition of Feminism in similar simple terms, stating that feminism functions to care for the wellbeing of women and girls in a world that continues to treat them like crap. Alongside that, also acknowledging that we live in a world where

gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality “can limit opportunities for people, the belief that this needs to be addressed and changed”. It reinforces that feminism is not “one big united front, with a sneaky set of objectives” and is a set of various beliefs and understanding, and again is probably better described as feminisms (Rogers, 2009).

An article on *Electronic Book Review*—a peer-reviewed journal of critical writing— also has a similar viewpoint. Lisa Joyce says the purpose of the discussion in the blog is “to inch feminism in the direction of its own demise, a terminus coinciding with the end of discrimination against people on the basis of gender, race, class, ability, etc” (Joyce, 2006).

Joyce also points out that the Critical Arts Ensemble - an award-winning performance and installation art collective who explore the intersections between art, critical theory, technology, and political activism - also seem to reinforce this understanding of feminism. The C.A.E. expresses concern for the relegation of feminism to a segregated world of women’s issues: “To speak about a social concern as a ‘women’s issue’ is considered a naive if not harmful reduction that tends

toward the very universalization of the subject that feminism claims to resist” (C.A.E as cited in Joyce, 2006).

“we’re interested in people now—not in men and women” and “be[ing] pro-woman without being anti-man” (Quotes from a journal launched by female literary radicals in 1919, originally used to coin the term Postfeminism in the 80’s. Cited in Cott, N, 1987)

Women still seem to be a subordinate group within a culture that prides itself on equality. As John Lennon phrased it in his 1972 song, quoting his feminist performance artist wife Yoko Ono, “Woman is the Nigger of the world”. It is highly debated as to whether Lennon – as a white male – had the right to make this statement, but it does serve in a popular culture sense to reinforce a main philosophy that I believe characterises the feminisms that I identify with today. This is the recognition that people are marginalised by gender, sexuality, race, class, that these people’s opportunities, lifestyles, and roles in society are often defined by others, and believing that this violation of human rights needs attention.

Feminisms: part four: performance art.

My practice began this year, drawing from the tradition of feminist performance and video art that erupted as an anaphylactic reaction amongst the radical climate of the 60's and 70's. The act of extending on these themes perhaps aligns my thinking more with the third wave.

What fascinated me was the extreme nature of the actions and language of feminist artists at this time, campaigning for equality in gender and sexuality, fighting for recognition as artists as well as for equality in the spheres of the workplace, family, and socially.

From feminist performance art pioneer Carolee Schneemann's use of her body to fight against oppressive conventions both artistic and social, and explore the potency of female sexuality. To Austrian artist Valie Export, whose earlier work surrounds themes of feminist actionism and who used her body to explore notions of identity through language and socially mediated rituals. America's Lynda Benglis whose video and pho-

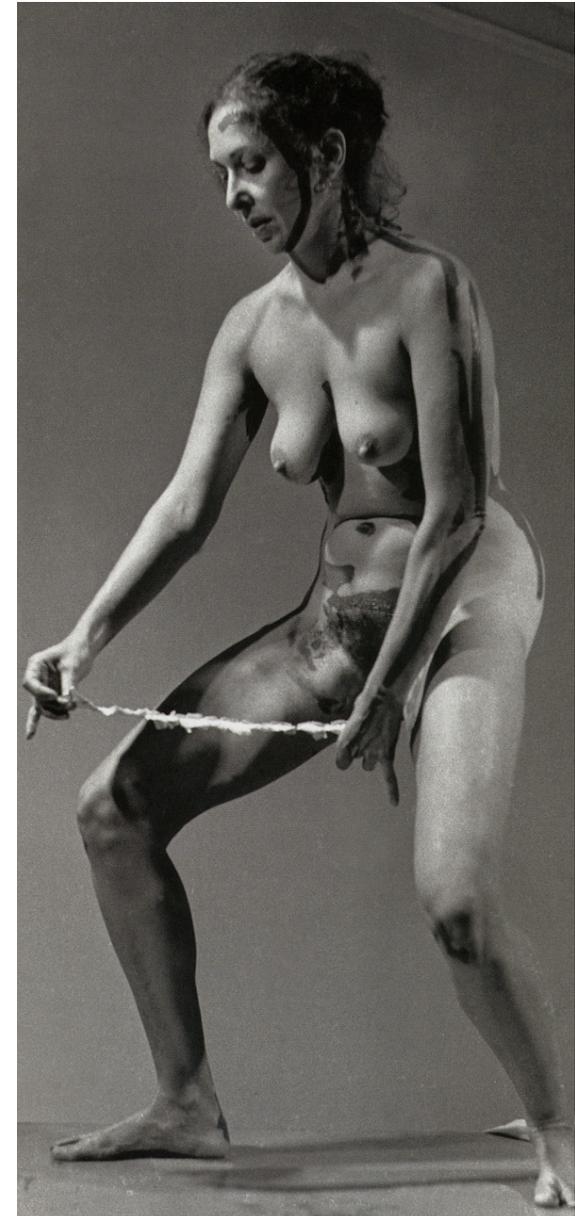


Figure one: Valie Export, *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, 1968. Figure two: Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 1975.

tographic works from the early 70's have evident feminist content, but tend to mock both sexes, and challenge both masculine and feminist positionings on gender roles. And Cindy Sherman's performance, film and photograph works in the later 70's and into the 80's, presenting herself through costume, makeup and pose to represent common female stereotypes (Butler, 2007).

The language used by the performance artists of this era is important to my work in its radical nature of self-representation and extreme ways of challenging society, but I am interested in exploring a language that seems more congruous and quintessential to my feelings and beliefs, and perhaps that of my generation. Although my practice acknowledges the perceived shortcomings and failures of the second wave, it pays a respect to it, while also poking fun in this direction.

Women of my generation have inherited certain freedoms that have been fought for using a language that seems to often no longer be understood or welcomed post that time. Now that people generally believe - falsely- that they understand what feminism is based on patriarchal mass media representations, as highlighted in the

beginning of the previous chapter, they have their eyes, ears, and hearts firmly closed to feminism.

Perhaps it is that the targets being fought for now are not so easily identified, and the situation of feminism today more confusing and murky, but feminist artists have begun working with a new set of language rules within this world. By virtue of women who have fought for feminism in previous eras, I do not feel the need to pull a scroll out of my vagina and read it to the audience, or hold the audience of a porn theatre at gunpoint while wearing crotchless pants (See figures one and two; key works of Schneeman and Export).

Instead, (but perhaps also aligning with – if my predecessors intended their performances humorous), I want to make fun of the absurdity of human existence, its social conventions and imposed inequalities. The research in this document draws on popular culture, in particular female comics, to explore this aspect of contemporary language. It is a means of communication that has subtleties, and its masters have a way of initially wooing an audience, with an often tongue-in-cheek manner of delivery that serves up poignant punch lines and social or political agenda

in a sometimes unexpectedly brutal way. It aims to protest, and to reflect the language of women in the media that is so common and accepted; taking it; caressing it, and serving it back gently and seductively to the world with teeth hidden in its cunt.

In reference to her work, Valie Export states that we are

“... born into a social order whose power conditions and phantasms are articulated by means of language, signs and rituals. These inscriptions in our feelings and consciousness, as well as in our body, make the body predestined as a medium of exploration of social reality” (Export, as cited in Butler, 2007, p.234).

My work continues to draw on the tradition of the use of body in performance art to explore and challenge social conventions, using the ingrained language of my culture and its rituals.

Laugh.

Human beings famously use humour as a way of dealing with things that are too awful to comprehend. When a child is told of bad news, such as death, they may often laugh, not knowing what else to do with the information. Weeks, or even days after a tragedy, jokes will circulate at the expense of the victims. Laughter can be a coping mechanism and can induce a personal or collective catharsis.

Comedy is a language that is familiar and comfortable to an audience, and in this way can be used as a means of cloaking more serious issues for discussion. Throughout much of the feminist literature I have read, feminist writers use humour as a tool for social and political change. Also from observation, recently there have been more and more feminist comedians come to the forefront. As Jessica Valenti argued, in regards to this in her article *Sense and humour*; "Whatever the stereotype says, most feminists develop a strong sense of humor - they have to. How else would we sur-

vive the daily sexism, a political climate that's hostile to our rights, and the general discrimination that comes with being a woman? If we couldn't laugh until we cried, we would probably spend all of our time sobbing" (Valenti, 2008).

