

**A feminist dialogue with the camera:  
strategies of visibility in video art  
practices.**

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## **Abstract**

This is a practice-based PhD that seeks to contest limited and reductive tropes of female representation in a contemporary Western context. The focus of the thesis is on video art, which, I argue, can be both a radical tool for deconstructing dominant mainstream images of femininity and play a role in developing progressive re-presentations of female subjectivities.

This thesis argues that there is a need to revisit feminist artworks from the 1970s and 1980s, the critical potential of which remains under-examined. Video as an artistic medium emerged during the late 1960s to 1980s over the same period that the women's liberation movement gained momentum and achieved historic societal and legislative change in the West. Women artists used the medium of video as a means to contest the representational economy of traditional gender roles that placed a broad array of limitations upon women. The camera apparatus allowed women to control the production of their own image, articulate their subjective experiences and directly address the spectator.

The re-imaging of female subjectivities progressed by feminist artists was, however, largely halted by the backlash against feminism in the 1990s. The issues raised by feminism, particularly in relation to female representation, therefore remain unresolved. This thesis argues that artistic strategies deployed by feminist artists in the 1970s and 1980s, underpinned by the radical principle 'the personal is political', which emerged in the 1970s, are still useful today. Through in depth analysis of selected video works from the 1970s onwards as well as reflection on my own art practice research, this thesis investigates how formal strategies employed by feminist artists can operate to undermine the status quo of hegemonic gender representations and to propose new potentialities of female subjectivities and gender identities.



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# Introduction

I look back to recover forgotten and effaced histories of artists who were women in order to position and understand the stakes for women as artists in practice today  
(Pollock 2001: 15).

## Frameworks

This thesis operates in an historical framework that starts with an overview of feminism in the late 1960s to late 1980s, through the feminism of the 1990s and 2000s to the current resurgence, which emerged in the UK around 2010. The analogy of waves is frequently used in relation to feminism in order to describe particular moments of activism.<sup>1</sup> There is, however, a queasiness within feminist discourse about the use of the wave analogy. Both the feminist visual theorist Griselda Pollock and cultural theorist Angela McRobbie, discuss the restrictions of the wave model to developing an understanding of the complex nuances of feminist theory and activism, not least because the wave model gives precedence to a Western dominated narrative. Pollock raises the concern that the analogy of waves constitutes a misrepresentation of history that is used by dominant discourse to obstruction to the progression of feminism (2015). The over-simplistic delineation of 'coherent' waves, McRobbie observes, operates as a method to stifle debates about change by disavowing the relationship between new ideas to existing practices (2009: 156). The refusal to acknowledge the complex and nuanced development of feminism sees the analogy of waves used to advance generational conflict as each evolution is portrayed by the mainstream media as a rejection of previous ideas and beliefs rather than a progression (2009: 156). In line with these discussions, this thesis will steer away from the terminology of waves with the exception of instances where cited authors have used the description themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> First wave feminism is understood to have taken place around the nineteenth and early twentieth century, second wave feminism refers to the mid 1960s to late 1980s, third wave feminism occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s and fourth wave feminism emerged around 2010. The emergence of feminism has varied geographically, therefore the time frames accorded to first, second, third and fourth wave feminism in the West do not necessarily correspond to those in other countries.

Geographically, this research refers predominantly to cultural, political and economic conditions in the West. While primarily concerned with feminist video art practices in the UK and USA, this thesis also makes reference to important historical and cultural global events and draws on relevant art practices by international artists. There is a salient cultural link between British and American feminisms and the feminist artwork that was produced in both countries. Each emerged in vigorous capitalist environments and they reflect the porous border between the two cultures that has become all the more permeable with the new technologies that connect artists across the globe. This is not to suggest that British and American feminisms are one and the same. On the contrary, there are marked differences now just as there were in the 1970s. Angela McRobbie notes, British feminism has been highly influenced by socialist and Marxist analysis, whereas liberal feminism has been more prominent in the USA (2013, 2009: 25).<sup>2</sup> In relation to video art practices in the 1970s and 1980s, the British video artist, academic and writer Catherine Elwes observed a similar trend that saw British artists deconstructing and critically analysing the over-determined feminine form while American feminism developed a more celebratory discourse concerning the female body (Elwes 2005: 48, 52). I mention both McRobbie and Elwes' observations here to demonstrate the convergences between cultural studies and art. McRobbie and Elwes' respective writing form important touchstones throughout this thesis and are indicative of my aim to read feminist video art practices through cultural theory.

Elwes' writing on video art practice is pivotal to this thesis for two reasons. Firstly, the artist was making feminist video artworks in the 1970s and 1980s that are concerned with issues relevant to this thesis: representation, subjectivity and agency. Secondly, Elwes has

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<sup>2</sup> Alison Jaggar's *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (1983) outlined four categories of feminist politics: liberal feminism, Marxist, radical feminism and socialist feminism. Jaggar defines liberal feminism as the application of legal rights and autonomy to women as well as to men. This sees the acceptance of 'the liberal ideal of creating a society which maximises individual autonomy and in which all individuals have an equal opportunity to pursue their own interests as they perceive them' (1983: 39).

consistently written about the development of video art and its history as well as the vital role of feminist artists in developing the art form. Elwes' contribution to the field of video art practice and theory provides a foundation for this body of research in its aims to critically re-examine historical feminist video artworks in a contemporary context. As such, Elwes' texts *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (2005) and *Video Loupe: A Collection of Essays by and about the Videomaker and Critic Catherine Elwes* (2000) are referenced throughout this thesis.

McRobbie's analysis of feminism and post-feminism throughout the 1990s and 2000s in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009) finds particular resonance with me as she describes the cultural conditions I grew up in. Her scrutiny of the multiple ways in which feminist critique was disrupted and suppressed by the mainstream in order to silence a younger generation of women rings true of my own experiences. It is this situation, which produced a lack of access to feminist history, theory and critique as I was growing up, that provides the motivation for this body of doctoral research. Youth culture in the 1990s and the new millennium called upon young women and men to be visually literate and yet at the same time overlook sub-tones of sexism, racism or classism as merely ironic playfulness on the basis that we were all supposedly equal now (McRobbie 2009: 17). This atmosphere allowed discriminatory language and behaviours to flourish in what became known as 'lad culture', which Tim Edwards argues is a 'reactionary *pre-feminist*' response to the gains of 1970s and 1980s feminism (2006: 34, original emphasis).<sup>3</sup> In this putatively post-feminist culture, objectification, the gaze and internalisation were unfamiliar concepts to me. In this void, the feminist video artworks of the 1970s and 1980s remain so important because it was an era when feminist artists were using the video camera to interrogate the politics of

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<sup>3</sup> There is a large amount of academic research in the fields of sociology and cultural studies on masculinity; much of this research is indebted to the development of feminist theory (Edwards 2006: 2). While a discussion of masculinity is outside of the scope of this PhD, for an analysis of masculinity see: Edwards, Tim (2006) *Cultures of Masculinity*, London: Routledge.

representation and in particular, the representation of the female body on screen. While much has changed since the late twentieth century, not least the progression of online technology, the conditions of objectification and internalisation in particular remain comparable, as I will discuss in chapter three and in relation to my own practice in chapter four.

The feminist video works of the 1970s and 1980s that I have identified in this thesis are concerned with expanding women's perception of the mechanisms of patriarchal culture and developing critical analysis that allow women to intervene in and reject the terms of their oppression.<sup>4</sup> This research makes the claim that feminist video artworks remain a way of developing feminist literacy in an environment that claims equality while at the same time deploying a pervasive sexism and misogyny. While there is a large and valuable body of feminist video artwork made throughout the 1990s and 2000s, my focus is primarily on the work made in the 1970s and 1980s because it dealt specifically with the terms of feminist critique in relation to subjectivity, agency, the gaze, objectification and internalisation. My research is located in the juxtaposition of the particular political moment of the 1970s and 1980s and today's neoliberal conditions. This thesis is concerned with the recognition of the value of the political that felt missing from the depoliticised vacuum I grew up in. PhD study has given me access to critical feminist theory and allowed me to learn the terms of feminist analysis that I was previously cut off from. The video works discussed in this thesis have been pivotal in developing my own feminist consciousness and providing me with the vocabulary and tools to question and challenge patriarchy.

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<sup>4</sup> The works referenced in this thesis are indicative of the large and varied field of women's engagement with video art. It is beyond the scope of this research to undertake exhaustive analysis of the field. This thesis stands as part of the endeavour to critically examine women's video art practices, which needs to be carried out on a global scale.

## Research questions

As I will elaborate throughout this introduction and in chapter one, this thesis is primarily concerned with the role visual representation and cultural production play in maintaining hegemonic power structures that continue to use 'the markers of gender, race and nation above all else' (Robinson 2001: 6) in order to marginalise those who are not privileged within ongoing cultural systems. This research considers a series of questions that arise out of contemporary Western culture and everyday lived experience. These questions are investigated through theoretical inquiry and analysis of existing feminist video art practice, as well as my own practice research. The following questions are considered:

1. How can the vexed issues of feminine representation and attendant objectification in a contemporary media landscape be contested through feminist video art practice?
2. What strategies did feminist video artists in the 1970s and 1980s develop that enabled their critique of traditional gender roles and mainstream representations of women on screen?
3. How can these findings be utilised in current feminist video art practices in order to further the feminist aim to radically restructure the politics of representation as it stands within current hegemonic patriarchal structures?

This thesis is deeply concerned with the socio-political and economic conditions that are violent towards women and serve to disempower them on multiple levels and across the intersections of race and class (Pollock 2015). The research questions emerge from the belief that feminist video art practices from the 1970s and 1980s play an important role in reconfiguring cultural norms and social conventions. Speaking in 2006, the American artist Martha Rosler observes,

What artists can do instead of maintaining the system in which they produce their work is to stand in a different social location and call attention to problematic things in all our lives – public or private, intimate or political. [...] art itself doesn't create

social transformation, but it points toward problems and possible solutions, and artists' engagement in political activities also help to produce political change (in Pachmanová 2006: 103).

Rosler draws upon the feminist principle and political slogan 'the personal is political', which I will discuss in detail later in the introduction, to make a broader point about what artists can achieve when they use their practice as a way of furthering their political engagement and challenging hierarchies of power. It is hoped that this thesis encompassing the examination of historical feminist strategies and methods in video art practice and their application and adaptation in contemporary feminist video artworks will contribute to the body of critical feminist interventions that strive to destabilise the structures of patriarchal power. This endeavour must necessarily contend with the terms of female objectification within dominant culture and the subsequent internalisation of this role by women.

## **Methodology**

In order to carry out this research into historical and contemporary feminist video art practices, I have implemented several research strands. Firstly, I undertook a review of the literature in the fields of video art, experimental film, film theory and cultural theory from the mid-1960s onwards. Secondly, I have carried out an appraisal of feminist video artworks and experimental films by women artists from the emergence of video art in the mid-1960s to current works. In order to do this, I have visited multiple archives both in person and online. These archives include: the British Artists' Film & Video Study Collection, LUX London, Electronic Arts Intermix, Video Data Bank, Media Art Net, UbuWeb: Film & Video, ArtFem.TV, Cinenova, Live Art Development Agency video archive, Women's Art Library (Goldsmiths, University of London) and the Betty Boyd Dettre Learning and Research Centre at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C. I have also looked at the DVD collections *All My Independent Women Video Lounge* and *REWIND + PLAY, An Anthology of Early British Video Art*. An in depth analysis of selected



video artworks from the 1970s onwards that are most relevant to my discussion also takes place in this body of research. These re-examinations consider the role of representation in maintaining hegemonic power structures and the ways in which women artists have historically used the medium of video to challenge these frameworks. Thirdly, the development of my own video art practice as research has been in dialogue with my literature and archive investigations.

Another strand that proved valuable to my research was my attendance in audit on the MRes *Art: Moving Image* degree programme at Central St Martins in conjunction with LUX. This allowed me to see which video artworks were being taught to students on a leading Moving Image research degree and to discuss with the students if and how these works related to historical and contemporary feminist art practices. This was particularly useful in relation to my analysis of Dara Birnbaum's video work *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–1979), as well as informing my decision to include a brief review of Andy Warhol's *Mario Banana No.1 and No.2* (1964), both in chapter four. A final element to my research has been participation in the research group Practice in Dialogue, founded in May 2014 by the artist Rose Gibbs and myself. The group consists of up to twelve artists who all situate their art practice within a feminist framework.<sup>5</sup> Meeting bi-monthly, the group discusses our own art practices in relation to the current cultural context around female subjectivity in mainstream culture, developments in feminist discourses and the wider context of historical feminist artworks and texts. This has provided a critical arena in which to discuss ideas around feminist art practices as well as to show my own practice–research and receive feedback. I will discuss Practice in Dialogue at more length in the thesis conclusion.

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<sup>5</sup> Participants have included: Miriam Austin, Alison Ballance, Ingrid Berthon-Moine, Cécile Emmanuelle Borra, Phoebe Colling-James, Rose Gibbs, Lora Hristova, Catherine Long, Ope Lori, Lauren Schneider, Abigail Smith, Nicola Thomas.

My visual practice operates primarily within the field of feminist video art and draws on my contemporary dance background to inform my use of performance to camera and everyday movement and gestures. My methodology is underpinned by an autoethnographic framework, which Catherine Russell describes in relation to film and video practices as an activity in which 'the film- or videomaker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes' (1999: 276). Russell was writing in the late 1990s when feminism was out of favour, however, her description of autoethnographic practices reiterates the feminist principle 'the personal is political' whereby the personal is connected to political frameworks. As a methodology, autoethnography provides a starting point for my questions and research and forms the basis for investigating points of conflict between feminist values and patriarchal culture's detrimental impact on women and girls. These cultural observations interact with my own lived experiences and affective response and provide a catalyst for questions and concerns.

Through practice-research a further set of inquiries emerge in the making process that lead to additional areas of theoretical and visual investigation. Formal strategies that I explore throughout this thesis and in my visual practice include performance to camera, close-up, everyday action and gesture, narrative and embodying the camera. I have explored the voice as a strategy of embodied utterance through direct address, voice-over and dialogue. Another strand of inquiry has been to investigate how to deconstruct visual codes in the same by means of re/appropriation, re-enactment and the use of archive footage. Abjection and humour are present in many of the video works I have researched and in my own practice. These strategies are considered in relation to the politics of representation, objectification, the gaze, subjectivity and agency. These practice-research processes are often intuitive and arise from a complication and tension I feel as an embodied subject implicated in heteronormative patriarchal culture. I have tried to identify and locate these tensions and work at their perimeters in order to find areas of

slippage where dominant ideology might be disrupted, as I will elaborate in chapter four.

These are concerns that are both intellectually and subjectively driven, informed as they are by my experience as a white woman from a working-class background. The subjective position transitions into research at the point where subjectivity is understood as located within and conditioned by a Western patriarchal matrix. Therefore my investigation of the pervasive and entrenched depiction of an idealised light-skinned slender woman becomes a set of questions: who is made visible and who is excluded? What are the cultural requirements that demand such exclusion? Who is the object of the gaze and whose gaze does the object exist for? What are the terms of contemporary self-scrutiny and self-objectification? How does the current sexualisation of women's bodies differ from the sexual liberation feminists campaign for? Most importantly, whom does this restrictive economy of representation serve? These questions form the structural framework of the research and inform the choices of which scholarly fields, theories and art practices to draw upon. As such, this thesis stands at the intersections of feminist critique, cultural studies and critical theory and references theoretical developments in the fields of post-structuralist philosophy, post-colonial critique and gender, queer and film studies. I have drawn upon these discourses to question the economies of representation and their implications for women. This theoretical research has formed the basis for my analysis of key feminist video artworks, detailed in the chapter outline, from the 1970s onwards.

## **Why video?**

Video is a medium that I am drawn to as a viewer and which also forms an integral part of my practice. Originally trained in dance, my work found expression primarily in the field of dance choreography specifically for the screen, which I will discuss in chapter four. My interest in the dancing body on screen was a starting

point for my engagement with video art. Teresa de Lauretis demonstrated in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (1987) the degree to which the apparatus of the camera is pivotal in creating, distributing and maintaining gender norms and cultural conventions. As a young woman choreographing, directing and editing dance film works, I was increasingly troubled by the objectification of women in mainstream imagery, which I witnessed on a daily basis. The lack of references in dance film imagery that allowed me to question the culture around me, meant that I gravitated towards video art practices and I discovered feminist video artworks that resonated with my own experiences. Video art constitutes a lens through which I explore issues of subjectivity, agency, objectification, the gaze and internalisation as well as the wider concern of finding a place for feminist video art practice today.

Video art provides a particularly useful framework for this investigation because the medium emerged and developed as an art form in the same era that the women's liberation movement was gaining momentum from the mid-1960s onwards. Consequently video art practices are entangled with the history of feminism in the late twentieth century as women artists used the medium to explore their concerns and in doing so developed strategies and methods that have been integral to forging the language of video art. It is only in the past twenty-five years that moving image art practices have been accepted into the fine art mainstream, which can be witnessed in the contemporary ubiquity of moving image works in galleries and museums and the number of practitioners working with the medium (Curtis 2007: 2-4). Video has proved collectable as demonstrated by the Kramlich Collection in the USA that holds more than two hundred video and new media artworks including works by the American artists Bruce Nauman, Dara Birnbaum and Vito Acconci. The new millennium has seen a rush to archive the early avant-garde history in projects such as REWIND in the UK as analogue videotapes are at risk of being lost due to their fragile material condition. The medium specificity of video enabled a set of radical practices that developed a

critical relationship to television conventions and highlighted the ideology television content conveyed directly into the home. Video as a medium was able to attack television at the level of form as well as that of content. Elwes suggests that the power of video art in its nascent days lay in its 'counter-cultural impulse' that saw artists deploying the art form as an 'antidote to the hegemony of television' (2005: 36). Television may not be the dominant disseminator of Western culture today; however, it remains one of the major platforms of the moving image in its various forms (Connolly 2014).

Andrea Barnwell Brownlee, the Director of Spellman College Museum of Fine Art, USA, contends that video art is 'situated firmly in the intersection of social commentary, autobiographical narrative, performance art, and theatre', thereby allowing 'artists to transform themselves before the viewer in an attempt to explore personal concerns that possess much larger sub cultural implications' (2008: 51). Video technology also allowed for a certain ease of use that made it attractive to artists making it possible to work on their own and without the additional expense and constrictions of a crew. This mode of working was especially appealing to women artists who were creating their own self-representations while trying to avoid falling into the trap of confirming dominant representations (Elwes 2005: 52).

In the West we live in an overwhelmingly image-based environment that continually deepens its reliance on fast, accessible generic information.<sup>6</sup> The late cultural theorist Stuart Hall argued that 'the image itself [has become] the prevalent sign of late-modern culture' (1997: 5). Mobile technology on smart phones and tablets means that as we go about our daily lives, digital video content is constantly available in the form of advertisements, music videos, films

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Ann Doane observes, 'the acceleration and propagation of individualized ways of consuming images coincides with historically specific changes in commodity capitalism. Commodification now works through the promotion of notions of personal lifestyle, and training in consumerism masquerades as the proliferation of choices provided by "interactivity"' (cited in Pantenburg 2014: 32).

and pornography all of which can be accessed at the touch of a keypad.<sup>7</sup> In this expanded field, digital video has become a key transmitter of representation and stereotype.<sup>8</sup> Cultural theorist Sot Hilly observes that in the shorthand of visual imagery, woman-as-sign remains a powerful referent. Sex sells and women's bodies are synonymous with sexual objectification, Hilly contends: 'it is this male, heterosexual, pornographic imagination based on the degradation and control of women that has colonized commercial culture' (2007: 7). While video's relationship to the domestic sphere still holds, digital video platforms have vastly expanded with the emergence of Web 2.0<sup>9</sup> that since the mid 2000s has allowed for widespread video sharing and immediate social commentary. Space and time collapses as videos that catch the public attention go viral around the global internet system within hours, sometimes only minutes.

From my perspective, having grown up in a pre-web 2.0 era with access only to mainstream media, which denigrated feminism as embittered, man-hating and abject (Sinsheimer 2007: 109), the emergence of video sharing platforms allowed for a new way of connecting to feminism. Seeing Rosler's video works *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) and *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977) on YouTube was a pivotal moment in my development. Forty years after the initiation of the women's liberation movement and across a generational divide, new online technologies provided a channel for the work of earlier feminist video artists to speak to me as

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<sup>7</sup> Ingrid Berthon-Moine's video work *iTouch* (2011), makes explicit the link between mobile technology and pornography. The work depicts a close-up shot of a person's finger relentlessly rubbing the screen of their smart phone on which a graphic image of a woman's hairless genitalia moves in response to the manipulation of the screen. The short work suggests the frenzy of consumption in which women's bodies exist for the consumer and a desire that can never be satisfied.

<sup>8</sup> I use the singular term 'stereotype' here to denote the underlying concept of stereotype – the use of simplistic and reductive terminology and imagery to describe particular groups or ways of being while at the same time presenting itself as containing a kernel of truth to its depictions.

<sup>9</sup> Web 2.0 is the more sophisticated development of the World Wide Web that gives prominence to user-generated content, online communities and participation such as social networking sites and video sharing platforms.

a young woman who was 'not a feminist, but...'.<sup>10</sup> For me, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* was the breach in the impervious cultural landscape of the new millennium that called upon women to be cool and sexy, one of the lads and at the same time, desired by the lads. By introducing me to critical feminist thought concerning the objectification of women in Western culture, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* was the rupture in mainstream representation that allowed me to start questioning its edifice.

## Representation

The Australian feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz asserts that feminism is deeply engaged with the issue of representation primarily because women's invisibility in dominant culture was one of the catalysts for the women's movement (Kontturi and Tiainen 2007: 247).<sup>11</sup> Sadie Wearing outlines the significance of this absence thus: 'it is in the sphere of representational practice that many of the meanings that circulate around gender (in the sense of masculinities and femininities) accrue, take shape and materialize' (2013: 194). These meanings subsequently become normalised and policed by mainstream heteronormative culture (Wearing 2013: 194) and in turn become constitutive of gender and subjectivity (Butler 1990). Wearing adds a critical point; representation also stands as a potential site for the disruption of patriarchal ideology and 'it is on the ground of representation that many significant battles for equality have been fought' (2013: 194). The visual arts is a key site of cultural production and reproduction and is in direct dialogue with mainstream culture, the two visual fields borrowing imagery from each other in a reciprocal and cannibalistic relationship. Feminist artists since the 1970s continue to be fully aware of this complex interrelationship as

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<sup>10</sup> 'I am not a feminist but...' became a frequently heard phrase used by young women in the 1990s and 2000s as they struggled to articulate their belief in women's rights that might result in them being labelled feminist with all the negative associations of the word (Zucker 2004: 423–435).

<sup>11</sup> Elwes confirms that until the 1990s televisual representations of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s largely reflected 'the experience, aspirations and desires of the white, heterosexual middle-class males that ran the networks', a situation that meant 'women, ethnic minorities, gays and ordinary folk were reduced to stereotypes or simply did not appear' in mainstream narratives (2005: 39).

well as the need to contest and shift representational imagery in order to forge new meanings.

Marsha Meskimmon writes about the importance of women artists' self-representations in *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (1996). Although Meskimmon overlooks video art to focus on other art forms including paintings, photographic work, sculpture, performance art and body art, her analysis of self-representation is still relevant to my thesis. Linking visual representation to systems of male power and knowledge from which women have historically been excluded, Meskimmon calls attention to the ways in which women's bodies have been regulated. The female form is 'sharply defined, presented and monitored for acceptability by the pervasive cultural power of social institutions, including the art establishment, mass media and the scientific and medical communities' (Meskimmon 1996: 165). Meskimmon suggests that self-portraiture by women artists continues to be a vital way of coming into representation and challenging underlying cultural ideologies that seek to maintain the subjugation of women. Critically, she notes that:

Many of the self-representations of women artists directly engage with the ways in which 'woman' as sign operates in visual culture, the ways in which the ubiquitous representations of women structure and control the very definitions of 'woman' in our society. Not only do these works take part in defining sexuality, gender, maternity and concepts of beauty for women, they reaffirm the crucial role of visual representation in the acquisition of female identity and any attempt to subvert or challenge it (Meskimmon 1996: 102).

As I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, this undertaking to intervene in the construction of 'woman as sign' (Cowie in Kaplan 2000: 48–64)<sup>12</sup> is evident in numerous video artworks made by women artists in the late-twentieth century. As feminist artists have

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<sup>12</sup> 'Woman as Sign' by Elizabeth Cowie was originally published in *m/f* (vol. 1. 1978), the feminist theory journal Cowie co-founded with Parveen Adams and Rosalind Coward in 1978. They were later joined by Beverly Brown. The journal ran between 1978–1986 and published 12 issues.



long highlighted, the battle for visual representation is paramount if the oppression of women and the structures that uphold their marginalisation are to be defeated. Feminist video artwork is part of this struggle and adds a crucial assertion of subjectivity, autonomy and self-determination through the strategies women video artists have chosen to use and which I will discuss throughout this thesis.

## **The personal is political**

The feminist principle 'the personal is political' and the role of consciousness-raising are important tenets of feminism that have informed the development of this thesis. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock cite the maxim of 'the personal as political' as 'one of the keystones of the politics of the women's movement' (1987: 44). Carol Hanisch, a founding member of the group New York Radical Women established in 1967, delivered a key paper in 1969 that was subsequently published under the title 'The Personal Is Political' in the edited collection *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* (Firestone and Koedt 1970). In the paper, Hanisch confronted the criticism levelled at women's consciousness-raising groups as a non-political form of therapy and merely the airing of personal problems. Rather, she argued, 'it is at this point a political action to tell it like it is, to say what I really believe about my life instead of what I've always been told to say' (1969). Drawing upon the civil rights principle 'tell it like it is', feminist consciousness-raising encouraged women to articulate their own lived experiences and situate them within a larger picture of ideological structures and systems of oppression. Kathie Sarachild, one of the early instigators of consciousness-raising as part of the New York Radical Women group, observes:

There has been no one method of raising consciousness. What really counts in consciousness-raising are not methods, but results. The only 'methods' of consciousness-raising are essentially principles. They are the basic radical principles of going to the original sources, both historic and personal, going to the people – women themselves, and going to experience for theory and strategy (1975: 147–148).

While the methods of consciousness-raising groups varied, the basic guideline was for a small group of women to regularly come together and going around the room, take turns to speak one at a time about the issues they faced in their lives (Sarachild 1975: 148). Rather than providing personal solutions or recommending therapy, as a male doctor or psychiatrist might have done, consciousness-raising aimed to expose and analyse the conditions of women's lives and use this as the basis for political review. Speaking of her own experiences of 'the personal is political' in the 1970s and 1980s, Catherine Elwes observes that:

Women did not present their experience as unique, but as a product of a political and cultural system, and a woman offered her insights as only one voice among many. It was the cumulative impact of their collective voices that formed the basis of political analysis that in turn lead to action.<sup>13</sup>

'The personal is political' formed a succinct and inspiring political slogan whilst also cleverly encapsulating a complex system of coming-to-awareness and politicisation that spoke beyond the rhetoric of dominant politics to women's lived experience, hitherto ignored by the patriarchal institutions of power.<sup>14</sup>

In 1980 at a panel discussion in conjunction with the *Issue: Social Strategies by Women Artists* exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, Martha Rosler responded to the question 'is the personal political?' in the following way:

YES, if it is understood to be so and if one brings the consciousness of a larger collective struggle to bear on questions of personal life, regarding the two spheres as both dialectically opposed and unitary.

NO, if the attention narrows to the privileged tinkering with or attention to one's solely private sphere, divorced from any

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<sup>13</sup> In discussion with Professor Catherine Elwes and Professor Anne Tallentire during a supervision meeting on 23 July 2014 at Chelsea College of Arts.

<sup>14</sup> During an MA theory lecture I attended at Chelsea College of Art and Design on the 1 December 2011, Dave Beech argued that 'the personal is political' is a highly successful rendering of performative speech: in the act of naming the personal as political, the personal becomes political.

collective struggle or publicly conjoined act and simply names the personal practice as political. For art this can mean doing work that looks like art has always looked, that challenges little but about which one asserts that it is valid because it is done by a woman.

YES, if one exposes the socially constrained within the supposed realms of freedom of action, namely the personal.

NO, if one simply insists upon protecting one's right to autonomy and regards this triumph of personal politics as a public emancipatory act.

YES, if one is sensitive to the different situations of people within society with respect to taking control over their private lives.

NO, if one simply urges everyone to 'free themselves' or 'change their lives'.

YES, if we understand how to make these demands for the right to control our lives within the context for the struggle for control over the direction of society as a whole (Rosler in Parker and Pollock 1987: 46).<sup>15</sup>

I quote Rosler's statement at length because her response could be said to pre-emptively describe the dichotomy between feminism and the post-feminist neo-liberal discourses that emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s. This division still stands today as mainstream post-feminist narratives continue to champion individual autonomy as more important than collective concerns. The right to pole dance, for example, becomes an issue of freedom of choice and alleged sexual empowerment rather than being perceived within an ideological narrative that objectifies women for the pleasure of male desire.<sup>16</sup> In making this shift during the 1990s, what is also disregarded is who is able to make choices. Choice in this instance is misapplied to all women while failing to recognise the lack of alternatives for women who for financial and other reasons, such as drug abuse or male

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<sup>15</sup> This text is also reprinted in Robinson, Hilary (ed) (2015), *Feminism–Art–Theory: An Anthology 1968–2014*. 2nd ed. Malden, Massachusetts; Oxford: John Wiley & Sons. pp. 68–69.

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of feminism and choice see: Ferguson, Michael L. (2010), 'Choice Feminism and the Fear of Politics', *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 247–253 and Snyder–Hall, Claire R. (2010), 'Third-wave feminism and the defense of "choice"', *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 255–261.

violence, enter the sex industry. As Hilary Robinson highlights, 'the main symptom of post-feminism is widely regarded as the depoliticizing of women's lives and issues' (2001: 442). In the post-feminist drive to claim female empowerment and demand equality with the privileges of elite white men, it is the women who are most vulnerable to discrimination and oppression that are left behind in the battle for 'equal' opportunities.

## **Patriarchal culture**

My research progresses from the conviction that we still live in a patriarchal culture, that is, a society run predominantly by white, heterosexual, wealthy men and, in turn, institutions<sup>17</sup> continue to be male dominated albeit with a few exceptions. Female exceptions to the rule who become prominent in the public sphere are frequently notable for the ways in which they are represented in the mainstream media that repeatedly scrutinises their looks and family relationships while overlooking their work-related achievements. A further complication for women accessing positions of power is the long history of patriarchal domination in the workplace that ultimately rewards masculine behaviours. Women are called upon to accept the conditions of what bell hooks calls 'white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy' (1984: 118, 1994: 197) and operate within its constraints, that is, to manifest the attributes of masculinity and Westernisation in order to be viewed as successful. As bell hooks calls to our attention, not all men are privileged within this system and the system itself is damaging to all who participate in it – including 'successful' men (2013b). Western patriarchal structures are deeply intolerant and contain racist, classist and homophobic agendas that impact on both men and women. In the UK, both men and women from ethnic minorities are substantially under-represented in positions of institutional power; class continues to remain a barrier to educational and career progression, and while there has been much progress,

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<sup>17</sup> By institutions I am referring to the complete range of organisations that support and maintain social structure: professional, educational, cultural or religious. Where I am making a point relevant to a specific type of institution e.g. educational, then I will include this information.

sexuality outside of the heterosexual paradigm is still frequently stigmatised (Jones 2011). As sociologist Jeff Hearn notes, patriarchy does not so much value men *per se* as it does maleness and masculinity (2013: 150).

## **Neo-liberal capitalism**

I apply to my research an understanding of late capitalist consumer culture and the rise of Western neo-liberalism. The latter emerged as the dominant economic strategy during the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister of Britain from 1979 to 1990, and Ronald Reagan, the President of the USA from 1981 to 1989 (Harvey 2007: 62). Neo-liberalism is a politics of deregulation and privatisation that aims to shift economic resources from the state to the private sector. The discourse of neo-liberalism appropriates the language of feminism, civil and gay rights, borrowing such terms as freedom, choice, empowerment and applies them to capitalist endeavours (McRobbie 2009: 29). Advancing the concepts of individualism and meritocracy, neo-liberalism has successfully undermined the collective nature of 1970s human rights movements. Post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak contends that neo-liberalism 'removes all barriers between itself and fragile national economies, so that any possibility of social redistribution is severely damaged' (1999: 357). While neo-liberalism pays lip service to notions of equality, its strategic aim is to amass capital through continuous economic growth, which results in a deepening inequality in post-industrial nations.

In *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (2013), Nancy Fraser argues that certain aims of 1970s Western feminism unintentionally coincided with the neo-liberal agenda. This saw women's entry into the workforce used as a camouflage for the devaluation of labour and equality politics distorted into a call for equality with the 'privileged male of the white race' (Spivak 1986: 225) rather than radically shifting patriarchal

culture. McRobbie names this neo-liberal version of gender equality as post-feminism (2009), which she argues, is intent on undoing the gains of feminism, as I will discuss at more length in chapter three. According to Fraser, Western feminism continues to be corrupted by a neo-liberal individualistic discourse that pits women into a competition to gain parity with men. In response to Fraser's writing, the academics Brenna Bhandar and Denise Ferreira da Silva argue that the corrupted feminism Fraser refers to was just one strand of feminist thought and only ever an option for white middle class women. Emphasising the plurality of feminism, they draw attention to the work by Black and Third World feminist scholars, which consistently critique the machinations of global neo-liberal capitalist culture and 'structural forms of patriarchal violence' through post-colonial theory (Bhandar and da Silva 2013).

## **Objectification**

The objectification of women in capitalist cultures has long been a vehicle for patriarchal violence to women that also serves to shore up male privilege. Laura Mulvey identified the sexual objectification of women as a key component of patriarchy and its representational systems in her article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975). Furthermore, she maintained that 'according to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification' (Mulvey 2009 [1975]: 20). Late capitalism has since learnt that the production of female anxieties as a driver of consumer culture can also be deployed against men; however, this still takes place to a much lesser degree and plays out along different narratives and insecurities (Power 2009: 15). The extension of consumer culture can be seen in the increasing number of cosmetic products aimed at men and the emergence of a

male grooming magazine culture such as *Men's Health*.<sup>18</sup> Sociologist Lisa Wade writes on her blog *The Society Pages* that objectifying men as well as women does not point to a new sexual equality. Rather, Wade argues, 'market forces under capitalism exploit whatever fertile ground is available. Justice and sexual equality aren't driving increasing rates of male objectification – money is' (2013). In spite of this apparent levelling of objectification, women's bodies are still offered for masculine consumption and continue to be presented as the locus of heteronormative male desire while at the same time the ability to attract the masculinised gaze<sup>19</sup> is sold to women and girls as empowerment (Penny 2011).

## **The resurgence of feminism**

The re-emergence of feminism currently taking place is voicing many concerns in common with the women's liberation movement of the 1970s and 1980s and similarly sees itself as a radical critique of hegemonic power structures. Young feminist women in the new millennium are increasingly calling on the feminist principle 'the personal is political' as well as activating the organising tool of consciousness-raising through online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs. There is a renewed focus on issues of representation, objectification, sexual and domestic violence, reproductive rights and the right to equal pay for equal work. A re-reading of the 'Seven Demands of the Women's Liberation Movement'

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<sup>18</sup> This publication encourages men to emulate male celebrities and develop their own 'ripped' torsos at the same time as advising heterosexual men on whether a first date is too early to ask a woman for anal sex or how much to tip a prostitute (December 2013 issue). I picked up this copy of *Men's Health* in one of the NHS waiting rooms at Guy's Hospital, London, where there were multiple copies available for patients to read.

<sup>19</sup> Pollock argues that the term the 'male gaze' ties the concept of the gaze to the male/female binary and diminishes the role of heteronormativity. Pollock suggests the term the 'masculinised gaze' increases the range of possibilities and allows for a more nuanced deconstruction of the 'heterosexual masculinization of the spectator position' in visual culture (2013: 141–148).

from the late 1970s reveals a list that could easily have been written in today's environment.<sup>20</sup> These are:

Equal pay; equal education and job opportunities; free contraception and abortion on demand; free 24 hour nurseries; financial and legal independence; an end to all discrimination against lesbians and a woman's right to define her own sexuality; freedom from intimidation by threat or use of violence or sexual coercion, regardless of marital status, and an end to all laws, assumptions and institutions that perpetuate male dominance and man's aggression towards women (Mackay 2011: 153).

In this era of gender aware governance, one that speaks the language of equality, it is important to question why these issues have returned as concerns amongst young women; a subject that I will return to in chapter three.