I am interested in exploring the absurdities of the human condition through humour. But as a woman, the history and ground broken by women humorists inevitably comes into the reading of my work with its own language. Caitlin Rogers of *Wisecracks*, a blog celebrating women's comedy, expresses the opinion that in a world where women and minorities are given so few voices in the mainstream media, a woman comedian holding a microphone could be considered feminist in itself. (Rogers, 2009). And as Margaret Cho says in an interview on the same blog "All women doing comedy are making feminist comedy, whether they choose to define it that way or not" (Cho, as cited in Callahan, 2009). By being a female comedian, a woman is challenging existing power structures with feminism and as Jessica Valenti of *The Guardian* says, "they are confronting the culture on a whole new level" (Valenti, 2008).

I was once outside a gig in Whanganui, sitting

on the pavement cooling down between bands. I had spent a fair bit of the time inside fending off a drunken man who had been trying to chat me up with a myriad of lines that to his seeming oblivion were of a high chauvinistic rating. This man came outside also, and began talking to a man he had just met that night. He then addressed the man's partner with the same macho-aggressive tone he had possessed all night;

"Are you my brother's woman?"

"Yea," she replied, in a tone imitating the asker.

"He owns this piece of meat."

Everybody laughed. With her quick reply, she called attention to the absurdity of the question, asserting her individuality but still affirming her relationship with her partner, all in a light hearted way. She acknowledged a negative labeling commonly attached to her as a young woman, claimed it in a way only she could, to take the power and control back, and subvert the situation and its social conventions.

Slapstick.



Figure three: *Serra's Floral Arrangement*, 2010.

Slapstick comedy stems from silent cinema. It is a type of physical comedy, involving absurd situations and scenarios, violence, and action that exceed the boundaries of commonsense. Slapstick comedy is traditionally quite boisterous, showcasing dramatic chases, collisions, and crude practical jokes. More than being a clown or buffoon, the comic must often also have control and precision, over acrobatic stunts, exquisite timing and skillful execution. We find pleasure in watching the comic perform a lack of control - and his skill at controlling this lack (Slapstick, 2011, Slapstick, 2010).

Slapstick relies mostly on the body to convey humor, with a physical language that is common, obvious, and not subtle. Slapstick possesses a charming "dumbness", and movement is considered primordial medium of expression (Slapstick, 2010).

The comedy itself is built in the tension between control and loss of control. It lies in the delicate balance between a character resisting an embarrassing or painful scenario, and their surrender, a surrender that the audience understands to be inevitable. The length and extremes of resistance makes it funnier, building tension, and adding to the pointlessness of the endeavor.

Suspense is created in the prolonged resistance to gravity, or another inevitability, and is punctuated with the contrast between the situation before, and the unfortunate outcome. The humor in slapstick often lies where someone's attempts for dignified etiquette are spoiled and rendered pointless. A classic pie in face joke is only funny if the receiver was clean first, and a banana skin slip is validated when a dignified march leads up to it (Slapstick Comedy, 2011).

I experimented with this slapstick punch line formula quite literally in both of my web-cam videos, *Web Dating*, and *Bondage (strap-on-top-knot)*. These films require viewing from start to finish, and lose their comedy and build up effect if watched on loop where either the punch line is seen first, or is missed entirely as the viewer moves on, expecting the loop formula of the rest of the series.

My other videos play more on lengthening the endurance, the striving, the trying and trying, the “balancing act”. They never climax with an achievement, but still retain the comedic value in their pointlessness, persistence, and pure absurdity. They never fail, they never win, they just keep trying. On loop. Consistently. Forever.

The success of these videos comes with a more subtle contrast, rather than a “before and after” scenario, and no real outcome or conclusion seems to be needed. The humour and beauty come in the character of Ginger’s persistence and dedication to achieve what she had set out to achieve, becoming more and more ridiculous and unobtainable with each video. The contrast is also in her inevitable failing, but the video does not

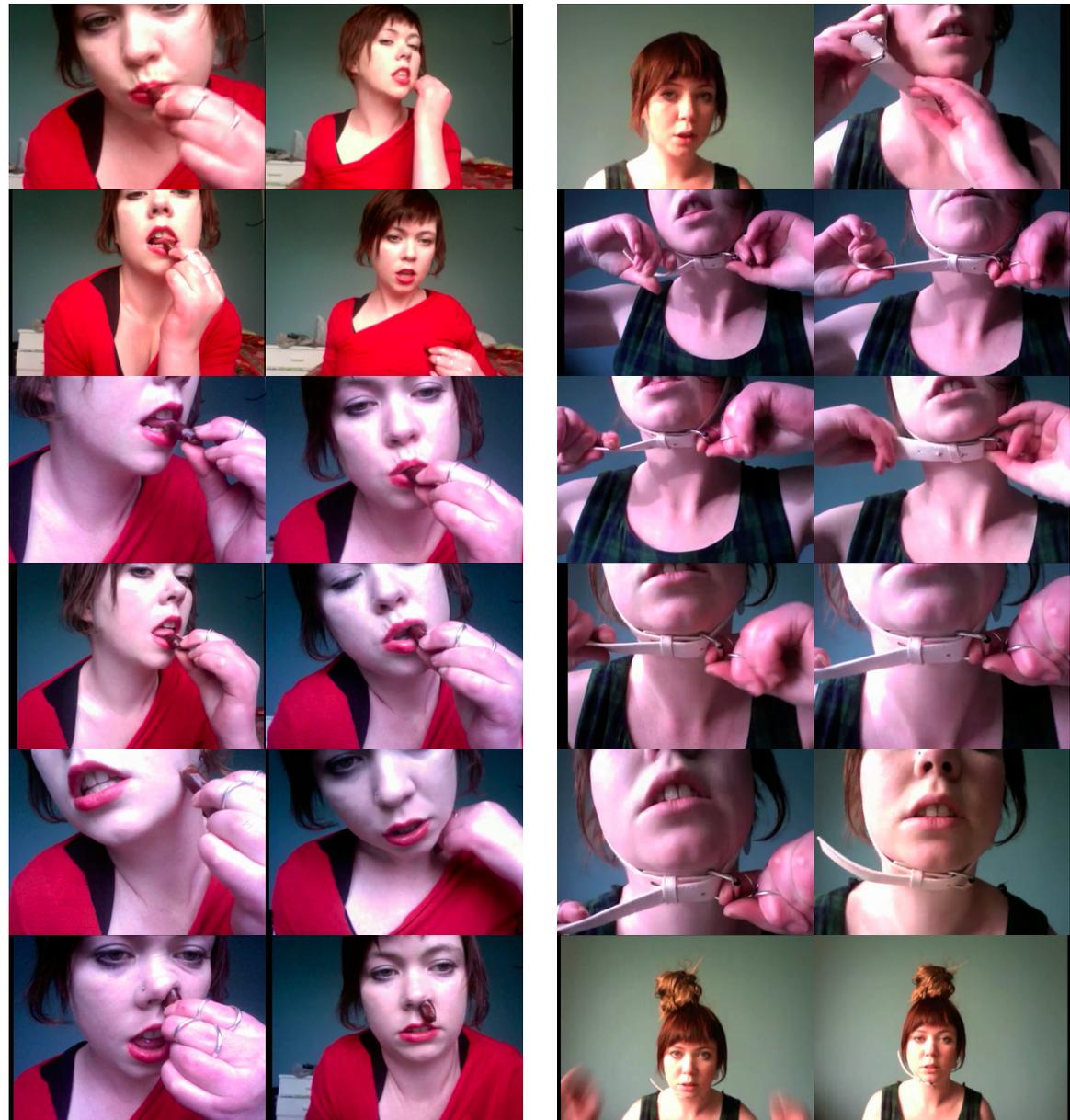


Figure four: *Web Dating*, 2010. Figure five: *Bondage: Strap on Topknot*, 2010.

need to show a fall, a banana skin slip, or a pie to blemish Ginger's self presentation. The viewer already understands the pointlessness of her action, and that in itself is contrast enough. The humour is strengthened with the build up, and the pointlessness is enriched with the lack of conclusion.

Star for example, shows Ginger just holding on, trying with all her physical strength and endurance to cling on. Inevitably, gravity will win, she will fall, but the audience already knows this, and it is not necessary to show that so literally. She is trying to hold on forever, romantically, to stay in the sky and shine. In this video, Ginger is living, incessantly, within the constructs of her own failure.

Most slapstick comedy stars are men, and physical comedy has a trend of being a male-based comedy. Some famous female comedians are present throughout slapstick history but most have been male. The writer of *Filmreference.com* says this suggests there could be a possible reluctance of women to be part of the mess, violence and pain typical of slapstick. The role of female comics in these physical humiliations seems to be more as punishment than by choice, and the elaborate slapstick jokes played on her intend to

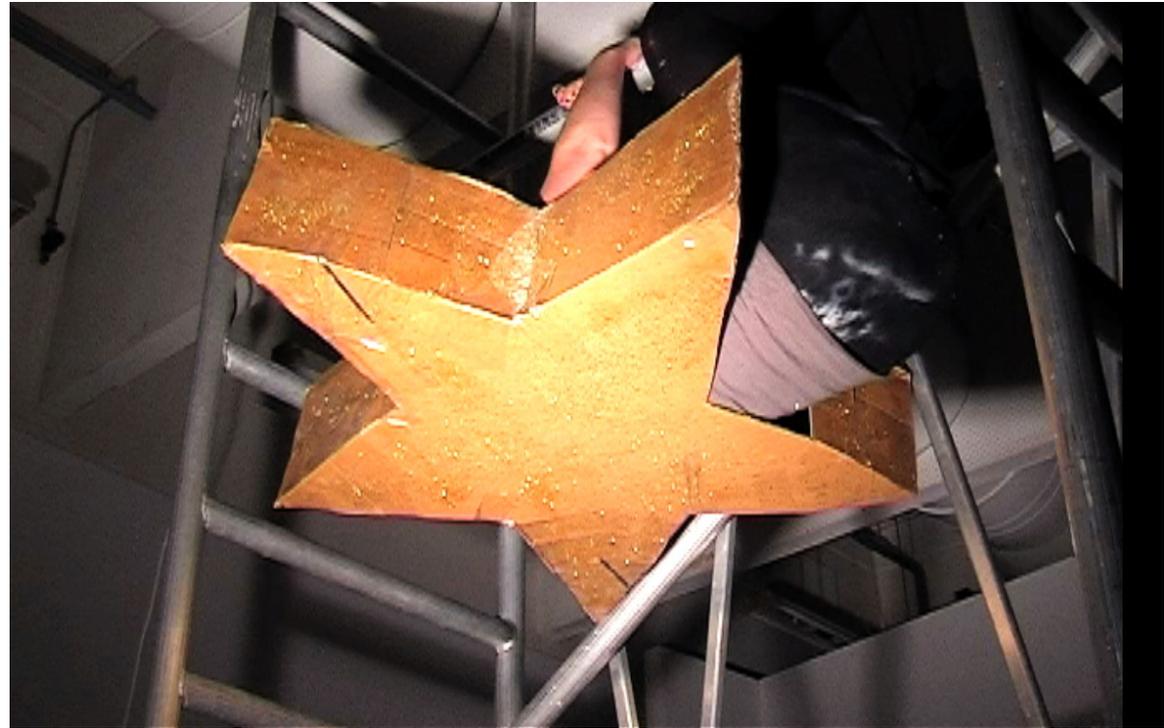


Figure six: *Star*, 2010.

take away her cleanliness, perfectness, and purity. For example throughout the films of the beautiful Doris Day "she is dunked in mud (*Calamity Jane*, 1953), ketchup (*The Thrill Of It All*, 1963), and sudsy water (*Move Over, Darling*, 1963)" (Slapstick Comedy, 2011).

The idea of the female being subject to the imposed rules or intentions of others is interesting in reference to the videos of Ginger Carrington that attempt to follow a certain set of rules or instructions, such as *Exit Series* and *Serra's Floral Arrangement*. In both these videos, the female character is following a set of rules imposed by society, and are particularly masculine-imposed ideas.

In *Exit Series*, Ginger does not ever fully fail. She does not really screw up, she does not trip, she does not expose herself as the task teasingly suggests. There may be an occasional accidental glimpse of panties, but nothing embarrassing. It is however, awkward in the persistence, and the concentrated enforced grace that does not come naturally. There is contrast and ridiculousness in the scenarios she exits, and her attempts to remain dignified even in such situations as a skip



Figure seven: *Exit Series: How to exit a vehicle like a lady no matter your skirt length*, 2010.

bin, work with similar, but subtler mechanisms to a pie in the face.

Humor in slapstick is derived from the comic's insistence to maintain control when it has been abandoned by others around them. As Ginger Carrington tries to exit a dumpster like a lady, so Charlie Chaplain's Tramp holds his silverware in the "correct" manner according to social etiquette. The tramp tries to maintain his dignity even though poor, starving and socially outcast, proceeding to eat his own boot from starvation. (*The Gold Rush*, 1925) The tramp's character conscientiously adheres to social etiquette even when society is in chaos.¹

Like the tramp, typical slapstick characters enact the condition of the modern citizen who, despite trying so hard, finds that in the eyes of the law nothing they do can ever satisfy, and they are incapable of doing anything right. Jan Verwoert of Frieze Magazine states "Yet they do everything wrong with such persistence that they succeed in turning the law on its head. They create a mirror world in which all standards are met (and they find love and happiness) because everything is exactly how it was not supposed to be. Through



Figure eight: Charlie Chaplain eating his own Boot in *The Gold Rush*, 1925. Figure nine: *Exit Series: How to exit a vehicle like a lady no matter your skirt length*, 2010.

this displacement they redeem all citizens. As it transpires that there is no way to fulfill the norm, everyone is absolved from the unreasonable demand to meet its standards" (Verwoert, 2007).

Cezary Bodzianowski is a performance artist whose photographs and short videos show him striking a pose or performing simple acts in everyday situations. In his work *Rainbow*, 1995, Cezary Bodzianowski is arched naked in a bathroom painted in the colours of a rainbow. This image shows him trying to be an intangible magical beautiful thing, failing in a pathetic sense but never the less trying with all the dedication and integrity he has. Verwoert sums it up romantically; "By unremittingly inhabiting the condition of his own failure he displaces the very notion of success and promotes an almost imperceptible Utopia" (Verwoert, 2007).

Artist Sonia Khurana's work *Bird* 2000, is also slapstick with a similar way of trying, diligently, to transcend herself and become something she can never be, failing in a constant sense rather than with a "punch line" or conclusion of sorts.

The performance shows the overweight artist flapping about on stage in a failed attempt to fly

like a bird. It has a sense of slapstick in her failure as an alluring Goddess and her fallibility and frankness displace grace and illusionism. Critic Sally O'Reilly states that Khurana "replaces canonical beauty with a charm and humor borne of the artist's self-conscious fragility" (O'Reilly, 2009).

Art historian Leon Wainwright reviews; "*Bird* is about being a body. It is about an encounter with failed flight. It is an investigation of two kinds of limitations: the body confronting its own flesh and the forces of gravity, and a discrete questioning of accounts of the body which overlook sexual difference" (Wainwright, as cited in *Body Perfect*, 2005). *Bird* uses a slapstick mode of communication in dealing with of the issues of appearance, weight and position in society as a woman.

Works like Khurana's *Bird*, use the self as the subject and exaggerate one's self, exaggerating a perceived weakness in order to make it a quality, or at least as an attempt to claim it back from its negative position within an unaccepting mainstream society. In the MFA thesis of local Wellington performance artist Bek Coogan, she talks of being on an "all time low" due to recently being in a car accident and having to wear a neck brace.



Figure ten: Cezary Bodzianowski, *Rainbow*, 1995. Figure eleven: Sonia Khurana, *Bird*, 2000

She then incorporated this brace into a costume with a gold sequined belly dancing top, undies and rugby socks. It started as a joke but became real and serious and she performed in it, combating her "all time low" with humour, mocking and exaggerating herself. Emphasizing the frail in order to transform it into strength. Coogan says: "By exaggerating oneself, one was able to be oneself again. I see the action of this outfit as some form of erotic will, not so much as erotic to cause sexual excitement, but more to cause me to re-install myself with the lust for living, by saying 'fuck it'" (Coogan, 2004).

Bas Jan Ader's work also has this attempt of striving for something, but it always is met with his succumbing to gravity. His falling series of videos show the artist in a variety of scenarios, remaining as still as possible until he tumbles. His tree fall in particular, shows the artist just holding on, until he no longer can, similar in concept to my video Star. They reference the themes of endurance in performance art, pain, and extremity. His videos have a sense of the comic, but are very human, and sad. FOOTNOTES 1: Example of Chaplain's Tramp borrowed from filmreference.com (Slapstick Comedy, 2011).



Figure twelve: Bas Jan Ader, *Fall (organic)*, 1971.

Women Are Funny?