Since the mid-2000s, there has been a cumulative resurgence of feminism in mainstream culture. The early days of this resurgence saw the emergence of texts by feminist activists and journalists that questioned the treatment of women in an allegedly post-feminist era. In *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2005), Ariel Levy highlighted the ways in which women are called upon by mainstream culture to compete with and denigrate other women. In *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (2010), Natasha Walter dismissed her previous celebration of 1990s feminism in *The New Feminism* (1998) to argue that young women increasingly struggle to opt out of an intensifying sexualised and objectified culture, one that they feel uncomfortable with. The prevailing opinion was that gender aware governance, with its focus on meritocracy and individualism, was failing young women because capitalist mainstream culture places increasing pressure on them to be seen as feminine, desirable

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<sup>20</sup> The first four demands emerged from the National Women's Liberation Conference held at John Ruskin College, Oxford in 1970. These demands were printed on protest banners and appeared on a petition handed to the Prime Minister Edward Heath on the 6 March 1971. On the same day, 4000 women marched through London on the first UK International Women's Day march. The fourth and sixth demands were added at the 1975 National Women's Liberation Conference and the final demand at a further conference held in 1978 (Mackay n.d., British Library n.d.)



and sexually available. Whilst the conditions of women's lived experience have substantially changed for the better since the women's liberation movement, with women gaining unprecedented access to education and employment, these gains have stopped short of revolutionising patriarchal society as was originally hoped.

Angela McRobbie argues that the backlash against feminism in the late 1980s and 1990s happened under the guise of post-feminism, an agenda that attacked feminist politics on multiple levels across popular culture, the mainstream media, politics and institutional structures (2009: 1). This backlash, Penny Florence observes, is 'characterized by a conservatism that has learned the language of opposition and revolution' (2001: 4). Patriarchal retaliation caricatured feminism as man-hating and aggressive while the advent of postmodernism and the concepts of multiplicity and pluralism served to undermine the collective strategies of the women's movement (Pollock 2001: 11–21). Postmodern irony deployed by the mainstream media across a range of magazine, music and fashion cultures as well as in advertising campaigns appealed to a new generation of visually literate youth and cultivated an insidious version of sexism and misogyny; 'objection is pre-empted with irony' (McRobbie 2009: 17). The emergence of Reality TV in the 1990s, in many ways a perversion of 'the personal is political' in which the personal is always visible but rarely political, ushered in a heightened scrutiny of the female form. The epidemic of makeover shows became a means to brutally critique women's looks and behaviour with special criticism reserved for working class women whose difficult financial circumstances were overlooked and their 'bad'

clothing/health/lifestyle choices instead linked to individual fault (Kokoli 2008).<sup>21</sup>

Alongside feminist concern at the new turn of female televisual representations was the awareness that legislative gains were failing to fully materialise into reality in the job market. In the instance of equal pay, for example, women who have been brought up to believe they would receive proper recompense for their labour are realising that legislation has not been transformed into financial parity with male colleagues. Current Government analysis of the gender pay gap reveals a discrepancy of 19.7% per cent in favour of men (Department of Culture, Media and Sport 2014: 5). Politically, pay transparency continues to be problematic and legislation that would enforce the 1970 Equal Pay Act and 2010 Equality Act has yet to be enacted. While women continue to struggle for parity of pay in the workplace, female reproduction remains another area of legislative challenge and difficulty. Nearly five decades after the 1967 UK Abortion Act, access to abortion has still not been extended to women in Northern Ireland who have to travel to England, Scotland and Wales and pay for private care. A similar situation prevails in the Republic of Ireland.<sup>22</sup> Anti-abortion campaigners in the UK are strengthening their crusade both outside the doors of family planning

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<sup>21</sup> Shows such as *What Not to Wear* (2001–2005) reprimanded women for dressing in unfeminine ways and suggested this was the root cause women's lack of confidence. Particular ire was aimed at gender neutral clothing that failed to show womanly curves. A modern form of corseting was advocated in the shape of 'magic knickers' as women were urged to revel in their curves while containing their flesh. For those who lacked curves or other attributes of feminine beauty the solution was to 'fake it', which was demonstrated through multiple reality TV shows gifting women with extreme makeovers. *Ladette to Lady* (2005–2010) dealt with young women's risqué behaviour that included swearing, drinking and being sexually active. The premise of the show was that particularly 'problematic' girls, who were almost always working class and sexually active, would receive five weeks of training in how to be a traditional lady. The skills they studied in were deportment, elocution, needlework, flower arranging, etiquette and cookery. The ladies in training would have the opportunity to entertain a group of elite young men in order to prove their feminine credentials.

<sup>22</sup> Savita Halappanavar died on the 28 October 2012 after being denied a life-saving abortion at the University Hospital Galway, Republic of Ireland. One nurse told Halappanavar that it is the law because Ireland is a Catholic country.

and abortion centres and inside Parliament with continued calls to reduce the abortion time limit.<sup>23</sup>

In the UK, the resurgence of feminism is taking place against a backdrop of global austerity and the rise of the political Right. The year 2010 saw the formation of a Conservative-led coalition government that embarked on a programme of austerity and swingeing cuts aimed at reducing the public sector and welfare provision. In the 2015 general election, a majority Conservative government was elected and ideological cuts to the state are deepening. The government has cut back funding for vital services from the National Health Service to charitable organisations as detailed in the Fawcett Society report 'The Impact of Austerity on Women' (2012), which argues that the cuts have fallen disproportionately hard on women's services. This impact can be seen in the number of rape support centres and domestic violence refuges, brought into existence through the determined efforts of feminist activists since the 1970s that are now struggling to remain open and provide vital services.<sup>24</sup>

Global austerity has also brought late capitalist cultures into disrepute as a newly radicalised youth start to question what we are being sold, that is, anxiety, exploitation and debt. Young women particularly are questioning the capitalist exploitation of feminine bodies as tools to sell products as well as provoke the anxieties required to shift further commodities (Penny 2011). Sex sells and the commercial imagining of women's bodies continue to be synonymous with active male sexual desire and women's passive 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey 2009 [1975]: 19). It is important to clarify that my

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<sup>23</sup> Since 2010 there has been a number of attempts to reform abortion law and introduce restrictions. The Conservative minister for women Maria Miller has backed calls for a reduction in the abortion limit to 20 weeks, while the Conservative Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt said in 2012 that the limit should be reduced to 12 weeks.

<sup>24</sup> Women's Aid launched the *SOS: Save Refuges, Save Lives* campaign in September 2014. Their website reports a crisis in specialist domestic violence refuge provision (Women's Aid 2015). Eaves for Women, a leading women's charity established in 1977 to support vulnerable women and campaign against male violence to women announced its closure in October 2015 due to lack of funds.

concern about female objectification does not stem from a moralist agenda and I actively repudiate attempts to align contemporary feminism with neo-conservative crusades over the sexualisation of women's bodies because their ultimate aim is not liberation but the repression of women's sexual agency. This thesis argues that what we are witnessing as alleged sexual empowerment is instead the more limited right to self-objectify within a heteronormative paradigm of male desire. These observations regarding objectification underpin the research questions concerning how as a woman, one enters into the frame of representation while simultaneously attempting to dismantle its terms.

## **Key contemporary debates**

An account of the return to the values and concerns of 1970s and 1980s feminist activism must take account of the contemporary theoretical developments and the vast shift in the media landscape that have taken place, some of which I have outlined already. The feminism of the new millennium harnesses new technologies and platforms to develop pioneering strategies to confront sexism and misogyny. This can be witnessed in the prevalence of online social media as campaigning and knowledge sharing tools, which ensures visibility in both the mainstream media and public consciousness. I suggest that new online technologies are being actively used as a means to share personal experiences of sexism in order to understand how they are part of systematic discrimination against women and girls. In turn, the knowledge gained from online sharing is used to develop strategies with the aim to change the conditions of women and girls' lives. In this way, I see these uses of online feminist activism as a contemporary development of 1970s consciousness-raising. Rather than a group of women being physically gathered in a room to discuss their experiences within the matrix of patriarchal society, women are coming together on online platforms and websites to similarly share, build an understanding of both new and ongoing challenges facing women, reach out to potential allies and gain

confidence and strength from each other. For example, Hilary Robinson's Feminism–Art–Theory Facebook page is an important resource for a younger generation of women who find that women's contribution to art practices are still overlooked in art educations and cultural institutions. Meanwhile the Russian feminist punk group Pussy Riot provide an insightful example of online visual activism through their use of online video sharing platforms and social networking sites as part of their radical interventions. Operating through the staging of unauthorised performances in public locations, the group quickly edit provocations into punk music videos and post these online. *Punk Prayer – Mother of God, Chase Putin Away* (2012) was the name of a song by the group and the title of an edited video of the guerrilla performance of the song in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. Although church officials halted the five members of Pussy Riot within minutes, the online video went viral and was followed by the arrest of three of the group in 2012 and subsequent two-year prison sentences. On appeal, Yekaterina Samutsevich, who had been prevented by church officials from actually reaching the stage in the Cathedral, had her sentence suspended. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina both served twenty-one months in prison. The case raised global awareness of the oppression experienced in Russia, particularly by women and the LGBT community and led to widespread condemnation of Putin, the Russian President (Suchland 2012).

In the UK, Laura Bates founded the Everyday Sexism Project in 2012 in order to give women and girls a platform to voice their daily experiences of sexism. The Everyday Sexism Project has an online blog where women can post their accounts of sexist encounters and a Twitter account that further circulates these statements. The website information details some of the difficulties facing women today that led to Everyday Sexism's formation:

It seems to be increasingly difficult to talk about sexism, equality and women's rights in a modern society that perceives itself to have achieved gender equality. In this 'liberal',

'modern' age, to complain about everyday sexism or suggest that you are unhappy about the way in which women are portrayed and perceived renders you likely to be labelled 'uptight', 'prudish', a 'militant feminist', or a 'bra burner' (Everyday Sexism 2012).

Bates' concern about the lack of conversations around sexual harassment and rape was that women's experiences of abuse were being reduced to unfortunate individual occurrences, while girls and boys were being socialised into accepting these behaviours as the norm. This silence, Bates suggested, hides a systematic abuse of women in the public sphere. She was proved correct when she launched the blog, which was inundated with women's testimonials as they had previously had few platforms or spaces to talk about these experiences. The project has since advised the British Transport Police in the training of police officers, which has led to a new acknowledgement of women's experiences of sexual harassment on public transport and an ongoing media campaign by Transport for London to increase awareness of this issue and to encourage women to report incidents (Bates 2013). This provides a pertinent example of contemporary modes of consciousness-raising and how the strategy activates 'the personal is political' to engender vital social and political change.

## **Intersectionality**

The current resurgence of feminism places a particular emphasis on the iniquities of gender inequality as seen through the lens of intersectionality. This concept provides a way of theorising the interconnections between all systems of oppression and discrimination including sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism and ableism. Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American Professor of Law and one of the founders of critical race theory coined the term in 1989 in her landmark book 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist

Theory and Antiracist Politics'.<sup>25</sup> Drawing on a long history of black feminist theory and interventions from Maria Stewart and Anna Julia Cooper in the nineteenth century, to Angela Davis and Deborah K. King in the 1970s and 1980s, intersectionality was a way of calling attention to the gaps in feminist, class and civil rights discourses and the ways in which 'women of colour are invisible in plain sight' (Crenshaw in Adewunmi 2014).<sup>26</sup> Crenshaw names a number of employment law cases in the USA where black women struggled for justice on the basis that they could not claim all women or all black people were discriminated against in instances where white women or black men were not subject to the same detrimental employment practices. The impact of intersectional discriminations, Crenshaw argues, is much greater than 'the sum of racism and sexism' (1989: 140) and this increased effect must be accounted for in legal, political and social analysis.

As part of the legal team representing Anita Hill in 1991 in her sexual harassment case against the then Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, Crenshaw observed the ways in which racial and sexual discrimination intertwined to work against Hill in the court of law. Thomas' claim that the case was 'a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks' (cited in Friedman 2011), saw the case enveloped by racial politics that overlooked Hill's experience of racism and sexism as a black woman. While white feminists supported Anita Hill, Crenshaw saw this backing as exhibiting a colour-blindness that overlooked Hill's race to focus on gender discrimination. In contrast, black women largely supported Clarence Thomas on the grounds of race but overlooked the gender discrimination that Hill was subjected to as a woman (Crenshaw in Adewunmi 2014). On a personal level, Crenshaw

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<sup>25</sup> For further discussion see: Crenshaw, Kimberlé (1991), 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, No. 6, pp. 1241–99.

<sup>26</sup> Ann Phoenix, the keynote speaker at Historical Contexts of Black British Feminism at Goldsmiths, University of London on the 11 December 2014, observed that Crenshaw's term became widely recognised because it encapsulated the theories of difference being articulated by black academics during the 1980s and 1990s. The term's particular merit was that it provided a way of theorising all people in terms of power relations that was not exclusionary.

references one of many experiences that led her to recognise and subsequently name intersectionality. She details an occasion while studying at Harvard Law School when a black male colleague who was a member of a prestigious men's club that had very few black members, invited Crenshaw and another black male student to visit the club as his guests. When they arrived it initially appeared, to their outrage, that they were being asked to enter by the back door. However, when it was clarified that only Crenshaw was being asked to enter by the back door, not because she was black but because she was a woman, her male colleague stopped protesting (Crenshaw 1989: 160–161). Crenshaw understood these discriminatory experiences of racism and sexism as inextricable from each other and argued for the need to understand how multiple oppressions and discriminations intersect to produce further categories of marginalisation.

Over the last twenty-five years, the theory of intersectionality has been expanded to include the additional comprehension of discriminatory practices that are applied to those who stand outside of normative paradigm in terms of class, sexual orientation, age, physical ability and health (Phoenix 2014). Intersectionality has become the defining issue of feminism in the twenty-first century where to date the successes of the women's liberation movement are largely seen to have benefitted white middle-class women more than black and working class women (Achola 2015). This limited progression for the small numbers of middle-class women deemed acceptable to masculine culture means that many of the women who have achieved positions of visibility and influence are still constrained within patriarchal modes of power.

Hazel Carby's critical essay 'White Woman Listen!: Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood', published in 1982, urges white feminists to recognise that not all women's experience of patriarchal systems and discrimination are the same. In particular, Carby notes that black women's relationship to work and domesticity



is fundamentally different to that of white women's and this gap needs to be accounted for in feminist discourses. Patricia Hill Collins maintains that black women's domestic labour in their own homes constitutes a vital form of resistance to patriarchal modes of social and economic oppression that conspire to harm black families (2008: 45–68). Bhandar and Ferreira da Silva note that black women played a leading role in the international wages for housework campaign,<sup>27</sup> which, they suggest, challenges the 'bourgeois norms of the family economy' (2013). Carby contends that black women experience kinship relationships differently to white women, operating within much wider networks and a greater range of positions in their communities, thereby allowing black women more authority than white women would have. She adds that black women are unable to disengage from black men in the way that the women's liberation movement called for in the 1970s and 1980s because they witness the discrimination their fathers, husbands and sons experience at the hands of white culture and support them in the battle against racism. On this matter she cites the Combahee River Collective, 'we struggle together with Black men against racism, while we struggle with Black men about sexism' (Carby 1997 [1982]: 111).<sup>28</sup> In the UK, Southall Black Sisters, set up in 1979, call attention to the impact of racism on both black men and women while at the same time highlighting the particular challenges that black women face at the intersections of racism and sexism. The increased discrimination and marginalisation black and Asian women experience intensifies their difficulties in accessing help against sexist and misogynistic practices such as domestic violence, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. Calling for these problems to be seen within a paradigm of global violence against all women rather than being held up as the barbaric practices of the Other, Southall Black Sisters draw attention to the

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<sup>27</sup> The International Wages for Housework campaign was originally co-founded in 1972 in Padua, Italy by Selma James, Brigitte Galtier, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici. In 1974, Margaret Prescod and Wilmette Brown co-founded the International Black Women for Wages for Housework campaign in New York City, USA.

<sup>28</sup> The Combahee River Collective was a black feminist lesbian organisation in Boston from 1974 to 1980.

difficulties of fighting sexism within their communities while battling together against racism.

## **Heteronormativity and the construction of gender**

The critique of patriarchal culture and its stratagems has resulted in the naming of heteronormativity by queer theorist Michael Warner in 'Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet' (1991). The concept originates from feminist theory of the 1970s and 1980s and, in particular, Gayle Rubin and Adrienne Rich's writing on the relationship between gender and sexuality within heterosexual culture. Gayle Rubin's 1975 essay 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex', argued that Western society 'rests upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality' (1975: 179). Rubin advanced the notion of a 'sex/gender system', which reinforces normative constructs of gendered identity so that women are compelled into matrimony and reproduction. She subsequently developed the concept of the 'erotic pyramid', which she proposed underpins Western structures:

Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top of the erotic pyramid. [...] Stable, long-term lesbian and gay male couples are verging on respectability, but bar dykes and promiscuous men are hovering just above the groups at the very bottom of the pyramid. The most despised sexual castes currently include transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sado-masochists, sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models, and the lowliest of them all, those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries (1991: 279).<sup>29</sup>

Writing in 1980, Adrienne Rich called for feminism to move beyond the assumption of female heterosexuality and question how female

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<sup>29</sup> Rubin's pyramid provides a useful framework for the hierarchy of sexualities and sexual expression. However, Rubin's statement also implies an objection to societal censure of paedophiles, for which she has been criticised. Her essay 'Blood under the Bridge: Reflections on "Thinking Sex"' (2011: 37–39) clarifies that she was trying to think through the way that teenagers' sexual expression is curtailed by the public concern about paedophilia and that she does not condone the sexual abuse of minors by adults. The transgression of erotic generational boundaries and subsequent societal disapproval also relates to consenting relationships between adults where one partner is substantially older than the other.

sexuality has been regulated by patriarchal cultures (637). Furthermore, Rich argued that female heterosexuality might well be 'imposed, managed, organized, propagandized and maintained by force, including both physical violence and false consciousness' (Williams 2013: 119). These discursive theoretical developments laid the foundation for Judith Butler's conceptualisation of gender construction and performativity in her 1988 essay 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory' and her ground-breaking book *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler argued that gender performativity is the reiteration of cultural representations of femininity and masculinity that operate to present the appearance of stable gender markers. In turn, these become constitutive of gender, as boys and girls learn to emulate and perform culturally determined behaviours in order to be accepted as male or female within heteronormative culture.

Alongside these developments, the emergent queer community dismissed the term 'homophobia' as limited. One of the shortfalls of the term was attributed to the assumption that homophobia applied only to gay men, thereby overlooking gay women's experience of discrimination and prejudice (Williams 2013: 120). Furthermore, the focus on homophobia places the emphasis onto individual attitudes rather than expressing the endemic culture of heterosexual privilege and the mechanisms that operate to disenfranchise gay women and men. Warner's development of the concept of heteronormativity allowed for the critique of 'heterosexuality as an institution that constructs and regulates both homosexuality and heterosexuality on the basis of normative notions of sexuality and gender' (Williams 2013: 121). This understanding provides a valuable theoretical framework to enable analysis of the ways in which patriarchal culture polices sexuality and propagates gendered narratives that uphold hegemonic ideology.

## Feminist art

Increasing concern about the conditions of post-feminist culture has coincided with a review of feminism in contemporary art. There has been a spate of feminist exhibitions since 2007 re-examining historical feminist art practices (Robinson 2013) beginning with *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, USA, and *Global Feminisms* at the Brooklyn Museum, New York City, USA (both 2007). The latter exhibition opened at the same time as the new Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, featuring the American artist Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979) as its permanent centrepiece. In the same year the Museum of Fine Arts in Bilbao, Spain, exhibited *It's Time for Action* and *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism*. 2009 to 2010 saw the nearly year-long *Elles: Women Artists* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The American art historian, critic and curator Amelia Jones, and the British academics Catherine Grant, and Hilary Robinson have each published papers on the re-appraisal of 1970s and 1980s feminist practice and artwork in a contemporary context. Grant raises the question that 'if second-wave feminism was now fashionable, what was it that drew such interest?' (2011: 265). While Robinson asks:

That so many major museums felt that it was timely to re-assess this movement and its intersections with the art world provokes the questions: What feminist politics informed these exhibitions, and what feminist politics did they produce?' (2013: 130).

Jones articulates an anxiety that the revived interest is predominantly driven by market interest and is limited by what art practices are commodifiable: 'surely it's no accident, for example, that the messy activism-driven feminist practices tend to be left out' (2010: 11). Drawing attention to the prevalence of big name exhibitions and surveys in the international art world, Jones contends that in relation to feminist art practices they serve to deracinate the artworks from crucial histories, discourse and activism.

Jones and Grant both identify a Euro–American shift towards politicised artwork in a post–9/11 world as well as a nostalgia for the allegedly simpler era of the 1970s. Grant’s paper, however, examines the re–engagement with 1970s feminist art practice from the perspective of younger feminist women and the notion of ‘fandom’. This reading looks beyond the art institutions’ surveys and the ‘bad girl’ rhetoric of the 1990s to a grassroots return to the messiness of feminist art activism. Grant argues that the young feminist ‘fans’ who look back to the 1970s for inspiration do not simply do so with nostalgic rose–tinted lenses but frequently deploy their engagement with past feminist practice to problematise the present contemporary conditions affecting women. In this way emergent feminist artists are using critical analysis to re–situate past feminist discourse that is either overlooked or over–simplified in the larger art market context into contemporary conditions relative to young feminist concerns. Katy Deepwell maintains that:

Feminism is still the tool through which women empower themselves, assume the right to name and describe their perspectives and take part in a self–reflexive, developing, open–ended set of debates about what it means to be women (plural) in a patriarchal culture. Feminist debate conceived in this sense is a political process and a set of strategies (1995: 5).

Over twenty years later, I would argue, this situation still holds true and, it is in the spirit of Deepwell’s statement that this thesis is written.

## **Chapter outline**

Chapter one will consider the challenges for women entering the frame of representation, and the attendant issues of the gaze, objectification and the politics of looking. In order to do this I will reference Annette Kuhn’s analysis of representation in *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (1985), Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock’s critical deconstruction of images of women in *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970–*

1985 (1987), Pollock's 'What's wrong with "Images of Women"?' and John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972). I will draw upon the late Stuart Hall's critical analysis on issues of representation in relation to both race and gender. Hall, a leading voice in the UK and internationally from the 1950s to his death in 2014, is particularly relevant to this thesis because of the influence of his theoretical developments on feminist cultural studies through his work at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies from 1964 to 1979.<sup>30</sup> Hall's work on issues of representation provides a direct link with Angela McRobbie who joined the Centre in 1974 and expanded Hall's theories in relation to feminist analysis. Hall was also a significant influence on fine art practitioners working at the forefront of feminist and black art practices from the 1970s onwards and was notably influential in the Black Arts Movement throughout the 1980s and 1990s in the UK (Spivak, Gilbert and Fisher 2014: 66–72).<sup>31</sup> Hall was influenced by Marxism, the civil rights movement and feminism, and drew upon these initiatives to develop critical analyses of cultural representations and their role in constructing meaning. Through a consideration of Hall's work, this chapter will explore how representation operates and whom it serves.

A discussion of Michael Pickering's book *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation* (2001), will demonstrate how stereotype operates to create intentional divisions in society and perpetuate inequality while presenting itself as both harmless and truthful. The chapter will discuss the difficulties inherent in attempting to forge positive stereotyping. The American feminist scholar, Peggy Phelan, provides a key framework to the ideas in this thesis through her discussion of the dangers of representation and visibility for women

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<sup>30</sup> Hall became the Centre's Director in 1968.

<sup>31</sup> Hall was the subject of a three-channel video installation *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012) and subsequent single-screen film *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013) by the British artist John Akomfrah, a founding member of the Black Audio Film Collective in the UK that ran from 1982–1998 and that was profoundly influenced by Hall's ideas. The Black Audio Film Collective comprised of John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, Reece Auguiste, Trevor Mathison, Edward George and Claire Joseph. Joseph left in 1985 and was replaced by David Lawson. John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul and David Lawson proceeded to found Smoking Dogs Films in 1998.

and her advocacy of 'active vanishing' in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993). Phelan has consistently related critical theory to art practices over the course of her career, contributing many vital texts that examine the conditions of feminist art practice, predominantly in a Euro-American context, that focuses on the politics of representation. The chapter will examine the theoretical problems concerning the frame of representation by means of an analysis of *Cornered* (1988) by the American artist Adrian Piper, *Make Up Make Down* (1978) by the Croatian artist Sanja Iveković, and *There is a Myth* (1984) by the British artist Catherine Elwes. Finally, the chapter will examine the critical issue of representation in a contemporary context.

Chapter two will re-visit 1970s and 1980s feminist video art practices and their exploration of representation by means of a discussion of critical writing by leading moving image scholars and practitioners. Taking Julia Knight's concern about the marginalisation of women's video practice as a starting point, this chapter will explore why it is critical to look back to women's early video works of the 1970s and 1980s. This chapter will explore the reasons why women artists used the camera in their practices and how they exploited this technology to challenge the circuit of representation. Drawing upon Elwes' writing on questions around representation, this chapter will critically analyse *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977) by Martha Rosler, *Hey, Chicky!!!* (1978) by Nina Sobell and *Free, White and 21* (1980) by Howardena Pindell. These artists utilised the medium of video in order to deconstruct dominant narratives and cultural imagery relating to gender and race and expose underlying systems of oppression and discrimination. The videos are all works that I have encountered online and have impacted on my own critical development as a feminist in my personal life and as an artist and researcher. The accessibility of artworks by an older generation and their connection to a younger generation demonstrates an important critical link with contemporary feminist art practices.

Chapter three starts with an exploration of the post-feminist backlash that materialised in the late 1980s and early 1990s and which still characterises mainstream discourses around equality even as feminist activism re-emerges among a newly radicalised youth. The chapter will consider the generation gap between 1970s and 1980s feminism and post-feminist thought in relation to art practice by means of Mira Schor's writing on Vanessa Beecroft in *A Decade of Negative Thinking: Essays of Art, Politics, and Daily Life* (2009). Angela McRobbie's text *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009) will provide a foundation to investigate how post-feminism has been used to disrupt the women's movement and forestall generational continuity that is only now being overcome. McRobbie has been at the forefront of feminist cultural theory for nearly four decades since beginning her early research career at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, lead by Stuart Hall. McRobbie adapts Hall's theory of representation to apply a critical feminist analysis to the cultural conditions of contemporary femininity and sub-cultures within a post-feminist, neo-liberal framework. The chapter will connect McRobbie's analysis to the sociologists Kath Woodward and Sophie Woodward's discussions of Western female visibility and invisibility within contemporary mainstream culture in their collaborative text *Why Feminism Matters: Feminism Lost and Found* (2009). Kath and Sophie Woodward are a mother and daughter who provide a useful cross-generational analysis of feminist politics since the 1970s. Woodward and Woodward, in contrast to Phelan, insist on the importance of female visibility. The chapter will examine their ideas along with the theories embedded in contemporary feminist video practice.

The chapter will also provide a critical analysis of three contemporary video works. The Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist's solo exhibition, *Eyeball Massage*, at The Hayward Gallery, London, took place just as I was starting the PhD in Autumn 2011. One of the few women granted a solo exhibition at the gallery, Rist is a highly successful moving image artist who is frequently seen as advocating a



post-feminist position similar to that of Beecroft. This chapter will analyse one of the works from the exhibition, *Selfless in the Bath of Lava* (1994), from my perspective as a younger woman engaged in the current resurgence of feminism. The chapter will then discuss Phelan's notion of 'active vanishing' through an analysis of *Female Fist* (2006) by the Swedish artist Kajsa Dahlberg. Finally, the chapter will examine the challenges of race and gender within heteronormative culture through a discussion of *I Want Me Some Brown Sugar* (2013) by the British artist Ope Lori.

Chapter four will provide a critical review of my own art practice by examining the influences in my work that will encompass the theories and artworks I have been researching over the course of my PhD study. This chapter will discuss gender in relation to contemporary dance and what prompted my shift to working in a fine art practice. In the course of the chapter, I will discuss the use of performance to camera, narrative and direct address, the manipulation of archive footage as well as re-enactment. This chapter will identify how my practice has led to the emergence of new knowledge. This analysis will be structured around the issues and theoretical underpinnings that I have discussed throughout the previous chapters.

## Chapter 1: The dilemmas of representational visibility for women

We learn ourselves through women made by men. A man is not a male film-maker, or a male writer. He is simply a film-maker or a writer. It is all a clever sleight of hand. Even our fears of what we might become are from them  
(Rowbotham 1973: 40).

### Introduction

In 1973, the feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham published *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* detailing the oppressive conditions of women's existence within patriarchal capitalist society. Rowbotham argued that women encountered 'an inability to find ourselves in existing culture', which positions male experience as the norm within dominant ideology (1973:35). This condition was similarly endured by other marginalised groups: 'the working class, blacks, national minorities within capitalism all encounter themselves as echoes, they lose themselves in the glitter and gloss of the images capitalism projects onto them' (1973:35). Rowbotham's concern about the repercussions of representational invisibility for women was further provoked by the everyday practicalities of women's lives. Rowbotham saw that women were far more likely than men to live in financial precarity and dependency and to be responsible for children and domestic labour with the result that women often had little recourse to time and space of their own. The primacy of the white male subject position that Rowbotham identifies and its control over representational systems in Western cultures resulted in a situation where feminine gender identity continues to be constructed and determined by patriarchal culture and internalised by women to damaging effect.

Forty years after Rowbotham's book explored the gap between women's lived experience and cultural depictions of femininity, the breach still exists. The symptoms and superficial appearances may have changed; today's representations reflect the increasing commodification of identity and the mainstreaming of pornography

(Levy 2005, Power 2009), however, many of the root problems of marginalisation and objectification and their attendant iniquities remain the same. Angela McRobbie details the contemporary conditions that frame women's lives in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009) arguing that young women in the West are unwittingly coerced into a 'new sexual contract' by neo-liberal capitalist society (54–93). This 'gender aware' regime concedes the right to education and employment, although these still have restrictions, in exchange for the acceptance of an otherwise unchanged world order and the discontinuation of any critique of patriarchal systems (McRobbie 2009: 57). In return for gaining access to certain privileges, women are required to reject the feminist politics that could result in a radical shift towards full equality and participation in society (McRobbie 2009: 18).

McRobbie names the 'fashion/beauty complex' as pivotal in ensuring the success of the new sexual contract (McRobbie 2009: 71). While women can now access some of the entitlements associated with masculinity, in exchange they have to enact particular modes of being that serve to reassure patriarchal culture that she is still primarily concerned with her visual appearance and desirability. McRobbie argues:

Patriarchal authority is subsumed within a regime of self-policing whose strict criteria form the benchmark against which women must endlessly and repeatedly measure themselves, from the earliest years right through to old age (McRobbie 2009: 63).

This transformation operates to make patriarchal power increasingly invisible and more difficult to counter as neo-liberal individualistic discourse presents women's participation in consumer culture as bound up in their right to make choices (McRobbie 2009: 68). McRobbie names this condition as 'post-feminist masquerade' whereby the 'heterosexual matrix' identified by Judith Butler is rigorously re-inscribed by mainstream narratives (McRobbie 2009:

64). At the same time, the fashion/beauty complex reinforces whiteness as the 'cultural dominant', which operates as a 'mode of re-colonisation' (McRobbie 2009: 69). Western clothing, sexual behaviour and nuclear kinship relations are held up as progressive and young black and Asian women are invited to emulate this white model in order to take part in mainstream culture. Participation in these customs is considered proof of a cultured, emancipated subject (McRobbie 2009: 87–88). This re-colonisation goes hand in hand with the insinuation that race, just like gender, is no longer relevant in the West and therefore the politics of anti-racism and of feminism are overly aggressive and passé (McRobbie 2009: 69). Consumer culture's dominant message is that we all have choices now; we just need to make the right ones.

Through analysis of advertisements, magazines, films and television content, McRobbie interrogates the ways in which feminine representation is combined with a knowing postmodern irony to reinforce the new sexual contract and maintain patriarchal hegemony (2009: 17). The deluge of stereotypical and retrogressive images to which women are still subjected form a relentless onslaught of expectations and rigid definitions of femininity that create an invisible boxing in. These markers constitute a new set of rules to which women and girls feel they must conform. In this environment, Kat Banyard<sup>32</sup> argues the post-feminist notion that equality has been achieved and the struggle for women's rights is over has been revealed to be a falsehood (in Aitkenhead 2012), one that is designed to disrupt the progression of feminist activism. Within the current neo-liberal capitalist condition, the ideal female body continues to be inscribed in particular ways: she is white, middle-class, slender, young and able-bodied. She is commodified, exploited, sexualised, limited, and this depiction of woman smiles back at us from the outlets of mass media every day.

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<sup>32</sup> Banyard founded the campaign group UK Feminista in 2010 and published *The Equality Illusion: The Truth about Women and Men Today* in the same year.

## **Representation in a culturally constricted framework**

Any challenge to the dominant patriarchal culture must consider why the politics of representation are so significant and what is at stake. How does the circuit of cultural production impact on different social groups and in particular, on those who are marginalised? What will a shift in representation achieve? To answer these questions, it is critical to analyse how representation operates and whom it serves.

Annette Kuhn observes that 'from its beginnings, feminism has regarded ideas, language and images as crucial in shaping women's (and men's) lives' (1985: 2). In consequence,

The women's movement has always been interested in images, meanings, representations – and especially in challenging representations which, while questionable or offensive from a feminist standpoint, are from other points of view – if they are noticed at all – perfectly acceptable (Kuhn 1985: 3).

Kuhn identifies feminism as a key driver in theorising the seemingly unassailable façade of visual representation. By intersecting with a consideration of Marxist theory on the superstructure – 'ideas, culture, ideology' (Kuhn 1985: 4) – the women's liberation movement was able to contemplate the ways in which strategies that called attention to gender discrimination could disrupt the status quo of hegemonic representations and rupture its implacable mantle. Louis Althusser's work on ideology as constitutive of identity, combined with Claude Lévi-Strauss' development of structuralism and Roland Barthes' work on images, revealed that meanings are generated through the codes contained in visual representations and although they appear inherent and natural, they are manufactured through systems of signification (Kuhn 1985: 5). Kuhn details the ways in which feminist theory added a critical layer of analysis to theoretical and philosophical advances and in doing so revealed them to be critically flawed as a result of their gender-blindness (Kuhn 1985: 5).

The ongoing deconstruction of dominant imagery remains vital work, Kuhn contends, and the multifarious contradictions that cultural hegemony seeks to hide must be exposed in order for the current paradigm of power to be disrupted (1985: 7). This continues to be the case thirty years later and it is through critical analysis, as Kuhn makes clear, that the charged meanings coded deep within visual representations can be identified, questioned and disputed.

Referencing the BBC television series *Ways of Seeing* and subsequent book by the art critic John Berger in 1972, Kuhn notes the ways in which representations are constructed in social and historical contexts by those in positions of authority. Berger highlighted the systematic exploitation of women's bodies in both fine art and consumer culture as an objectified Other, positioned for the gratification of the masculinised gaze. By examining the hierarchies of power depicted in the image, Berger demonstrated how the notion of men's apparent superiority over women is widely circulated and reiterated so that female inequality is perceived as a cultural norm. This disparity of power and its normalisation as simply the way men and women are, Berger argues, results in markedly different social bearings. For men, this means that his 'presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies' (Berger 1972: 45). In contrast, 'a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her' (Berger 1972: 46). This culturally enforced difference based on notions of the gender binary produces a situation whereby the ideological narratives informing mainstream culture are internalised by women and girls and become deeply embedded in the female psyche.

In opposition to the internalisation of phallogentric<sup>33</sup> ideals, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock's edited collection of texts *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970 – 1985* (1987), demonstrates the breadth of analysis of visual representation

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<sup>33</sup> 'The advancement of the masculine as the source of power and meaning through cultural, ideological and social systems' (Gamble 2001: 294).

carried out in that period by women artists, critics, theorists and writers. Parker and Pollock observed that just as feminists recognised the sexist content of imagery across films, advertisements, magazines and fine art among others, it was 'also necessary to admit that we were profoundly shaped as women by these images through which we came to imagine what we were or might be' (1987: 125). Pollock's essay 'What's Wrong with "Images of Women"?' (1987 [1977]: 132–138) dealt with the difficult issue of how to decolonise female imagery when the feminine form is so over-determined in visual culture. The essay also raised the problem of the category 'images of women' as this assumes imagery to be a reflection of the world rather than operating as a signifier of ideological systems in which the meaning of 'woman' is deeply embedded (Pollock 1987 [1977]: 133). This assumption risks activists thinking that it is enough to create 'positive' or 'good' imagery of women in opposition to the 'bad' imagery patriarchal culture propagates. One of the most concerning risks Pollock identifies is that the cultural signification of woman-as-sign is so encompassing that attempts at subversive imagery are recuperable by dominant ideology and simply feed back into the loop of the objectification of women.<sup>34</sup> To circumnavigate this danger, Pollock insists that women artists need to have a strong understanding of the ways in which ideology functions through the image in order to create alternative representations to the seemingly impervious façade of mainstream depictions. It is this feminist analysis of the mechanisms of representational systems that remains so important today. As such, the collection of texts in *Framing Feminism* still provides a valuable tool to the current generation of younger women – who on the one hand are surrounded by image-based culture and are highly visually literate, and the other hand, have been cut off from feminist critique, which might reveal how gender binaries and traditional roles are normalised and maintained in the image.

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<sup>34</sup> At a research event I organised to exhibit my practice-based research and discuss counter-strategies to hegemonic representations at Chelsea College of Arts on the 1 April 2015, the London-based American artist Eldi Hablo spoke about the risks of fetishist depictions and her dismay at finding images of her *Wrestling Women* paintings (2008 – 2011) co-opted by a pornography website.

Historically, representation was understood to contain a double meaning: firstly, the image is a sign, standing for an object, a person, an event; secondly, it is seen to be a reflection of reality. This second meaning is implied by the word itself: to *re*-present is to present something that was already there in some shape or form (Hall 1997: 6). Hall suggests that it is also useful to consider the political and legal meaning; a representative is someone who stands in for members of the general public. So the idea that a depiction is both a reflection of reality and also stands in for another meaning is integral to the concept of representation (Hall 1997: 6). Thus, an image, which represents some aspect of the world must necessarily contain the notion of giving cultural meaning to what is depicted. If, however, representation is merely a distortion of reality, then, Hall contends, understanding the distortion should simply be a case of measuring the gap between the depiction and 'reality'. As he points out, though, this presupposes the existence of a true, fixed meaning that can be quantified. The advent of postmodernism in the late twentieth century shifted and complicated notions of authenticity, reality and fixed identities. What emerged in their place was an understanding of the world as multiple, plural, fractured and in constant movement that allowed for the nuanced analysis of complex cultural constructs. Hall accommodates the postmodern condition arguing that representation is far more complicated than a mere gap between the 'real' and its simulacrum and contains inherent and multiple contradictions that are key to the circuit of cultural production.

While the meaning an image holds depends on individual perception and what Norman Bryson calls 'cultural baggage' (2000: 3), the way in which the depiction is presented informs the interpretive process. This process is absolutely key; instead of representation being reflective of reality, it is constitutive of meaning and subjectivity. In order to fully understand the interpretive process, Hall argues, we must grasp how signification enters an event and becomes constitutive of its meaning. Thus we need to examine culture as the primary way human beings make sense of and allocate



meaning in order to construct a 'social world', which in turn depends upon shared concepts and beliefs (Hall 2007: 9). Within this social framework, interpretations are plural and multiple, however, at the same time they are underpinned by shared cultural maps of meanings, which people need in order to understand the world and communicate ideologically. Cultures are based on these shared conceptual maps, which operate as systems of classification and form an understanding of relationships and shared attributes. While the ability to understand and deploy conceptual thoughts and classifications is a human attribute, the shared maps of meaning established in society are learnt and internalised as we become cultured subjects.

Thus, representation holds enormous significance because it is the very foundation on which we make sense of the world around us, with which we construct our subjectivity and through which our position in society is coded and deciphered (Hall et al. 2013: xvii–xxvi). Stuart Hall observed that representation conceals its constructed nature through superficially appearing as a simple and commonsense way of comprehending the world. Human beings are immersed in the cultural circuits they live in and this contrives to make representation transparent and seemingly natural. The suggestion of commonsense knowledge that supposedly reflects the world starkly contrasts with the complex constructions of beliefs, hierarchies and power that are coded within and disseminated by representational systems. Language and communication - anything that is capable of conveying meaning through symbols and signs such as body language, facial gestures, music, digital communications and fashion - complete the circuit of representation (Hall 1997: 11). Signifying practices depend on culture, which acts to disseminate signification through visual and textual modes of communication.

In a globalised world, Hall contends, the media has become the dominant system for the circulation of meaning. These extensive media networks raise the question of power; who wields the control to

convey meaning to whom? (1997: 14). Feminism argues that this power continues to be retained by elite white men (hooks 2002: 4). It is within this framework of white patriarchal power that the image has become a key transmitter of ideology and, as such, requires particular attention from cultural theorists in order to expose the messages coded within the depiction (Hall 1997: 5). The sheer excess of both still and moving visual images in contemporary Western culture facilitates the subliminal methods at work in representation because one is required to look and think carefully in order to fully deconstruct the intended message and decide on one's own position. In the face of so much visual content, analysing the multitude of representations people encounter every day becomes an impossible task. As people go about their daily lives, they continuously absorb the messages contained in the image, often without the full awareness that they are consuming dominant ideologies that favour controlling groups while being prejudiced against those who are considered Other. The ability to produce and control knowledge through communication technologies of every kind is an incredibly robust ideological system. Arguably, representation is the most powerful system of producing and disseminating meaning on both a local and global scale.

Within this circuit of cultural production what is absent signifies as much as what is present. Every representation is constructed and encoded through visible and invisible ciphers that are in turn decoded by the viewer (Hall 1980).<sup>35</sup> The codes that are visible are marked in the image while others remain unmarked; a relationship is formed between the two as the marked signifiers invoke the absent ones. In 2013, the Chilean artist Carina Úbeda exhibited 90 used sanitary towels that the artist had handmade from cloth. She framed in embroidery rings alongside dried apples dangling from the ceiling at the Center of Culture and Health in Quillota, Chile. The cloths are embroidered with text including the words 'destroyed' and 'production'.

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<sup>35</sup> Hall's essay 'Encoding and decoding' (1980) was originally published as 'Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse' in 1973.



Fig. 1  
Exhibition image, *Cloths* (2013), Carina Úbeda.

The exhibition, *Cloths*, was deemed provocative enough for The Daily Mail, a UK tabloid newspaper not known for its reviews on contemporary art, to publish an article on the work (Daily Mail 2013). This article subsequently circulated on social media with comments beneath the article including: 'disgusting', 'foul' and 'repulsive'. While much was made of the used sanitary cloths, very little has been written about the apples, which according to The Daily Mail article represent ovulation. This interpretation was cited across other articles and blogposts (The Huffington Post 2013, Jang 2014). While I have not uncovered the source of this interpretation, which may well have come from the artist herself, I would like to offer another meaning. Predominantly a Catholic country, Chile upholds the widespread Adam and Eve mythology. In Judeo-Christian societies, Eve is strongly linked to the image of the apple, the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which she was tempted to eat and subsequently tempted Adam with. After eating the apple, Adam and Eve became aware of bodily shame for the first time. While both were punished by being cast out of Eden, Eve received further punishments: pain in child-labour and subjugation to man.

Henceforth, 'the curse', woman's menstruation, and bloody childbirth were associated with uncleanness and shame.<sup>36</sup> I suggest that through the inclusion of apples, Úbeda is invoking the cultural relationship between women's bodies, abjection and shame, as well as referencing the way in which these cultural constructs are used to subordinate women. This also accords with the many responses to the work that emphasise its apparently 'disgusting' nature. This interpretation depends on what is not visible but is coded in the signification of menstrual fluid and apples in Judeo-Christian cultures.

## **Ideologies and the construction of stereotypes**

Although there are constant attempts to fix and police meaning, both Hall (2013: 259) and Kuhn (1985: 19) maintain that it is impossible to fully control. For those who deploy representation to shore up their power, the inability to control the intention of the message is weakness in the circuit of cultural production. Meaning can be shifted because it relies on interpretation as well as on temporal and spatial contexts. As already discussed, signification is dependent upon shared understandings and systems of classification and it is these shared structures that patriarchal power attempts to solidify into ideologies with the aim of building 'a relationship between the image and a powerful definition of it' (Hall 1997: 19). In turn, this constructed relationship between signifier and signified becomes both normalised and invisible through its repetition so that the desired definition appears to be the only possible interpretation of the sign (Hall 1997: 19). The ability to control the production of such closed meanings and establish what is viewed as the norm is sought after and mobilised by those in institutional power. Antonio Gramsci named this process – the manipulation of beliefs, perceptions and values – as cultural hegemony, whereby a ruling elite exerts ideological

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<sup>36</sup> The Bible states: 'when a woman has a discharge, and the discharge in her body is blood, she shall be in her menstrual impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. And everything on which she lies during her menstrual impurity shall be unclean. Everything also on which she sits shall be unclean' (Leviticus 15: 19–30). In terms of childbirth, the level of uncleanness is dependent on whether a female or male child is born. The mother is deemed unclean for one week after the birth of a boy and for two weeks after the birth of a girl (Leviticus 12: 6).

domination so that their worldview becomes normalised and works to uphold their power.<sup>37</sup>

The deployment of stereotype as a signifying practice is integral to systems of representation and works by attaching a limited range of characteristics to an identity, which become established and reinforced through repetition as the only characteristics of note (Hall 2013: 247). While superficially engaged in creating simplifications, stereotypes also hold decisive ideological convictions and values (Pickering 2001: 3). Michael Pickering notes that stereotyping is used to negatively portray particular characteristics and assign them as deviant to marginalised groups. In doing so, stereotypes also serve to revalidate the behaviours or features of the dominant group they are measured against and thus function 'as a form of social control' (Pickering 2011: 5). In this way, 'stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes "difference" in a process of Othering (Hall 2013: 247–248). The key mechanism of stereotype – what Pickering calls its 'paradoxical features' (2011: 4) – is the cultural understanding that while stereotypes may be simplifications and exaggerations, there is, at the same time, a kernel of truth in their depictions (Hall: 247). The inflexibility of stereotype generates a sense of order and the 'illusion of precision in defining and evaluating other people' (Pickering 2001: 4). Speaking about her documentary film *Estate: A Reverie* (2015), Andrea Luka Zimmerman, a German filmmaker based in London, argued that the local council intentionally let the housing estate she lived in fall into disrepair thereby invoking a set of stereotyped signifiers against the tenants.<sup>38</sup> The image of the highly visible and run-down estate<sup>39</sup> fed into the national narrative of the feckless and delinquent work-shy on benefits and in turn became a further justification to evict people from their homes under the guise of

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<sup>37</sup> Gramsci was imprisoned by the Italian Fascist regime in 1926 until 1935. During his imprisonment, Gramsci wrote about cultural hegemony in what became known as the *Prison Notebooks* written from 1929 to 1935. They were first published in Italian in the 1950s and were only translated into English in 1971 (Crehan 2002).

<sup>38</sup> Andrea Luka Zimmerman in conversation with Lucy Reynolds at the MIRA 2:2 issue launch at Chelsea College of Art, 19 November 2014.

<sup>39</sup> As each tenant moved out of the building the council boarded over the windows with bright orange boarding thus serving to increase the visibility of dereliction.

problem tenants. To counter this stereotyping, Zimmerman along with Lasse Johansson and Tristan Fennell, who also lived on the estate, devised the photographic project *i am here* (2009–2011), which saw the artists place large scale photographic portraits of the residents over the orange boards and turned the building into an art project that foregrounded marginalised subjectivities.



Fig 2.  
Video still from *Estate, A Reverie* (2015), Andrea Luka Zimmerman.

The underlying suggestion of an alleged truth makes stereotypes hard to dislodge and has many implications for those who are Othered within this system. In the West, particular sets of attributes have been gendered, racialised and classed by the ruling elite over centuries to form powerful referents of pre-defined meanings that shore up that same dominant class. This understanding of how stereotypes operate to marginalise and persecute people transforms its processes from a supposedly naïve way of making sense of the world into a powerful tool that both delineates and oppresses the Other. The circulation of imagery that maintain detrimental stereotypes of marginalised groups are key in producing belief systems that are both flawed and prejudiced. The struggle over representation is one in which diversity and unrealised potentialities are at stake, 'the possibilities of identities which people have not seen represented before' (Hall 1997: 20). It is these potentialities and

possibilities of identities that present a threat to the survival of patriarchal culture.

In order to contest the effects of restrictive representations, increasing attempts are being made to deploy 'positive representations'. The aim of these depictions is to enable alienated communities to disrupt their own cultural marginalisation. Hall raises two problems with this strategy. Firstly, in order for the tactic to succeed, the positive imagery must in turn become fixed; however, this necessitates constant policing due to the impossibility of the task (1997: 20). In the face of unreconstructed systems of representation that simply appropriate and co-opt alternative identities there is no guarantee that the beneficial meaning of positive imagery can be maintained. This coincides with Pollock's concern that affirmative, celebratory images that attempt to challenge the representation of woman-as-body and decolonise the female form simply 'consolidate the potency of the signification rather than rupture it' (Pollock 1987: 135). Secondly, we might ask, who gets to define what is deemed to be positive? It is rare that marginalised groups have the means to determine their own representation and the power to distribute imagery on a scale that could meaningfully combat the powerful mechanisms of the news media, advertising, film and television industries and the fashion/beauty complex. Instead, it is people who have already attained some position of visibility and power within the ongoing structures of cultural hegemony who attempt to re-define and present positive representations. This situation means that 'positive' representations in the West continue to be determined by predominantly white wealthy men and, to a lesser degree, white women. Anita Harris dubs the attachment of celebratory attributes to young women the 'Can-Do Girl' (2004: 13-36), as summed up in a 1997 report sponsored by the cosmetic and skin care company The Body Shop. More recently, the UK has witnessed the 'This Girl Can' campaign launched in 2015 by Sport England to encourage young women to play sport. Rather than exposing and questioning the cultural narratives around femininity and masculinity that operate to

discourage girls from taking part in sporting activities, the campaign centres around reassuring girls (and patriarchal culture) that it is still possible to be feminine and desirable at the same time as running, boxing or going to the gym. This manifests in a familiar application of sexual innuendo – ‘hot and not bothered’ – and exhortations to keep up beauty regimes. The text accompanying the image of a young woman sporting boxing gloves reads ‘underneath these gloves is a beautiful manicure’ while another one reads ‘my gameface has lipstick on it’. The television advert and billboard series supposedly celebrate difference– ‘I jiggle therefore I am’ – however, the campaign operates as a continuation of stereotypical imagery that position woman-as-body, woman-as-sign.

Another example of attempts to combat damaging representations of women in Euro-American cultures through positive stereotypes can be seen in Sheryl Sandberg’s campaign to depict ‘empowering’ images of women. Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, published *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013), and is the founder of Leanin.Org. The premise of Sandberg’s call for women to ‘lean in’ is that women don’t put themselves forward for professional opportunities in the way that men do. This, she suggests, becomes particularly marked when women are thinking about having children. As a result, women tend not to be in the job positions they had anticipated by the time they planned to take maternity leave, which culminates in women feeling more reluctant to go back to their careers afterwards. Sandberg encourages, or admonishes, (middle-class) women to take charge of their destiny and ‘lean in’ to opportunities and career progression. She rightfully acknowledges the damaging impact images can have on women’s ambitions and has set up a collaborative project with Getty Images called the *Lean In Collection*.<sup>40</sup> This provides stock images for newspapers, magazines, websites and other online sources that need a generic image of a woman to illustrate their text. The collection has

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<sup>40</sup> The collection can be viewed at: <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/creative/frontdoor/leanin> [Accessed 23 February 2016].



been praised for its inclusivity due to its featuring of women from different racial and ethnic backgrounds as well as dual heritage and lesbian couples. Conversely, Sandberg has been criticised for portraying a limited array of white middle-class heteronormative ideals (hooks 2013), which is an assessment I agree with.<sup>41</sup> Even those who stand outside of the norm are made to conform to a prescribed set of attributes: attractive physiques, financial means, successful careers, marriage and motherhood, which culminates in ageing 'gracefully'. As an example of positive stereotyping, this collection demonstrates some of the multitude of concerns that arise in the context of female representation. I would argue that the *Lean In* images actually constitute a policing of those standing outside of patriarchal heteronormativity illustrating what McRobbie describes as the adherence to certain equalities of education, employment and participation in visible aspects of society without the intention to fully interrogate the status quo of patriarchal hegemonic power. While these advances towards equality are immensely important, they are also used to mask the underlying inequalities between men and women and the dynamics of intersectional discrimination (Faludi 2013).

Attempts to configure 'positive' representations also risk creating harmful alliances. Calls to reduce the sexualisation of girls such as the 'Let Girls Be Girls' campaign, for example, are backed by feminist campaigners, the Conservative Party, the Church and anti-abortion campaigners along with concerned parents and adults who may or may not have political or religious motives (Smith and Attwood 2011: 327). The feminist aim is to disrupt sexual objectification and move to an environment where women and girls have full and equal access to human rights including sexual agency. For many in the Conservative Party along with the Church and anti-abortion campaigners, however, the aim is to curtail female sexuality and strengthen a discourse of abstinence and purity in which the

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<sup>41</sup> hooks argues that Sandberg uses her racial and class privilege to advance a faux-feminist position that 'obscures and undermines visionary feminist concerns' (2013a).

female body is a vehicle for reproduction and for her husband's pleasure only. These alliances can be dangerous and it is still those who are privileged already in our culture who deem what is and is not a 'positive' image of a woman.

Hall suggests that a more useful way of contesting stereotypes is to inhabit the stereotyped image in order to try and turn the depiction against itself and rupture the representation that has previously appeared naturalised and fixed (1997: 21). Furthermore, Hall argues that the most powerful stereotypes are those that contain fetish because of the significant ways that fetishistic imagery operates through fantasy and identification (1997:21). The role of fetish in representation means that the image 'can only be understood in relation to what cannot be seen, what cannot be shown' (Hall 2013: 256). Fetishism, that which is taboo or forbidden, relies on displacement and disavowal and allows for problematic and conflicting beliefs to find expression. Post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha observes:

It is a non-repressive form of knowledge that allows for the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one official and one secret, one archaic and one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and division (cited in Hall 2013: 257).

In order to deconstruct the politics of representation, Hall argues, it is vital to intervene in the relationship between the image and its fetishistic signification that stereotype is engaged with conveying (1997:21). Disrupting the image from within as a counter-strategy deliberately focuses on the fetishised body in order to contest the delineations of gendered, racial and sexual difference as they are marked in dominant culture (Hall 2013: 264). Hall calls this a process of 'trans-coding negative images with new meaning' (2013: 267, original emphasis).

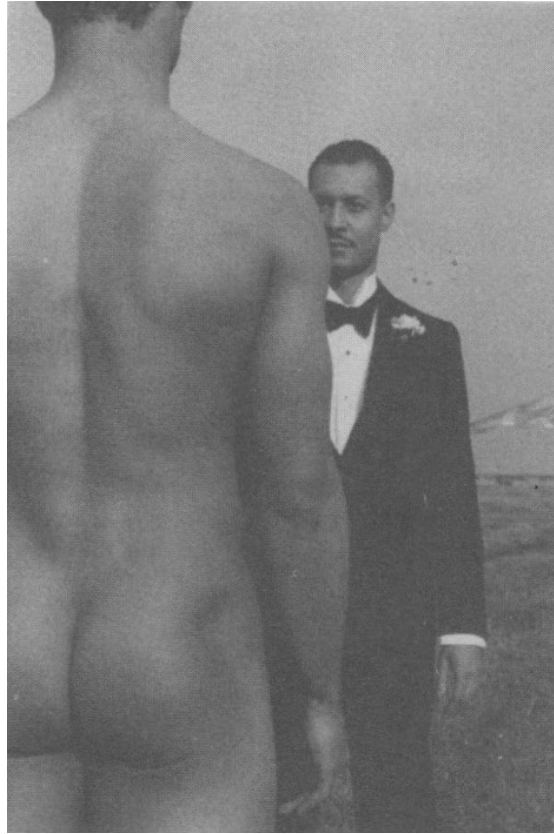


Fig. 3  
Film still from *Looking for Langston* (1989), Isaac Julien.

Giving the example of Isaac Julien's film *Looking for Langston* (1989),<sup>42</sup> part of which Hall narrated, he observes that attempts to disrupt fetishistic imagery are frequently rooted in the act of looking, which can operate to expose and defamiliarise 'the desires and ambivalences which tropes of fetishism inevitably awaken' (2013: 264). I will explore the notion of disrupting fetish in more detail in chapter three through a discussion of Ope Lori's multi-screen installation *I want me some brown sugar* (2013).

## **Representation and feminist art practices**

As discussed in the thesis introduction, in 'The Return of Feminism(s) and the Visual Arts, 1970 – 2009' (2010), Amelia Jones speculates on the possible reasons for the resurgence of interest in feminist art practice in the contemporary international art world and

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<sup>42</sup> In 1983, Isaac Julien along with Martina Attille, Maureen Blackwood, Nadine Marsh-Edwards and Robert Cruz founded the Sankofa Film and Video Collective dedicated to developing black film culture.

raises concerns about the motivation behind it. Jones looks back 'to the rise of the feminist art movement in the 1970s to explore again, in relation to what is being said and made *now* under the name of feminism' (2010: 12, original emphasis). In doing so, Jones raises several points pertinent to my argument and Peggy Phelan's quandary concerning the double bind of visual representation, which I will discuss in the next section.

Jones locates the female body as the channel through which women continue to be objectified yet also the means through which women could historically 'access their own social and political agency' as a site of resistance (2010: 24). The body, Jones maintains, is a critical site for feminist artists making work concerned with female subjectivity and agency (2010: 25). This understanding situates the female body as the nexus of the struggle for women's right to control their own lives. However, Jones raises the concern that since the 1970s, representations of the female form in advertisements, films or pornography have increased in their over-determination of woman-as-sign and as fetish in ways that make feminist endeavours to enact the body and resist the male gaze harder to conceive (2010: 17). I would like to question what this means in terms of feminist depictions of the female body. Is the female body, already over-determined in the late twentieth century, now so accounted for by neo-liberal capitalist exploitation and pornographic depictions that images of women's bodies cannot function as a site of resistance to cultural hegemony?

In considering these questions, I would like to ask whether the conditions of the late 1960s to the late 1980s allowed for women to challenge patriarchal imagistic codes in a way that is not possible now. Or, were there particular modes of provocation operating then that can be excavated and considered anew? My thesis is that the 1970s and 1980s was an era rich in attempts to explore questions of female subjectivity, representation and agency in a way we have not seen again until recently. Catherine Elwes observes of that time that

'women artists were impatient to speak, to visualise and to become visible' (2005: 41). This enthusiasm led them to experiment with a diverse range of media and strategies and found women at the forefront of avant-garde practices including performance and video art. By developing artistic practices to deconstruct the terms of cultural hegemony and its representational methods, women artists began to systemically unsettle the ideologies contained in the image and use their art practices to obstruct, reject and undermine the objectification that women were subjected to.

Some of the strategies women artists used were criticised for being too simplistic and at risk of setting up essentialist 'positive' images of women in a flawed binary against men's 'false' depictions (Pollock in Parker and Pollock 1987: 133). A collective paper by feminist academics, authors and artists at the 1979 Socialist Feminist Conference held in London, raised concerns about a supposedly feminine sensibility or a female aesthetic:

But in celebrating what is essentially female, we may simply be reinforcing oppressive definitions of women, e.g. women as always in the separate sphere, or women as defining their identities exclusively, and narcissistically, through their bodies (Cowie et al 1981: 240).

Other artists, such as the American artist Hannah Wilke in her *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* (1974–1982), were charged with exploiting their own bodies. There was also considerable concern about using the bodies of other women in work and thereby subjecting them to the male gaze and the economy of objectification. Lucy Lippard argued in 'The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art' that 'a woman using her own face and body has a right to do what she will with them, but it is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult' (1995 [1976]: 102).<sup>43</sup> Elwes, participating in the British video art movement, noted that:

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<sup>43</sup> Originally printed in *Art in America* (1976), Vol. 64, No. 3, pp. 121–138.

For many women working in England, even the slightest glimpse of a feminine presence in moving image art was rife with the danger of falling into reiterative patterns of sexual objectification. This led many to abandon the image of woman altogether. These artists were convinced that the gaze and, by extension, the film or video camera were constructed to reflect only a masculine subjectivity (Elwes 2005: 48).

The British video artist Katharine Meynell observed that in the USA, where, for example, the American artist Carolee Schneemann was making work like *Fuses* (1965), she had not come across such strong feminist anxiety about representation of women. According to Meynell, in the UK, filmic theories of looking and being looked at were being passionately debated and pointing a camera at a woman could seem to be a terrorist act, an act of violence against a woman perpetuating the male gaze and her objectification.<sup>44</sup> Meynell summed up her perception of the difference in USA and UK attitudes in an occurrence at the Royal College of Art while she was studying there in 1982. The RCA film students screened Schneemann's *Fuses* but many in the women's group, Meynell excepted, had wanted to ban it. Meynell felt that if turning the camera on a woman could be interpreted as an objectifying act then instead of doing it to somebody else, the best option was to turn the camera on herself, to brave 'the personal as political' and through this hope to produce interpersonal identification. In spite of such dangers and accusations, feminist artists such as Meynell and Schneemann displayed a commitment to uncovering the codes of representation and attempted to break through its constructs to expose or tear down patriarchal ideology. This commitment, tenacity and diversity of strategies contributed to this period being an exciting and vibrant era for the researcher to re-examine. Many of the accusations of essentialism, narcissism, naivety and didacticism have started to unravel as re-examinations have revealed the complexity of strategies deployed against dominant ideologies.

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<sup>44</sup> Conversation with Katharine Meynell on 4 September 2013.

## **The trap of female visibility**

In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), Peggy Phelan has written about the ways in which the circuit of representation applies differently to women and men in Western culture. Phelan argues that:

By the mid 1980s, feminist artists and theorists had clearly articulated the trap for women within the representational codes of patriarchy: to enter the frame of representation is already to approve of that frame; however, to reject that frame allows patriarchy to continue its traditional obliviousness to women as anything other than 'objects' of masculine power (2001: 43).

Within systems of visual representation, Phelan contends, the male figure is already imbued with value. As the universal and the norm, he is therefore unremarkable; furthermore, it is his privilege to determine the signification of the female figure, who stands as Other in linguistic and visual fields (1993: 5). Women, therefore, continue to be marked, imaged and represented by men just as Rowbotham argued in 1973. This creates two problems: firstly, that in producing more depictions of the previously under-represented Other, dominant culture determines a way to label, restrict and fix the representation of the Other (Phelan 1993: 2). Secondly, the politics of representation itself is phallogentric, it is gendered male (1993: 5). That is, culture remains constructed from the perspective of male heterosexual desire and within a heteronormative matrix. The result of such one-sidedness is that visual representation of women frequently reduces them to fetish; a substitution of the phallus (Phelan 1993: 6). This analysis interconnects with Hall's observation that fetishism is a formidable stabiliser of stereotypes. What Phelan is observing is that within the circuit of culture, women are already held to be inferior;

from birth, they lack the value and meaning that men are born into and which is their birthright.<sup>45</sup>

In connection to the politics of representation discussed earlier in the chapter, Phelan's analysis of women's cultural treatment suggests that representations of the unmarked, unvalued and meaningless female figure gain even more significance within the economy of the visual as part of a constitutive process. What Phelan demonstrates is that by conforming to mainstream depictions of femininity, women are given a channel to move from unvalued and meaningless to become the 'valued' bearer of meaning in the eyes of patriarchal culture. However, this apparent value and meaning comes at a price and is restricted to a narrow array of culturally determined female subjectivities that are almost always sexually objectified. As McRobbie argues, the levy also includes the rejection of feminism and the spurning of female unity (2009: 54–93).

Contemporary women and girls learn their value through the significance of their bodies and their marking as fetishised sexual objects. Phelan observes that while men may also be objectified it has a different significance, which means the 'sexual objectification of men allows for an ascendancy toward "power" while sexual objectification of women almost always implies a degradation' (1993: 51). She argues that these opposing meanings are 'absolutely and crucially connected to how men and women are seen within a patriarchal ideology of heterosexuality and sexual difference' (1993: 51).<sup>46</sup> Within this framework, the process of internalisation whereby ideology is learnt or unconsciously assimilated into subjectivity becomes almost inevitable. The correlation between the cultural

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<sup>45</sup> Judith Butler argues that from the moment of birth and the announcement 'it's a girl!' the infant is propelled into the processes of girling: 'to the extent that the naming of the "girl" is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain "girling" is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm' (1993: 232).

<sup>46</sup> Mulvey suggests in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' that 'according to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification' (2009 [1975]: 20).



production of devalued female subjectivity and the marked attributes of worth that patriarchal culture attaches to femininity becomes evident as women and girls internalise patriarchal values that ultimately denigrate and restrict them. The processes of internalisation compound the power the circuit of representation holds, especially for those who are marginalised within it.

Phelan suggests that greater consideration should be given to representational invisibility as a strategy that can potentially resist and disrupt the status quo of patriarchal cultural re-production. While she recognises the difficulties of rejecting the frame of representation, Phelan is concerned with the Left's adherence to visibility politics. Emphasising that 'visibility is a trap', she argues that it 'summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession' (1993: 6). This attachment to visibility politics leads to the belief that disenfranchised social groups will somehow benefit if they are represented in the culture. As a result, activists on the Left devote their energies to increasing the representation of marginalised groups at the risk that visibility in the current white dominated patriarchal framework may not actually bring about a change in underlying ideologies (1993: 7). Phelan argues that a major flaw in visibility politics is the presumption that difference is always visible and clearly defined. This assumes that the 'relationship between representation and identity is linear and smoothly mimetic. What one sees is what one is' (Phelan 1993: 7). In contrast, subjectivities are multiple and nuanced, ambiguous and contrary. As Adrian Piper demonstrates in her video *Cornered* (1988), discussed in the next section, what you see is not always what you get.

## ***Cornered* (1988), Adrian Piper**



Fig. 4  
Installation view of *Cornered* (1988), Adrian Piper.

Wearing a blue jumper and a small string of pearls around her neck, Piper sits behind a desk with her hands clasped and arms leaning on the table top like a businesswoman about to close a deal. The camera alternates between this mid-shot and a tight close-up of her head and shoulders. The single screen video work is shown on a monitor, which stands in the corner of the room with a table similar to the one in the work overturned and barricading the monitor in. In front of the overturned table, a number of chairs are placed. Piper's posture is authoritative and purposeful, leaning forward slightly, she announces:

I'm black. Now let's deal with this social fact, and the fact of my stating it, together. Maybe you don't see why we have to deal with them together. Maybe you think it's just my problem, and that I should deal with it by myself. But it's not just my problem. It's our problem.

On the walls are copies of a birth certificate, one identifying Piper's father as white and the other one as octoroon, someone who has

one-eighth black ancestry. Within the logic of the United States, any black ancestry classifies a person as black, which, Piper asserts, is a position that means the majority of white people in the USA are in fact black. Piper takes this assessment and her own position as a light-skinned woman asserting her black identity, as the basis for the work. Comprising a spoken dialogue of which we can only hear Piper's side, she calmly and quietly addresses the spectator and asks them a series of questions. Piper asks what the spectator will do with the information she has given her or him about their possible black heritage. Will they ignore the question or go away and research their ancestry? Will they be proud or ashamed to discover black ancestry? Or will they be relieved or proud if they discover they are 'certifiably white?' As the spectator, we embody the other half of the dialogue confronted by her incisive monologue.

Phelan suggests that by unsettling the relationship between skin colour and racial identity, Piper disrupts the ideology of the visible, which assumes difference is always visible and comprehensible (1993: 8). An assessment I agree with. However, as discussed earlier in the thesis, Phelan also argues that the conditions of visibility constitute a trap that aims to rigidly demarcate difference and its perceived boundaries. This would suggest that Piper, while disrupting white patriarchal beliefs, has also exposed herself to the 'colonialist/imperialist appetite for possession' (Phelan 1993: 6), which seeks to fix her representation and meaning in dominant culture. Furthermore, by appearing in the frame of representation, Piper could be said to be unintentionally signalling her approval of the frame that she is attempting to disturb. In contrast, I would argue that Piper disrupts the assumption that difference is perceptible by calling herself into visibility. By presenting her own subjecthood and self-representation and connecting the personal to the political she asks how her visibility in the video work and the narrative she gives us calls into question our very understanding of categories and classifications. Taking Hall's argument that the most powerful challenge is to occupy the stereotype and disrupt it from within, I

would argue that Piper accomplishes this by presenting the viewer with visual codes of racial identity and femininity, which she simultaneously disrupts through her monologue and insistent questioning of the conditions of race. This disruption is further compounded by the exhibition view of the overturned table and her father's two birth certificates that tell two opposing versions of reality.

Piper uses her own visibility in the video work to rupture our understanding of 'black' and 'white' stereotypes, that is, how black or white people should supposedly look, act, dress and speak, 'if someone can look and sound like me and still be black, then no one is safely, unquestionably white. No one'. Phelan observes that:

One cannot simply "read" race as skin-color. The tendency to do so leads to the corollary proposition that all people with the same skin colour believe the same thing, and there is, for example, such a thing as a coherent African-American community (1993: 8).

She adds, 'the visibility of black skin is not, and cannot, be an accurate barometer for identifying a community of diverse political, economic, sexual and artistic interests' (1993: 10). Again, this is an assessment I agree with, yet, at the same time, it is precisely the visibility of Piper as a light-skinned black woman who is often, against her wishes, perceived by those around her to be white and her articulation of her subjectivity that allows Piper to expose deeply embedded cultural beliefs and question their verisimilitude. Piper makes visible the position of her gendered and raced body as the indexical site of complex subjectivities that exist in the face of dominant culture. It is these nuanced identities that patriarchy seeks to make invisible in an effort to deny the complexities of lives that fall outside of rigid heteronormative structures. By calling attention to the contradictions in the ideology of the visible and disrupting its suggestion of truth in that moment of visibility, Piper demonstrates the way in which identity is deeply informed by underlying belief systems. In doing so, the artist interrogates the veracity of representation and stereotype and the modalities of internalised belief

systems. Piper asks the spectator to think beyond the categories of what we think we know about the world, about others and about ourselves.

### ***Make Up Make Down (1978), Sanja Iveković***

Sanja Iveković, a feminist artist from Croatia, made a series of video works in the 1970s, which critiqued the commodification and fetishisation of femininity as well as the attendant pressures placed on women to conform. From 2012 to 2013, Iveković was the subject of a solo retrospective across Calvert 22 and South London Gallery and an associated conference at the Royal College of Art.<sup>47</sup> In the subsequent publication, Lina Džuverović, Artistic Director of Calvert 22 observes that Iveković's work is engaged with revealing and disrupting the social construction of gender by deconstructing the artifice of visual representation and the politics of the gaze (2013: 14). These counter-strategies can be seen at play in the single screen video work *Make Up Make Down* (1978) in which Iveković links femininity to the dynamics of physical appearance and sexual objectification set within the framework of Western capitalism. The work, which is viewed on a monitor, encapsulates processes of internalisation as we witness the Caucasian female performer, whose face we do not see, locked within a ritualistic performance of applying make-up as society dictates she should in order to improve the way she looks to others.

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<sup>47</sup> The exhibition *Unknown Heroine* was held at Calvert 22 gallery and South London Gallery from 14 December 2012 to 24 February 2013. The accompanying one-day symposium *Twenty Three Percent*, named after the pay gap between men and women working in London, was held on 25 January 2013 at the Royal College of Art, Battersea, London.

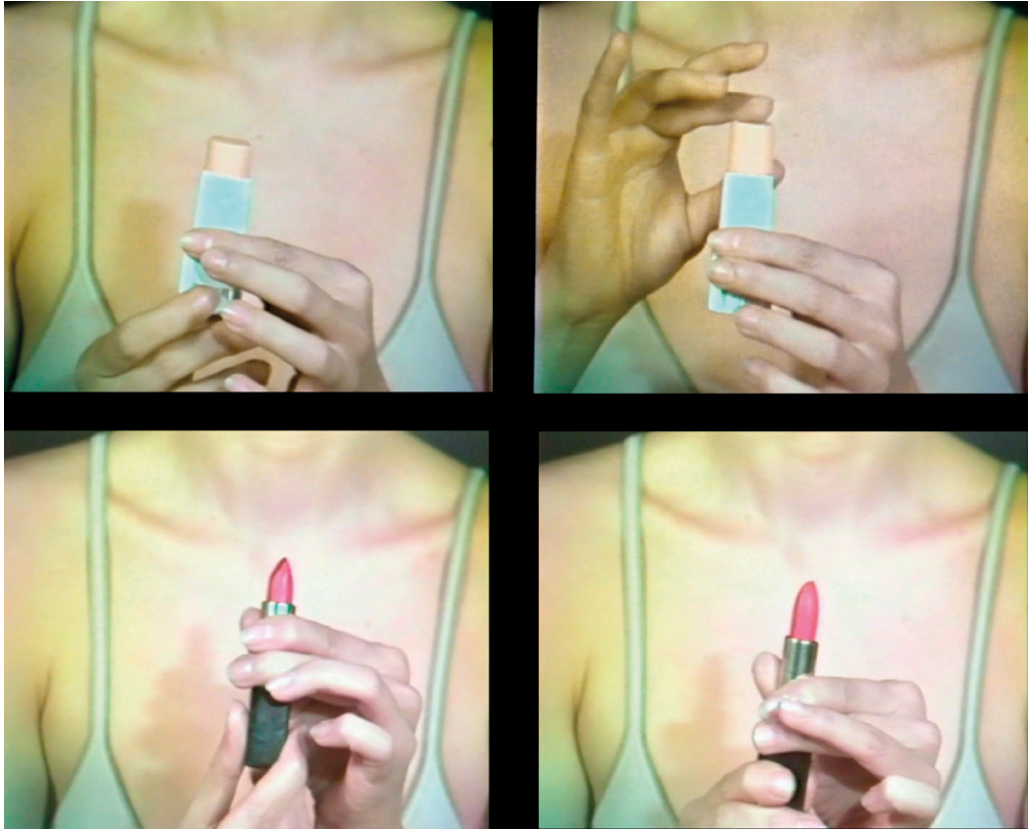


Fig. 5  
Video stills from *Make Up Make Down* (1978), Sanja Iveković.