Regina Barreca states that the history of comedy has in fact been the history of male comedy (Barreca, 1992, p.10). Mary Crawford says “the stereotypical representation of female humor has been one of deficiency” (Crawford, as cited in Barreca, 1992, p.29). All studies of humour have been undertaken in a male-understood forum, and this has contributed to this stereotype. In Nancy A. Walker’s *A Very Serious Thing*, a study on women’s humor in American culture, she also talks of how the topic felt like uncharted territory when she began studying American women’s humorous writings in 1979. There was no lack of American humour study, but women generally seemed to be left out, or relegated to the footnotes, bar a few exceptions (Walker, 1988, p.xi).

This follows the same form as much of history does in other fields, female comedians were left out in the same way female composers and scientists were overlooked until the 70’s when feminist scholars began revising this, not just to

represent women but to create a more gender balanced way of viewing things. Walker however, draws a different conclusion about the lack of history surrounding women’s comedy, a more basic reason, being simply; “women aren’t supposed to have a sense of humour” (Walker, 1988 p.xi).

Much writing on women and comedy talks about a common underlying belief throughout history that women are not meant to be funny, that being a funny woman turns men off, that it is terrifying, and stereotypes of butchness and aggression dominate in order to compete in a man’s terrain. Stand up comic Margaret Cho affirms “the comedy world is so male dominated, you really have to fight to get stage time, you have to fight to get support” (Cho, as cited in Callahan, 2009).

This seemingly primitive stereotype is not even an ancient understanding that went out with the belief that women could not partake in sport less their organs fell out of their vaginas. It is certainly still around today. And through researching, it was

a topic that frustrated me, all parties basing their opinions on typical stereotyping and participating in a ridiculously circular argument.

Joanne R. Gilbert's studies also confirm with Walker that historically, alongside most fields of women's accomplishments and achievements, women's humour has been marginalised. Gilbert also indicates that women have often been accused of not having a sense of humour when they do not laugh at jokes that are at their own expense. In this environment, for a woman to be considered funny, she has to laugh at jokes that degrade her (Gilbert, 2004, p26). This differs from the humour of self-depreciation which will be discussed further in this thesis, as it is one group putting down and degrading another, without the social license to do so. In this situation, the target is passive, rather than empowered.

In the book *Last Laughs*, Regina Barreca states "Women have traditionally been considered objects of comedy because they are perceived as powerless; they are perceived as humourless because it is assumed they simply refuse to get the joke" (Barreca, R. 1988, p 12). The validation of a joke depends on both the teller and the told, and

if the listener does not find the joke funny it does not mean that they have no humour, as has commonly been assumed (Barreca, R, 1992, p 3).

As Gilbert puts it " If we consider the release of laughter roughly the intellectual equivalent of an orgasm, then perhaps women have been "faking it" for years, laughing to please men at the very moment of perceived violation" (Gilbert, 2004, p26).

In simple terms, in the schoolyard, if a boy kicks sand on a girl he is funny, the girl is funny if she laughs when a boy kicks sand all over her. This reinforces the set gender roles of humour, with men as initiators, and women as reactors. Women are considered to have a good sense of humour when they laugh at men's jokes (Gilbert, 2004, p26).

In a *Vanity Fair* article in 2007 entitled *Why Women Aren't Funny*, Christopher Hitchens argues that men need humour desperately, as their only chance to attract women. He says nature has not been as kind to men as it is to women, and apparently women do not need to make men laugh because they already appeal to men (Hitchens, 2007). If women already appeal to men by na-

ture, this raises a lot of questionability surrounding beauty image, etc.

Feminist writer Germaine Greer also stirred up a lot of controversy with her 2009 article on this topic that began with "I should probably not have said, in so few words on television recently, that women aren't as funny as men"(Greer, 2009). The following explanation however, served relatively well to just reinforce this statement in a whole lot more words, and as writer Kate Harding in her review of the article scathingly put it "then following them up with conclusions that amount to, 'We're from Venus - whaddaya gonna do?'" (Harding, 2009.)

Greer's overall conclusion seems in a sense to support Hitchens', stating that it is not that women are less funny than men, they just don't feel the need to be funny as much. Greer states simply, that women are not as competitive. She points out that men are brought up in a dense masculine culture of joke making, which is competitive in social situations. Women have not grown up with an equivalent humour breeding culture of their own, and are not invited to join the boys club. She sums it up with the statement "Men do the

inspired lunacy; women do droll”, which could be an accurate observation, but her tone in the paragraph suggests that “droll” is not as of as higher a value as more “masculine” types of comedy (Greer, 2009).

Hitchens also states that humour is a sign of intelligence, and he points out that there is a primitive wide belief amongst women that they are threatening if they appear too bright. Therefore he concludes, both women and men do not want women to be funny. Men want women as audience, not rivals (Hitchens, 2007).

This argument, Hitchens says, of course does not mean women can not be funny. Hitchens admits that the wits amongst women are “formidable beyond compare” (Hitchens, 2007). This reinforces women’s literature scholar Judy Little’s statement that female comedy says “truly dangerous things obliquely” (Judy Little, as in Gilbert, J. p 14) as women become the subjects of comedy, its creators, rather than merely the objects or audience.

So the argument that attempts to explain the perception of women not being as funny as men is in pointlessly circular summary as fol-

lows: Women aren’t supposed to be funny. Jokes are often at women’s expense. Women do not need to compete using humour because they are already attractive or do not need it to compete for acceptance and power within their social group like men do. Women’s humour has not been acknowledged or studied in the same way. Women’s humour is threatening. Women have ovaries for brains.

Clichés and stereotypes such as these do not always go quietly. Successful American comedienne Tina Fey, writer and star of *30 Rock* affirms that there are people who continue to insist that women are not funny. “You still hear it,” she says. “It’s just a lot easier to ignore” (Fey, as cited in Stanley, 2008). Whatever the reason for the stereotype, women’s humour is powerful in a way that it reclaims back a field or language that has been denied a woman’s territory. My work participates in this, particularly with its use of slapstick which by its physical nature is typically a man’s comedy. Maybe, in reference to Hitchens and Greer, women do need to use comedy to compete, but perhaps not for social acceptance within their own gender or for procreation, but for

claiming social rights.

Things are changing however, despite this apparent underlying reluctance to accept women as being men’s funny equals, there is a new breed of hilarious women coming to the forefront. Men in my immediate peer group state that they are indeed attracted to funny women. Perhaps the world is becoming more accepting, or perhaps it is now that the stereotype has shifted from what Hitchens describes as “hefty or dykey”, and there is a beautified army of female comics in our sights, such as Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and Chelsea Handler.

Perhaps it is that, as Alessandra Stanley of *Van-ity Fair* says, comedy has opened up, and there is no need to do “ugly girl comedy.” She says comedic material produced by women is no longer limited to “self-loathing or man-hating... the humour is more eclectic, serene, and organic” (Stanely, 2008) or perhaps droll, as Germaine Greer put it. Now that the man-kind are not having sand kicked on them, they can find women funny. Thousands of years of sand-kicking towards women, vs. a few decades of sand-kicking towards men.

Women Are Funny.

Subversive Women's Humour.

"Comedy is a way women writers can reflect the absurdity of the dominant ideology while undermining the very basis for its discourse" (Barreca, 1988, p19).

Women's humour is a subversive, "renegade comedy", that "mocks the deepest possible norms, norms four thousand years old." (Little, as cited in Gilbert, 2004, p xiv). It is an example of the marginalised using humour to make the dominant culture uncomfortable. Comedy, stand up comedy in particular, is a medium in which "the powerful may laugh at themselves and the powerless (at least temporarily) prevail" (Gilbert, 2004, p xviii).

Humour has commonly been associated with marginality and there is a long tradition of it throughout history, from the physically deformed fools of the ancient world to the marginalised comic personas of the Jewish, African American and Female contemporary stand up comics. In her book *Performing Marginality*, Joanne R. Gilbert states that many comics are society's misfits, the

people most adversely affected by established power relations. This status in society gives the comic license to be a social critic, and comedians are traditionally allowed deviant behaviour not acceptable of others. As a member of a disenfranchised group in contemporary culture, comedians become "authorized through humour to perform [their] marginality as social critique" (Gilbert, 2004, p16-18). Performing their social standing can be subversive.

Humour is a form of power, when a person is the deliverer of a joke they are in control of the situation, and the audience is not. Barreca says "Making your own jokes is equivalent to taking control over your life – and usually that means taking control away from someone else" (Barreca, R. 1988).

This inversion of social expectations and "norms" is often constructed in stand up comedy. Gilbert states that "Hierarchies are inverted, power relations are subverted, and a good time is had by all" (Gilbert, 2004 p.xii). Comedy presents and mocks the things that are taboo. Stand up comedy avoids offending and aggravating audiences by presenting trenchant social critique under the

guise of mere entertainment. Gilbert describes how comics perform a social function that comes from the traditions of ancient fools, who "held up a mirror to the culture", exposing humankind's frailties or failures, bringing forth the laughter of recognition in response. They emphasise and capitalise on their "marginality or "difference" from the mainstream" (Gilbert, 2004, p.xiii).

For example, American-Asian self-proclaimed feminist comedienne Margaret Cho tells stories of instances when it gets racial. Cho recalls a time she was interviewed on a radio show after releasing her book, where the interviewer said to her "so, Margaret, we really loved the book, but tell us what it was like making *Charlie's Angels*?" She looked at them in disbelief before replying "No... I'm the one from *Grey's Anatomy*". This joke reinforces common stereotypes, exposing the ridiculousness of common assumptions (Cho, 2009).

By performing marginality in order to make audiences laugh at social constructs they have a part in perpetuating, the systems of power are overturned. The powerful are made fun of, cultural hierarchies are undermined and change is advocated by acknowledging the present conditions.

Figure thirteen: Bee vs McCain: Women's Health Air Quotes, 2008.

Sarcasm.

Contradictions are inherent in humour, and it often functions both to affirm the social ideal and to reject it at the same time. "Humour and laughter often dramatise the violation of a norm and at the same time reaffirm the norm." (Coser 1960, cited in Gilbert, 2004 p18). The videos of Ginger may function this way, in particular *Exit Series* and *Web Cam Series*, both emphasise the norm, or expected behaviour in an exaggerated way, emphasising the character's violation of it and protest against it, but also in a sense reinforcing it or its existence. This works, as subversive comedy does, "as a public affirmation of shared cultural beliefs and as a re-examination of these beliefs" (Douglas, cited in Mintz 1987, cited in Gilbert, 2004, p18).

Sarcasm and satire function this way. Satire is a mode of communication through which human vices, abuses, or shortcomings, collective or individual, are criticised through ridicule, irony and derision, ideally aiming for improvement. The primary purpose of satire is not humour, but more



to express disapproval of something using "the weapon of wit". Sarcasm is a militant force within satire, using irony to approve or accept as natural the very values the satire is attacking. It approves the direct opposite of what the satirist wishes to promote (Satire, 2010).

For example, American comedienne Samantha Bee's sarcastic performance after John McCain made finger-gestured air quotes around the words "women's health" in response to a debate question about late-term abortion legislation. Bee proceeded to mock-affirm his views in an extreme rant about uncovering the "seedy underbelly of the women's health scam" of women, and how women had better shape up and stop this "scam" (Bee, 2008).

Jessica Valenti paraphrases Bee's performance:

"Let's face it, women love abortions and we'll do anything to get one. The later the better," Bee said sarcastically, before continuing with a flurry of air quotes of her own. "'Hemorrhages', severe 'uterine infections'. 'dying', blah, blah, blah, blah. And while we're at it, enough with the whining about 'rape', 'incest', and 'incest rape.' We're on to you, ladies. Those aren't a golden ticket to the abortion factory, OK?" (Bee, 2008, as cited in Valenti, 2008).

Bee's performance exposes the ridiculous idea that women would be gagging for late term abortions for so-called social reasons punctuating her rant with "John McCain has finally put the concerns of women where they belong: in derisive air quotes" (Bee, 2008).

Funny Ladies.

As mentioned above, there is a tradition, or stereotype, of comediennes being “hefty or dykey” or participating in “man hating” and “ugly girl” comedy. Comediennes have felt a need to compete in what is seen as the man’s sphere of comedy, using similar aggressive tactics, and have also used this to subvert contemporary ideals on beauty and femininity. The other alternative seems to be to create a comic persona that is offbeat and likeable. As Alessandra Stanley observes; “back in the day... Joan Rivers and Roseanne Barr perfectly represented the two poles of acceptable female humour: feline self-derision or macho-feminist ferocity. (The fact that both those pioneers are now almost as well known for drastic cosmetic surgery as for comedy is either a cautionary tale or a very sad punch line.)” Stanley also points out the evidence that beauty in male comics is not so important; pudgy Jack Black and Seth Rogen are placed as romantic leads opposite Kate Winslet and Katherine Heigl (Stanely, 2008).

A similar assumption to the “hefty or dykey” comic is made when the label feminist is heard. Feminists are often stereotyped as butch, man hating, hairy lesbians, and in the current climate, the term “feminism” is not one readily embraced by young women. Feminists are also usually characterised as humourless, and as Jessica Valenti of Vanity Fair jokes; “ominously discussing the patriarchy” (Valenti, 2008).

Despite these stereotypes, what has been emerging over recent decades is a new breed of comics; sexy contemporary comics. There is also a line of sexy performance artists. Sexy sexy women. Is this a result of the backlash against feminism and the emphasis on beauty because women are afraid of these negative stereotypes? Are they still wanting to be accepted by men or are they happy in their ability to be sexy? Are women claiming their sexuality and using it to subvert stereotypes and inequality, and invert the power dynamics? Or are they just down right making fun of what it means to be sexy? Or are they still saying there is too much pressure?

Perhaps this is linked with the understanding of the postfeminist movement, as a backlash

against the outdated, previous image of feminism. These comics and performance artists however - even though presenting themselves in a sexual pleasing way - are not afraid to sacrifice that all for humour. This itself, is perhaps precisely the reason they as women can get away with it. Greer also noted in her article that comediennes do not seem afraid to degrade their physical image for comedy. She stated “Pamela Stephenson of Not the Nine O’clock News briefly toured the working men’s clubs of Britain with a courageous routine featuring menstruation jokes, which she probably got away with because she was blonde and gorgeous” (Greer, G, 2009). This is also the way the comedy of slapstick tends to work with women, as discussed above, the beauty’s perfection being spoiled for the audience’s gratification.

What ever it is, for whatever reason, these groups of comics and performance artists are whom my practice seems to be currently identifying with, and I shall discuss examples of such women further. All of the comic routines and jokes I mention are from within the last few years. It is also interesting to note that all the women in the following examples are American come-

diennes, perhaps a reflection of the prolific and dominating nature of American media, producing a line of women that fight it, using it's very devices.

I have also investigated the genre of stand up comedy, because it employs the medium of monologue. Although I do not speak within my videos and all communication is through physical movement, and they would not traditionally be considered monologue, I am performing alone, as these stand up comics are, creating a narrative by myself. According to Gilbert, stand up comedy gives women the ability to "engage in rhetorically charged social critique cloaked in the trappings of entertainment." (Gilbert, 2004, p.3).

Stand Up Comediennes.

Margaret Cho is an Asian-American stand up comic best known for her sharp comments on race and body image in Hollywood. In her series *Revolution*, Cho dresses in a beautiful long gold evening gown. She wears makeup, and looks feminine, cute and elegant. She begins talking about diets, a typical, society approved "women's

topic" and tells of one particular time where she could eat only persimmons. She performs the scenario to the audience, where she is driving along, peacefully, singing softly, humming in a quiet, timid way, before suddenly yelling with force and fear, that she realized; "I am going to shit, RIGHT NOW!" Cho holds a theatrical expression of shock for a long dramatic moment, before saying quietly, vulnerably, with her cute little innocent-girl smile being replaced with a solemn damsel in distress expression, "and it caught me off guard" (Cho, 2003).

Cho springing scatological humour upon an unsuspecting audience acts subversively by expressing the gross, everyday aspects of a society-enforced norm that is intended to make her fit the conventional image of beauty. Through Cho's performance, she lures the audience into her story with her "feminine" vulnerability and sweetness, before ambushing them by transforming her character and yelling "shit."

Cho draws attention to the truths of what diets do to you, in a ridiculously unsexy way, pointing out the absurdity of what women put themselves through to conform to contemporary ideals of

beauty. By presenting herself as feminine and beautiful, and then contradicting all that by telling the whole world she shat her pants, she is following a tradition of female comedy as talked about above, challenging societies beliefs about femininity. As Christopher Hitchens believes; "For some reason, women do not find their own physical decay and absurdity to be so riotously amusing, which is why we admire Lucille Ball and Helen Fielding, who do see the funny side of it" (Hitchens, 2007).