The focus of the camera's gaze is her upper chest area framed by the thin straps of her top and her plunging neckline; the bare expanse of her chest and her prominent clavicles form a backdrop for the cosmetic items she seductively raises to the observing mechanical eye of the camera. Slowly and alluringly, Iveković handles the cosmetics before applying layers of make-up to her unseen face. Her refusal to be rendered fully visible, to be marked in totality, allows a space for questions to arise. Who is she? Why is she undertaking this ritualistic act? Who is she performing for? The familiar routine of a woman making-up her face – gestures that as children we might have seen our mothers perform and emulated ourselves – are exposed as ritualistic acts. Just as Judith Butler lays bare the facets of cultural hegemony in order to challenge them, in *Make Up Make Down*, Iveković performs an element of typically unquestioned feminine behaviour – painting our faces – to interrogate what these everyday acts mean within the dominant heterosexual matrix.

The woman in the work is exposed as simply a canvas on which the dual mechanisms of commodification and objectification are inscribed: a role she internalises and daily performs, which serves to limit and restrict her both in the frame of visual representation and in everyday life. Yet, Iveković's refusal to be rendered fully visible in the work also disrupts charges of her own narcissism and refuses the spectator's desire to know her face, consume her beauty and fix her identity. The work occupies a space between visibility and invisibility. Iveković critiques from within the frame but she doesn't give herself away. Helena Reckitt observes that throughout Iveković's practice she has identified the ways in which political systems use the signification of the female form and her image to shore up normative structures of power (2013: 8). Iveković's artworks examine different aspects of feminine conduct in order to reveal how representations of femininity are deployed to condition female behaviour to the advantage of dominant value systems (Reckitt 2013: 8). In *Make Up Make Down*, Iveković performs a fetishistic female stereotype while refusing to be marked in totality and in doing so disrupts the smooth transference of ideological values attached to images of women in patriarchal society.

### ***There is a Myth (1984), Catherine Elwes***

In the UK, Catherine Elwes made a number of video works in the 1980s and early 1990s that examined motherhood from the point of pregnancy, a time when women lose autonomy over their bodies,<sup>48</sup> to the early years of parenting. Cultural expectations placed upon a mother include her subservience to the child's needs as well as her subsequent loss of desirability.<sup>49</sup> *There is a Myth* (1984), a single

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<sup>48</sup> As well as losing autonomy over their own bodies, there is also a documented relationship between pregnancy and the onset or increase of domestic violence committed by a male partner towards the pregnant woman. For more information see: World Health Organization (2011), *Intimate partner violence during pregnancy*. Available at: [http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/violence/rhr\\_11\\_35/en/](http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/violence/rhr_11_35/en/) [Accessed 26 February 2016].

<sup>49</sup> This loss of desirability has diminished somewhat with a shift in expectation to the new mother quickly regaining her figure in order to retrieve her sexual appeal to men and signify her control over her physique. The late twentieth century saw the development of the terms 'yummy mummy' generally applied to young affluent mothers and 'MILF' an acronym for Mother I'd Like to Fuck, usually applied to middle-aged women.

screen video viewed on a monitor, examines the mother's body as provider (or denier) of sustenance and scrutinises her signification as a potential threat to man. The tape begins with black text on a white background that reads:

There is a myth in which a woman creates the world by spontaneously giving birth to many sons. They become afraid. If she can give life, she may also have the power to take life. And so they kill her (Elwes 1984).

After the text disappears from the screen, a woman's breast and infant's hand fill the frame. The tiny hand moves roughly against the breast and the nipple starts to leak milk. We can hear the baby's breath as the small hand becomes more and more insistent, hitting the mother's milking breast with a clenched fist. Outside of the frame, the infant is feeding from the other unseen breast. After this scene, the woman's mouth is viewed in close-up as a fleshy phallic object is pushed between her lips. The camera pulls back to reveal the artist sucking her own thumb; her fingers gently stroke her nose.



Fig. 6 and 7  
Video stills from *There is a Myth* (1984), Catherine Elwes.

Next, the woman removes her thumb and snaps her teeth, making biting gestures towards her child. The threat of her teeth become apparent as the sound of a snarling dog is layered with the image. The video is open to multiple readings, all of which continue to be relevant today. Firstly, the work speaks of the culture of violence against women, which is rationalised in patriarchal society; she is a threat that needs to be neutralised. The second reading manifests the



taboo of public breast-feeding in a culture that sexualises breasts and ignores their biological function. Thirdly, there is the signalling of female autonomy, pleasure and desire.

The taboo of public breast-feeding is one that remains in force in contemporary Western culture. Lisa Steele notes that Elwes' self-representation 'is extraordinarily explicit. No matter how common the act, representations of lactating breasts are almost completely absent from our collective visual experience' (Elwes 2000: 70), a situation that remains largely unchanged. Elwes stated,

I wanted to make an image of a breast that was an object of nourishment. In Oxford where I live, the only place you can bare your breast to feed a child is in the café at the Museum of Modern Art. However, bare breasts are on display across top rack magazines at every newsagent in the city (2000: 60).

Over the past few years, online platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have been embroiled in disputes with women over the social media sites' heavy-handed policies of removing images of breast-feeding women or blocking the offending women's profiles. At the same time young feminist campaign groups including Everyday Sexism and Women, Action & the Media have challenged Facebook's refusal to remove images that highly sexualise women's bodies and/or approvingly depicts them as the victims of violence.<sup>50</sup> In a cultural environment where woman's bodies and their breasts in particular are overwhelmingly sexualised, mothers still feel an anxiety about breast-feeding in public. One response has been the increasing use of breast-feeding shawls and cover-ups in order to ensure that feeding is discrete. Another response has been the organisation of breast-feeding flash mobs, frequently in response to an individual woman's experience of being humiliated for breast-feeding her child at the event's location. However, although reassuring as part of a large group, this does little to change women's individual experience in a

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<sup>50</sup> Facebook has particularly been criticised for its tolerance of violent and graphic images of women. See: O'Toole, Emer (2013), 'Facebook's violently sexist pages are an opportunity for feminism'.

hyper-sexualised culture. As Elwes says of her work: 'the mother's breast returns to its original function as a source of food, thus subverting its narrow adult reading as object of heterosexual desire' (2000: 144). Images of women's bodies that destabilise the limiting constructs of the patriarchal gaze are significant and valuable to a society that rarely sees depictions of women outside of the heteronormative sexual narrative.

Steele, on the other hand, argues that, 'Elwes' tape is not about breastfeeding; she uses this image in various forms throughout the tape as a metaphor for pleasure, human pleasure' (2000 [1984]: 70). The emphasis on gratification and autonomy while still inhabiting the role of mother is important. Catherine Lacey suggests that:

Elwes identifies an active physical love or desire quite unlike conventional notions of the mother's self-abnegation in her relationship with her child (cited in Elwes 2000: 61).

Mainstream illustrations of a mother typically depict her cooing over her child, her face radiating love, or, conversely: tired, anxious, frazzled and unable to cope. Rarely is the maternal body shown as autonomous and sexual; a site of pleasure and desire that she inhabits and controls. 'Pleasure, Elwes suggests, may be the seat of women's power and men's traditional fear of it' (Lacey cited in Elwes 2000: 61). Within Hall's framework of representation it could be argued that both Elwes and Iveković intentionally inhabit the stereotype in order to deconstruct its ideologies from within. Both works refuse the objectifying gaze by means of abstraction; however, they do not render themselves invisible. They act from within the frame but set about dismantling its constructs. Piper, Iveković and Elwes image their own bodies on the screen in ways that disrupt conventional narratives of race, femininity and maternity. Through playing with the visual codes indexed in the image and their own cultural position as woman-as-sign, the artists raise critical questions about identities and their marked attributes in patriarchal narratives.

Phelan points out that if 'representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture' (1993: 10). She adds, 'the ubiquity of their image, however, has hardly brought them political or economic power' (1993: 10). Acknowledging that advocates of visibility politics call for a shift in the politics of representation, Phelan asserts that they remain worryingly vague on how to attain any change in the underlying ideologies contained in the image. She asks, 'what is required in order to advance a more ethical and psychically rewarding representational field, one that side-steps the usual traps of visibility: surveillance, fetishism, voyeurism, and sometimes, death?' (1993: 10). In response to her own question, Phelan argues for an 'active vanishing, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility' (1993: 19, original emphasis). A problem with active vanishing, however, is that in order for it to be effective as a strategy, society needs to be aware of who has chosen to 'wilfully' disappear. In the contemporary context, Phelan acknowledges active vanishing only works for those who are already largely represented, which in the West, tends to be white middle and upper class women.

Although the proliferation of images of scantily clad young white women has not brought them political or economic power, the lack of images of women who stand outside of this framework has not brought about a shift in hegemonic structures either. If active vanishing remains accessible as a strategy only to middle or upper class white women, then those who stand outside of those boundaries remain in the same unseen place. I would argue further that active vanishing risks leaving all women in the same place politically, that is outside of the arenas of power and decision-making.<sup>51</sup> The main difference seems to be a question of alleged 'choice'. The strategy seems to imply that, as women, we stand in the same place of

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<sup>51</sup> Globally only one out of five Parliamentarians are women according to United Nation figures. Source: UN Women (2016), *Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation, Women in Parliaments* [online]. Available at: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures> [Accessed 22 February 2016].

marginalisation and indifference but this time it is somehow a positive choice. I do not believe this constitutes freedom, but replicates the limited range of movement to which women have long been restricted.

This is not to say that active vanishing or representational invisibility cannot have its uses. The strategy can be highly effective as demonstrated by the American dancer, choreographer and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer in her feature length film *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985) in which the female protagonist is never shown but is present through her voice and her narration. Similarly, this strategy has been used to great effect by the British artist Lis Rhodes in her experimental 16mm films including *Light Reading* (1978) and *Cold Draft* (1988). A more recent example of how representational invisibility can be successfully deployed is the video work *Female Fist* (2006) by Kajsa Dahlberg, which I will analyse in chapter three. The female protagonist is never visible although we are made conscious of her physical presence in front of the covered camera's eye through her embodied utterance.

Representational invisibility is an important and useful strategy, but does not bear up to scrutiny when presented as the only method available to women. They cannot systematically signal their disapproval of the patriarchal frame of representation by standing outside its limitations. Who would know that they are there, protesting in the margins? The ongoing battle with visual representation is, I believe, paramount in the struggle for women becoming equal and autonomous subjects. In order to fully initiate change in the structures of power and dominant ideology, it is not enough to simply make legislative change if patriarchal ideology and its depictions still underpin social institutions and human relationships. To this end, I argue that it is vital to fight for representational visibility that reflects the multitude of subjectivities and possibilities for female agency in the world.

## Chapter 2: Feminist video art practices in the 1970s and 1980s

In the early 1970s, feminist artists, critics, and historians began to question the apparently systematic exclusion of women from mainstream art. They challenged the values of masculinist history of heroic art which happened to be produced by men and which had so powerfully transformed the image of woman into one of possession and consumption (Chadwick 2012 [1990]: 8).

### Introduction

In 2001, the moving image academic and writer, Julia Knight, contributed a chapter on feminist video practice to the collection *Feminist Visual Culture* (Carson and Pajaczkowska: 249–263). In this essay, Knight issued a call to arms and raised the following vexed issues:

Women working creatively with video in Britain have suffered from a lack of critical recognition on three levels. First, at a general historical level, there has been 'the denigration of women's art as second rate and innately inferior to that of men.' Secondly, video has been critically neglected as an art form in Britain. And thirdly, women working with video in Britain have been marginalised within the video sector itself (Knight in Carson and Pajaczkowska 2001: 249).

The last decade has seen various initiatives that have sought to address Knight's second point concerning video art being a neglected art form. Several conferences, texts and research projects have sought to canonise artists' experimental film and video practice as emergent art forms of the late twentieth century. In the UK, a number of publications by both art historians and video practitioners have contributed to this discourse. These include Knight's text *Diverse Practices: A Critical Reader on British Video Art* (1996), *A History of Experimental Film and Video from the Canonical Avant-garde to Contemporary British Practice* (1999) by Al Rees, *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (2005) by Catherine Elwes, *A History of Video Art: The Development of Form and Function* (2006) by Chris Meigh-Andrews, and *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain* (2007) by David Curtis. Curtis, along with Malcolm Le Grice, co-founded the British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection at Central Saints Martins in

2000. Al Rees at the Royal College of Art, published the second edition of *A History of Experimental Film and Video from the Canonical Avant-garde to Contemporary British Practice* in 2011. In 2012, *Rewind: British Artists' Video in the 1970s and 1980s* (Cubitt and Partridge 2012) was published as part of the REWIND project based at the Duncan of Jordanstone College at the University of Dundee. This project aims to conserve early video works that are at risk of being lost and provides a historical and theoretical context in the form of documentation and interviews.

However, with the exception of the texts by Knight and Elwes, which are no longer available to buy in print, I would argue that this recent historicisation has not yet impacted on Knight's first point, that women's art is all too often denigrated as inferior, or her third point, that women working within video art are themselves marginalised. Evidence of this marginalisation can be seen in the diminishing of feminism's contribution to video art practice to a few pages or less in each text. As well as this lack of textual analysis, recent screenings of artists' experimental film and video art from the 1970s and 1980s frequently include only a tokenistic number of women artists. A recent example of the gender bias in video art was the REWIND book launch at the Tate Modern on the 25 September 2012. The speakers at the launch comprised six men and not one woman, while the attendant screening included ten works by men and four works by women artists. The text, *REWIND: British Artists' Video in the 70s & 80s*, continued the male bias with only two out of nine chapters written by women despite the history of women's engagement at the forefront of avant-garde video practices. The discontinuation of both Knight and Elwes' books, although still available in libraries, points to yet another marginalisation.<sup>52</sup> This situation is replicated on an international scale with texts such as *California Video: Artists and Histories* (2008) by

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<sup>52</sup> I tried to order copies of these texts from a multitude of sellers including Waterstones, WH Smith, Blackwell and Amazon, which all said they were available. However, each time I placed an order, it would be cancelled with an explanation that the text was no longer being published. I have tried emailing the publishers to find out why and received no response. Elwes' book has since been re-issued as an e-book only.

Glenn Phillips, *Film and Video Art* (2008) by Stuart Comer, *Video Art* (2006) by Sylvia Martin and *Video Art* (2006) by Michael Rush, providing vital pointers towards feminist video art practices but only as a footnote to the history of the art form. As yet, there is little contextual analysis that is purely engaged with feminist video art and its reverberations throughout moving image practices.<sup>53</sup>

Knight's chapter in *Feminist Visual Culture* calls attention to the ways in which women artists from the late 1960s onwards were challenging 'the dominant paradigm in art, art criticism and art history for its privileging of both male artists and a particular kind of art practice' (2001: 253). However, to date, the historicisation of video art manifests the same patterns identified by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (1981) and expanded on by Pollock in *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (2003). This sees the historical focus predominantly occupied with the work of white, Western and heterosexual men with the inclusion of a few tokenistic women. This is an ongoing issue that extends beyond the parameters of the art world and sits within a wider paradigm of Western history being written by white men from their perspective and is consistent with the mechanisms of patriarchal cultural hegemony that operates to marginalise the Other (Rowbotham 1973: 35, Elwes 2005: 39). From a feminist perspective, there is a painful irony in this traditional and retrogressive treatment of video art history. In its nascent form, video art was a tool that women artists turned to in an attempt to work in an area without an already established patriarchal lineage (Elwes 2005: 41). The American artist Joan Jonas observes that the emergent field of video as an art practice provided women artists with an opening into the male-dominated art world, because, unlike

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<sup>53</sup> There are efforts currently underway to remedy this situation. The Duncan of Jordanstone College at University of Dundee, home to the REWIND project, has been awarded £234,872 by the Arts and Humanities Research Council to undertake a two-year research project from March 2015 to February 2017 into *European Women's video art in the 70s and 80s*. Led by the artist and academic Elaine Shemilt, the project will culminate in a much-needed text and conference on women's significant role at the forefront of video art practices in Europe.

painting and sculpture, there was not a tradition of male-domination already in place.<sup>54</sup> For Jonas and her cohorts, video was a medium that 'offered women a space to develop their own voice' (Jonas n.d.). Many women artists used video art to give expression to their own subjective experiences in line with 'the personal is political', thus developing a critique of the treatment meted out to women by patriarchal society and challenging traditional gender roles. Furthermore, women's video art making constituted another method of consciousness-raising that could reach far beyond the spatial and temporal confines of feminist groups. The effectiveness of this mode of consciousness-raising can be witnessed in the way that these video artworks continue to resonate through generations of women and instigate political consciousness.<sup>55</sup> Yet it is exactly this history that continues to be neglected and marginalised.

Knight concludes, 'it is unsurprising therefore that there is a dearth of literature addressing women working with video in Britain', as a result, 'any sense of a history of feminist engagement with video is not immediately evident' (2001: 249). Feminist artists and writers of the era have largely contributed their own critical analyses of women's experimental film and video art practice, but these are dispersed and can take time and resources to find. Knight's essay ends with the warning that 'it is important to prevent the debate and work generated by women videomakers from sinking into oblivion. [...] they remain relevant in the new digital era' (2001: 261). Furthermore, she argues, 'if women's engagement with older media technologies, such as video, is forgotten, we risk having to fight the same battles all over again' (2001: 262). The aim of this chapter is to

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<sup>54</sup> For further discussion of the artistic greatness attributed to men and not to women see: Nochlin, Linda, (1971), 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' *Art News*, No. 69, pp. 22-39 and 67-71.

<sup>55</sup> An example of this reverberation is the online resource ArtFem.TV founded in 2008 by the Austrian artist Evelin Stermitz. The website has no historical organisation or hierarchy and many of the works are uploaded without dates creating a mash up of video works from the 1970s to current feminist artworks. Video works by established artists such as Martha Rosler, Nina Sobell and the Guerrilla Girls sit side by side with often lo-fi video works by emergent artists concerned with issues of gender and race, such as *Reiteration to Resistance* (2006), a single screen video work by the British artist Amanda Egbe and *The Art of Aging* (2011), a single screen video work by Evelin Stermitz. See: <http://artfem.tv> [Accessed 22 January 2015].



look back to this vital era of feminist practice and re-examine a selection of video works and their formal strategies in order to reconsider the ways in which they were intervening against the politics of representation at the time that they were made, as well as considering how these strategies might intervene in contemporary culture.

As I noted in the introduction, Martha Rosler's video artwork *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977) provided a vital catalyst for my own subjective formation as a feminist who, until encountering Rosler's video in the mid-2000s, was living in a contemporary media landscape where feminism was rarely discussed or if it was, the spectre of the bitter man-hating feminist loomed large. My own experience suggests that feminist video works can intervene outside of the gallery and inside the home due to their circulation on online video sharing platforms such as ArtFem.TV. In this way, feminist art practices can provide vital slippage in the seemingly impervious wall of representations so consistently maintained by the film industry, mass media and the fashion/beauty complex as demonstrated in Sanja Iveković's defamiliarisation of femininity and consumerism in *Make Up Make Down* (1978), discussed in chapter one. Current feminist video works continue this critical work as can be seen in *Crème De Co* (2013), a single screen video work viewed either online or on a monitor by the British artist Ellen Angus in which an attractive young woman parodies shopping channel adverts and makes up a 'luxury' cosmetic product using her own body fluids. *Crème De Co* has a dreamy shopping channel feel that quickly shifts into the abject. The woman, dressed in a silk negligee, makes the luxury cosmetic by violently chopping and bashing herbs and fruits to which she adds her own body hair, nail trimmings and menstrual fluid. She blows her nose into the mixing bowl and urinates into the mix. Having combined the ingredients, she tastes the mixture, pours it into a cut glass bottle and holds it up tantalisingly for the viewer.

## Reconsidering critical histories of video art

The lack of critical analysis of feminist video art practices from the 1970s and 1980s means there is little acknowledgement of the impact this work had on the videos produced by their male counterparts as well as the wider context of contemporary art practices. While these works continue to be under-examined and overlooked, the history of video art remains under-theorised. Texts that have provided this thesis with critical contextual analysis include Chris Straayer's 'I Say I Am: Feminist Performance Video in the '70s' (1985) and 'Sexuality and Video Narrative' (1989), Catherine Elwes' *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (2005) and *Video Loupe* (2000), and Andrea Brownwell and Valerie Cassel Oliver's *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women and the Moving Image Since 1970* (2008). In antithesis to Phelan's proposal of active vanishing, Brownlee and Cassel Oliver define black women artists' video practices as crucially intervening in the visual field through the depiction of their own self-representations and subjective experience. By critically analysing and deconstructing the cultural dynamics of race, gender and class through the role of visual representation, the artists are able to expose the very mechanisms that perpetuate and maintain the ongoing marginalisation of their lives and those of their families (Brownlee and Cassel Oliver 2008: 12).

Straayer locates feminism as 'undoubtedly one of the most influential political and philosophical forces in the '70s' (1985:8).<sup>56</sup> She observes that both 'inside and outside of the art world, feminists sought equal rights, self-definition, inclusion of personal and domestic content in public concerns, and access to effective speech and action' (Straayer 1985: 8). Furthermore, the work being made by women artists around subjectivity, narrative and autoethnography had a critical impact in the visual arts at a time when modernism and

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<sup>56</sup> A viewpoint that was repeated by many speakers including the filmmaker and academic Trinh T. Minh-ha and the artist Carlos Motta at the Visual Activism symposium held in San Francisco, 14–15 March 2014, which examined the ongoing relationships between visual culture and practices of activism.

abstract expressionism was at its height. Against this background of male-dominated abstraction and minimalism:

Women artists reintroduced verbal text; narrative; political didacticism; social action; domestic space with its associated issues of maintenance, nurturance, and containment; physicality; female sexuality, and, most notably, a female assertion of self (Straayer 1985: 8).

These strategies require re-examination from a historical viewpoint as well as in the current context of feminist resurgence politically and in the arts. Elwes' texts and in particular her chapter 'Disrupting the Content: Feminism' (2005: 37–58) along with writing on her own practice in *Video Loupe*, provide crucial detail about the historical framework of women's video art. Of the work being made in the 1970s and 1980s, Elwes notes, 'feminist art urged activism in the wider world, but it also embarked on a redefinition of femininity itself at the level of representation' (2005: 40). Identifying many of the strategies that Straayer writing in the USA similarly noted, Elwes demonstrates the numerous ways women artists were disrupting rigid notions of gendered subjectivity and prescribed social roles as they were delineated in the patriarchal world. Underlying these strategies was an engagement with the feminist principle 'the personal is political' as a tool to generate the formal qualities of a work as well as content based on previously untold histories and private experiences. It is this crucial intention of redefining at the level of representation and the strategies that women artists developed to enable this critical work that I argue is of such importance to the current generation of young feminist artists and activists.

Elwes draws attention to the manner in which these strategies have found their way into men's art practices in her critical essay 'The Pursuit of the Personal in British Video Art' (2000 [1996]: 135–150) and her chapter on 'Masculinities: Class, Gay and Racial Equality' (2005: 59–75). In particular, Elwes identifies the invocation of the personal in men's video artwork, which she argues was informed by women's art practices. However, Elwes also notes that within

representational language men 'start from the centre, not the periphery' (2000 [1996]: 145). This concurs with Phelan's assessment discussed in chapter one that while the visual language of objectification equates to degradation for women, for men objectification translates into another depiction of his power (1993: 51).<sup>57</sup> Aside from texts by feminist artists and academics, there continues to be a lack of recognition of how the strategies that were shaped and formed by women artists have influenced the wider geographies of contemporary art. One noticeable area of omission is the recuperation of documentary in art practices, which had been widely critiqued and dismissed with the advent of postmodernism (Stallabrass 2013: 12). Notions of reality and truth were being dismantled and feminist artists and film-makers were condemned as essentialist for holding onto the appearance of veracity (Juhász 1994: 171–189). These activists, however, insisted on the value of personal testimony in the face of dominant patriarchal cultures that seeks to suppress alternative narratives and histories. In spite of being criticised for drawing upon outmoded modalities of documentary, narrative and the authorial voice, women used these methods to counter their own invisibility and marginalisation in mainstream culture. Although often diminished as essentialist, women artists were insisting on plurality through depicting subjectivities that were largely unseen. Multiplicity and heterogeneity was inherently present in the work.<sup>58</sup> Just as women insisted on their subjectivity and the right to depict their experiences, they were in fact insisting on the diversity of perspectives that had previously been dismissed by white masculinised culture. Thus, women's adoption of autoethnographic film and video production as an embodiment of 'the personal is political' constituted an inherent threat to the sameness of

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<sup>57</sup> Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock argued in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* that 'a man may be placed in a feminine position but will not become feminine. Because of the social power of men in our society no man can ever be reduced to a crumpled heap of male flesh in the dark corner of some woman's studio' (1981: 124).

<sup>58</sup> Annette Jael Lehmann contends, 'video is not a neutral apparatus, not an unbiased recording medium; rather, it functions as an artistic medium that must fundamentally call into question the visual depiction of women. Video tests the possibilities and boundaries of changing visual forms and modes of representation; it is a medium of reflection that functions by analyzing hegemonic visual forms' (2008: 86).

phallogentric identity and culture as it was being played out in the postmodern era.

An era of vigorous social, economic, cultural and technological change, the mid-1960s commercial release of the video portapak<sup>59</sup> by Sony saw artists begin to experiment with the new medium as an artistic tool. The emergence of video art as a practice in the late 1960s and 1970s coincided with the rise of the women's liberation movement and a deepening awareness of the ways in which ideologies both underpinned and communicated through the still and moving image. This convergence of video technology with the rise of a radical social movement towards women's emancipation meant that feminist artists conceived of the medium of video as an instrument that could aid them to potentially disrupt cultural hegemony (Lehmann 2008: 86). Wielding this cumbersome apparatus that could nonetheless be used without a crew, women artists explored ways to tackle the ideologies underpinning cultural representations of women and began to situate their own subjectivities in the work. Meigh-Andrews observes:

From the outset artists working with video have not only drawn from diverse cultural influences, but they have also imported ideas and attitudes across national boundaries, enriching and nourishing the wider fine art practice as well as re-appropriating ideas and approaches from other disciplines and media (2006: 2).

Video, like avant-garde performance, had no formal rules and traditions (Lehman 2008: 83), 'their only convention was that there

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<sup>59</sup> The portapak was the first portable video system that could be carried by one person. It was battery powered, self-contained and provided analog video recording. Hermine Freed, an early video artist in North America, stated, 'the Portapak would seem to have been invented specifically for use by artists. Just when pure formalism had run its course; just when it became politically embarrassing to make objects, but ludicrous to make nothing; just when many artists were doing performance works but had nowhere to perform, or felt the need to keep a record of their performances; just when it began to seem silly to ask the same old Berkleean question, 'If you build a sculpture in the desert where no one can see it, does it exist?'; just when it became clear that TV communicates more information to more people than large walls do; just when we understood that in order to define space it is necessary to encompass time; just when many established ideas in other disciplines were being questioned and new models were proposed – just then the Portapak became available' (1976: 210).

were no conventions' (Elwes 2005: 41). This irregularity opened up possibilities for video art practices to represent alternative subjectivities in ways that could intervene in the status quo of what it meant to be 'feminine' in traditional male-dominated culture. As Straayer observes, the absence of patriarchal precedent and thus female exclusion was important to women artists working with the medium (1985: 8). Straayer notes that 'while performance opportunities in the gallery establishment were not always available to women, video technology was accessible through schools and newly founded cooperatives' (1985: 8). Knight, on the other hand, argues that access to technology remained more limited for women artists than their male counterparts as mainstream gender narratives continued to disparage women's technical skills. Feminist activism in the form of setting up women-only courses and distribution networks such as Circles<sup>60</sup> and Cinema of Women, supported women artists to gain traction in new technologies and increase their distribution networks. Combined with a focus on tackling systems of representation, the 1970s through to the late 1980s became a fertile period of provocative and challenging art practices that dealt with issues of gender, race, sexuality and discrimination (Straayer 1985: 8).

In *Hammer and Knife* (1987), a single screen video work, the British artist Louise Forshaw stands in the middle of a field and as the camera slowly zooms in on her, she speaks directly to the male viewer. Quietly describing male privilege, violence and her own rape that led to her sleeping with a hammer and knife under her pillow, Forshaw implicates all men in the cultural systems that perpetuate the subordination of women: 'I hear you're hurting people outside on the street, and I pace the perimeters of my room. Because of you I've learnt a martial art. You sit opposite me on trains and try to make

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<sup>60</sup> The first women artists' film and video distribution network. Founded in 1979 by a small group of artists including Felicity Sparrow, Lis Rhodes and Annabel Nicholson. In 1991, due to funding cuts, Circles merged with Cinema of Women, also founded in 1979, under the name Cinenova. (LUXonline, available at: <http://www.luxonline.org.uk/histories/1970-1979/circles.html> [Accessed 26 January 2013]).

polite conversation and when I answer you think I want to fuck'. Crucially, Forshaw rejects the performance of femininity she has been socialised into and through her stance, monologue and direct look refuses to seduce the camera and the viewer (Elwes 2005: 50).



Fig. 8  
Video still from *Hammer and Knife* (1987), Louise Forshaw

In doing so, the artist calls attention to the sexual violence perpetrated against women while simultaneously disrupting the normative cinematic and televisual paradigm whereby women's distress and trauma, especially at the hands of men, is enacted for the pleasure and titillation of the viewer.

Video as a discursive medium enabled Forshaw to make her confrontational work. The technology also provided live relay and closed circuits, which allowed artists such as Joan Jonas in *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972), and the British artists Tina Keane in *Playpen* (1979) and Rose Garrard in *Beyond Still Life* (1980), to problematise the spectator's voyeurism through the live presence of the maker of the work who demonstrated her agency, subjectivity and

skill.<sup>61</sup> In each of these works, the artists use monitors as part of their live relay performances. This combination of the physical woman and her on-screen image called attention to the disparity between the video representation and the artist's actual presence (Elwes 2005: 20). Similarly, the German artist Ulrike Rosenbach made a series of live video performances. *Don't believe I'm an Amazon* (1975) saw the artist shoot arrows at a target overlaid with the image of the Virgin Mary. While one camera captured the Madonna's passive image, another documented the intensity and focus on Rosenbach's own face as she shot each arrow into the target. The resulting live images from both cameras were in turn superimposed on a single monitor to create a feedback loop linking the docility of the venerated virgin mother to the violence enacted upon female bodies and the subsequent internalisation of that very violence by women. The work suggests a desire to destroy the external constraints of docility and passivity placed upon women and to target subsequent internalised behaviours and demolish them.

Other artists explored the voice as a way of disrupting the coded significations of the female body on screen. The Canadian artist Lisa Steele adopted the voice of her grandfather to blur the division between male and female identities in *The Ballad of Dan Peoples* (1976), a single screen video viewed on a monitor but now often projected. While, a decade later, the British artist Pratibha Parmar demonstrated the endurance of the strategy in *Emergence* (1986), a single screen video work, made with the Black Audio Film Collective, which focused on the lived experiences of four artists and writers – Sutupa Biswas, Mona Hatoum, Audre Lorde and Meiling Jin. The work attempted to disrupt the boundaries of subjectivity, gender and sexuality. Their intertwining spoken narratives and Parmar's visualisation of the gaze of the Other enacted by the four women, operate to create what Gwendolyn Foster, in her analysis of the work

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<sup>61</sup> For further discussion of live relay see: Westgeest, Helen (2016), *Video Art Theory: A comparative Approach*, Malden, Massachusetts; Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, pp. 45–59.



in 1997, calls 'woman as speaking subject, gazing subject, interrogating corporeal performative subject' (1997: 76).

Feminism remains an unfinished project and many of the cultural, social and political issues that were at the forefront of feminist thought in the 1970s and 1980s have remained relevant as a result of the post-feminist backlash (McRobbie 2009). The contexts and external appearances may have changed, however, the core issues of inequality and discrimination against women remain the same. The recent resurgence of grass roots feminist activity has seen a movement towards exposing and framing retrogressive and sexist imagery in an attempt to disrupt the widespread objectification of the female form and further women's equal participation in society. There is still much to be learnt from the ways in which feminists in the 1970s and 1980s recognised the pivotal role of representation and strived to challenge and shift women's depictions in visual culture. The feminist video work of the 1970s and 1980s that I look back to explored a range of visual methods and devices in order to challenge the constructions of gender in ways that allowed women to be visible and insist on their subjectivity and agency as women and human beings in the work. It is the contention of this research that it is vital for a younger generation of feminist artists that these works are critically analysed and evaluated so that these historical works may be utilised as a strong foundation for further feminist practice.

From a substantial body of women's video practice made during the 1970s and 1980s, I have chosen to look in depth at three works that particularly resonate with my thinking about contemporary issues of sexism and the intersections of discrimination. These works are indicative of the wide range of video works that explored feminist issues during this era. It is no accident that these works are all available online. While I examine less accessible works elsewhere in the thesis, the availability of the three works in this chapter has meant that they have formed a vital foundation in my own development of a feminist political consciousness. Both before and

during my PhD research, I have been able to return to these videos repeatedly as well as referring other women to them. This also raises the question of visibility: all three video works are by American artists. This perhaps reflects the fact that the most accessible online video databases are all based in North America: UbuWeb, Video Data Bank, Electronic Arts Intermix and YouTube, which although not art specific features a growing number of video artworks. Media Art Net in the Netherlands provides a certain counter balance but the artworks on the site are less accessible and the interface itself is harder to navigate. At present, many works by international women artists are hidden in small, little known archives and distribution networks such as Cinenova in London, art college libraries and the personal archives of the artists themselves. The availability of the three video works analysed in this chapter by no means points to these works being fully incorporated and analysed within the video art canon. Even the most well known of them, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen*, *Simply Obtained*, all too often merits just a few sentences or passing reference in the currently available histories of artists video.

### ***Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977), Martha Rosler**

In an N.Paradoxa interview with Martina Pachmanová in 2006, Martha Rosler stated that as a young woman in 1967, when the women's movement was emerging, she puzzled over the idea of 'war between the sexes' (Rosler in Pachmanová 2006: 100). She observed a vexed issue for women's liberation; how could women organise effectively and mobilise against patriarchy when they were living with men in intimate relationships? (2006: 99). Rosler's engagement with feminism brought the realisation that through the discussion of individual experience and the everyday issues of women's lives, a community could be formed that could have the potential to challenge patriarchal structures:

In the 1960s and 1970s this began to be called 'consciousness raising', and even though it might sound a bit didactic now, that was a moment in which we realized that most of the so-called 'women's problems' result from the distribution of social power, within the family and in society at large. [...] 'Where does the power reside?' was a question I have been asking ever since (Rosler in Pachmanová 2006: 100).

This analysis of the mechanisms of patriarchal society instigated an ongoing questioning of patriarchal cultural hegemony in Rosler's art practice. *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977), a single screen video, is a critical piece in this body of work.<sup>62</sup> Rosler deploys the knowledge she gained through consciousness-raising to dissect intellectually the societal oppression of women. Through the cogency of her vocal narrative she systematically reveals the schisms of gendered and racial hierarchies of power and the ways in which foundational ideologies are disseminated by dominant culture and subsequently internalised by those marginalised within societal belief systems.<sup>63</sup>

The first two minutes of *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* consists of a black screen, with Rosler's distinctive Jewish-American accent providing the voiceover detailing the structure of the work and what it is about. Her first three lines tell us that, 'this is an opera in three acts. This is a work about perception. There's no image on the screen yet'. In an instant Rosler sets up an arena where she is asking the viewer to perceive, to be open and think beyond the frame. She proceeds to detail the three acts of the opera: 'the first act is in real time and it ends in a montage. Act two is symbolic. [...] Act three is tragic, horrific, mythic'. She elaborates on her use of the term perception: 'it isn't about the perception of small facts. It isn't about the physiology of perception. It's about the perception of self.