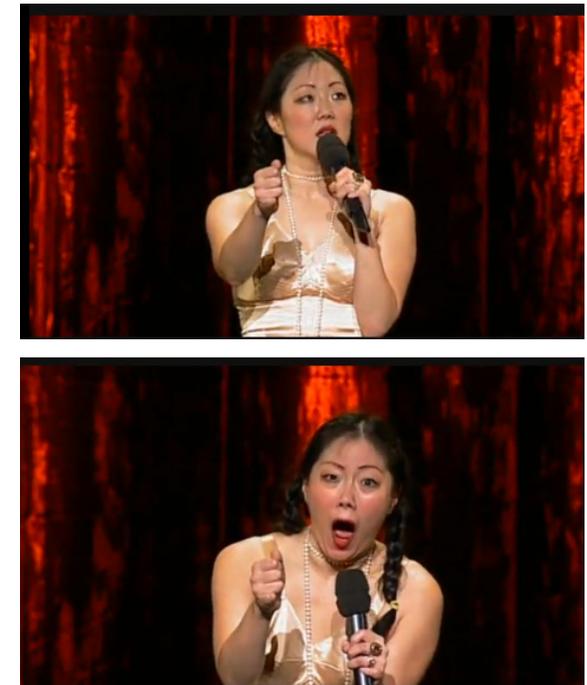


Figure fourteen: Margaret Cho, *Revolution*, 2003.

Figure fifteen: Kristen S Schaal, *Angry Erotic Sheep in the Woods*, 2008.



Cho continues with her anecdote saying, “I held my ass so tight I made a diamond in there. Which was not my best friend” employing a common phrase, again alluding to feminine consumerist and beauty ideals. Cho then says she realised she was going to have to give up, to let go, and let it happen. She switches again to her gentle, vulnerable persona, trying to convince herself it’s ok, I am, I am. Its only me, I am, I will, indeed. She tells this part of the story like telling a difficult, traumatic memory. (Cho, 2003).

Kristen Schaal is another American comedienne, best known for her roll as Mel on *Flight of the Concorde*. A candid, improvised YouTube video of Schaal entitled *Angry Erotic Sheep in the Woods*, shows the unconventional-looking Schaal dressed in a pretty yellow dress attempting to act and

pose sexy for the camera, prompted by a male voice. “Beautiful, give it to me, give it to me” the voice says, in a sexual tone cliché of fashion photographers. His prompts get more and more obscure as Schaal poses, commanding her to be an erotic sheep in the woods. Schaal baas and struts, attempting to emulate the common media portrayal of a beautiful sexy fashion model, but failing, not completely, but just enough to be humorous alongside the absurdity of the comments. The language employed here is similar to the language of my exit series, with it’s use of society, or masculine enforced instruction, Schaal’s attempts to follow the instruction in a ladylike manner, and her failing, just a bit.

Schaal’s body and facial expression imitate those found commonly in women’s magazines

and fashion, but the subject of the erotic angry sheep draws attention to how unnatural and ridiculous they are. One YouTube comment makes the observation that it also “mocks society’s demand for women to fulfill contradictory roles simultaneously; to be both sweet and feisty, both angry and submissive, both erotic and wholesome” (Schaal, 2008).

Wanda Sykes is a black American comedienne. In her 2006 HBO comedy special *Sick & Tired* Sykes comes up with the concept of a removable vagina.

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if our pussies were detachable? Just think about it. You get home from work, it’s getting a little dark outside, and you’re like, ‘I’d like to go for a jog ... but it’s getting too dark, oh! I’ll just leave it at home!’ ... [There’s]

just so much freedom - you could do anything" (Sykes, 2006, as cited in Valenti, 2008).

She exclaims, at the scenario of a man jumping out at a woman whilst she is jogging without her vagina "I have absolutely nothing of value on me - I'm pussyless!" before proceeding to perform a series of lunges, emphasising her freedom in a teasing kind of way (Sykes, 2006).

Syke's routine makes fun of the basic fact of woman's vulnerability. She begins by talking about how even as little girls, women are taught they have something everybody wants, and need to guard it, to treasure it. It brings to attention the physical aspect of woman that is the primitive root of women's oppression, and highlighting the sad truth that a woman does not even have the freedom to go for a jog after work if it is getting a bit dark. "And you are just jogging" she says "pitch black, just enjoying yourself" (Sykes, 2006). It points out the absurdity that such a simple, primitive right can be taken away.

Sykes is also making the statement that the vagina is the only vulnerable part, without it, women are no longer a target. Her joke suggests that so much more would be achievable in this world

and its systems if women did not have vaginas, and she makes fun of the absolute absurdity of this. She mocks those who "want" it, who forcibly take it, and how ridiculous it is that women have to totally remove a vagina from the situation to be free, rather than by just having the right of it being their own. She jokes about ideas around feeling of entitlement of men in a patriarchal system, and simply points out that the whole situation is just so retarded.

Maria Bamford is an American comic known for her self-deprecating comedy involving jokes about depression. "I never thought of myself as depressed" says Bamford, "so much as paralyzed by hope" (Bamford, 2009).

Her comic persona, both on stage and in her series of short episodes *The Maria Bamford Show* is a totally marginalised character. One of her routines is her talking to a popular girl from high school years later who is working as a checkout girl. "I've seen you on TV," the imaginary character says in her bitchy, popular girl voice, to the shy, unconfident Maria, "It's just like high school, you're not funny, you're just weird" (Bamford, 2009). Bamford's character is a freaky, creepy, chick that

is cute and feminine, but manic. It reminds me of the comic persona of Kristen Schaal, something loveable, and attractive, but something really, really strange.

The rhetorical tool of self depreciation is often employed by marginalized comics, drawing on their own oppression to both subvert cultural hierarchies and norms, as well as for a personal and communal catharsis. Perhaps this also reflects the idea of the victim as discussed in the first chapter. Bamford's "hissy fits" show a manic woman trying hard to control her insanity, and are often expressed through cheerful song. It shows her persistence in attempting everyday things but her failure in doing so, expressing the pressures of living, the difficulty of life.

The Maria Bamford Show is the story of Bamford living with her parents while she recovers from a mental breakdown. It is self-deprecating in its comical presentation of living with depression, her failures in trying to make friends, date, find a job, overcome anxiety, and just function "normally" in society. Her style of performance links to female performances art's tradition of the monologue, and is ridiculously hilarious as well as overwhelm-

ingly sad.

In situations like this, the aftertaste of a comedic experience can often be sadness. Heller gives the example of how Russian literary critic Belinskij was overcome with laughter after first seeing Gogol's comedy *The Government Inspector*, but upon reflection exclaimed, "how sad indeed, our Russia" (Belinskij, date, as cited in Heller, 2005 p11).

In a way similar to the comedic strategies of the above comediennes, social norms are inverted in my videos in the very act of both my claiming and self-acknowledgment of failure as the perfect woman living up to all social requirements. This is conveyed in a realistic sense in *Exit Series*, where the character strives to carry out common social conventions, yet fails somewhat. It is present in a more extreme sense, in the attempts to be a star, and climb, and cling to something up high. A star, is something intangible, resplendent, magical, spiritual, and something famous. Something that is literally impossible to become. This takes the difficulties of conforming to social rituals to an extreme, rendering it to a ridiculous and pointless task, in a bundle of taped together cardboard and glitter. In this, it reveals that there is no way to ful-

fill the norm, and consequently, as Verwoert put it, (in regards to Bodzianowski) absolves myself and all participators in society from the unreasonable demand to meet the standards of social conventions (Verwoert, 2007).

The comediennes discussed above protest social conventions as a way to subvert ingrained expectations. Cho enacts an inevitable human failure of conforming to social norms, by talking about the very human grossness of extreme dieting. While presenting herself as beautiful and employing scatological humour, she subverts the expectations and her failure of being perfect. Schaal in a more obvious way directly confronts expectations of beauty, with an exaggerated slapstick-esque failure in conforming to idealised images of beauty. Her over-performed mock-persistence contrasted with the ridiculous facial expressions she possesses, enhance the effects of the perceived failure. Bamford's self-deprecation and constant failure, yet unstoppable persistence to meet social standards of life serve to protest the very conditions. These comics incessantly reside within the condition of their own failure, and in doing so invert the social conventions and expectations of

society's unobtainable notion of success.

These women have all used humour as a strategy for talking about serious topics, their comedy disguising their themes in a way familiar and acceptable to the audience, and disarming the perceived power structures and conventions. The themes discussed by the women above include obesity, sexism, racism, rape, diets, beauty, pressures, social etiquette, depression, not fitting into society, humiliation, patriarchal power structures. Nancy A. Walker (p.x) noticed a dominant theme throughout her studies of women's comedy, that women use it as a device to talk about being a member of a subordinate group, how this feels in a culture that prides itself on equality, as well as trying to meet "standards for behaviour that are based on stereotypes rather than human beings... Women have used humour to talk to each other about their common concerns, to survive, and frequently to protest their condition."

Funny Art.