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<sup>62</sup> Other early video works by Rosler include *A Budding Gourmet* (1974) and *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), both single screen video works, and *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue* (1982), a live performance screened on Paper Tiger Television's public-access cable programme in New York City. These artworks comprise valuable and still relevant analysis of the multiple fault lines and discriminations that exist throughout women's lived experience. *Semiotics of the Kitchen* remains Rosler's most frequently cited video work and features in most video art histories.

<sup>63</sup> See Appendix 3 for a transcription of the voice-over.

It's about the meaning of truth. The definition of fact'. Throughout the work, Rosler asks the viewer to question who has the power to define and control the facts available to the public.

In her 1979 article, "'And What is a Fact Anyway?" (Discussing a Tape by Martha Rosler)', Amy Taubin draws a parallel between Rosler's introductory voice-over and the Brechtian concept of *lehrstücke* or 'learning-play'. As in the learning-play, the viewer is informed of the work's structure in advance and Rosler's voice-over functions in a similar mode to Brecht's use of titles (Taubin 1979: 59). Taubin suggests that Rosler:

Realizes that the extent to which women have been objectified and have incorporated that objectification into their sense of self can only be understood by experiencing and observing it in a learning situation (1979: 61).

The artist's own voice-over tells us that 'this is a work about learning how to think'. The emphasis on education underscores Rosler's belief that if we really use our senses and intellectual capacity, we can learn from the staged device of the video play she presents us with. The suggestion that Rosler's video is theatrical, whilst also offering 'a documentary record', again underlines what Rosler's voice-over calls the 'definitions of facts' and proposes that we, the viewers, are also part of a play, an everyday act. Anticipating Judith Butler's theoretical discussion on the construction of gender and performativity, Rosler asks us as the spectators, but also as the actors in our own performative lives, to consider what we have been taught and subsequently internalised. She asks us to not only discern and identify these learnt roles but to question the power structures they are upholding.

Rosler's narrative introduces some over-arching social themes and swiftly draws connections between them. It comes as a shock when she invokes the holocaust, 'I needn't remind you about processing and mass extermination. You remember about the

scientific study of human beings'. This statement raises a number of questions and puts the onus on the viewer to connect herself or himself to history. *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* was made thirty-two years after the end of Second World War, and Rosler's statement implicitly condemns amnesia concerning eugenics and raises multiple questions: have we indeed forgotten? Do we still make the connections between science and eugenics and extermination? Do we remember the ways in which science and technology can be deployed to oppress and regulate? Rosler draws links between processing, racism, extermination, science, coercion, sexism, bureaucracies, systems, statistics and institutions. Although she does not identify herself as Jewish in the work, Rosler deliberately invokes the spectre of genocide and suggests this is where we end up if we do not perceive the insidious methodologies of oppression that play out in the everyday and which are integral to the discriminatory practices of patriarchal culture and its colonising instincts.

When I first heard Rosler's statement linking the suppression of women to the holocaust I was taken aback; my immediate reaction was to reject what she was saying as excessive and even offensive to those whose lives had been lost or irredeemably altered by the genocide. I had to go back to Rosler's request that I open my eyes, perceive and learn in order to start discerning and accepting the complex connections Rosler makes. Her provocative invocation of genocide asks the viewer to consider how these horrific events came to pass and how cultural practices and their representational systems played a role in the persecution of fascism's victims. What were the everyday practices that allowed these atrocities to happen with the complicity of 'regular people'?<sup>64</sup> I suggest that Rosler is asking us to remember how the Jewish people and other targeted groups were

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<sup>64</sup> The American social psychologist Stanley Milgram published his controversial research *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* in 1974. Following the trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, Milgram wanted to investigate the willingness of people to follow orders if that meant harming others. Contrary to expectations, Milgram found that sixty-five percent of the study's participants continued to give what they thought were painful electric shocks to another participant on the basis that they were following orders.

stereotyped, denigrated and dehumanised by people in power, using propaganda to normalise their claims in the lead up to the genocide. What Michel de Certeau calls 'the practices of the everyday' (1984) can also describe a set of commonplace actions: name-calling, stone-throwing, avoidance and segregation, to name but a few. What originates as myth and stereotype can become part of an insidious system of dehumanisation that acts as a rationale for violence as discussed in chapter one. Rosler's voice-over elaborates:

For an institution to be evil it need not be run by Hitler. As Steven Kurtz has observed, it need only be run by heartless people, sometimes called intellectuals or scientists. In the name of responsibility native peoples have been colonized and enslaved. The lives of women, children, workers and subject people regulated in every degree, for their own good.

Asking us to look closely at the processes of Othering and connect these to practices of sexism, misogyny, racism, colonialism and genocide, Rosler links the regulation of disenfranchised peoples to coercion, brutality and the implementation of paternalism. In the case of women, as becomes explicit throughout the video narrative, they are subject to a sustained set of cultural acts of violence that in a joined-up picture constitutes the systematic torture and murder of women by men on a global scale (Žižek 2014). This is a point I will come back to in discussion of the final act of Rosler's video-play.



Fig. 9  
Video still from *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977),  
Martha Rosler.

The opening scene begins with a man calling out 'next'; a woman walks into the frame with her back to the camera. She stands in a sterile, white room with two men dressed in lab coats who appear to be scientists. There is a desk in the left-hand foreground with one of the men sitting behind it on a swivel chair. The second man stands by the wall where a large white sheet of chart paper hangs down to the floor and spreads out towards the camera. In the centre of the room is a chair and in the back right hand corner is a large mirror partly obscured by the frame of the camera's eye. The woman sits down on the low chair facing the scientist who, on his high swivel stool, sits above her and beside an official-looking desk. Holding a clipboard in front of him, he questions the woman (Rosler) about her sex, age, race and ethnic background before requesting that she removes her shoes and stand against the wall by the chart. From the woman's replies we understand that this is the same person who delivers the voice-over. She takes her place against the chart and the second scientist marks up her body shape, height and arm reach,

forming the shape of a crucified body. She moves back to centre screen and takes her place on a small platform in front of the primary scientist. Unquestioningly she does as she is told. As we watch the scene progress, Rosler's bleak, emotionless voice-over starts again and she delivers her thesis.

She's being told how to think, what to think. The nature of action. She's being instructed in what to feel. [...] Her body grows accustomed to certain prescribed poses, certain characteristic gestures, certain constraints and pressures of clothing. Her mind learns to think of her body as something different from herself. It learns to think, perhaps without awareness, of her body as having parts. These parts are to be judged. The self has already learned to attach value to itself. To see as a whole entity with an external vision. She sees herself from outside with the anxious eyes of the judged who has within her the critical standards of the ones who judge.

Reminiscent of John Berger's discussion of the representation and objectification of women in art and Western culture in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Rosler's performance aptly demonstrates the dual process of feminine internalisation and complicity. Berger observed that:

From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman (1972: 46, original emphasis).

In line with the demands of this dual position, Rosler's manner remains passive and disassociated; at most, mildly curious about the processes of her invasive examination. Standing on her small dais, she submits to an exhaustive measurement regime whereby the senior scientist takes every possible measurement of Rosler's body. In response to the scientists' continuous requests, she gradually removes articles of her clothing until about two thirds of the way through the first act she stands naked before them. As she undresses, the scientist takes more of her measurements – arms, legs, waist – and states them aloud to be added as a series of statistics by the second scientist to the marked out silhouette of Rosler's body on the wall chart.





Fig. 10  
Video still from *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977),  
Martha Rosler.

Early on in this measurement process, three women wearing lab coats enter to the left of the chart, standing in height order and watching the proceedings. Simultaneously, a man's voice-over starts telling the story of a previously 'happy, normal, healthy, highly intelligent' little boy called Tommy Smith. Tommy has stopped developing physically and mentally at school and become undernourished and disinterested in food. Psychiatric services get involved and through Tommy's role-playing with dolls, it transpires that his mother goes out to work while his father does most of the housework and caring. The little boy is uncertain about male and female role models to the detriment of his own gender identity and physical development. The voice-over continues:

It was all very confusing to Tommy. He was at a stage in which a normal boy wants to identify himself with a male figure but his family set up was such that he was not certain what the figure stood for, and, anyway, he was not sure that he wanted to be that kind of a man.

The school authorities and their psychologist consult his parents and as a result, the boy's parents revert to traditional gender roles: his mother reduces her work hours and now sees as 'her main job to love and care for Tommy' while his father relinquishes his caring responsibilities. Tommy starts eating again and recommences growing up as a 'normal' and 'better adjusted boy'.

The male narrator tells this story in the familiar authoritative syntax of a radio presenter. This authority is undermined when at certain points in the account the narrator's educated voice repeats what he has just said in a disjointed reiteration that adds a layer of dissonance to his seemingly factual account. Also belying the narrator's phlegmatic tones is the highly emotive use of language; in this story, normal equals healthy, which both require the individual's correct gender identification and associated behaviours in conventional society. Particular condemnation is laid at the mother's door; it is because of her full time employment that the father has to provide 'mothering services' thereby emasculating her husband and depriving her son of his own formation of masculine identity. Especially damning of the mother are the concerns about the reduction of the boy's appetite and subsequent undernourishment, 'he was not eating enough, particularly enough milk and a result was a shortage in his intake of proteins and minerals'. Milk is associated with the nurturing mother and her own breast milk while protein is linked with meat and masculinity. The result of Tommy's alleged maternal neglect is that the mother is depriving the boy of his masculinity, which, like sustenance, is his male right. Carol Adams argues in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (2010 [1990]) that not only is animal protein associated with men but access to better and more abundant food is also seen as a male prerogative. She describes how power has always been equated with the right to eat meat and as a result of paternalistic hierarchies, 'women, second-class citizens, are more likely to eat what are considered to be second-class food in a patriarchal culture: vegetables, fruits, and grains rather than meat' (2010 [1990]: 172). Adams is clear that while both class and race

determine access to good quality food, nonetheless 'the sexism in meat eating recapitulates the class distinctions with an added twist: a mythology permeates all classes that meat is a masculine food and meat eating a male activity' (2010 [1990]: 172). Furthermore, she suggests that the colonising forces of Western patriarchy deliberately used access to animal protein to reinforce 'a hierarchy of race, class, and sex' (2010 [1990]: 175). In this way, cultural hegemony is maintained through controlling nourishment while race, class and gender is deeply coded in the substances we are allowed or not allowed to eat.

While the man's voice-over describes Tommy's predicament, the scientists continue to direct Rosler to undress and position herself to facilitate the accumulation of her corporeal statistics. The statistics captured from her body adopt a more judgemental role as the first scientist now registers each one as either meeting an appropriate value or falling above or below the required norm. The three women assistants, who could be interpreted as the Three Graces of classical Greek mythology representing charm, beauty and creativity, carry toy instruments, which make the sound of a bell or kazoo depending on whether Rosler's body meets the standard expected. The intense scrutiny of her body becomes increasingly invasive and culminates in the scientist kneeling in front of her to measure the length of her vagina. Rosler as the performer remains passive while her voice-over continues to deconstruct what is happening.



Fig. 11  
Video still from *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977),  
Martha Rosler.

Having been thoroughly examined, Rosler is free to dress in alternative outfits, which is edited to form a montage.<sup>65</sup> Rosler does her hair and make-up while her voice-over details a list of all too familiar techniques and strategies in order to maintain the mask of femininity. These include: 'to keep thighs and knees pressed together, to tighten the muscles of the stomach, to cast the eyes down'. The list of socially authorised feminine behaviours has not much changed today and can still be found filling the pages of contemporary women's magazines. 'To keep the brow smooth, to smile', Rosler tells us, a refrain that many women and girls, including myself, are familiar with as strange men take it upon themselves to tell women to 'smile'. Her voice-over continues:

The total woman remembers to [...] manage her image in such a way that her personality disappears, and her ability to absorb, to be projected upon, to present herself for delectation,

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<sup>65</sup> Due to the material qualities of video, which deterioration over the time, the montage Rosler speaks of is hard to see and appears more as an edited but linear progression.

substitutes for private desires of the self as self in which masochism is the definition of fulfilment. They say women are masochists by nature. What is nature? I say masochism is a crime against women.

As the montage progresses, Rosler extends her critique to relate the personal restrictions placed upon women's bodies to wider political aims and strategies. In doing so, she questions the neutrality of scientific tests and shows how they are implicated in eugenics and social control. She maintains that statistics and measurements are used to assert the superiority of those who wield them and to sustain the subordinate position of the Other.

Rosler lists American scientists of the early and mid-twentieth century who have propounded eugenics:

Many of these men are pioneers in the testing movement. All are on record testifying to the racial superiority of white, Nordic males, to their natural superiority over people of all other races and, of course, women.

She asks us, 'do you believe in Tommy Smith?' and questions the ulterior movements behind the allegedly scientific case study. The story of Tommy Smith, it transpires, was written up in an academic psychiatric journal in 1967 just as the women's liberation movement was gaining momentum. Rosler highlights that twelve years after the end of the Second World War and its processing and extermination of 'undesirables', American scientists have still not learnt the necessary lessons and continue to measure, test and define humanity and impose a hierarchy of value that limits visions of non-normative gender roles.<sup>66</sup> Rosler ends her montage arrayed in a large white wedding dress, her hair coiffed and her face made-up. The traditional wedding apparel is the ultimate symbol of success for Western women as well as indicating their subjugation as they are given away like

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<sup>66</sup> In a similar vein, the academic psychologist and writer Cordelia Fine makes a strong case in her book *Delusions of Gender: The Real Science behind Sex Differences* (2010) for the ways in which ideological notions of 'biology is destiny' continue to create a bias in gender-based research with interpretations of studies being forced into a masculine/feminine binary by either scientists or the mainstream media.

chattels by the father to the husband. The scene ends with a close-up of Rosler's outstretched physical measurements that appear like a carefully calculated crucifixion. 'Although these dimensions are what qualify her as a desirable subject within male culture,' Elwes observes, 'the clinical and deadpan manner of their collection turns the image of the artist into an ironically passive and violated generator of numbers that add up to a woman and yet signally fail to represent her' (2005: 50).

The second 'symbolic' act of the opera lasts for just one and a half minutes. Rosler, still naked, crouches down in front of the camera and breaks several eggs into a bowl before tilting the vessel up to the camera's gaze. I read this act as a consideration of the symbolic link between the womb-like egg and society's treatment of women as incubating procreators. Rosler's actions are performed gently yet the act is aggressive; break female bodies open and they are just wombs. The process Rosler enacts suggests a cannibalistic culture that feeds on female physicality.



Fig. 12  
Video still from *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977),  
Martha Rosler.



The third 'tragic, horrific and mythic' act opens with a baroque trumpet call accompanying photographic documentation of women and girls being measured and examined. There is no suggestion of where, when or why these images were taken. The archive draws a parallel between Rosler's performance in the video and women's lived experiences. The music abruptly stops and Rosler speaks a litany of crimes against women. She starts by repeating the word 'femicide' five times before detailing the brutalities carried out on the bodies of women and girls: 'rape', 'clitoridectomy', 'woman battering', 'bound feet, bound bodies, bound images'. She loops and repeats these crimes, audio feedback occasionally echoing through and overpowering the sound of her voice. The effect is to create a disturbing sense of the endless repetition of these brutalities.



Fig. 13  
Video still from *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977),  
Martha Rosler.

The litany of crimes against women, such as female genital mutilation, nearly forty years after this work was made, continue to be commonplace, with the exception of foot binding, which is no

longer culturally acceptable. Of particular relevance to this thesis is Rosler's association of women's bound bodies with bound images. Again, Rosler suggests the pivotal role of representation in enabling a cultural framework whereby the multiple acts of violence against women and girls and the restrictions on their bodies become acceptable, commonplace and matter-of-fact, a situation that continues to see two women a week killed by intimate partner violence in the UK alone. The 'Post-2015 Consensus: Conflict and Violence Assessment' paper by Stanford University's James Fearon and Oxford University's Anke Hoeffler found that more people are killed through domestic violence each year than through civil war and concluded that women and children are disproportionately affected by this violence (2014: 49).

In the light of these stark figures, Rosler's alignment of the global oppression of women to genocide, which initially shocked me, takes on a grim reality. While feminist campaigners have long spoken out about the brutal realities facing women and girls, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek recently used his high profile on the political Left to call attention to the rising tide of gender violence against women (2014). Detailing examples of femicide in Canada and Mexico, he argued these cases must be seen in a joined up globalised picture where attempts by women to financially and culturally emancipate themselves from patriarchal domination result in their abuse and murder. Žižek also makes the connection to sexual violence in the UK and the Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal, which saw the systematic abuse of young vulnerable girls and women from 1997 to 2013 being ignored by institutional authorities. At the same time, in the UK, horrific stories are emerging concerning the rape and abuse of hundreds of women in the 1970s and 1980s by men previously respected as celebrities.<sup>67</sup> These cases cannot be consigned to a woeful past era of sexism and misogyny when current evidence of

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<sup>67</sup> These include Jimmy Savile, Rolf Harris and Max Clifford (Greer and McLaughlin 2013: 243–263; Browne 2014: 9–19).



endemic abuse, such as Rotherham and the global trade in sex trafficking, continue to be exposed.

Rosler links the small acts and social practices of the everyday to the widespread and systematic oppression of the Other. What at first appears to be an unwieldy and even offensive suggestion; that the holocaust can be connected to the treatment of women,<sup>68</sup> becomes a chain of events that shows how seemingly small acts of stereotyping and complicity can lead to such extremes of violence against marginalised people. In doing so, she calls attention to the ways that misrepresentation and objectification contribute to the Othering and dehumanisation of people and points to the internalisation of these ideological depictions by women resulting in female passivity. Arguing that the system of brutality and coercion needs to be made visible so that it can be challenged, Rosler refuses to point the finger at the complicity of the marginalised but rather calls attention to the processes of societal training and the difficulties attendant in rejecting learnt ideology. Through her version of the learning-play, Rosler suggests that the recognition of systems of exploitation and identifying whom they serve is a vital starting point in the rejection of the prescribed roles of the Other. Only then may women gain their rightful status as citizens.

Throughout this video work, Rosler deploys a range of different formal strategies, which remain relevant to contemporary feminist practice. A key method is her use of narrative and voice-over. Although Rosler's passive body is manipulated, degraded and reduced to statistics, her voice-over provides a constant counterpoint, which clearly articulates what is actually happening and rejects the process as unacceptable. Rosler's use of voice-over allows her to exploit the

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<sup>68</sup> Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel's text *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust* (2010) gives an account of the hitherto unacknowledged ways in which sexism and misogyny intersected with the genocidal aims of Hitler in the form of sexual violence meted out to Jewish women and girls at the hands of the Nazis, non-Jewish men who hid Jews from the regime as well as fellow Jews in the ghettos and concentration camps and the subsequent erasure of these stories from history.

traditional authority of the narrator and through this appropriation of power she counters the insults to her body. Although depicting her naked body, Rosler's formal use of the camera with its monotonous long shot, does much to refuse the male gaze and diminish her sexual objectification. By using this strategy, Rosler circumnavigates Lucy Lippard's subtle abyss, the treacherous space between women's use of representation to expose the objectification of women by men and men's own objectifying depictions of women, discussed in chapter one, and thus mitigates her own objectification while calling attention to its mechanisms. Furthermore, through the device of her flat, deadpan voice-over, Rosler refuses readings of her narration as hysterical or emotive and instead lays out her arguments point by point for the viewer to join up the dots between the structures of power and discriminatory practices she calls into question. The connections are there to be made but we, as viewers, have to perceive them. Rosler's voice serves as a constant reminder of her intellect and lived experience as a woman in Western culture. Through her articulation of what is happening, she retains her agency and subjectivity even while we watch her body passively submitting to manipulation. Rosler states her identity in the title of the work and reminds us that regardless of her gender, she is still a citizen.

### ***Hey, Chicky!!! (1978), Nina Sobell***

In 1978, the same year that the American pornographic magazine *Hustler*, featured on its cover an upside down woman being ground up by a meat grinder with the caption: 'we will no longer hang women up like pieces of meat', Nina Sobell made the black and white single screen video artwork *Hey, Chicky!!!*. A play on the pervasive labelling of women and girls as 'birds' and 'chicks', Sobell uses the carcass of a chicken to expose the cultural connections between women's bodies, exploitation and consumerism as well as referencing the feminine traits of internalisation and complicity within these structures.

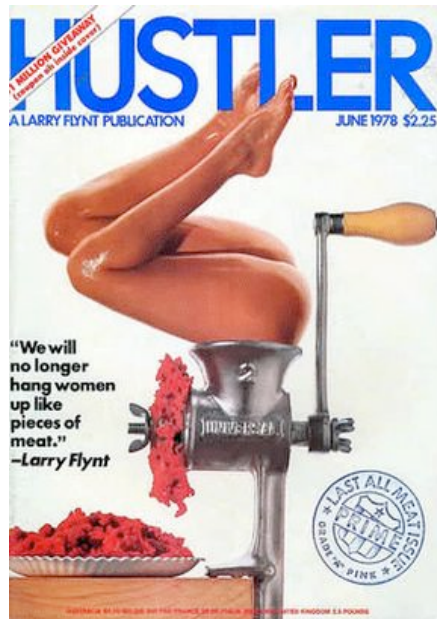


Fig. 14  
*Hustler* magazine cover image (1978), a Larry Flynt publication.

Like Rosler, Sobell uses her naked body to expose the insult of female objectification while deploying counter-strategies to avoid merely perpetuating the same old exploitation of the female form that Lippard (1995 [1976]: 102) and Pollock (1987: 135) warn of. Strategically, *Hey, Chicky!!!* operates in a different mode to Rosler's deadpan narrative and compliant manoeuvres; Sobell remains silent throughout the work and disavows the desiring gaze through her taboo-invoking sexualised performance with a chicken carcass. Performing directly to and for the camera, Sobell counters the charge of narcissism<sup>69</sup> as well as her own objectification through a range of formal strategies. One way in which she achieves this mitigation is through her control of the camera apparatus, of which the spectator is made fully aware; Sobell only leaves the frame to manipulate the camera's settings. As Straayer observes, 'an advantage to performance video is its ability to simultaneously position the artist as both subject and object of her own gaze' (1985: 8). This loop of subject and object is a significant counter-strategy to the dominant system of woman performing for the male gaze and one that many women artists used in the early days of video art (Garrard 2008).

<sup>69</sup> Rosalind Krauss suggested that video as a medium is inherently narcissistic in her critical essay 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', *October* 1 (1976), pp 51-64.

Thus women explored what it meant to perform for their own and other women's look and to do this through the prism of self-authored and subjective experiences. In order to avoid Lippard's subtle abyss, Sobell also invokes taboos and performs the abject by means of her complex treatment of the chicken carcass that is anthropomorphised and presented as alternatively a baby and a woman. Without a spoken narrative, the meaning of the work largely rests upon Sobell's non-verbal performance that she underpins with her knowing use of popular music and the selected songs' lyrical content.

The work starts with a close-up of a chicken carcass wrapped in plastic with the price label facing the camera. Sobell wants us to know this chicken had a price on its head. The initial close-up shot lasts for three long minutes during which we see only Sobell's hands touching the carcass while popular music plays in the background. She unwraps the chicken with rhythmic hand motions as if she is about to start dancing to the music she's listening to. This gesturing sets up a playfulness and suggests that what we are about to see is all a bit of harmless fun.



Fig. 15  
Video still from *Hey, Chicky!!!* (1978), Nina Sobell.

However, once the bird is unwrapped Sobell brusquely handles its body; her fingers pinch and pull at the chicken's flesh and she penetrates the carcass with her fingers, thrusting them back and forth in a sexual gesture. The extreme close-up shot mimics hard-core pornographic representations that are only interested in the penetration of female flesh. Pushing her hand into the chicken's orifice, she pulls out the chicken's severed phallic neck and uses this as a penis substitute to further violate the chicken. Discarding the phallic symbol and abandoning her more brutal gestures, Sobell re-assumes her playful manner although she continues to violate the dead hen. Music plays in the background and Wilson Pickett sings:

I'm gonna wait 'til the midnight hour. That's when my love comes tumbling down. I'm gonna wait 'til the midnight hour. When there's no one else around. I'm gonna take you girl and hold you. And do all things I told you in the midnight hour. Yes I am, yes I am (Cropper and Pickett 1965).

As Sobell proceeds to eviscerate the chicken, pulling organ after organ from its cavity and rubbing them over the chicken's pelvis, Pickett and Cropper's lyrics take on a sinister undertone that suggests male physical dominance, force and coercion. From time to time, Sobell uses one of the chicken's internal body parts to give the bird a playful little smack; a gesture that is reminiscent of the masculine habit of slapping a woman on her bottom as an appreciation of her flesh, or a reminder that her body is not her own, behaviour that women and girls still regularly experience nearly forty years later. The artist's playful demeanour combined with her actions creates a disturbing atmosphere that suggests the ways in which actions of harassment and exploitation are habitually masked and excused – boys will be boys. The inertia of the objectified and violated body of the chicken underscores the lack of consent; the carcass, after all, cannot say yes.

Three minutes into the sexualised performance, Sobell walks out of the frame in order to operate the camera. Slowly pulling the camera out from a close-up to a mid-shot, the chicken, lying forlornly

on its side, is revealed to be resting on a platter, waiting to be cooked and devoured.



Fig. 16  
Video still from *Hey, Chicky!!!* (1978), Nina Sobell.

As the slow pull back shot takes place, Sobell's appreciation of cultural codes and significations is demonstrated again through her darkly humorous and knowing selection of songs. Barbara Lewis sings:

Baby I'm yours, and I'll be yours until the stars fall from the sky. Yours until the rivers all run dry. In other words, until I die. Baby I'm yours (McCoy 1965).

The message is clear; while men sing about the possession of women, women sing about serving themselves up to men. The joke is on the bird, of course, she's already dead and has no choice about whether or not to be consumed.

Sobell shifts the camera's gaze slightly towards the chicken and re-enters the frame wearing a black unbuttoned shirt that exposes

her breasts, her face remains out of shot. Sitting behind the chicken and facing the camera, Sobell's navel is almost level with the carcass and appears like a target in the centre of the frame. The juxtaposition of Sobell's orifice-like navel hollow and the chicken's void suggests a link between the artist's body and the feminised space between the bird's legs. The focus on Sobell's navel also raises the spectre of the umbilical link between mother and child, which the artist plays on throughout the work. This meaning takes precedence as Sobell scoops up the chicken's body and holds it against her bare torso, spreading its wings against her body in an embrace that resembles a child clutching its mother. She gently jigs the 'baby' bird up and down as if soothing a child or playfully pretending that mother and child are dancing. She cradles its carcass as if it is a newborn baby, then sits it back down on the platter and waves one of its wings at the camera in the manner of a new mother waving her infant's hand at a friend in a goodbye gesture.



Fig. 17  
Video still from *Hey, Chicky!!!* (1978), Nina Sobell.

Again, Sobell cradles the bird, rocking it from side to side before suddenly slipping a hand between its legs in an uncomfortably sexual gesture. The discomfort stems from the viewer's identification of the dead chicken as a child and Sobell's action invokes the taboo of paedophilia and child molestation. Sobell's actions take on a more sinister note as her performance links cultural displays of masculinity and femininity to sexual violence and the exploitation of the most vulnerable amongst us. Like a puppet, she makes the chicken carcass dance again and forces it to curtsy; an action that women were historically expected to perform in order to show respect, gratitude and signify their inferiority. Laying the bird back down on the platter, Sobell exits the frame so that she can operate the camera again. First, the music changes to an upbeat 1960s instrumental tune and then in time with the music, Sobell repeatedly jerks the camera's zoom in and out, mimicking the back and forth motion of a pelvic thrust. Callously objectified by the camera's invasive look, the chicken lies immobile and desolate on the platter. Superficially, as with most of Sobell's performance, her actions and use of the camera's gaze appear playful and humorous but contain a disturbing undercurrent, in this instance, by making reference to the sexual molestation of non-consenting bodies. The action of the lens serves as a reminder of the ways in which cameras linger over the female form drawing attention to their sexualised physicality and in particular, their breasts and buttocks.

Sobell crouches down to re-enter the frame and kneels behind the chicken. At six minutes into the work, this is the first time we see the artist's face, we can also see that she is now topless. This scene becomes one of the most perturbing and fetishistic of the work as Sobell puts her mouth to the chicken's body and sucks and mouths the raw meat. Parodying sexual acts, she licks and sucks around the chicken's (vaginal) orifice and fellates the corpse's leg. Her lascivious actions verge on the cannibalistic as her mouth also threatens to devour the bird's flesh. Using her mouth, Sobell picks the chicken up by one of its fleshy wings and dangles its body between her breasts



before re-identifying the chicken as an infant by holding it in turn to each of her breasts as if she is nursing a baby. Straayer observes, 'this collapsing of the baby role with the chicken's already established roles of dead animal, food material, and sexual object sets up further taboos including infanticide, cannibalism, and pedophilia' (1985: 11). Mediated through the cultural significations attached to the abject qualities of raw meat, Sobell's performance of woman and child as well as the emphasis on sex, provokes an unsettling of conventional understandings of women's domestic and nurturing roles.



Fig. 18  
Video still from *Hey, Chicky!!!* (1978), Nina Sobell.

Releasing the chicken, Sobell allows it to flop pathetically onto its side. She moves out of view and repositions the camera to a wider shot. *In The Midnight Hour* starts to play again as Sobell returns to the frame now wearing a buttoned up cardigan. This time, she performs the role of a lip-smacking, eye-rolling pervert; a dirty old man eyeing up a potential victim. In the era of Jimmy Savile revelations, Sobell's depiction of the caricatured sexual predator takes on even more significance as it becomes apparent that perpetrators of

abuse can hide in plain sight while the testimony of survivors of violence is discredited and dismissed.<sup>70</sup>



Fig. 19  
Video still from *Hey, Chicky!!!* (1978), Nina Sobell.

Sobell takes a fur shawl and drapes it around the bird, performing a process of socialisation that transforms the chicken into a woman:

By donning a fur, this (chicken) woman is further connected symbolically to both animal and animal slaughter. And while women are consumers, they are often also commodities and the medium of exchange' (Straayer 1985: 11).

Sobell continues her leering behaviour towards the chicken/woman as she forces the carcass to prance about. Discarding the fur, she enacts a final link between woman-as-consumer and woman-to-be-

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<sup>70</sup> Jimmy Savile was an English TV presenter, DJ and radio personality who fronted a range of BBC television shows predominantly for children and young people from the late 1960s to the 1990s. He was praised for his fundraising and awarded an OBE in 1971 and knighted in 1990. After his death in 2012, allegations of extensive sexual abuse by Savile and cover-ups by public bodies emerged. He is now thought to be one of the most prolific sex offenders in Britain who abused individuals ranging from 5 to 75 years old. Due to his charitable activities, many of his victims were hospital patients. Victims who came forward prior to Savile's death had to contend with his celebrity status and were dismissed by those in positions of authority. Peter Rippon, the former BBC Newsnight editor, pulled an exposé on Savile by saying, in reference to women's verbal testimony, that the only evidence they had for Savile's alleged abuse was 'just the women and a second-hand briefing' (BBC 2012).

consumed as she packs the bird away into her handbag, one of a myriad of symbols connecting consumerism to femininity.

This work contains an over-arching strategy of defamiliarisation or alienation (Pollock 2003: 212) that is achieved through a range of sub-strategies and methods. I understand defamiliarisation as a process of 'making strange', whereby everyday actions and gestures that are familiar and largely unquestioned are made to appear uncanny, denaturalised and emptied of their symbolic meaning even if the effect lasts for just a split second. In doing so, symbolism that is embedded deep into our culture, so normalised as to be transparent and unquestioned, can be brought to the surface so that it can be challenged. This was a recurrent counter-strategy that ran through many of the works made by feminist artists in the 1970s and 1980s in order to disrupt the normalised constructs and rituals of femininity. Women artists such as the American artist Eleanor Antin in *Representational Painting* (1971), Hannah Wilke, also from the USA, in *Gestures* (1974) and the Croatian artist Sanja Iveković in *Make Up Make Down* (1978)<sup>71</sup> were already exposing the construction and performativity of gender that Judith Butler theorised in the late 1980s and 1990s in 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution' (1988) and *Gender Trouble* (1990).

Butler draws on Simone de Beauvoir's claim in *The Second Sex* that 'one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman' (1949: 267), to theorise the modes in which we constitute ourselves as subjects (1988: 270). The reinterpretation of what it means to be a woman, from inherent to constructed, provided a foundation for Butler to argue that gender is far from a stable identity, instead it is 'an identity tenuously constituted in time' and through the performance of particular actions (1988: 120). Butler continues:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary

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<sup>71</sup> All three works are single screen videos viewed on monitors.

relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style (1988: 271).

I suggest that ten years before Butler was writing, Sobell was enacting this relationship in an attempt to break open and subvert the façade of normative gender identity. Sobell experiments with the 'different sort of repeating' that Butler later theorises and utilises an excessive performance of gender codes and rituals in order to subvert and make the familiar appear strange. In order to achieve this, Sobell carefully layers a range of different strategies and techniques that focus around her anthropomorphic treatment of meat, which operates to conflate the consumer and the (feminine) body to be consumed. Maria Troy, writing in the Video Data Bank's programme note for the video work, observes: 'bordering on the unthinkable, if this woman plays with the chicken as a child, does that mean she would cook and eat her infant?' (1998). By drawing an analogy between meat and the cultural treatment of women's bodies, Sobell presents a highly problematic relationship between herself as the mother and the chicken/baby, thereby complicating the trope of woman as nurturer and care-giver.

The success of *Hey, Chicky!!!* centres around Sobell's ability to perform an excessiveness that remains recognisable. Her actions and gestures are exaggerated and deviant, off-putting and unpleasant. Yet as viewers, we know and can visualise the originary acts and the cultural conditions from which they emerge, consequently making strange previously unquestioned behaviours. Throughout this work, Sobell creates a loop that links popular culture, sexism and normative gender roles. Through the use of taboos and her mode of performance, she critiques feminine representations and unsettles the category of woman. In a contemporary Western culture that still adheres to notions of what is deemed feminine or masculine behaviour, this challenge to heteronormative narratives of gender still has potential to agitate and destabilise. This thesis will discuss the

use of meat and abjection in relation to my own practice in chapter four.

### ***Free, White and 21 (1980), Howardena Pindell***

While *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* calls attention to systems of oppression as experienced by women and *Hey, Chicky!!!* problematises the category of woman through the breaking of taboos, Howardena Pindell's single screen video work, *Free, White and 21* (1980), viewed on a monitor, relates to the cross-sections of racial and gendered discrimination.<sup>72</sup> Made nine years before Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term, this is a work that explores the dynamics of intersectionality and the politics of difference. Pindell adopts the principle of the 'personal is political' to draw on her experiences of racism as a framework and formal structure for the video work. As such, this analysis discusses the experiential accounts Pindell describes as well the representational strategies used throughout the work. Framed within a commentary of Pindell's everyday confrontations with racism is a critique of prejudice that she has encountered from her white peers and colleagues in the feminist movement. Although Pindell does not use the term essentialism, she contends that her experiences as a black woman are meant to conform to white women's field of reference. As a participant in the women's liberation movement, Pindell found that her artistic merit was still dependent on her willingness to conform to the use of symbolism that came from white culture. The refusal to subscribe to these symbols meant that her work was not validated in the eyes of her white peers.<sup>73</sup> Within the context of feminism, Pindell finds that while her subjectivity as a woman is judged to be valid, her account of racism is trivialised and ignored. The British artist Sonia Boyce observed in 1986 that 'being a black woman is a perpetual struggle to be heard and appreciated as a human being'.<sup>74</sup> Pindell's

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<sup>72</sup> See Appendix 4 for transcript.

<sup>73</sup> Pindell does not say what these signs are.

<sup>74</sup> Source: A.I.R Gallery exhibition catalogue, 1986: 6. Boyce's solo exhibition at A.I.R Gallery took place six years after *Free, White and 21* had its first screening at the gallery.

struggle to be heard is manifest in the artist's video work. Furthermore, she calls attention to the ways in which the separation of race from the politics of feminism consequently replicates some of the same hierarchies found in patriarchal society that continue to position the lives of black people as Other. This is an observation that postcolonial feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty expanded in her critical text *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* (1988) in which she analysed the ways Western feminist discourse has tended to reproduce the categories through which the West constructs and represents itself as superior to the Other.

*Free, White and 21* features two women, both performed by the artist. In one role Pindell performs herself talking to the viewer about her experiences of racism while in the other she appears in whiteface and a blond wig. The two women never appear in the same frame; instead their performances are spliced together with the white woman intermittently interrupting Pindell in order to reprimand her disparagingly, 'you know you really must be paranoid. Those things never happened to me'.