In the ways discussed above, through processing difficult and painful issues, laughter is therapeutic. It can be a way of dealing with emotions without eliciting them. (Heller, 2005, p11). Curators Michael Rooks and Dominic Molon write of the cathartic release from individual and collective human pain and regret that laughter can bring when used as a tool to expose our foolishness, greed, hatred and other shortcomings, and make the object of its mockery personal and familiar (Rooks, Molon, 2005). This therapeutic effect of the comic is not direct, it is achieved by reflection, by the work of the intellect, by understanding. (Heller, 2005, p11.)

In 2005, Michael Rooks and Dominic Molon curated a traveling exhibition entitled *Situation Comedy: Humour in Recent Art*. The show contained more than fifty works by established, as well as younger contemporary artists working primarily in North America and Europe, celebrating the increase in the frequency of humour within art over the last five to ten years. The Contemporary



Figure sixteen: Martin Kersels, *Tossing a Friend*, 1996 ,

Museum of Honolulu's written introduction to the exhibition muses that this increase is, "perhaps satisfying an urgent need among artists and audiences alike to reflect upon the absurdity of daily existence" (Situation Comedy, 2005).

The show looks at humour as a means of critical engagement, rather than simply as entertainment. The curators mention, in their essay

Comedy Is Not Pretty, that a lot of social change art tends to preach to the choir, and comedy presents a different way for political or socially conscious art to communicate. Comedy provides the audience a sense of immediacy and familiarity, and is an effective as a strategy for critical engagement and a disguise for serious social issues (Rooks, Molon, 2005).

In Christian Jankowski's video *The Hunt*, 1992/1997 we are shown a section of footage from the artist's week-long quest to eat only groceries he shoots in the supermarket with a bow and arrow. It is his needless process of making such a simple, everyday task difficult, and his application of a pointless degree of skill, that transforms "an innocuous domestic chore into a hypermasculine rite" (Rooks, Molon, 2005). It is slapstick in character, with its absurdity of situation and physical clown-like precision, and challenges issues of identity and the social norms that surround them.

Martin Kersels' piece *Tossing a Friend*, 1996 is a series of photographs showing Kersels, a somewhat corpulent man, throwing a small female friend into the air. Again, this is slapstick in its absurdity and physical nature, and the huge difference in size comically emphasises power imbalances with gender within society. The curators state that Kersel is holding both sides of the argument to ridicule (Rooks, Molon, 2005).

Laura Nova is another artists from the Situation Comedy exhibition. Nova says her work is "based upon my observations of human actions in so-

cially awkward situations" (Nova, 2011). Her work is an extensive catalogue of humourous video, performance and installation pieces that explore social "norms" of public and private behaviour and absurd moments of modern existence. Her work deals with very human issues of pointlessness and vulnerability, and she plays with putting the audience in situations as players of the games she has constructed.

Nova's installation *Feet First*, 2009, is an eight feet high platform with a ladder leading up to it, above several gym mattresses. The description alongside it is simply *People jumping at their own risk*. A series of photographs show people participating, becoming the performers. It is slapstick in its physical comedy, and creates a feeling of looming peril. It pokes fun at performance art actions alluding to Klein's leap into the void.

The disclaimer aspect of the caption serves to wash Nova's hands clean of any potential consequence of this social situation, despite being the creator of something dangerous and ridiculously pointless. The situation plays with handing power over to the participator, but it is still ultimately Nova who has control of the situation.

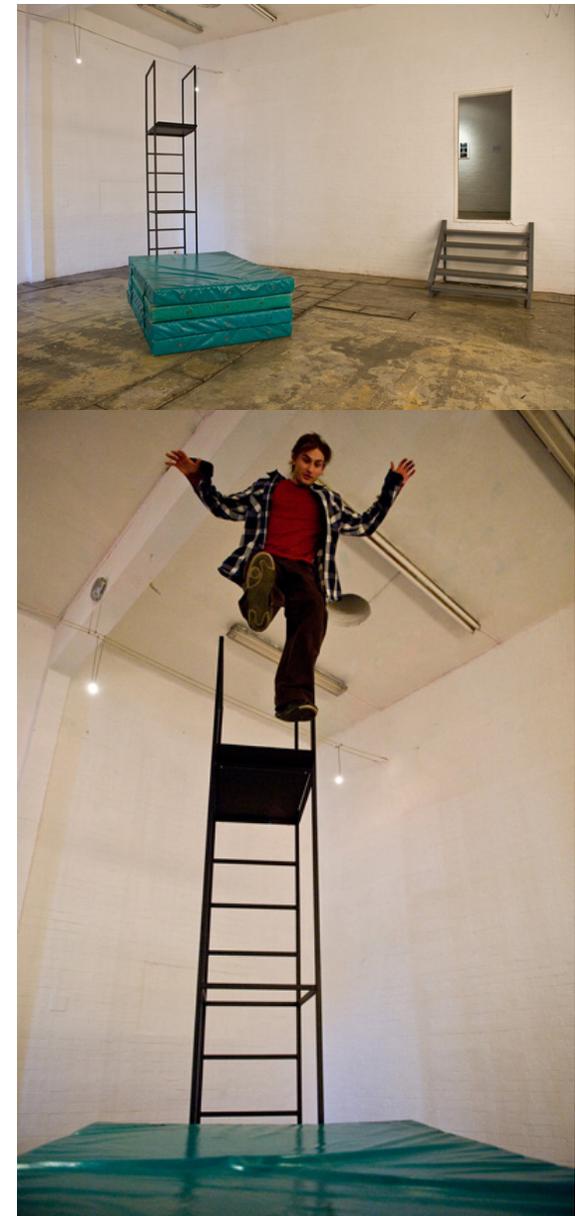


Figure seventeen: Laura Nova, *Feet First*, 2009.



Figure eighteen: Laura Nova, *Head in a Box*, 2009.

Head in a Box 2009 is another physical art prop that engages the audience in a slapstick sense. The caption states that it is a sensory deprivation chamber, and is simply a box on a gallery wall that the viewer is encouraged to place their head inside. Through this act, the work makes fun of the art gallery experience, and a certain pointlessness of human interaction and art. It is slapstick-esque, and renders the participators body very vulnerable, in a bent over position with sight and sound deprived. It is ridiculous in the sense that someone would volunteer to put themselves in that situation. It is perhaps, in a sense, acknowledging the vulnerability of human existence, while alluding to self-punishment, reminiscent of putting oneself willingly in the stocks.

Nova's works do not seem to be explicitly gendered, but one that does deal with a more typically female experience is her installation *Overflow*, 2000. *Overflow* is a sink installed in a women's bathroom that turns on sound instead of water. Each tap plays a separate audio track, one laughing and the other crying.

There is an element of surprise, as the unsuspecting viewer goes to use the seemingly conven-

tional sink, and a private moment is unleashed in a public space. Volume can be altered, allowing for the sounds to be mixed according to personal preference.

Women's bathrooms are often a place for tears and laughter, to sneak off and cry alone, or giggle with friends. *Overflow* also references the stereotype of women being too emotional, or hysterical, as mentioned at the beginning of this thesis. This concept is contradicted by the user being able to turn the emotion on and off, like a tap, but perhaps enables the audience to cathartically wash their hands with it.

Palestinian artist Raeda Saadeh's work *Vacuum* 2007, is a video performance of the artist continuously vacuuming dust in the desert. *Vacuum* is a performance of an endless, pointless endeavor, a domestic task that is acted out laboriously in futility. It is somewhat comedic, in a slapstick sense but I am unsure that is the intention. Throughout her work, Saadeh critically confronts the traditional Muslim image of woman, using her self as the subject, a woman whose scope of action is limited by political and private conditions (Biennale Cuvée, 2008).

Figure nineteen: Raeda Saadeh, *Vacuum*, 2007.



Figure twenty: Sanghee Song, *Gesture to be a Good Daughter*, 2004.

Sanghee Song is a South Korean artist who deals with the image of woman in the patriarchal culture of her country. Song has developed a set of instructions for the etiquette of a “good daughter”, and translated the “internalized code of behaviour into complex apparatuses”. Her installation *Gesture to be a Good Daughter* 2004 is a steel chair, reminiscent of a torture device, devised to hold a girl in the “proper posture for seating”. It is a comical piece, expressing the difficulties and pressures of following expected etiquette, and showing what is supportive and what is coercive about the system. The installation *Ready To Die* 2006, is also a steel contraption designed to ironi-

cally demonstrate the rituals of mourning and the rigidified pose in images of the dead, topped off with a glowing neon halo above (Biennale Cuvée, 2008).