Fig. 20 and 21  
Video stills from *Free, White and 21* (1980), Howardena Pindell.

The framing of the women predominantly consists of head and shoulder shots, which shift back and forth from an extreme close-up shot through to a mid-shot. The shifting of the framing from authoritative newsreader mid-shot to acute close-up suggests that

unlike the neutral newsreader imparting someone else's narrative, the stories Pindell relate are her own. Her voice remains largely impersonal throughout the work with just the occasional tremor or slightly shocked inflection betraying her sentiments. The close-up of the camera similarly reveals the traces of embodied memories flitting across her face as she struggles to contain their affects behind a neutral front.

Detailing story after story of abuse and discrimination, Pindell's account begins with her mother's own childhood maltreatment by the white babysitter who washed the little girl's 'dirty' skin with lye in order to lighten her skin tone, burning and permanently scarring her in the process.<sup>75</sup> Her narrative continues through her own experience of being a little girl in kindergarten where she was tied down by her teacher, who believed bathrooms should be segregated, to prevent her going to the toilet. Pindell reworks the evoked image of the little girl being tied down and re-presents the scene as an adult slowly encasing her head and face in a white bandage. Her eyes, mouth and ears are smothered and rendered unusable as the bindings of whiteness stifle her own senses. Her actions suggest the way in which she is dehumanised, the requirement to conform to 'white' both obliterating Pindell's identity and suffocating her. The gradual covering up of Pindell's blackness to replace it with the featureless mask of whiteness suggests the violent and reductive nature of racial division that discriminates on the basis of colour.

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<sup>75</sup> Lye is a strong caustic compound made from sodium hydroxide that can cause chemical burns. Diluted and mixed with other compounds it can be found in soap and household products. It is much stronger than bleach, also made from sodium hydroxide, which is used in the UK.



Fig. 22  
Video stills from *Free, White and 21* (1980), Howardena Pindell.

Pindell describes how at high school her teacher refused to put her in the accelerated history class where she belonged because a white student with lower grades would allegedly go further. The racism continues through university, graduation and employment. She details the repeated instances of being overlooked and rejected for opportunities that she sees white women enjoying. She tells us about being the only black person at a wedding party and the host changing her seat in order to watch how Pindell eats. She recounts the experience of that same person deliberately and obviously shaking Pindell's hand only after greeting every other white person in the room. After each account, the woman in whiteface intervenes to accuse her of being paranoid and ungrateful, 'well, you ungrateful little... After all we've done for you'.

Towards the end of the video the viewer is shown in close-up, the woman in whiteface pulling and peeling off her skin to reveal Pindell's features. The camera pulls back and the artist holds out the skin-like mask for a moment before discarding it. Andrea Barnwell Brownlee argues that:

The removal of the white mask suggests three interrelated topics: a declaration that the skin game is over; an intimation that the blonde subject and Pindell have more in common than previously thought; and an assertion that the subject doing the peeling away is actively involved in dismantling perceptions (2008: 47).





Fig. 23  
Video stills from *Free, White and 21* (1980), Howardena Pindell.

Pindell gives another interpretation, based on her shame at her whiteness, 'the first thing that comes to mind is removing my white relatives' (cited in Brownlee 2008: 47). In an interview with Lynn Hershman Leeson, Pindell talks about her white heritage as the result of her ancestors' rape by white slave owners. Her shame at her whiteness is inextricably linked to this history. When travelling in Africa she felt 'diluted' as a result of her light skin, 'it was a very strange sensation. I just wanted to get the whiteness off me' (Pindell cited in Brownlee 2008: 47). Brownlee suggests 'the removal of the mask was a vital ingredient in a powerful metaphoric cycle, which directly linked fair skin, pain, shame, and the removal of whiteness, to reveal a renewed sense of blackness' (2008: 47). Pindell's insistence on blackness and the politics of difference experienced through her identity as a woman was a critical response to existing in Western culture, which seeks to celebrate whiteness and its cultural ideals and aesthetics. Adrian Piper refused to allow her identity as a black woman to be rendered invisible on the basis of a light skin colour that could pass as white in Western society; Pindell, who does

not have this option, sees a history of violence and colonisation in her own light skin and similarly calls herself into the frame of representation to deconstruct the politics of racialisation as they play out upon her body and throughout her life. The sociologist Ann Phoenix observes that black women have been calling attention to and critiquing the intersections of racism, gender and class ever since Sojourner Truth's incisive speech *Ain't I a Woman?* in 1851. Phoenix calls for us to recognise the ways in which the intersections of discrimination are both recurrent and new, 'struggles are always recursive, one must always think about how things return as well as recognising when things have changed for the better' (2014). This recognition of recursivity is critical at this current moment in time. Phoenix notes that the achievements of 1970s and 1980s feminisms are being undone in the face of a resurgent white patriarchy. She warns, 'things that are apparently gained are easily lost' (Phoenix 2014).

*Free, White and 21* was included in the 2008 exhibition *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Artists and the Moving Image Since 1970* co-organised by the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta, USA, in order to address the marginalisation of black women artists. The catalogue states the curatorial motivation as being initiated by 'the awareness that black women artists historically have been rendered invisible, and continue in the twenty-first century to be underdiscussed and underexhibited [sic]' (Brownlee and Oliver 2008: 12). The preface elaborates that the artists' exhibited artwork represents the 'steady, ongoing effort to explore their lives, evoke familial and communal memories, and critique our social landscape through the use of the moving image' (Brownlee and Oliver 2008: 11). This critical body of work utilises a range of strategies familiar to feminist art practices including direct address, narrative, performance and storytelling as well as an insistence on 'the personal is political'. Furthermore, these works sit within the tradition of consciousness-raising in their struggle to raise political awareness of the daily discrimination faced by black

women and in doing so, insist on their own subjectivity and agency. From their subject positions as black women, artists such as Pindell in *Free, White and 21* and Adrian Piper in *Cornered* (1988), utilise their control of both the camera's eye and the frame of the screen to disrupt the narrow field of representational value adhered to them in mainstream Western culture. In doing so, they resist their colonisation by the symbolism of a white ruling class.<sup>76</sup>

The title of Pindell's video, *Free, White and 21*, comes from a commonly used phrase in America from the late 1800s and 1900s, which was still in use as late as the mid 1960s and roughly interprets as beholden to no one (McMillan 2015: 174).<sup>77</sup> In 1965, Malcolm X referenced the phrase and its meaning in his speech at Ford Auditorium, Detroit:

When you get the white man over here in America and he says he's white, he means something else. You can listen to the sound of his voice – when he says he's white, he means he's a boss. That's right. That's what 'white' means in this language. You know the expression, 'free, white, and twenty-one'. He made that up. He's letting you know all of them mean the same. 'White' means free, boss (Transcript of Malcolm X speech).

Pindell would have been familiar with this phrase and is invoking the discrimination and privilege that is integral to the statement. She will never be viewed as 'free, white and 21' – beholden to no one – in Western society unless it substantially changes.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Valerie Cassell Oliver observes, 'this interface of body, history, and contemporary society comprises what Stuart Hall refers to as *resignification*, an act of resistance that uses the body (or image thereof) to reclaim and redefine' (Brownlee and Oliver 2008: 40).

<sup>77</sup> *Free, White and 21* is also the title of a 1963 American film. The film's plot concerns the trial of a black man accused of raping a white woman; a recurring narrative in white American culture during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that was frequently used as a justification for the lynching of black men.

<sup>78</sup> Although the phrase 'free, white and 21' is viewed as archaic now, it continues to hold relevance as the last few years has seen the ongoing murder of black individuals including children by light-skinned police officers, security guards or citizens in the USA and in the UK. The new civil rights protest calls: 'Black Lives Matter' and 'I can't breathe', the dying words of Jimmy Mbenga, killed in 2010 in the UK, and Eric Garner, killed in 2014 in the USA reveal a fundamental truth about the endemic racism of Western society.

Pindell's work utilises feminist and civil rights techniques of the era – tell it like it is – to speak to both black and white women. In a similar vein to *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, Pindell's *Free White and 21* is 'a work about being done to' (Rosler 1977) and takes the form of exposing and critiquing multiple forms of oppression. In discussion with Hershman Leeson, Pindell notes that consciousness-raising had a profound effect on her life (2006: 12). However, she also observed her isolation as the only black person present and that when she spoke on issues of racism she was silenced by the other women (2006: 12). In the face of this silencing, Pindell draws on the foundational strategies of consciousness-raising in feminism and 'the personal is political' communicating through video narrative, storytelling and direct address. Speaking of the format of video, she later observes, 'video and digital technology were not in the uppermost part of my mind; I'm a painter, and I was more interested in painting. But this seemed the right medium for this expression' (cited in Brownlee and Oliver 2008: 18). Video provided a platform that allowed Pindell to reveal her experience of consciousness-raising as a black woman who finds herself, yet again, restricted because of her skin colour. Pindell demonstrates how the structural racism of white Western patriarchy had been subsumed into white feminist activism and needed to be challenged. Refusing to be suppressed, Pindell activates the medium of video to speak directly to the viewer and constructs an arena where her subjective experiences can be shared. Video, through its relationship to televisual forms of address, possessed the capacity for dialogue with its viewers (Elwes 2005: 41). Making the connection between the head and shoulder shot and television's use of eye-to-eye contact with the viewer in news programmes, Elwes observes that women artists were able to adopt the authoritative presence of the predominantly white male newsreader and assume the respect they command (2005: 41). By replicating the framing of the newsreader, Pindell appropriates their authority in order to present her personal narrative in keeping with 'the personal is political'. Harnessing the potential of televisual exchange and video syntax, Pindell crafts her own mode of

communication that allows her to articulate and circulate her critical message. As a black woman who is denied positions of visibility, Pindell activates the mode of video production to present a narrative that is usually silenced and obscured while also asserting the validity of her account.

When the work was first shown, Pindell recalls that the reaction of white feminists tended to be one of anger and she was accused of hostility towards white women (Pindell in Hershman Leeson 2006: 14). The video was first shown at A.I.R Gallery in *Dialectics of Isolation: Third World Women Artists of the United States* (1980), curated by Ana Mendieta, but overall, Pindell struggled to get the work screened at the time she made it (Pindell in Hershman Leeson 2006: 14). However, *Free, White and 21* has remained relevant and continues to be pertinent to the current resurgence of feminism and the civil rights movement in both the USA and UK. Pindell observes of the work, 'oddly enough it's had life, it had legs for many years, I think because it brought up issues that people were aware of [...] still being a problem' (in Hershman Leeson 2006: 14). This continues to be true today as intersectionality becomes the new guiding principle of contemporary feminism and charges of elite white feminism underpin many heated debates (Phoenix 2014).

Pindell's construction of the work skilfully draws on a range of strategies that allows the artist to take control of her representation and speak to the viewer. Like Sobell in *Hey, Chicky!!!*, the work primarily operates through Pindell's performance to camera. However, Pindell combines her performance with direct address to the viewer and a particular use of mid-shot and medium close up framing that allows the artist to acquire the authorial address of the predominantly male newsreader. The cogency of Pindell's narratives and her appropriation of male authority allows the artist to disrupt the white woman's charges of paranoia and ungratefulness and expose her scepticism as yet another example of racism. Furthermore, Pindell's construction of the dialogue between herself and the white woman

pre-empt the potential disbelief of the viewer in response to Pindell's account – a response that Pindell says she has received many times – and in doing so exposes and challenges the underlying racial prejudice the viewer may hold.

The three works I have analysed in this chapter are indicative of the breadth and scope of women artists' engagement with feminism and issues of representation in their art practices in the 1970s and 1980s. Using video as an artistic medium, these artists decoded the politics of the everyday and the representational symbolism of mainstream culture. Through their analysis and disruption of hegemonic and naturalised gendered and raced significations, these works continue to raise issues that are relevant to contemporary feminism. Women's oppression, so thoroughly exposed by Martha Rosler still describes many contemporary women's experiences. Nina Sobell's performance of taboos is perhaps even more relevant in a society that explicitly sexualises and commodifies women and girls yet signally stigmatises them for being sexually active. Howardena Pindell's powerful account of racism continues to speak to the current resurgence of feminism, which is still absorbing and battling through issues of intersectionality and post-colonial theory. The artists place their bodies in the frame of representation in order to deconstruct and challenge the visual codes that reverberate through the politics of everyday life. Their forthright examination and refusal of the significations of race and gender as they are coded into the image remain relevant to crucial issues within today's culture.

## Chapter 3: Contemporary issues of representation

Questions about the power of images, the politics of sexual assertion, and the 'proper' expression of female desire refuse to go away. Are women who play with sexually suggestive images liberating themselves or succumbing to patriarchal prejudices? (Heartney 2013: 15).

### Introduction

Through a discussion of artist and writer Mira Schor's *A Decade of Negative Thinking: Essays on Art, Politics, and Daily Life* (2009) and cultural theorist Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009), this chapter will examine the post-feminist agenda that emerged in the 1990s and that still informs mainstream contemporary culture. While this thesis argues that we are witnessing a significant resurgence of feminism, it is vital to understand how contemporary feminism is engaged in an ongoing struggle with post-feminist and neoliberal agendas. Having explored the post-feminist development, I will consider the dangers of contemporary female representational invisibility through an analysis of Kath Woodward and Sophie Woodward's chapter on 'Visibility and Invisibility, Silences, Absences' in their collaborative text *Why Feminism Matters: Feminism Lost and Found* (2009). The chapter will then discuss their ideas in relation to the exploration of Phelan's writing on the perils of visibility in chapter one before proceeding to examine three works from the 1990s onwards that are relevant to the emerging argument.

### The post-feminist agenda

The American artist and writer Mira Schor states that 'women coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s have been bathed in and have internalized a three decades-long, culture-wide backlash against feminism' (2009 [1999]: 32). Schor assesses the impact of this backlash in her chapter 'The *Ism* That Dare Not Speak Its Name' (2009 [1999]: 21–35, original emphasis) through a discussion of an

encounter with the younger Italian artist Vanessa Beecroft. At a feminist art conference on *The Body Politic: Whatever Happened to the Women's Movement?* in 1998, Vanessa Beecroft described her mother, she was a 'communist, feminist, vegetarian, and everything else' (2009 [1999]: 21). Schor's written response is scathing:

In the mysterious way in which a good joke works, it is the word *vegetarian* that reduces the two other terms, which represent major political and social movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to the kind of crack-pot movements which now reductively sum up the sixties and seventies [...] here vegetarianism is a coded caricature (2009 [1999]: 21, original emphasis).

Whatever happened to the women's art movement, Schor asks in relation to Beecroft, before answering her own question: 'she had happened to it' (2009 [1999]: 21). Not just 'she' but a new generation of young women who benefit from the gains of the women's liberation movement yet disavow feminism and deny any continuing need for activism. Schor continues, 'according to [Beecroft], such "screaming" work may have been necessary to make polemic points and get attention early on in the feminist art movement, but she herself had experienced no problems in her four-year career' (2009 [1999]: 21). Although Beecroft does acknowledge, without question, that her works tend to be shown in women only exhibitions. Beecroft remarks that she is 'always impressed by beauty in women, the ability to be objectified, and to objectify themselves' (cited in Schor 2009 [1999]: 22). Her performance and video documentation featuring 'disaffected, Barbie doll-figured, half-naked women' (Schor 2009 [1999]: 21) appears to have assimilated the post-feminist condition that McRobbie articulates so clearly.





Fig. 24  
Documentation of performance *VB35* (1998), Vanessa Beecroft.

Schor asks, 'isn't that what the early feminist artists' movement had worked for, the day when young women artists would feel only entitlement and possibility?' (2009 [1999]: 22). She asserts, however, that the sense that feminist battles are over and no longer relevant in the art world or wider cultural context is a false one. In 1998, at the conference where Schor and Beecroft had encountered each other, it was noted that the gains women artists had made in the 1970s, which saw the number of female artists included in exhibitions increase from approximately four to twenty-five percent, have never been exceeded. Fifteen years later in 2013, the East London Fawcett group undertook an audit of London galleries that found this percentage had risen to thirty-one percent, still well short of parity. While women account for sixty-one percent of art students, only thirty-one percent of gallery-represented artists are female. Just five percent of galleries represented an equal number of female and male artists while seventy-eight percent of galleries represent more men than women. The figures for non-commercial galleries are just as disheartening with two thirds of art shows by men being staged

compared to just a third by women.<sup>79</sup> Heartney et al. reveal similar statistics in the USA and at international art biennials where women artists consistently lag behind in both gallery representation and earnings (2013: 10–13).<sup>80</sup> These figures raise serious concerns about structural sexism in the art world where all too often women are relegated to administrative positions rather than being seen as the drivers of artistic and cultural change.

Schor argues that early feminist artists 'still see and experience the underlying discriminatory practices of patriarchal systems because they were trained to look for them in the world *and in themselves*' (2009: 22, original emphasis). This reflexivity is crucial because, as I argued in chapter one, the ideological structures women are raised in are deeply ingrained. Internalisation and complicity are integral to the ways in which representation and stereotype beguile and present dominant ideology as innate and truthful. Schor observes that women during the 1970s and 1980s had both identified the process of internalisation and taught themselves to look out for its stealthy entanglement. Strategies stemming from the belief in 'the personal is political' and the practice of consciousness-raising were key to this endeavour as they allowed women to identify and share common experiences. The post-feminist shift that foregrounds pleasure, choice and empowerment over the critique of power and its modes of operation means that internalisation is overlooked as women absorb the message that they are individually responsible for their own choices.

Schor expresses her frustration with Beecroft's response, which, for Schor sums up the post-feminist position that feminism has been successfully concluded and is no longer relevant. In

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<sup>79</sup> See: <http://elf-audit.com/the-results/> [Accessed 30 June 2015]. Reprinted in Robinson, Hilary (ed.) (2015), *Feminism–Art–Theory: An Anthology 1968–2014*, 2nd ed, Malden, Massachusetts; Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 64–65.

<sup>80</sup> The lack of parity in the art world forms the basis for the ongoing activism of the anonymous Guerrilla Girls, founded in 1985 in New York City, USA, who use statistics to call attention to the inadequate representation of women and artists of colour in the arts.

contradiction, Schor argues that this stance is disputed every day by evidence provided in the mass media, which demonstrates that women are still subject to the decrees of an ideological system, grounded in capitalism, that is 'committed to their objectification' (2009 [1999]: 28). This objectification is not just ideologically problematic but dangerous for women as they continue to bear the brunt of male domestic and sexual violence. Schor declares that 'complacency, combined with contempt for the people who fought for such rights, makes it even easier for the forces some assumed were defeated to take these rights away again'; rights, which she observes are conditional, while sexism is fundamental (2009 [1999]: 30). Post-feminism, under its guise of empowerment, allows for a limited representation of what a feminine figure actually looks like (Woodward and Woodward 2009: 116). All too often, this appears to be the same youthful, slender, white and light-skinned body that Western culture is accustomed to and demands (Golden 2005: 18). Examples can be witnessed across Western mainstream advertising, films and television as well as in women's magazines that also contain numerous tips on how to obtain the required body figure. The magazine covers below demonstrate a uniformity of physique that is displayed for the viewer's consumption while simultaneously exhorting the magazines' readers to achieve the idealised body for themselves.



From left to right,  
 Fig. 25 Cover image of Karlie Kloss, Glamour magazine, May 2016.  
 Fig. 26 Cover image of Scarlett Johansson, Cosmopolitan June 2016.  
 Fig. 27 Cover image of Miranda Kerr, Women's Health magazine, November 2016.  
 (See also Fig. 29 on p.155 for an example from GQ magazine).

Post-feminist discourse tells us that a woman attaining this figure is supposedly powerful in her objectification, whilst demonstrations of feminine agency appear to be connected to her ability to self-objectify and gain the approval of men (McRobbie 2009: 64–72; Woodward and Woodward 2009: 114). This can be seen in the magazine covers' focus on the cover stars' bodies that align their looks with the markers of wealth and success. Beecroft's use of partially clothed or naked women operates within this framework of objectification.<sup>81</sup> It is these idealised and objectified figures and the forces that bring them into being as supposedly empowered symbols of femininity that I want to keep in mind as I examine McRobbie's critical analysis.

## **Backlash politics**

In *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009), McRobbie argues that the emergence of post-feminism is not merely a question of a backlash against feminist politics and its perceived triumphs. It is also distinguished by a profound anti-feminist agenda, a mutation that McRobbie calls the 'complexification of backlash' (2009: 11–12). This development marks a process by which the achievements of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s have been vigorously undermined (McRobbie 2009: 11) at the same time as producing a 'pro-capitalist femininity-focused repertoire' of female identities that signally fail to critique dominant power structures (McRobbie 2009: 158). McRobbie identifies multiple aspects of 'third wave' feminism in the 1990s and early 2000s that celebrate consumerism, individualism and pleasure at the expense of

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<sup>81</sup> Julia Steinmetz, Heather Cassils and Clover Leary's insightful article *Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate Vanessa Beecroft* (2006) details Cassils and Leary's experience of the three-day long process prior to performing *VB46* (2001) before a live audience in the Gagosian Gallery. The authors raise a number of ethical issues concerning the exploitation of women's bodies in Beecroft's performances and the series of processes that (literally) strip the women of subjectivity and agency. Steinmetz observes, '[the audience] are led to believe that the performance is self-contained, that it begins when the doors of the gallery opened and ends when the models walk out of the room three hours later. Without insider information, I would not have known that the models had been working under extremely exhausting and traumatic physical and emotional conditions for the three days prior to the performance' (2006: 772).

crucial analyses of inequality and racism and aligns them with post-feminist discourse.<sup>82</sup> She argues:

Through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism (2009: 11).

A key strategy of this undoing is the assimilation of certain elements of feminism into the political and institutional spheres as well as being incorporated by mainstream media and popular culture (McRobbie 2013). The vocabulary of the women's liberation movement and in particular the terms 'empowerment', 'choice' and 'freedom', has been appropriated by neo-liberalism for different ends. Instead, the syntax of progressive social movements is redeployed in order to underpin an individualistic discourse as a substitute for feminism and other social movements including anti-racism and gay and lesbian rights. This strategic appropriation and re-situating of what McRobbie terms 'faux-feminism' is then used to undermine and obstruct a re-emergence of feminist activism amongst younger women. The complicity of women is ensured by 'an over-arching framework of capacity, freedom, change and gender equality' that operates to conceal new methodologies of gender policing (McRobbie 2009: 51). At the same time, as discussed in chapter one, these new pro-capital female identities are positioned against non-Western women who are represented as the passive victims of unenlightened non-Western cultures (McRobbie 2009: 26). McRobbie contends that the fracturing of feminist discussion and cohesion is essential to cultural hegemony because a united international feminist politics has the potential to fundamentally disrupt the status quo of patriarchal domination (2009: 2). This disruptive potential underpins the anxiety of patriarchal institutions and governance, which do not wish to see established hierarchies overturned. For a genuine feminist politics to be activated, McRobbie asserts, we must recognise how these bodies

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<sup>82</sup> McRobbie states she is critical of the generational-led wave model of feminism and uses the term 'third wave' with caution in relation to the self-proclaimed label used by younger feminists in the 1990s and 2000s (2009: 156-159).

and institutions are working in opposition to feminism in the 'guise of enlightened "gender aware" forms of governmentality' (2009: 2) that seek to create a veneer of equality while at the same time maintaining patriarchal hierarchies.

Drawing on Judith Butler's writing in *Antigone's Claim* (2000), McRobbie introduces the notion of a 'double entanglement' whereby 'neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life' co-exist with 'processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations' (2009: 12). An example of this duality can be found in David Cameron's Conservative conference speech in 2011 regarding same-sex marriage in the UK, 'I don't support gay marriage despite being a Conservative. I support gay marriage because I'm a Conservative' (Cameron 2011). This declaration reveals the actual cause Cameron and the more modern elements of the Conservative Party are concerned with: the shoring up of the nuclear family as a heteronormative ideal. In her 1973 text *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, Rowbotham compellingly argued that the nuclear family is essential to capitalist systems and their ruling elite to ensure the continuation of a compliant work force. Furthermore, she argues that certain feminine traits of cooperation, docility and subservience, cultivated through patriarchal society, are required so that the reproduced workforce can be reared according to capital's prescription (Rowbotham 1973: 103–108). In today's vocabulary, heteronormativity and the apparently reconfigured family unit provide a continuation of traditional modes of gender conventions and social ties. These work to convince the public of capital's progressive values while at the same time maintaining a status quo in underlying power structures. Cameron's statement demonstrates the way in which conservative capitalist ideology co-opts processes of liberalisation to ensure that patriarchal structures of power can continue to sustain its edifice.

This double entanglement of conservative and liberal ideologies coincided with feminism in academia rigorously critiquing itself

through the post-colonial and queer critique that charged feminist debate in the late 1980s and 1990s (McRobbie 2009: 13). The interrogation of feminist discourse saw the discrediting of the category of 'woman' and charges of essentialism levelled at 1970s feminism by theorists such as Elizabeth Spelman in *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (1988). Spelman argued that the Western feminist focus on an essential 'woman-ness' was underpinned by patriarchal definitions of femininity (2008). Postmodern concepts of plurality and the dismissal of foundational truths combined with critical developments in post-colonial feminist thought by writers such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1986) and Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) to problematise the notion of a united female position from which to challenge patriarchal structures. At the same, the emergence of new feminist thinking around the body and gender identity by theorists such as Haraway (1984), Butler (1990), and Grosz (1994), further fractured the notion of common experiences that are shared by all women. McRobbie describes this development as a necessary process that opened up feminist theory and expanded its horizons. However, she warns that as the essentialist 'we' becomes dismantled, it is the 'she' of individualism that remains (2009: 13). Claire Snyder in 'What is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay' (2008), insists on the progressive elements of 1990s and new millennial feminism with its focus on diversity and inclusivity. However, she adds that the movement was guilty of reducing 1970s and 1980s feminism to a simplistic sex-negative, white, middle-class movement that spoke with one essentialist voice (2008: 175–196). Scholars such as Audre Lorde (*Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* 1984), Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (*This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* 1981) were removed from their historical context and repositioned as 'third wave' (Snyder 2008: 180). As a result, the multiplicity of feminist debate in the 1970s and early 1980s is denied while the vital contributions of women of colour from that era are eradicated and their place in history denied. Hilary Robinson reminds us that 'one of the constant tensions within feminist writing

comes from the need to talk with and for a collectivity of women, and the conflicting need to recognize and articulate difference between women' (2001: 3). At the Historical Contexts of Black British Feminism talk at Goldsmiths on the 11 December 2014, a member of the Southall Black Sisters in the audience made a similar point and argued that it is vital for women of colour to hold onto the collective unity of black while recognising the differences within their group; otherwise the movement becomes fractured and divided.

In the UK, the shift in feminist academic debate coincided with New Labour's<sup>83</sup> focus on meritocracy in the wider context of the Western capitalist movement towards neo-liberalism. The 1990s also saw the rise of what McRobbie calls 'popular feminism' whereby issues such as domestic violence, equal pay and workplace harassment were raised and discussed in mainstream culture while the structures that produce discriminatory practices were overlooked, a situation that continues today (2009: 13–14). McRobbie identified this practice in the girls' and women's magazines of the 1990s such as *Elle*, *Just Seventeen*, *More!* And *Mizz*, in which she discerned a new focus on sexual health, equality with male peers and pleasure while still set against the backdrop of heterosexuality and the requirement for women to enact femininity (1997: 190–209).<sup>84</sup> Subsequently, McRobbie revised her previously positive reception of the mainstreaming of women's rights to a critical stance that perceives 'equal opportunities feminism' to have become the acceptable face of post-feminist politics while simultaneously overlooking the need to challenge conventional structures of power (2009: 57–58). Today, the practices McRobbie criticised can be witnessed in mainstream books such as Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (2013), discussed on page 65 of this thesis. This faux-feminism demands equality with those most privileged within patriarchal

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<sup>83</sup> New Labour refers to a period in the history of the British Labour Party from the mid-1990s to 2010 under the leaders Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. New Labour came to power in 1997 with Tony Blair as Prime Minister until 2007. Brown was Chancellor during this time then served as Prime Minister from 2007 to 2010.

<sup>84</sup> See McRobbie's chapter on 'More! New sexualities in girls' and women's magazines' in *Back to Reality?: Social Experience and Cultural Studies* (McRobbie, A. 1997).



culture, that is, wealthy, white, heterosexual men, without questioning privilege itself. This faux-feminism demands equality with those most privileged within patriarchal culture, that is, wealthy white heterosexual men, without questioning privilege itself. Thus equal opportunities aspiration substitutes for genuine feminist politics and the radical agenda of challenging the foundations of patriarchal power is dismissed in the mainstream media and within political institutions as the ambitions of resentful man-hating women. Instead, a limited array of rights are invoked, such as access to education and employment, along with the appearance of female sexual liberation, but within the scope of an 'unaltered social order' that ultimately still positions women as the marginalised Other (McRobbie 2009: 14).

Alongside the notion of double entanglement, McRobbie draws on Stuart Hall's writing on the politics of articulation in response to Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), to theorise a process of 'disarticulation' that erodes feminist gains under the guise of modernisation (McRobbie 2009: 24). Laclau and Mouffe suggest that learning from contiguous social struggles enables 'chains of equivalence', which function to establish solidarity across social movements and enable mutual learning and support from one another's struggles. McRobbie argues that it is these chains of equivalence that are now being vigorously disarticulated by political institutions and those who control the mainstream media. Divisions and fractures are created between social movements and organisational groups, as they are re-positioned to be in competition with each other for limited resources and political recognition.

McRobbie calls disarticulation a way of undermining and denigrating collective movements by advancing the notion that we now live in an equal society (2009: 26). The primary aim of disarticulation is to disrupt communication and create divisions between women regarding their common concerns. According to McRobbie:

Disarticulation works then as a kind of dispersal strategy [...] A hysterical and monstrous version of feminism therefore informs the political practices of disarticulation as that which is somehow known about, and must be dealt with, before it has the chance to be rekindled by a younger generation (2009: 27).

Having displaced feminism, 'a highly conservative mode of feminine "empowerment"' takes its place, which encourages hierarchies amongst women along the lines of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and class. Thereby resulting in the intentional disruption of potential dialogue and political unity, an example of 'pre-emptive disarticulation' (McRobbie 2009: 27). McRobbie argues that these processes need to be read in the context of neo-liberalism and the meritocracy favoured by Britain since the New Labour government. She cites *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (2003), Lisa Duggan's examination of neo-liberalism in the USA in relation to the disassembling of social movements and in particular, the politics of feminism and anti-racism. Duggan argues that fundamental features of neo-liberalism encompass the propagation of commodity culture throughout everyday life, the shrinking of the state and welfare reform and the drive towards individualism and personal responsibility (2003). In turn, structural inequalities are repositioned as the fault of people's own decisions. Primarily, neo-liberalism has implemented a discourse that is based upon market forces and re-presented as neutral economic 'commonsense' (Duggan 2003: xiv). This allows for the dismantling of progressive policies and funding, which successfully undermines many of the gains the women's liberation movement made such as the funding of specialist women's rape and domestic violence services now currently under threat.

McRobbie places particular emphasis on mainstream media and the interrelated fashion and beauty complex set within consumer culture, and their role in destabilising any gains feminism had made towards shifting the economy of female representation. She locates their power in the ability to set and define protocols of sexual

behaviour, which in turn maintain heteronormative narratives of gender roles (2009: 15). This can be witnessed in the advertising campaigns from the mid-1990s onwards that deliberately square up to feminist critique by using ironic sexist imagery and refuting any objection as 'killjoy feminism' (Ahmed 2010). Young women are unable to critique or condemn without being dismissed as prudish or visually illiterate, which results in them withholding objection so as to prove that they 'get' the joke. In consequence, 'the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent' (McRobbie 2009: 18). Within this context of ironic sophistication and individualisation, the post-feminist female subject is presented with an excess of choice that is alleged to be the result of increasing female agency. However, McRobbie contends, that 'choice is surely, within lifestyle culture, a modality of constraint. The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices' (2009: 19). Women who make the 'wrong' choices are held to be personally responsible and judged harshly: women who demonstrate sexual agency are still labelled sluts (Bates 2012); they are blamed if raped or sexually harassed (Baird 2016); abortion continues to be a taboo that is under attack from conservative and religious groups (Smurthwaite 2015), while single mothers are routinely blamed for the deterioration of society.

Within this matrix is the requirement for older women to exhibit an immaturity that in our society signifies femininity and mitigates her threat to phallogocentric power (McRobbie 2006: 24). This paradigm has a dual programme, functioning to castigate women throughout their adult lives through its wilful fetishisation of an immature and sexually available version of femininity that Western women are compelled to emulate in order to be visible in our culture. The reification of a young nubile sexuality that is contradictorily depicted as both naïve and designing is also damaging to young women and girls as they bear the brunt of sexual objectification and regressive moral judgement (Durham 2008). This can be witnessed in the Rotherham scandal referenced in chapter one, whereby the epidemic abuse of young

vulnerable girls was overlooked even in instances when they reported sexual violence and asked for help. The abused girls were viewed by authority figures as sexually and morally delinquent and the victims of their own faulty decisions (Jay 2014). The cultural requirement for girlishness operates to silence women and undo feminist gains in numerous ways, one of which is the propagation of female infantilisation; women are not to be taken seriously is the coded message. As women reach personal maturity and economic stability where they may be in a position to speak out against sexism and inequality, they are instead pitted into battle to retain their looks, find a life partner (preferably male) and compete with other women for male approval. In *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (1990), Naomi Wolf argues that as women achieve more power in patriarchal society, the pressure on women to conform to a narrow depiction of beauty increases in line with their gains (10). Popular culture tells women that a key way to do this is to perform girlish femininity, both in mannerisms and appearance. This also manifests in the media scrutiny that women in positions of institutional power find themselves subject to, which critiques their looks and wardrobe.<sup>85</sup> Their words and decisions are treated reductively while their appearance is putatively newsworthy. The focus on physical appearance intersects with ageism to increase older women's invisibility.<sup>86</sup>

In her single screen video work *Perdón* (2010), viewed on a monitor and online, the Swedish artist Anna Jonsson examines the double bind that both young and older women are caught in through

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<sup>85</sup> For example, female politicians are bundled together and reduced to sexist buzz-lines such as 'Blair's Babes' or 'Cameron's Cuties' (Mavin et al. 2010). In response to David Cameron's 2014 cabinet reshuffle that resulted in several women being promoted, the Daily Mail ran the front page headline *Thigh-flashing Esther and the battle of Downing Street catwalk* (16 July 2014). The inside article *Esther, the Queen of the Downing Street Catwalk* (Williams 2014) featured images of the promoted female politicians with accompanying comments on their hairstyles, clothes and shoes; no attention was paid to their politics or achievements.

<sup>86</sup> Professor Mary Beard contravened the unspoken rule that older women stay invisible and in response experienced a barrage of written abuse after she appeared on the BBC's political television programme *Question Time* in January 2013. Many of the comments focussed on Beard's looks and age, and an image of her face superimposed over female genitals was circulated on the internet.

the focus on their looks. The video consists of a static head shot of a young woman who wears a violet wig, matching glittery heart shaped sunglasses and black make-up pencil marks on her face that resemble exaggerated wrinkles. Part of the way through, she removes her glasses to reveal sagging bags drawn under her eyes. Caught in a fish-eye lens effect, the woman forlornly repeats the word 'perdón', which translates to 'forgiveness' and is used by way of an apology. The work reads in two ways, firstly as a comment on the invisibility of older women who can only apologise for their presence and secondly as a recognition of the ways in which ever younger women are compelled to feel anxious about their 'ageing' looks by the fashion/beauty complex.



Fig. 28  
Video still from *Perdón* (2010) by Anna Jonsson.

The well-documented production of such anxieties is highly commodifiable as can be witnessed in the rapid expansion of the global cosmetic surgery market (Davis 1995, Blum 2005, Heyes and Jones 2009). In a series of essays examining the phenomenological

experience of being-in-the-world from girlhood to womanhood, the feminist theorist Iris Marion Young's *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays* (2005), describes how Western culture reveres the youthful nubile body and attaches to its representation a limited number of idealised characteristics that are unattainable for the majority of women (2005: 79). In her essay 'Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feel' (2005 [1990]), Young analyses the West's phallogentric focus on women's breasts and argues that women who resort to the surgeon's knife in an effort to conform to an age-less Barbie-like appearance do so because patriarchal culture so clearly devalues those bodies that do not match up to a singular type of youthful feminine physique (Young 2005 [1990]: 75–96). A significant number of women report distress at their inability to match the standards of beauty represented as the cultural norm (Bordo 2003 [1993]: xxi; Bates 2014). In this cultural context, Young contends, it is understandable and even rational that women do go to extreme lengths to achieve the ideal. However, she adds, the degree to which it can be argued that women are demonstrating choice is debatable (Young 2005 [1990]: 92).