These pieces all deal with social and cultural etiquette, enacting the absurdities of human life, and all doing so with a performed seriousness, a performed genuine integrity. This is seen in Saadeh’s sincere and persistent pointless vacuuming, Song’s apparatuses for maintaining correct female behaviour, the intended prestige of Nova’s ridiculous contraptions, and the earnest nature in which Kersels tosses his friend and Jankowski hunts his food.



Figure twenty-one: *Popsicle*, 2010.

“The face must be square to the camera with a neutral expression, neither frowning nor smiling, with the mouth closed.’¹ When applying for a visa, these are the requirements for ID photographs requested by many governments. You can try to put on the right face, but be prepared to fail. If you have ever queued up for official approval by the authorities, you will know how hard it is to do the right thing when the eyes of the law are on you. Even when a neutral demeanour is required, people tend to overstate their case.”

Verwoert states this in reference to Bodzianowski’s work. Social conventions and imposed rules are intensely difficult to adhere to when one is trying specifically to do so. Verwoert states that Bodzianowski has mastered the straight face, the “neither smiling nor frowning. . .His appearance is

positively impenetrable.” The same applies to the above artists, both literally in their facial expressions, and figuratively in their performed sincerity.

Ginger’s character has also attempted this in situations directly involving social etiquette, such as the exit series and the floral arrangement. To be neutral and to carry out what is required of her, the lack of emotion emphasising the ridiculousness of the situation, and conveying the mock-sincerity of a slapstick character. Despite this sincerity and deadpan expression, the actions fail enough to express that there is no way to inhabit social conventions in a way that meets collective expectation.

Popsicle, on the other hand, shows an attempt to do this, but in its test of endurance reveals a self-consciousness In an attempt to control pain and

maintain concentration, Ginger’s face transforms into an almost catatonic stare. It is reminiscent of Andy Warhol’s screen test of Ann Buchanan, in which Buchanan stares, deadpan for the entire duration of the film without ever blinking. Her stare is focused at the camera, and while maintaining her concentration and complete lack of expression, tears slowly form in her emotionless eyes, drip down her cheeks and roll off her chin. Is the cause of her tears a response to the endurance and pain of not blinking, or is it a response to an emotional recall? On an independent cinema blog, JJ Murphy responds; “the shock of this is compounded by the utter discrepancy between her deadpan expression and the tears that emanate from her eyes.” This reminds me of Laura Nova’s *Video Crying on Cue* 2000, in which “Over

indulgent feelings are re-enacted” through a close up of eyes crying profusely in reaction to chopping onions. Tears from an onion are produced by a different response than emotional pain, yet the physical reaction is the same (Nova, 2011). The contrast of the emotional self-control evident in Buchanan’s screen test, with its inevitable escape beyond control of the individual, is also present in *Popsicle*. Despite pain, Ginger does not give in until the task is complete, the popsicle is melted, trying with all her strength to be strong through the physical and emotional duration of such pointless action, reminiscent of endurance and waiting themes of feminist performance art. *Star* is also similar in this way, a pointless striving, a physical endurance, but this time with an inevitable failure, where as even though pointless,

Popsicle succeeded in completing its goal.

Comedic art confronts emotions without directly eliciting them, processing issues that are difficult to discuss, and can in this way be cathartic. Molon and Rooks advocate that “the self acknowledgment of our inner tramps, fools and blunderers is both a disarming and liberating exercise.” Through humour in art we can make fun of ourselves, of humankind. We can make the object of its mockery personal and familiar, serving to free us of human failings and follies. We can taking the imposed rules of society, and embrace the fact that it is impossible to measure up to them. Yet in doing so, we claim these conventions, confidently, mocking them, mimicking them, and triumphantly render them powerless.



Figure twenty-two: Andy Warhol’s *Screen Test of Ann Buchanan*, 1964.

Figure twenty-three: Laura Nova *Crying On Cue*, 2000.

Video.

My series of videos have a low quality, vernacular aesthetic that mimics YouTube videos, and home videos. YouTube is part of the language of popular culture in my generation, one that I both am influenced by and can contribute to. My videos reflect the culture of people making videos at home featuring themselves doing anything, often really strange things. In a sense this could be considered contemporary entertainment in a way slapstick silent films were with the prevalence of dumb, physical humour, and the ridiculous and the pointless. The prank and gag culture on YouTube is highly prevalent with male protagonists, and the language in my work reflects this, but from a female viewpoint.

I want my videos however, to be differentiated, and I don't upload them to YouTube as they would reflect too accurately, "genuine" YouTube videos. By putting it in a gallery context, it creates new meanings, and allows for critical readings more in line with my thinking as well as in

relationship to movements in art. As Sally O'Reilly said, about Pipilotti Rist and her use of the medium of the popular music video clip, Rist's imitation is convincing, and if not for the gallery context the work is shown in the irony may be overlooked and continue to perpetuate stereotypes. (O'Reilly, p86.)

The scenarios and situations of my videos work better in this format, rather than the tradition of live performance as mentioned earlier in this thesis. It serves to distance the audience from the performer in a way that it appears as if the character is acting out her tasks unaware of an audience, and is just something she would do normally- getting on with her everyday life, which strengthens the absurdity of the idea. The idea of voyeurism is present in this medium, with internet culture references.

My video aesthetic also reflects that of early cinema, in its amateur way of shooting and editing, and its fixed camera view. The act of projecting the films also alludes to cinema, and in a way creates a sense of value, worth or importance as opposed to them being viewed as commonplace YouTube videos. The videos have been tested

on TV monitors and computer screens, but both gave either a 90's music video aesthetic, or a web cam aesthetic. Projecting them shifts the context completely, and promotes them to a status that is more special, and demands more attention.

Low quality video has certain innocence to it, a certain charming dumbness akin to that of the comedic language I employ. A low quality like that of my childlike taped up glittery cardboard star, my shoddy odd coloured car, and my tacky, long-stemmed plastic roses in a vase far too short for them. Within this, like the slapstick character of my videos, it possesses a certain integrity, an honesty not present in "higher" forms of digital technology. A persistence perhaps, to continue to try, to press on, to search for beauty but never quite measuring up to the high resolution expectations of the current conventions of the new, better, brighter "norm" of H.D. Perhaps it is the perceived pointlessness in its persistence of using what is being considered an outdated format, that, in fact, validates it.

Conclusion.

My goal at the beginning of this was a hefty one, to figure out what feminism is in my generation, my culture, and where my position is within that. As a result, my position towards feminism is an ambivalent one, but as Bell Hooks suggests, feminism is something I choose to advocate, rather than acquire or assume by default of being female, as political movement rather than a lifestyle. I believe the term feminisms is suited to better describe this political movement as shifting and changeable, and to accept the inherent contradictions within it.

Throughout history, women have used humour as a device to talk about these issues, about being a member of a subordinate group. "Examining women's humorous performance as a potential site of resistance cloaked in the guise of entertainment can teach us about the power of telling one's own story in a culture that continues to marginalize women" (Gilbert, p xvii).

I feel this search was important, not so much in labelling my work as feminist, but, important as

a female artist working with the absurdity of human social situations, to position the work within a historical and contemporary context in regards to feminism and its rich history of art. Feminism is largely misunderstood and viewed in a negative way, definitions created by patriarchal mass media tend to dominate, and it was important for me to create work in regards to this that clearly articulates my views through the murk.

The situation of feminism today is confusing. It is full of contradictions, and this era of media-driven-postfeminism has been a catalyst to the confusion, leaving my generation largely ambivalent. My ambivalence towards feminism is evident where I perpetuate social conventions and expectations, particularly through the anti-victim mentality. Yet in this act, I am rejecting it, and taking the power away from it. In my own life I totally advocate that the expectations of the world are not of high importance, that its ok to just let yourself have a break, however, hypocritically, I do not really ever let myself do that, and have a huge problem accepting failure, in any form.

At the end of the production Minge, the M.C concluded, "we were raised by a generation of

women who told us, we can do anything, and we interpreted that as, we must do everything."

Therefore, Ginger realised, it is ok to feel like you do not measure up, it is ok to feel angry at sexual inequality and injustices in the world. Humour has acted cathartically in processing this for her, and perhaps in turn can for an audience. By accepting her own perceived failure amongst social conventions, she has inverted these expectations, rendering them powerless. By mocking the very systems of oppression, she has inverted the power heirarchies. Inheiriting a freedom from understanding her position within these, and a freedom from laughing at them.

"Humor, "Makes us responsible for our foolishness, greed, hatred, and other shortcomings by making the object of its mockery personal and familiar. Humor exposes the individual and collective horror and regret that our personal failings cause, and laughter provides a cathartic release from them." Molon

By constantly inhabiting the condition of her own failure, and by laughing, by taking ownership, the cream pie is never actually thrown in her face.

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