## **The dangers of representational invisibility**

The academics Kath and Sophie Woodward collaborated on the book *Why feminism Matters: Feminism Lost and Found* (2009) to bring a cross-generational perspective to their analysis. The chapter on 'Visibility and Invisibility, Silences, Absences' focuses on the lack of representations of women outside the hyper-prominence of sexualised female bodies that constitute the norm in Western culture. Patricia Hill Collins names these depictions of femininity along with multifarious stereotypical images designed to Other and objectify marginalised groups as 'controlling images'. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000 [1990]), Collins identifies the ways in which controlling images are deployed in order to ensure the subordination of black women. Critically, the significations contained in the image are 'designed to

make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life' (Collins 2000 [1990]: 69). Woodward and Woodward argue that the lack of alternative representations has profound effects on women's psyches, which impacts on their relationship to their own bodies and compromises their ability to see themselves in positions of institutional power. The authors point to an incongruity in contemporary images of women:

A focus on invisibility may seem somewhat surprising given that, in the contemporary climate, there is a proliferation of representations of women's bodies seen in any brief perusal of a magazine rack of popular magazines and newspapers, on the web and in film and television. However, this same explosion of sexualised images of women, we argue, can be seen as part of the reiteration of 'sameness' that Irigaray identifies [...] This proliferation of imagery does not necessarily equate with diversity, but can be seen in terms of the same patriarchal dominant form of representation (2009: 111).

They argue that this adherence to sameness, to the excessive imaging of a narrow and limited range of white feminine attributes, actually works to make all women invisible. They identify the paradox that women who stand outside of this constricted realm of representation are rarely seen in our media. Yet women who align their identities and their bodies with the sexualised and infantilised media images of women suffer further disempowerment through society's ongoing desensitisation to the increasing pornification of women. Thus the sexualised woman becomes invisible as, on the one hand, she blends into an objectified sameness and on the other, receives little acknowledgment outside the frame of sexual objectification that focuses on her body at the expense of her intellect.

Woodward and Woodward develop a convincing argument about how such a system works by drawing upon McRobbie's discussion of post-feminism. They argue that in contrast to the widespread notion that women are now sexually liberated, the

prevalent hypersexualised and objectified images of women must not be misidentified as liberation (2009: 129). Rather these depictions conform to the ongoing phallocentric structures of male heterosexual desire and serve to perpetuate the same normative standards of beauty (Woodward and Woodward 2009: 121), which is both feminine and positioned in relation to masculine power (Berger 1972: 45–46). An example of this dual standard can be seen in the GQ's special five–cover edition from 2012, which the writer Alex Hern highlighted in the *New Statesman* in the same year. Four of the covers depict individual men wearing evening suits, while the one cover featuring a woman depicts the singer Lana Del Ray posed nude with her ankles crossed to cover her genitals. In addition, Hern calls attention to the resemblance between Del Ray's pose and one from a 1970s porn poster, which further illustrates the ways that women operate as a sign for men's sexual appetite.





Fig. 29

Cover images of James Corden, John Slattery, Tinie Tempah, Robbie Williams and Lana Del Ray as well as the 1970s porn poster Del Ray's pose resembles.

It is Woodward and Woodward's contention that the continual reduction of women to their physicality leads to a situation where women are habituated to their own objectification and direct comparison to other women's bodies (2009: 131). This is a circumstance not unlike the one Martha Rosler deconstructs in *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* and which John Berger observed over 40 years ago:

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another (Berger 1972: 46).

Female visibility in Western culture is still frequently contingent on male approval and women are thrust into rivalry with each other as they are forced to compete for the male gaze. McRobbie argues that the fashion/beauty complex operates through the deployment of the male gaze and female objectification in ways that are designed to acutely invoke both self-surveillance and criticality of other women (2009: 61–69). Yet as the fashion/beauty complex is superficially<sup>87</sup> seen to be a largely female industry, women are charged with imposing a rigid construct of perfection on themselves (McRobbie 2013) and the value that is assigned to their bodies is alleged to emanate from women's own skewed vision. Catherine Elwes notes,

In spite of the efforts of early feminism, woman as spectacle, as positively or negatively charged erotic object, has become increasingly embedded in popular culture and John Berger's 1972 analysis of the female psyche hardly needs revising in the age of perpetual surveillance (2009).

Woodward and Woodward argue that depictions of female 'sexiness' and eroticism appear so defined and fixed in meaning because they are deeply sedimented in patriarchal logic and dominant representational systems (2009: 116). This sedimentation reflects the reduction of women throughout Western history, which continues today even as feminism improves conditions for women. These representations play out across race and class as all women are urged to attain a symbolic femininity that issues from the patriarchal imagination. It is these deeply-held ideological belief systems that feminist interventions in visual culture seek to expose and rupture.

In the Western economy of feminine self-objectification, feminism, as McRobbie noted, is subsumed and replaced by the

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<sup>87</sup> I say superficially because many of the fashion and beauty companies continue to be owned and run by men. Condé Nast, for example, is owned by Advance Publications, which, in turn, is owned by Samuel Irving Newhouse Jr. and Donald Newhouse. Currently, Robert A. Sauerberg Jr. is the CEO and President of Condé Nast, and Charles H. Townsend is the Chairman. Condé Nast publishes multiple women's fashion magazines including *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Tatler*, *Glamour* and *Brides* as well as the men's magazine *GQ*. In 1982, Martha Rosler used the example of Condé Nast and its male ownership to critique the ideologies at work in magazines directed at women in her video work *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue*.

concept of 'empowerment', which is deployed by gender-aware government, the media and the fashion/beauty complex to promote post-feminism. In 'embracing empowerment,' Woodward and Woodward suggest, 'there has been an abandonment of any understanding of power, or indeed of patriarchy' (2009: 112). Empowerment is instead invoked on behalf of the individual and the choices she wishes to make rather than being seen within a social framework of hierarchy and control, which exert pressure and influence over people's lives and decision-making processes, as Young argues. The current model of 'empowerment', Woodward and Woodward contend, is merely another strategy to convince women that their physical appearance and sexual attractiveness to others is where feminine power lies.<sup>88</sup> This is what 'choice' is reduced to: having sexual power over heterosexual men and their gaze; a power that is at best a façade for the subordinate position of all women in phallogentric culture.

Numerous feminist commentators have raised the issue of the proliferation of hypersexualised images of women in what Ariel Levy termed 'raunch' culture (2005). The argument that this imagery is merely the same old patriarchal paradigm that objectifies and reduces women is now countered with a barrage of faux-feminist language concerning choice and sexual liberation. However, as Phelan convincingly argues, the sexual objectification of women in consumer culture almost always implies degradation (1993: 43), which invariably undermines the rhetoric of empowerment. The invisibility of hypersexualised women that Woodward and Woodward observe marks a different kind of obscurity to that which affects women of colour who historically have been most noticeable through their absence from mainstream representations. This situation is shifting as

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<sup>88</sup> A position that the social scientist Catherine Hakim misguidedly argues for in her text *Erotic Capital: The Power of Attraction in the Boardroom and the Bedroom* (2011). Hakim contends that attractiveness is a personal asset, which women can maximise to get ahead in business and in their personal lives. This simply reiterates the retrogressive position of women prior to feminism, only now with the objective of reaching the boardroom. However, as Rose Gibbs notes, 'if women merely adapt themselves and their lives to fit into an andocentric order, they will leave existing institutions much the way they found them' (2015: 4).

the over-sexualised and exoticised controlling images of black women Collins warns of are becoming deeply interwoven into the mainstream music industry and its derivative celebrity depictions in the media. These visual representations, Sut Jhally maintains, are part of wider racist initiatives designed to police black identities (2007: 5).

### ***Selfless in the Bath Of Lava (1994), Pipilotti Rist***

Pipilotti Rist, an artist with a background in commercial art and music, marks an interesting relationship between feminist and post-feminist discourses. In 2011, just as I started my PhD research, Rist was the subject of an extensive survey exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London entitled *Pipilotti Rist: Eyeball Massage* that ran from the 28 September 2011 to the 8 January 2012. One of the most successful female video artists working today who routinely exhibits large-scale complex video installations on an international level, Rist relies heavily on the post-feminist figure of white idealised femininity; an empowered, sexually liberated and slender figure. While Rist makes the grandiose claim in one of the Hayward exhibition wall notes that the figure of a naked woman in her work represents 'mankind', Catherine Elwes responds that 'the overdetermined image of a desirable naked woman is constitutionally incapable of standing in for humankind in a resiliently patriarchal universe' (2012: 272). In my opinion, Elwes' concern is apparent in many of Rist's recent works included in the exhibition, such as *Lobe of the Lung* (2009), a three-channel video projection, which demonstrate a tendency to perpetuate the bland commodification of the desirable youthful body. In contrast, I would argue that Rist's earlier work was more confrontational, disruptive and mocking of the spectator's look. *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much* (1986), a single screen video viewed on a monitor, sees the artist capering around in front of the camera, breasts exposed, as her excessive performance and manipulations of the video format distort and accelerate both the image and her voice serving to ridicule the popular music video format of attractive women performing for male approval (Heartney et al 2013: 98). In a reversal

of female objectification, *Sexy Sad I* (1987), a single screen video viewed on a monitor, sees the vulnerable naked figure of a man alone in the wood ineffectively punching and flailing at the invasive camera's eye that relentlessly focuses on the flaccid penis swinging between his legs. While in *Ever Is Over All* (1997), a two channel video projection, the female protagonist jauntily parades down the street holding a large fake flower. It is only when she uses the bloom to smash the windows of parked cars that we realise the lethal potential of the elegant flower she holds.<sup>89</sup>

A work that I felt ambivalent about at the Hayward exhibition and which provoked a feeling of discomfort in me was *Selfless in the Bath of Lava* (1994). A single screen video installation just a few centimetres in circumference, the work is projected onto the floor so that the viewer must look down towards the image at their feet. The artist's body is contained in a hellish environment of bursting flames and boiling lava: a miniature abyss at the viewer's feet. The tiny figure reaches up towards the viewer and cries out for help in German, French, Italian and English: 'I am a worm and you are a flower', she cries. 'You would have done everything better. Help me. Excuse me'. Flames emerge through her body and crackle on her skin. Towering over the miniature video, the viewer looks down upon Rist's face, breasts and arms as she reaches up in supplication. Occasionally the viewer glimpses her stomach and feet, and when she bends over, we catch sight of her back and the tops of her buttocks. Her exaggerated appeals continue until the artist's body crumples up in a technological dissolve and abruptly disappears from the boiling hellhole. After a few moments, the work loops and she returns to perform her pleas once again.

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<sup>89</sup> Beyoncé references this work in her visual album *Lemonade* released in April 2016 in which she wears a yellow dress and smashes parked cars windows with a baseball bat.



Fig. 30  
Video still from *Selfless in the Bath of Lava* (1994), Pipilotti Rist.

This installation needs to be considered within the context of religious iconography and the concept of hell that many religions and mythologies assure us exists somewhere. Rist herself has made the religious connotations explicit by previously installing the work beneath a medieval sculpture of the Madonna and Child in Zurich (Phelan 2001: 72). Traditional Christian depictions of hell such as *The Last Judgement, Casting the Damned into Hell* (Memling 1467–70) and *The Fall of the Damned* (Rubens 1620) portray a monstrous pit beneath our feet, deep in the bowels of the earth. Tortured naked bodies reach upwards towards the salvation they cannot hope to obtain.





Fig. 31 and 32  
Detail from *The Last Judgement, Casting the Damned into Hell* (1467–70), Memling (left) and *The Fall of the Damned* (1620), Rubens (right).

Rist's imaging of her own body bears a resemblance to these religious representations of tormented sinners. The angle of the camera produces a focus on her body and, in particular, her breasts, that suggests the sinfulness she embodies is that of eroticism. Women's sexual desire is so feared in patriarchal and religious narratives that it has historically been scourged with fire amongst other means of punishment. The subjugation of women continues to be demanded by many cultures and religions while the practice of setting fire to those deemed to be witches is still reported in many countries (Schnoebelen 2009). Although this terrible punishment is also meted out to men, Jill Schnoebelen's 2009 report for the United Nations identifies women being at significantly higher risk (8–14) and the witch-hunt of women has always been more prevalent as the gendering of the word 'witch' itself suggests. The burning of women has a long history ranging from the European witch-hunts in the Early Modern period of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries to the practice of suttee in some Asian communities, where widowed women would immolate themselves on their husband's funeral pyre. Immolation is also meted out to women

in the practice of honour killings, where the woman's alleged sexual misconduct, even if she has been raped, is perceived to be so shameful to the culture she lives in that she must be killed or kill herself. Rist's work can be located in this globalised context where women's alleged sin and disobedience has historically been and continues to be punished with threats of damnation and fire.

*Selfless in the Bath of Lava* rests, in particular, on Catholic iconography, which the Hayward's exhibition catalogue identifies as purgatory.<sup>90</sup> In Catholic narratives, the duration of punishment to be endured in purgatory is determined by the severity of the sin. In *Selfless in the Bath Of Lava*, however, the woman is consigned to eternal punishment; she can never escape the purification her body must undergo. Even the crumpling of Rist's image at the end of the loop only to reappear a few minutes later is another violence visited upon her body. The nature of her sin, which must be monstrous and for which she pleads forgiveness, is never revealed. We can only presume that her sin resides in her body, or rather, her sin *is* her body. After all, she describes herself as a 'worm', a legless, slithering invertebrate wriggling in the soil, conjuring up images of (impotent) snakes. The viewer can make the connections: worm becomes snake, temptation, the Fall and ends with Eve's culpability. Situated within the virgin/whore dichotomy of Catholicism, the purification of Eve/Rist's sexual body places the artist in direct contrast to the Catholic ideal of womanhood: a virgin mother. Perhaps a virgin birth is the required purification. As this event is unattainable for mortal women untouched by the hand of god, it is out of reach for all women. The work suggests that because of women's 'original sin' within patriarchal religions and cultures, women's bodies must be kept in a continual state of purging, cleansing and purification, a condition that arguably drives the relentless cleansing women are compelled to maintain by societies that hold women's sweating, bleeding, leaking bodies to be abject.

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<sup>90</sup> A place where souls are sent to be purified by punishment in preparation for entry into heaven.



Phelan asks, 'if reality is what we come to know through and in the screened image, how exactly should we view the screen?' (2001: 34). In this instance, Rist positions the viewer so that he or she towers over the miniscule work and Lilliputian figure in a manner that produced a sense of discomfort as I watched the work. Towering over the vulnerable woman, the spectator seems to represent a god-like figure who, within the lexicon of Catholicism, is always white, heterosexual and male. Phelan argues that the viewer's positionality depends on the exhibition context, when viewed in the context of the Madonna and Child, the work 'seems to be addressed to a god' (2001: 72). In the art gallery, however, the spectator becomes 'a kind of (male) art viewer' (Phelan 2001: 72). The critic Dominic Molon suggests that the artist seems to be 'flattering the (male) spectator by appearing naked, crying for help, and acknowledging the viewer's superiority' (cited in Phelan 2001: 76). I would argue that whether viewed in the gallery or in the context of Christian iconography, the work always renders the viewer as a male god-like figure, a saviour, albeit not really as all-powerful as one is made to feel. After all, there is nothing the viewer can do to quell the flames or rescue the pleading woman from the inferno.

The tiny naked figure positioned on the floor and the towering, clothed, god-like viewer enter into a problematic dialectic. The installation is so small and quiet it can easily be missed and walked over. The fragility of the audio means one has to listen intently to pick up the words. As viewers, we bend down to stare at this strange little object on the floor. It is so simple to render her invisible; all we have to do is tread upon her screened body. Rist's positioning of the viewer as a male god superficially appears to give the viewer control over the tiny body and yet, as the saviour she appeals to, we do not have the power to give salvation or bestow the forgiveness that would absolve her sin. We can at best pity her and at worst ignore her supplications and render her invisible. The sense of (male) power the work invokes is carefully undercut by the lack of control that Rist actually gives the spectator. In this way, the sense of discomfort that the work invoked

in me could be called a productive discomfort by the way it calls into question the power dynamics between the small female figure and the seemingly dominant (male) viewer.

The artist's ironic humour adds another layer to the work. Phelan suggests, 'Rist's supplications above a bath of fire can easily be read as an ironic comment on Christianity's versions of sin and hell [...] the speaker takes on the role of the guilty, albeit not terribly contrite, sinner' (2001: 72). Her exaggerated grimaces, exuberance and mocking demeanour allegedly 'send up the operations of visual power operative in all exhibitions' (Phelan 2001: 76). Similarly Molon asserts that Rist is 'using her irrepressible humour to up-end the desiring gaze into the lava-bath' (cited in Phelan 2001: 72). I am not absolutely convinced that the desiring gaze is up-ended. If Molon is referring to the way Rist's body disappears to leave the viewer gazing into the pit of lava, he or she knows the footage is looped and the artist's body will reappear to satiate their scopophilic desires while they are free to walk away at any point. Arguably, Rist's referencing of religious iconography exposes the insult of Christian patriarchy that erotises the 'sinful' woman's body while castigating her for being the embodiment of sin. However, this strategy also puts Rist in danger of falling into Lippard's 'subtle abyss', whereby women's use of female bodies to expose the insults of patriarchy merely replicates and thereby reinforces the original insult. This is where Rist's 'irrepressible humour' plays a crucial role in mitigating that risk. It implies that although society may condemn her body to a burning inferno, she endures, all the while mocking authority with an exaggerated pretence of suffering and contrition, a parody of the sexual guilt of women, which is said to deserve punishment.

Alongside these considerations, it is useful to reflect on the title of the work, *Selfless in the Bath of Lava*. Selflessness is still promoted as the idealised intrinsic nature of the maternal woman. The ability to care, nurture and sacrifice her own needs for those of others, are highly valued in a woman. This selflessness again harks back to the

ultimate mythic woman: Mary, Mother of God. Perhaps the notion of selflessness also brings us to the worm that Rist calls herself. Worms aerate the soil allowing for the fecundity of matter and therefore they could be viewed as maternal and selfless creatures. Without women the world would not be populated; without worms the land would be barren. Rist could be suggesting that it is women's selflessness and passivity that places them within a metaphorical bath of lava. And what is this bath of lava? In Western consumer culture, baths are commonly associated with either the single woman or the mother and her child. Numerous advertisements depict women sinking back into their bubble baths to languorously eat their candlelit bars of chocolate or just seductively relax in the water.<sup>91</sup> For women, the coded visual language implies that this activity takes the place of sexual pleasure. Conversely, when she has moved on from these self-indulgent times in her life, the bath becomes associated with the bathing of infants where the mother now takes her pleasure from the ritual of ablutions and the softness of her baby's skin. *Selfless in the Bath of Lava* suggests that women need to abandon their sexual guilt and scourging of the body to attain, if not heaven or utopia, then perhaps a more liberated present.

### ***Female Fist* (2006), Kajsa Dahlberg**

*Female Fist* (2006) is a twenty-minute single screen video with English subtitles, viewed on a monitor, by the Swedish artist Kajsa Dahlberg, which was shown as part of the 2011 group exhibition *When is a human being a woman?* at Hollybush Gardens, London. The work takes the form of an interview with a lesbian activist from the Copenhagen queer feminist community who is a member of an anonymous collective producing pornography made by lesbian women for private consumption within their own community. The artist, it

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<sup>91</sup> Heidi Klum's 2016 advert for LOVE magazine features the model caressing her body and gazing at the camera as she baths. Adverts in circulation when *Selfless in the Bath of Lava* was made include Cadbury's 1992 flake advert featuring a woman reclining in the bath seductively eating a flake chocolate bar as her bath overflows and Radox's 1994 herbal bubble bath advert featuring a woman in a steaming bubbling bath while a man's sensuous voice-over urges the woman to 'relax your muscles'.

transpires, part of the way through the work, is the video editor for the pornography project. *Female Fist* begins with a silent static shot in a public square in Copenhagen; people come and go paying no attention to the camera. The shot is overexposed and the plaza is as bleached out as the sky creating an almost dream-like quality belied by the ordinary gestures and actions taking place.



Fig. 33  
Video still from *Female Fist* (2006), Kajsa Dahlberg.

After thirty seconds, the lens cap is clipped over the camera's eye accompanied by the first audible sound. The image turns black except for four small gaps around the edges of the lens cap that let in light. These gaps allow for a sense of movement as light filters around the blindfolded lens and the sounds of movement confirm the relocation of the camera from the square to another setting. The lens cap remains in place throughout the video and English subtitles appear against the black of the lens cap. There is a suggestion of a whisper, someone puts down what sounds like a mug and a woman starts to speak, 'about two years ago, I and a few others decided that we

would like to make a lesbian porn movie'. The woman speaks for sixteen minutes about the queer feminist activist group she is part of and the porn film they are making. The challenge for the group is how to resist the overdetermination of heteronormative representations of lesbian desire and how to work outside standard distribution networks so that the film is only seen by women. After reflecting on the film, the activist talks about the difficulties queer women encounter in finding a space within culture that is not repressive towards lesbian identity. She concludes that there is a need to make space and platforms, to invest in separatist rooms that provide respite from a culture that 'despises all that I represent'.

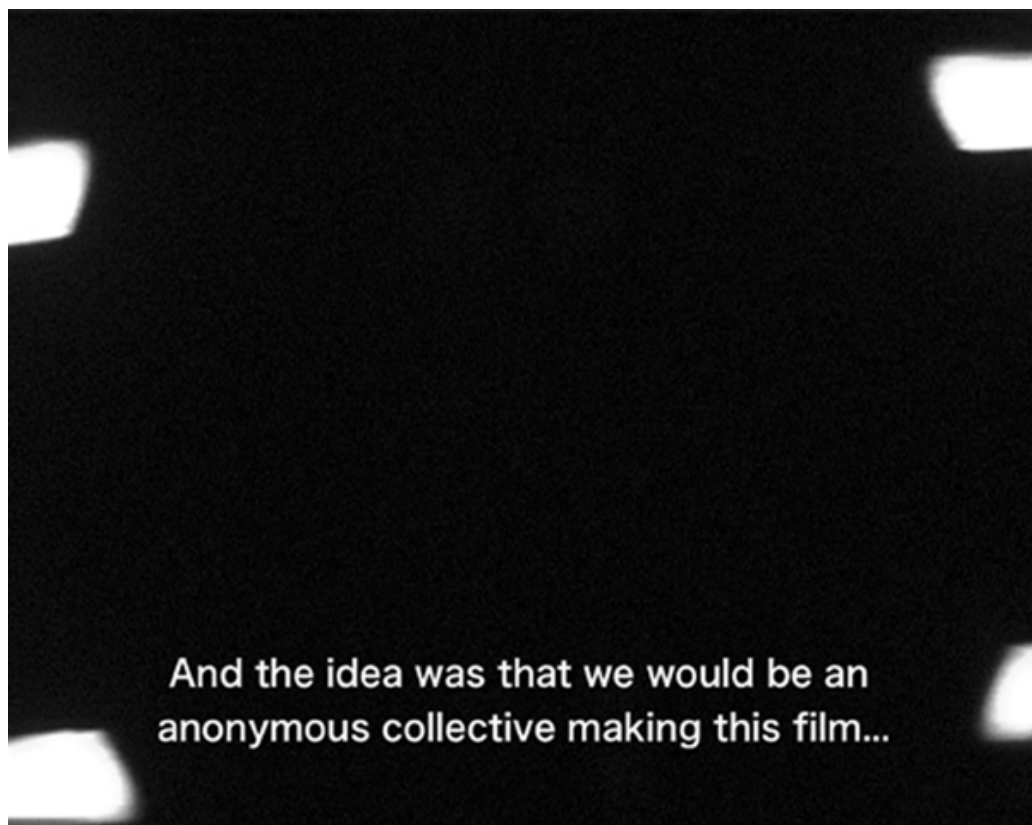


Fig. 34  
Video still from *Female Fist* (2006), Kajsa Dahlberg.

In chapter one, I discussed Phelan's suggestion that entering the frame of representation denotes approval of the patriarchal frame, and her call to women to adopt the position of representational invisibility. I argued that this stance has limited use because standing outside of the frame leaves patriarchy free to represent women

however it chooses, which is predominantly to promote a sexually objectified model of femininity. Dahlberg's video work *Female Fist*, however, marks an effective adoption of strategic invisibility that operates to disrupt the desiring gaze and foreground female subjectivity through an embodied voice and by giving prominence to the intellect. Dahlberg's use of this tactic is particularly useful to examine in the light of the contemporary sexual objectification of women because it deals not only with the still culturally problematic issue of female sexuality but also a sexuality that stands outside of the patriarchal norm and is all too often marked as deviant. The question of transforming patriarchal conventions is one that Elizabeth Grosz is occupied with. She argues:

I don't think we are in danger of being contaminated by patriarchal thought, since we are already contaminated by patriarchy. The real question is how can we exceed patriarchy, how can we put more into patriarchal texts than there is there so they become transformed in the process? (2007: 255).

I suggest that Dahlberg successfully achieves this transformation by employing formal strategies that challenge hegemonic representation and open up a space for a critical revisioning of marginalised lesbian subjectivity beyond patriarchal stereotypes. Furthermore, I would argue that Dahlberg's critical reappraisal of lesbian sexuality also allows for a wider questioning of female desire. By disputing the stereotypes surrounding an alleged deviance, Dahlberg disrupts the very framework of what is understood as female sexuality. The subject of the work calls into question the demarcations between 'normal' sexuality and what is deemed aberrant. A critique of heterosexual pornography and its disregard for female pleasure is implicitly made, 'we wanted to see pornography [...] that was made by someone we knew was having a good time while making it'.<sup>92</sup> Although the work is ostensibly about lesbian pornography, the topic opens up a set of dialogic questions concerning the totalising effect of

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<sup>92</sup> Niki Kyriakidou made the observation that the word pornography is derived from the Greek word *porni*, meaning prostitute. Therefore, sexual depictions that stand outside the system of monetary exchange, as does the project described by the lesbian activist, cannot be deemed to be pornography.

heteronormative culture, visual representation, and the struggle to find alternative spaces that allow for difference.

The activist alleges that lesbian sexuality is invisible in mainstream culture. Instead, faux-lesbianism is depicted in 'straight' pornography where women perform the gestures of homoerotic desire for the prurient desires of their male partner/s. The performance of supposedly lesbian eroticism has also become a mainstay of heterosexual female pop stars' music videos and public appearances (Ross 2012). The faux-lesbian kiss is now widely performed by young, beautiful and heterosexual pop stars in order to garner headlines, promote new music releases and suggest their apparent post-feminist sexual empowerment.<sup>93</sup> This aggressive appropriation of lesbian eroticism by heteronormative culture whilst marginalising the lesbian community itself marks a further difficulty for gay women who wish to visually represent themselves and their community. This treatment of lesbian sexuality by mainstream culture could also be said to mark what Catherine Russell terms the zoological gaze, 'a cultural practice in which the Other (species) is brought close and yet kept apart, at a safe distance' (Russell 1999: 123). This can be witnessed in contemporary mainstream displays of faux-lesbianism, which must always be revealed as inherently false and performed only for the male gaze of late-capitalist consumerism.

As discussed in chapter one, Griselda Pollock's essay 'What's Wrong with "Images of Women"?' (1987 [1977]) raised the concern that images of female sexuality might be mistaken for conventional pornography. In a contemporary culture that primarily represents lesbian desire within the confines of heteronormative male fantasy, both Dahlberg and the lesbian activist in *Female Fist* must avoid a similar trap. The artist draws on the feminist principle 'the personal is political' by using the video as a form of consciousness-raising in line

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<sup>93</sup> Madonna and Britney Spears kissed at 2003 MTV Video Music Awards, which garnered numerous headlines in the media. Miley Cyrus kissed Katy Perry 2014, again generating numerous headlines, during Cyrus' Bangerz Tour.

with historical feminist art practices as discussed in chapter two.<sup>94</sup> The work utilises three formal strategies: firstly, it operates in a documentary or ethnographic mode; secondly, the female subject is rendered invisible; thirdly, she is re-embodied through her embodied utterance. The interviewee's invisibility gives her speech the quality of a voice-over; in this way, it connects to the documentary mode by inhabiting the role of the disembodied male narrator customarily heard in this format and which aligns the male voice with 'transcendence, authoritative knowledge, potency and the law' (Silverman 1984: 134). Furthermore, film theorist Kaja Silverman contends, within screened modes of representation, to allow a woman to be heard without being visible is dangerous to male sovereignty, 'it would put her beyond the control of the male gaze, and release her voice from the signifying obligations which that gaze sustains' (1984: 135). Elwes suggests that the 'body heard but not seen' is a strategy that allows women artists to circumnavigate the hazards of visual representation while remaining present in the work (2005: 53). By castrating the gaze, the artist can inhibit the carnal expectations of the audience and deny the 'distorting lens of patriarchal culture exemplified by television and Hollywood film' (Elwes 2005: 58). Women artists' recourse to the absent body combined with embodied utterance can shift the emphasis from the feminine form to the woman's own viewpoint. In doing so, feminist artists insist on their cogency as human beings without being reduced to an objectified Other. 'To dis-embodiment the female subject', Silverman asserts, is to 'challenge every conception by means of which we have previously known her, since it is precisely *as body* that she is constructed' (1984: 135 original emphasis). It is this disruption of woman-as-sign that Dahlberg produces and in the rupture seizes the authority assigned to the disembodied voice to articulate an alternative narrative.

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<sup>94</sup> A key example is *The Politics of Intimacy* (Gustafson 1974), in which nine women discuss their sexuality in individual interviews. These predominantly take the form of standard head and shoulder shots that are conventionally used in documentaries and television interviews.



Catherine Russell's notion of the zoological gaze provides a useful term for the way in which Western societies want to look at the Other while at the same time restraining what is held to be deviant. Russell observes that:

Ethnography, zoology, and pornography share a common disciplinary technology of vision that seeks to control, contain, and master the field of the Other, but in doing so, they produce a supplementary discourse of violence and wildness. The field of the Other is rendered exotic and erotic precisely by virtue of the apparatus of vision (1999: 120).

Dahlberg disrupts the processes of Othering by blinding the apparatus of vision and positioning the would-be subject of the zoological gaze as the authorial commentator who directs the viewer's reading of the work. This stance invokes a set of codes and conventions, similar to Howardena Pindell's use of the newsreader persona in *Free, White and 21* (1980), which draws on the language of television whereby the voice-over is imbued with the authority of the documentary narrator (Elwes 2005: 54). As a result, voice-over can facilitate the manifestation of authority and provide a platform to be heard, which in mainstream culture is rarely afforded to marginalised subjects. This formal device enables the disenfranchised voice to occupy a different terrain in relation to the viewer. Within the documentary mode, her utterance is uninterrupted; indeed it must be heard in order for the viewer to enact the social contract of the documentary-audience relationship. The codes of the documentary comprise listening and learning from the authoritative narrator, even though the veracity of documentary has been much disputed and shown to be as much a construct as fiction. Within the parameters of 'the personal is political', however, the narrator is not holding out her experience as all-encompassing truth. Rather, she is using the platform of auto-ethnography to articulate her lived experience within a world that all too often refuses to see or hear her beyond the limits imposed by patriarchal heteronormative culture. The protagonist in *Female Fist* states:

I'm trying to find my own way, my language, and my way of performing sexuality, my way of representing sexuality...cultural programming is, of course, enormously difficult to liberate yourself from.

Accordingly, she demonstrates an awareness of the power of cultural representations and the complicated processes of internalisation. Invoking Virginia Woolf's formative text *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the activist suggests that if the marginalised Other is able to create 'a room of one's own and for others', they can at least establish a safe space, a community and platforms from which to speak and challenge the frameworks of oppression. These spaces can also provide respite, she states, 'it gives me a sense of not just being hurled around in a culture which, at heart, despises all that I represent'. A room of one's own allows the activist to regroup and consider new modes of resistance.

The interview ends with the activist's observation that the spaces gained by marginalised groups are fragile, they 'might disappear the very next week'.<sup>95</sup> The voice falls silent and the sounds of the public square abruptly starts up again before the lens cap is removed. We find ourselves viewing the square from the same earlier static position. As before, people walk past the camera taking no notice of its presence; this shot is held for three minutes before the loop seamlessly begins again. It is critical that Dahlberg returns us to public space rather than ending the work at the conclusion of the interview. In doing so, she shifts us from the intimate space we have inhabited for the last quarter of an hour into the hectic sphere of everyday life, consequently raising the question of whether the fragile space the activist spoke of can actually exist in the public domain. The shift also causes an important disruption to the viewer's own conscious and sub-consciously held beliefs. When I first watched

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<sup>95</sup> An observation that is pertinent as, in the UK at least, specialist services for marginalised groups have been closing since the austerity drive that began in 2010. Imkaan, a black feminist organisation working towards eradicating violence against women and girls, released the report, *State of the Sector: Contextualising the current experiences of BME ending violence against women and girls organisations* on the 21 November 2015, warning of the critical state of BME women's services and the significant risk of closures.

*Female Fist*, this section of the work confronted me with my own underlying convictions. During the work, I was intently reading the subtitles and was involved in following the narrative, however, the abrupt change from private to public initiated a change in my viewing. I found myself scrutinising every person who entered the square in my endeavour to detect the protagonist. I was sure she must be there; why else would Dahlberg include this otherwise mundane shot? However, as I examined every person that came into view, I realised that I could not discern her. No one conformed to the image of the activist I had unintentionally built up in my imagination. I had unconsciously assumed I would know her mark. But, she could have been anyone: any age, height, build, masculine, feminine or gender neutral appearance; I did not have a clue. This realisation exposed deeply-held stereotypes that I had unwittingly absorbed from mainstream culture. In this moment of exposure, I was able to re-consider and re-evaluate the ideological depictions of gendered identities that I witness every day. Just as Butler and McRobbie call upon cultural analysis to reveal the underlying machinations of dominant ideology so that it can be called into question and dispersed, Dahlberg uses the formal structure and content of her video work to the same end.

### ***I Want Me Some Brown Sugar (2013), Ope Lori***

In the summer of 2013 the ageing Mick Jagger shimmied across the stage at Glastonbury and belted out the lyrics of the Rolling Stones's classic *Brown Sugar* (Jagger, Keith Richards, 1971):

Scarred old slaver knows he's doin' all right. Hear him whip the women just around midnight. Brown Sugar, how come you taste so good. Brown Sugar, just like a young girl should.

The adulation and lack of criticality from a predominantly white middle-class audience<sup>96</sup> amply demonstrated that the post-racial,

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<sup>96</sup> At the *Sex, Gender and Race, the Politics of Women's Art* symposium held in conjunction with Ope Lori's exhibition on the 5 October 2013, Dr Lez Henry talked about his shock upon hearing the racist and sexist lyrics of *Brown Sugar* when it was originally released.

post-feminist world we ostensibly live in has not yet been attained.<sup>97</sup> The British artist Ope Lori's exhibition *I Want Me Some Brown Sugar* opened three months later in September 2013 at the 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning Centre in Herne Hill, South London and was concerned with the crucial need to interrogate racially charged messages contained deep within mainstream Western culture. In her practice, Lori examines the intersections of racism and sexism from her perspective as a black, lesbian woman who is subject to 'three degrees of separation from the dominant white male order in British culture' (Lori 2014: 17). The artist is committed to both the concept of intersectionality and the feminist principle of 'the personal is political'. Through her artwork, Lori constructs a practice of radical black feminist and queer criticality in order to problematise contemporary representations of female subjectivity.

Referring to her practice as 'image activism', Lori is unusual in her insistence on bringing black and white women together in the frame in order to appraise the 'negotiation of gender' and value that forces black and white women into a contentious relationship based on patriarchal and heteronormative white values (Lori 2014: 15). By exploring black female subjectivity in relationship to representations of white femininity, the artist excavates issues of colourism,<sup>98</sup> which, she argues, positions black women as masculine in contrast to their white counterparts within ongoing white aesthetics and privilege. Cultural theorist bell hooks describes that aesthetic as the requirement to 'live out standards of beauty set by white supremacy' (2001: 111), that is: light skin, straight hair, slight physique and small features (Norwood 2014). The author Marita Golden states:

The equation is simple and complex. Light skin, 'White' features plus straight hair equals beauty. Dark skin plus long straight hair and 'White' features can equal beauty. Light skin, 'Black' features, and coarse hair equals ugly. There are so many caveats. So many footnotes to the clauses of the color

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<sup>97</sup> For further discussion of post-race and post-feminist discourses see: Catherine Squires, et al. (2010), 'What is this "Post-" in postracial, postfeminist... (fill in the blank)?' *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 34: 3, pp. 210–253.

<sup>98</sup> The term was coined by Alice Walker in 1982.

complex. The precious treasure of light skin is like a charm; it works its full magic only in tandem with the complete arsenal of 'White' physical traits (2005: 18).

This idealised white figure is set as the template for femininity in the West while black women are coded as Other.<sup>99</sup> In turn, white beauty standards become internalised by black women and form the basis for colourism, which Lori understands as a mode of discrimination that 'privileges lighter skin tones over darker skin tones even within members of the same racial group' (2014: 13). Lori's art practice examines how the objectifying function of the heteronormative male gaze reduces and limits both black and white women albeit in different ways, as I shall discuss in this analysis.

*I Want Me Some Brown Sugar* is a multi-screen video installation that explores the dynamics of race, gender and sexuality through the act of scopophilia and the fetishisation of different racial and gendered bodies. As discussed in chapter one, cultural theorist Stuart Hall argued that fetishistic imagery is one of the most efficient ways ways of constructing ideological representations of race and gender (1997: 21), which can be easily disseminated through the networks of popular and high culture (1997: 5). Hall went on to suggest that occupying the fetishistic stereotype in order to break it open remains a powerful method of disrupting dominant ideologies. However, as Lucy Lippard pointed out, this is a strategy that is fraught with risk,<sup>100</sup> but one that Lori navigates by placing both male and female, black and white performers of different ages and sexual orientation in the same roles and subjecting them to identical processes of objectification in order to allow the differences in their performances to expose the underlying distribution of power.

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<sup>99</sup> A dual standard called into question in 1851 by Sojourner Truth in her speech on slavery known as *Ain't I A Woman?* delivered to the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, USA.

<sup>100</sup> While Lippard observed that 'it is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose the insult' (1995: 102), similar risks are attached to the use of fetishistic imagery in an attempt to disrupt it.

The looped installation comprises six monitors positioned in portrait mode in a line along two walls meeting at right angles; four screens are placed along the left wall and two on the right. Each of the six screens contains a watcher sitting at the back of the frame looking out towards the viewer while a procession of scantily-clad figures walk across the foreground. The size and positioning of the screens replicate the dimensions of a standing person and create a sense of intimacy with the viewer. The silent work is pared back to the very minimum thereby focusing attention on the protagonists and their racial and gendered identities. Aged between early twenties and forties, the eight performers comprise equal numbers of black and white men and women. They each, in turn, occupy the position of watcher and bearer of the look, while both genders also perform as the objects of desire. The watchers appraise both men and women with equally evident desire thus complicating the heteronormative paradigm of mainstream gender relations. The deceptively simple format supports some revealing differences between the men and women's performances. Firstly, in the role of the undressed walker, the men wear simple boxer shorts or pants whereas the women are dressed erotically in an array of thongs, lacy pants, basques, suspenders and stockings. The men walk barefoot while the women teeter on stiletto heels. The women are spectacle while the men seem to just exist as themselves, thus giving substance to Phelan's claim that sexual objectification has crucially different implications for men and women (1993: 51). This difference is replicated in the manner of walking whereby the men simply stride across the foreground whereas the women appear to be highly conscious of themselves and their bodies and both the watcher's and viewer's gazes. As the women cross the screen, John Berger's assessment of the conditions of female objectification and the perpetual circuit of scrutiny women are socialised into comes to mind (1972: 46). Berger's analysis still rings true and appears to be confirmed by the fact that Lori gave both male and female performers identical instructions on how they should walk and what they should wear, black underwear in the role of the walker and black tie garb when performing as the watcher, and yet the end

results are so different. A second notable difference relates to how the watchers are dressed. The men wear suits, the costume of power, while one of the black women and one of the white women remain in their underwear with the addition of suit jackets. The other two women wear tight-fitting dresses. Lori seems to be signalling an endemic imbalance of power; women are not treated equally even when they ostensibly occupy the same positions as their male colleagues.



Fig. 35  
Exhibition View, *I Want Me Some Brown Sugar* (2013), Ope Lori.

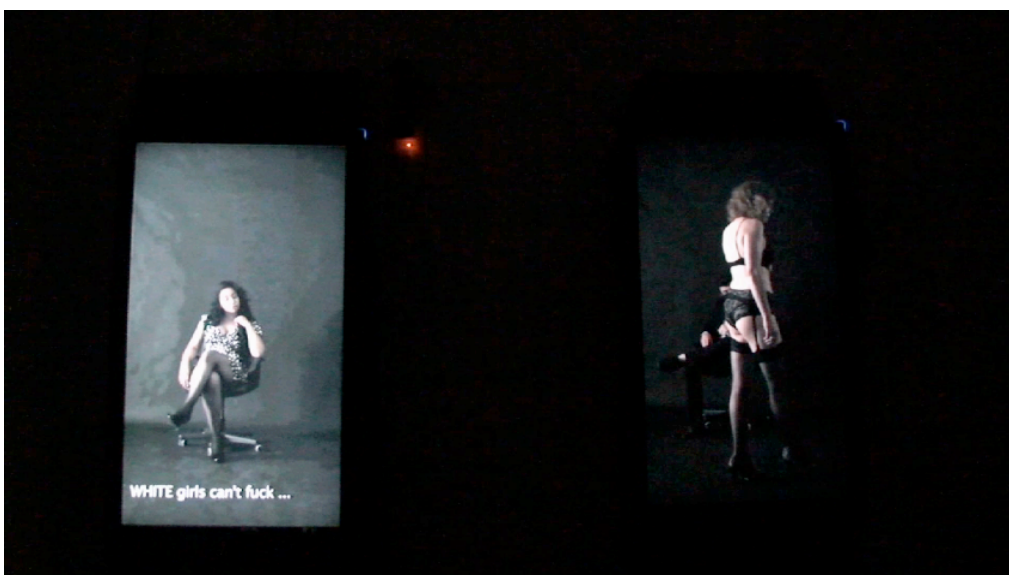


Fig. 36  
Exhibition View, *I Want Me Some Brown Sugar* (2013), Ope Lori.

Lori further complicates the image by continuing her use of text, this time deploying comments taken from pornography websites that feature inter-racial sex. The text appears in teletype fashion along the base of the screens, temporarily obscuring the walkers' feet. Apart from the artist's decision to place the words 'black' and 'white' in capital letters, the comments are unedited: 'BLACK stallion' and 'BLACK on WHITE, or WHITE on BLACK...but only with two chicks!!!'. The crude and stereotypically racist and sexist commentary appears whenever a black person and a white person encounter each other on the screen and is particularly vicious in relation to the black women. Gail Dines suggests that 'the media industry has to operate with some restraint since we have, as a society, made some surface attempt at reining in the most vulgar and crass demonstrations of racism. Not so for the porn industry' (2010: 122). It is here, Dines argues, that the unequivocally racist, sexist and misogynistic paradigm of Western culture is most exposed. The origins of the comments in *I Want Me Some Brown Sugar* are ambiguous; sometimes they seem to emanate from the watcher, sometimes the walker. There is also the suggestion that the words could be issuing from the unspoken thoughts of the audience. This confusion suggests that perhaps we are all implicated in the reductive deployment of damaging stereotypes. In *I Want Me Some Brown Sugar* the meeting of black and white bodies on screen accompanied by the texts set up a complex dialogue that functions to expose the narrow range of Western racial and gendered stereotypes to which we are still subject and highlights the tensions they produce. An apparent exchange takes place between a walking black woman and seated white woman, which reads: 'WHITE girls can't fuck' and 'poor BLACK girl, she doesn't know how to repay the favour'. This dialogue points to the cultural constructs that deliberately ensure divisions between women of different skin colour and operates to disrupt potential communication between them. None of the performers actually verbally communicate at any point in the work. Instead, they move through an endless loop of clichéd sexual stereotypes that serve to keep them apart.



In line with Phelan and Lippard's cautions on the dangers of entering the frame of representation, Lori suggests that 'working towards representational visibility only leads to placing black women in the same positions as white women. It traps them into a similar system of oppression' (2014: 123). If a new unity between black and white women is to emerge, Lori contends, both communities need to understand the different modes of oppression they experience – the imposition of an idealised and largely unachievable white femininity and the denigration of black female bodies that denies black is beautiful. Both achieve the same aim: the subjugation of women's bodies. Like Phelan, Lori recognises that representational invisibility does not have to be construed as a negative situation for black women, but, she argues, it embodies the fear those bodies inspire (2014: 125). In order to confront these fears and the prejudices they generate, Lori suggests that 'through making our bodies visible and mapping out the politics of the gaze upon us, the absurdity of these frameworks can be highlighted' (2014: 125). This strategy has a strong lineage within feminist art practices. Women have long made marginalised bodies visible in order to reveal and deconstruct the ways in which the culture distorts their experience and relegates them to a socially demeaning position. The American artist Betye Saar's early assemblages from the 1960s for example, frequently invoked the stereotype of the 'mammy' figure to lay bare the frameworks of black oppression and, crucially, signal resistance (Jones 2011: 166). Several decades later, Lori's exhibition arouses many feelings of dismay and consternation at the persistence of racist and sexist representational tropes embedded in contemporary culture. However, the exhibition also contains much that might give us hope. Lori's work is about making space for black women to be both audible and visible as human beings, which she achieves by situating black women as the subjects of her work and challenging the ways in which black femininity is conventionally positioned in the frame of representation.

The works I have analysed in this chapter are engaged with issues of female sexual objectification and the masculinised gaze in

contemporary culture. Just as Woodward and Woodward observe the invisibility accorded to hypersexualised women by patriarchal culture, Rist literalises women's diminished position in relation to the god-like (male) viewer. However, while the work suggests the violence enacted on women's bodies and Rist performs feminine helplessness, her lack of contrition and exaggerated pleas point to another narrative. Rist simultaneously ridicules the desiring gaze and ultimately reveals the viewer/masculinity to be powerless. Dahlberg refuses objectification by blind-folding the apparatus of vision and insisting on subjectivity through recourse to embodied utterance. She reveals the imaginary image of the lesbian narrator to be misleading as the viewer futilely looks for the woman amongst the crowd in the final scene. Lori places black and white women and men in the same roles, subject to the same gazes, to reveal underlying significations culturally assigned to images of race and gender. Through the artists' focus on deconstructing the representational codes contained in the image, their video works suggest ways of trans-coding the image with new meaning.

## Chapter 4: A feminist practice in dialogue.

The woman artist thus transgresses what it is to be an artist and what it is to be a woman. She–artist is bodily, professionally, of the margins; the (gendered) visuals of her (gendered) body and of her (gendered) work are by their existence transgressive; they are on the edge, marginalised; they cross borders (Robinson 1995: 139).

### Introduction

As a practitioner currently working within a fine art context, my work has moved through and been informed by different modes of production and methodologies. My early training in contemporary dance initiated my screendance practice<sup>101</sup> and my work encompassing roles as a choreographer, filmmaker, editor and, increasingly, performer. Training as a dancer focussed my attention on the materiality of the performing body and how the conditions of gender affect gestures, actions and movements across the dynamics of the everyday as well as in the frame of theatrical space. Studying in a dance environment constituted mostly by female students and tutors, the portrayals of femininity by student peers raised important questions for my practice; in particular, what does it mean to perform the feminine as women? And what are the repercussions of deviation from the norms and conventions of culturally determined heteronormative gender? Hilary Robinson maintains that:

It is not possible simply to be a person who happens to be female (or male) within our systematics of representation: we do not recognise 'a person', we recognise 'a female person' or 'a male person'. Ambiguity breeds anxiety or transgressive fantasy (1995: 138).

As my own work became increasingly screen-based, I attempted to pare back the markers of gender through the use of extreme close-ups, fragmented, jarring editing and heavily out-of-focus and

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<sup>101</sup> Screendance is variously known as dance for camera, dance film, dance for screen and digital dance. The founding in 2010 of *The International Journal of Screendance* has gone some way towards formalising the terminology. Broadly defined it refers to a screen-based work that can only be realised on screen rather than as a live performance. Works that initiated from live dance works incorporate filming and editing strategies that critically revision the work as opposed to documenting the performance.

distorted shots. These early investigations established an interest in the politics of rendering the body on screen, which, combined with my own intensifying dissatisfaction with mainstream representations of women and femininity, compelled me to look beyond dance to how artists were working with, and depicting the body, in other screen-based practices.



Fig. 37  
Video still from *Sometimes I feel a little bit crazy* (2005), Catherine Long.

My work is concerned with the dynamics of cultural production and reproduction and the systematic objectification of women involved in these processes. The aim of my practice within the current research project is to engage with and address the problematics of female representation and attendant objectification in the West. The aim is to investigate how, as an artist, I can transgress the status quo of cultural hegemony and generate a critical re-presentation of female subjectivity. The re-situating of my practice within a fine art discourse accounts for the shift from dance to an emphasis on everyday actions and gestures, the use of direct address and voice-over as well as a focus on performance to camera rather than

performance that is observed and captured by the camera. This work takes inspiration from the 1970s and 1980s feminist video artworks discussed within this thesis whereby the artists were utilising the syntax of video to challenge the paradigm of patriarchal ideology ingrained in cultural representations as discussed throughout this thesis. As a young woman in the twenty-first century, I see the discourses of 1970s and 1980s feminist theory and praxis along with their application in building a representational visual language, as foundational for developing a contemporary feminist practice today. As Griselda Pollock suggests, artists must understand the mechanisms of ideological systems in creating and maintaining significations of woman (Parker and Pollock 1987: 136).

I would, however, like to emphasise that as Geethika Jayatilaka<sup>102</sup> so clearly articulates, 'we are not younger versions of the women who marched in the 60s and 70s because our conceptions of feminism and equality are shaped by our different experiences and lives' (2001). Although my practice is inspired by earlier feminist work, I am aware of, and responsive to, the wider socio-political and economic context that prevails today, as well as the developments in critical theory and the revising of feminist positions since the late 1980s. While my practice is actively engaged with interrogating the circuit of representation and its ideological undercurrents in a manner that I align with the questions being asked in the 1970s and 1980s, my works is concerned with the conditions that adversely effect and are particular to women today. I aim to disrupt the conditions of contemporary female sexual objectification and the terms of the new sexual contract outlined by McRobbie, discussed in chapters one and three. In doing so, I hope to disturb the narrow iterations of Western gender norms and conventions. Catherine Elwes raises the concern that:

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<sup>102</sup> Speaking at the *Rebranding Feminism* event at the Institute of Contemporary Arts on the 30 November 2001. Jayatilaka was the Head of Policy and Parliamentary Affairs at the Fawcett Society from 1999–2001. For transcript See: [http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2001/12/rebranding\\_feminism\\_geethika\\_jayatilakas\\_talk](http://www.thefword.org.uk/features/2001/12/rebranding_feminism_geethika_jayatilakas_talk) [Accessed 10 October 2013].

The proliferation of video technologies and the Internet today provide the structure for the continual exposure of femininity – in costume – while simultaneously stoking the internalised anxieties of individual women about the adequacy of their performance (2009: 8).

In this current climate of female objectification, Martha Rosler's *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977) and *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue* (1982) remain relevant in Western society as well as to geographies further afield where the West is engaged in exporting its notion of the idealised female body as a new form of colonialism (Bordo 2003 [1993]).



Fig. 38

Video still from *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue* (1982), Martha Rosler.

As noted in the thesis introduction, Martha Rosler's statement 'is the personal political?' continues to have relevance in a contemporary media landscape whereby the backlash against feminism has taken the form of an individualistic neo-liberal and choice-based post-feminist stance. As I have argued, Rosler's statement delineates the crucial fault line between feminism and post-feminism in the twenty-first century; that is, the difference between,

on the one hand, advancing one's own position while positioning it as feminist because it is done by a woman and, on the other hand, linking personal experiences to the wider collective struggle for change. In my own video practice, I have endeavoured to work beyond the merely personal to relate the issues being dealt with in the video works to the wider collective struggle to radically change the conditions of women's lives and critically re-present female subjectivities. Rosler argues that the personal is political if one uses the personal to expose 'the socially constrained within the supposed realms of freedom of action' (cited in Pollock and Parker 1987: 46). Much of my practice research has initiated out of my own experiences as a young woman coming of age in the early 2000s and since then my increasing awareness and recognition of the conditions of sexism and misogyny surrounding women in Western society. My concerns about these conditions and the dominant representation of women that stems from the patriarchal imagination in Western culture have formed the basis for my video practice. I have endeavoured to use the video work as a platform to deconstruct and expose continued circumstances of sexism and misogyny as well as to suggest an alternative feminine subjectivity that is engaged with dismantling the status quo and building a different future.

While drawing on feminist video art practices, I continue to be influenced by dance practitioners, in particular the late Pina Bausch and Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker. Both artists have made work exploring gender performativity and theatricality, themes that are integral to this thesis. Bausch, a German choreographer brought up in post-war West Germany, and her company Wuppertal Tanztheater,<sup>103</sup> came from a tradition of *Ausdruckstanz* or German Expressionist Dance, which is a style signified by its representations of everyday life.<sup>104</sup> Bausch's choreographies critiqued the damaging limitations of

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<sup>103</sup> Bausch was appointed director of the company in 1973.

<sup>104</sup> For further discussion see: Müller, Hedwig (2013), 'Expressionism?: 'Ausdruckstanz' and the New Dance Theatre in Germany' in Royd Climenhaga (ed.), *The Pina Bausch Sourcebook*, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, pp.19–30.

the masculine/feminine binary, for both sexes, and its violent and traumatic social effects.



Fig. 39  
Documentation from *Kontaktof* (1978), Pina Bausch and Wuppertal Tanztheater.

In the past, Bausch has been criticised for an alleged misogyny running through her work that offers women no future beyond painful reiterations of a misogynistic present (Mumford 2004: 44). While Bausch does not offer a vision of improved prospects for women, she portrays masculinity as similarly confining and destructive, 'an unbridgeable chasm seems to hold men and women in two equally unreal and inhospitable worlds' (Servos 2008: 108). Bausch insists on unsettling gendered behaviour and drawing attention to its painful limitations. I would like to extend Bausch's portrayal of femininity to make the connection between trauma and anxiety, both being part of the female human experience. Peggy Phelan draws attention to the frequent investigation of distress and pain in feminist artwork and the relationship to feminist coming-to-awareness as a point of trauma as one awakens to 'the violence women experience in a world run by men' (2012: 44). Pollock suggests that female trauma is an ongoing response to the harmful and violent treatment of women's bodies in the West and on a global scale (2015).<sup>105</sup> This sees cultures all around

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<sup>105</sup> Griselda Pollock speaking at *Stories That Matter: Feminist Methodologies in the Archive* panel discussion at the ICA on the 22 November 2015.



the world disfigured and devastated by the systematic mistreatment of women, which all too often is viewed as the norm and simply the way the world is (Pollock 2015). Both Bausch and De Keersmaecker use repetitious actions as a stylistic method that invokes a conflicting sense of connection and alienation in the spectator. Identification is provoked through the use of recognisable everyday actions whilst distancing is affected when these same recognisable actions are reiterated until they become fragmented and abstracted, even violent, creating disorientation and defamiliarisation. The futility of gendered actions is exposed through its disjointed performance, while the adherence to codes of femininity and masculinity is questioned and challenged.

The Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker and her company Rosas emerged a decade after Bausch in 1983 and pioneered a style that came to be known as Euro-crash; a heavy, weighted style often performed in boots, featuring recurrent and often confrontational gestures and actions (Briginshaw 2000: 108). De Keersmaecker's breakthrough work *Rosas danst Rosas* (1982), made into a screen adaptation in 1997 with the Belgian musician and filmmaker Thierry de Mey, used 'femininity as a choreographic device' (Hargreaves 2015). Four women perform a reiteration of feminine gestures: flicking their hair away from their face, exposing their bra straps and adjusting their clothing, clutching their breasts and defensively wrapping their arms around their stomachs.<sup>106</sup> De Keersmaecker's choreography exposes the ritualistic performance of learnt gestures that are deemed to be feminine. Yet, the women's performances also underline their strength and skill as they navigate everyday life. The way in which Bausch and de Keersmaecker's choreographies explore expressions of femininity form an historical

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<sup>106</sup> Beyoncé appropriated the work in her 2011 music video *Countdown*. De Keersmaecker responded that the new version diminished the feminist impact of the work as the choreography became repurposed in order to sell a product (Hargreaves 2015). Similarly, Beyoncé has faced accusations of plagiarising Pipilotti Rist's *Ever Is Over All* (1997) (Shepherd 2016).

context within dance, from which my own interest in gendered everyday gestures and actions have developed.



Fig. 40  
Video still from *Rosas danst Rosas* (1997), Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker, Thierry de Mey and Rosas.

## Video as an artistic medium

Video has been a key medium of my practice through the duration of my dance training and fine art research. Throughout the research process, I have questioned what has drawn me to the medium of video and what can be achieved and articulated through the screen and its representational language. My interest in video art practice has always been concerned with the body on screen and the tension of representation; of being visible to the viewer while also controlling what lies within the frame.

My eye is drawn to the close-up image and the details of physicality: texture, tone, lines and marks. Seen in close-up, the body becomes fragmented and abstract and yet, in other ways, the screened materiality of the body takes on haptic qualities, as the flesh appears almost close enough to touch. My own short video work *In the Eye of the Beholder* (2013–2015) is a two-minute exploration in

holding the camera's gaze. Concerned with the ambiguity of looking, there is no narrative structure to the work. The extreme close-up of the eye and the detail of the veins and moisture of the eyeball suggests there is vulnerability in the act of looking. While the eyelashes and glimpses of facial features mark the subject as feminine, she is largely hidden from the spectator's voyeuristic gaze.



Fig 41  
Video still from *In the Eye of the Beholder* (2015), Catherine Long.

The close-up shot has a history within feminist video practice that operates to confuse the desiring gaze and diminish objectification. The American artist Nan Hoover exploited the qualities of the macro lens in the series *Landscape* (1983), *Half Asleep* (1984) and *Eye Watching* (1984). Hoover isolated parts of her body as abstracted landscapes, depicting an almost overwhelming physicality through the sensory capabilities of the body: touch, sight, smell. Katharine Meynell's video *Vampire S Eat* (1992) tightly framed the fleshy female mouth, accompanied by the sounds of licking, sucking and slurping. Meynell set the upturned monitor in the seat of a chair, so that anyone sitting down would appear to offer their own seat to her lascivious licking. This humorous yet unnerving installation made a direct play on both male desire and Freudian castration anxiety, thus suggesting both the pleasure and threat of the female mouth. Marina Benjamin observes, 'the inarticulate lips that mouth no words, that

literally speak in tongues, confront us with the zero of nothingness and remind us of the silencing of women in patriarchal culture' (1992). As the work progresses and the mouth becomes bloodied, 'the need to consume, to ingest, carries sexual overtones; woman as blood-sucker, lamia and castrator of men are all prefigured' (Benjamin 1992).



Fig. 42  
Video still from *Vampire S Eat* (1992), Katharine Meynell.

The use of close-up in these video works invoke the *monstrous-feminine* of Barbara Creed's eponymous text in which she argues that the female reproductive body is culturally viewed as terrifying and abject (1993). Rejecting Freud's assessment of woman as castrated, Creed argues that male fear of women stems from the concept of woman as castrator, an assessment that Meynell's *Vampire S Eat* visualises.

Close-up images allow for slippage as the familiar body becomes abstracted while recognisable actions are denaturalised. The

use of close-up by feminist artists is frequently more extreme than the traditional close-up shot that seductively frames the object of the look, thereby creating representations of the female body that are at odds with and challenging to the established codes of the image deployed in mainstream media. This unconventional form of camera work is distinct from the traditional Hollywood framing of femininity that Mulvey critiques:

Within the narrative structure, femininity and sexual spectacle tend to condense, exaggerating the cinema's (in Godard's terms) specific condensation between the beauty of woman, the close-up, and the stasis of spectacle as opposed to the movement of action (1996: 45).

It is this feminised stasis of spectacle that the American artist Andy Warhol subverted in *Mario Banana No. 1 and No. 2* (1964), which features a close-up head shot of Mario Montez, a gay man, in a fur-like wig and elaborate make-up gazing at the camera while mock-fellating and devouring a banana. Montez's performance is a play on the eroticism of the Hollywood actress's close-up and the heterosexual male desire implied by her coyly parted lips. There are two versions of *Mario Banana* projected one after the other; the first 16mm film is in colour and the second is black and white. Taken on their own, the works have different impacts. The colour version operates as a parody of phallogentric dominant culture, with his extravagant and excessive make-up, fur-like wig and diamante hair adornments, Montez signally fails to pass as a woman. Rather, he is blatantly a man camping it up for the camera. The somewhat carnivalesque effect openly mocks the Hollywood starlet spectacle and the heteronormative desiring gaze.



Fig. 43  
Film still from *Mario Banana No.1* (1964), Andy Warhol.

The black and white version, when watched on its own, fails to make the same critical observations. The detail is lost and Montez now successfully passes as female; as a result, within the economy of representation, female eroticism is maintained as it is constructed by patriarchal culture. However, when the two works are watched together, the spectator's knowledge that Montez is a man works in conflict with his seductive feminine act. Warhol's appropriation of the Hollywood stasis of spectacle queers the image by revealing both the inherent campness and masquerade of the Hollywood starlet, the object of male heterosexual desire. The work ridicules mainstream heteronormative fears of gayness by suggesting a homoeroticism underlying popular imagery. *Mario Banana's* success in manipulating the codes of femininity exposes the ideological construction of the image that in Hollywood terms should only frame a woman in such a manner.





Fig. 44  
Film still from *Mario Banana No. 2* (1964), Andy Warhol.

At the other end of the spectrum, the wide shot can produce defamiliarisation through the dual affects of distancing and alienation. Cold and formal, the distant lens frames more information than the close-up but fails to reveal the detail. The viewer can see the wider picture but corporeality becomes dismantled. The body on screen, already produced as object, becomes further objectified and yet, the aloof monotonous shot can also operate to diminish the gaze and confuse the paradigms of sexual objectification as Rosler demonstrated in *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977). The medium of video allows for certain dimensions of temporal and spatial control and raises the question of what is held within the frame and what stands without. What is the viewer not allowed to see? What is restrained by the frame? These are the qualities that I am drawn to. Editing allows for a different vision, one of juxtaposition, layering, working across temporal zones and playing with spatial dimensions. My video practice contains a relationship between past and present; a re-examination of the past to contextualise and critique the present. Non-linear digital editing provides a platform to explore these qualities.

## A different sort of repeating

My practice frequently involves performance to camera, which draws upon my dance background and observation of everyday gestures and actions. Performance to camera also has a feminist history, which raises the questions of why the strategy is used as well as how it operates in screen-based practices within the framework of representation. In chapters one and two, I discussed the ways in which performance to camera allows for a situating of subjectivity in the work, a declaration on behalf of the artist: I am here and I have agency, or, as Chris Straayer summarises, 'I say I am' (1985: 8).<sup>107</sup> Performance can deconstruct and defamiliarise the conventions of everyday life through its exposure of artifice and masquerade as demonstrated by Nina Sobell's excessive performance in *Hey, Chicky!!!* (1978), discussed in chapter two. Performance calls attention to that which is declared naturalised and innate – femininity and masculinity, for example, and demonstrates these marked characteristics as learnt, performed and inscribed on the body. Performance also requires skill as the filmmaker Sally Potter observed in relation to traditional performance modes (1980). It is a skilful woman who performs the artifice of culturally desirable femininity as Eleanor Antin demonstrated in her video performance *Representational Painting* (1971) in which the artist spends thirty-eight minutes applying make-up to her face.

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<sup>107</sup> Straayer argues that 'diverse works within this genre of video shared a basic level of content summarized by the statement "I am" and, furthermore, they demand the legitimacy of such content by framing it in the performative statement "I say". Video technology helped establish this frame'. See: 'I Say I Am: Feminist Performance Video in the 1970s', *Afterimage*, November 1985, 8–12.





Fig. 43  
Video still from *Representational Painting* (1971), Eleanor Antin.

In today's climate, women pluck, shave, diet, apply make-up, contain their flesh and manage attributes that are designated undesirable, that is, those that are deemed to be masculine. Ingrid Berthon-Moine, a French artist based in London, explores the relentless rigors of women's cosmetic routines and their place within the domestic sphere in her single screen video work *Alors tu m'aimes?* (So you love me) (2009). Through a series of close-up shots, the viewer sees the artist remove dry skin from her feet with a cheese grater, trim her nails with a vegetable peeler, suction her thighs with a vacuum attachment, work a phallic roll-on deodorant into her hairy armpit until the crevice is oozing with thick white fluid, smear lipstick onto her lips until the lipstick breaks and finally, depilate her groin by singeing her pubic hair off with a lighter. The work ends when the lighter breaks apart with the heat and the artist involuntarily recoils. Throughout the work, the artist's body is aligned with domestic chores and food to be consumed; the maintenance of her body is just another household task to undertake and another consumable prepared for consumption.



Fig. 44  
Video still from *Alors tu m'aimes?* (2009), Ingrid Berthon-Moine

The work's humour combines with a visceral sense of revulsion as skin grates, nails snap and hair burns, leaving the viewer questioning the normalisation of cosmetic routines that, while usually performed with tools specifically designed for body, still involve a ritual of regulation and pain.

As discussed in chapter two in relation to Nina Sobell's work, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity outlines how gender identities are culturally and socially constructed. Drawing upon Derrida's concept of iterability, Butler argues that:

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling

the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance (1993: 95, original emphasis).

It is these conditions of constraint, prohibition, taboo and ostracism that feminist artists deconstruct through recourse to modes of performance that can reveal the regularised and reiterated construct of gender performativity. This understanding of reiteration and the 'possibilities of gender transformation' (Butler 1988: 271) has become a central tenet of my work: how can one re-perform and re-vision everyday gestures and actions to transform what we understand as gendered behaviour? My own *All That Glitters Is Not Gold* (2013) explored the tension of what it means to become and socially enact a woman through the use of gestural and verbal repetition. The parameters of the work were to perform to camera an array of feminine gestures while repeating the word 'woman'. Off screen and at intervals, I layered on make-up that became more obvious and excessive through the duration of the work. By repeatedly saying 'woman', I aimed to invoke a process called semantic satiation,<sup>108</sup> also known as semantic saturation, a psychological phenomena whereby the repetition of a word causes it to temporarily loses its meaning for both the speaker and the listener. Not only does the term become emptied of meaning so that it is heard as unintelligible sounds, the sudden meaninglessness of the word can instigate a questioning of signification as a concept and process. I wanted to see if the processes of semantic satiation could also work non-verbally, perhaps by playing with reiterating feminine gestures they may also break down and perhaps constitute a 'different sort of repeating' (Butler 1988: 271).

The work is ordered in four 'acts', which are divided by a cross-fade edit and the performer re-appearing with more make-up applied to her face. The image has been heavily saturated so that the woman performs against a background of gold glittering pixels while also appearing clothed in the same glitter that intermittently crackles on

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<sup>108</sup> Leon Jakobovits James coined the term 'semantic satiation' in his doctoral thesis (1962) at McGill University, Montreal, Canada.

her skin and hair. The gold glitter effect references the cosmetic products designed for women that are infused with shimmering materials and suggests the artifice of femininity.



Fig. 47  
Video still from *All That Glitters Is Not Gold* (2013), Catherine Long.

The woman performs a limited palette of femininity, flicking her hair away from her face, fluttering her eyelashes, clapping her hands in glee, each gesture accompanied by the pronouncement 'woman'. The question arises: what is she declaring? For each assertion appears empty and fatuous. The information she delivers appears self-evident, and yet, in its seemingly axiomatic repetition, the information becomes oblique. While the work raises questions about the meaning of the category woman and how it is performed in contemporary culture, the performance does not achieve its aim of breaking down as described in the process of semantic satiation. This is due to its shifts in tone and register that disrupt the monotony required to generate the deadening psychological phenomenon. Instead the work points to the vacuous nature of socially inscribed womanhood as the reified goal for the female sex, while suggesting the masquerade<sup>109</sup> and artifice involved in presentations of prescribed

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<sup>109</sup> See Mary Ann Doane (1982), 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator' *Screen*, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 74–88 and Doane (1988), 'Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator', *Discourse*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 42–54.

femininity. Elwes's critical essay 'Through Deconstruction to Reconstruction' (2000 [1985]: 46–48) raises the concern that while some film theorists have suggested that the excessive performance of 'woman' can expose femininity as a pretence, the risk remains that the erotic power these representations of femininity hold in dominant culture is what women exchange for real political power. This is a position advocated by social scientist Catherine Hakim and her championing of feminine erotic capital as an asset to be exploited (2011). My critique of the lure and artificiality of feminine ideals is also named within the title. 'All that glitters is not gold' is a common expression in the UK that means not everything that appears to be precious or true is actually so. The phrase also suggests what is known as 'fools gold', a substance of little value but with the appearance of gold. The title endeavours to raise doubt prior to viewing and invoke a suspicion of the performance's superficial qualities in order to suggest the daily masquerade of femininity is perhaps nothing more than a folly.

## **The vernacular of archive**

My video *Know You're Mine* (2015) employs a different method of reiteration in order to interrogate dominant gender narratives and the ways in which women are trapped within modes of representation. The video is a reworking of five short excerpts of archive footage, four of which are in domestic settings and one featuring a beauty contest, from the 1950s and 1960s. The video work takes its name from the lyrics of the 1974 British pop song *Scullery*, which plays throughout, in which Clifford T. Ward sings of a woman undertaking domestic work while still managing to remain attractive: 'you still have ingredients that make you shine, and when you take your apron off I know you're mine'.<sup>110</sup> The opening scene sees a woman positioned on her hands and knees with a small boy, presumably her son, riding on her back and a little girl, her daughter, sitting beside them laughing and nodding her head in approval at the game. The video footage is

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<sup>110</sup> See appendix 8 for lyrics.



heavily decelerated and manipulated so that the mother and her children's actions jolt and stutter on the screen. Their slowed down facial expressions expose underlying tensions and emotions that belie the seemingly happy family depiction in the original unedited footage. While both the footage and music has been reduced to a laboured halting pace throughout the video, the editing in the sequence is fast and fragmented creating a dissonance between what the spectator sees in the actions and their original intent. The son jerkily bounces up and down and back and forth on his mother's back as she appears to struggle and weep accompanied by the sound of heavily edited whoops and cries.



Fig. 48  
Video still from *Know You're Mine* (2015), Catherine Long.

A male father/narrator figure watches from across the room and in response to the woman's apparent distress caused by her son's abuse approvingly exclaims, 'amazing, isn't it, and she's done the washing and ironing today for a family of five'. The scene progresses to a woman doing domestic chores, first in a kitchen where she appears to be struggling to either put on or rip off her apron, then tidying up a bedroom in faltering movements that sees her make several abortive attempts to pick up household items from the floor. The winner of the 1969 Miss America beauty contest receives her accolade, mouth opened wide as if crying in pleasure before the

image deceleration and the audio suggests an underlying distress and transforms her expression to a howl of pain. Another woman hangs laundry outside to dry in a banal domestic scene as the music, in contrast to the image, shifts into an exuberant fairground-esque romp. The video returns to the mother still being abused by her son as her daughter grins and her husband complacently relaxes. The final scene sees the woman in the kitchen grappling with an iron, for a split second it looks like she will throw the iron across the kitchen, instead she haltingly puts it down and continues her domestic duties as the video fades to black.

*Know You're Mine* utilises anonymous archive footage featuring unknown women with the exception of Miss America.<sup>111</sup> One of my reasons for looking back to this era is the prevalence of a post-feminist nostalgia for 1950s housewife kitsch. The romanticisation applied to this figure all too often overlooks the difficulties of this restrictive role that 1970s feminism fought to expose and move beyond.<sup>112</sup> The work is a polemical attack on this mode of domestic nostalgia, while also suggesting deeply-held notions of gendered power and the trap of representation for women. Through the editing of the little girl's smiling, nodding head as her brother rides their distressed mother, I wanted to indicate her internalisation of the cultural messages regarding women's place in society.

*Know You're Mine* draws upon the language of archive footage in order to lay bare the values underpinning the original image. In contrast to the mainstream uses of archive depictions that frequently serve to invoke a sentimental nostalgia and strengthen dominant

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<sup>111</sup> The Miss America beauty queen is possible to identify through the Miss America website as Judith Ford, who won the title in 1969, the year of feminist protests that nearly caused the telecast to be disrupted. The leaflet *No More Miss America!* by Women's Liberation was distributed at the protest by Robin Morgan. Source: <http://www.missamerica.org/our-miss-americas/1960/review.aspx> [Accessed 9 January 2015].

<sup>112</sup> See: Coontz, Stephanie (1993), *The Way We Never Were: American Families And The Nostalgia Trap*, and Gillis, Stacy and Hollows, Joanne (eds) (2009), *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture*.

ideology, the vernacular of artists' archive filmmaking operates in a different mode. Laura Mulvey suggests that:

The original material is, very often, anonymous, bereft of aesthetic interest or, indeed, of cinematic consciousness. The artist filmmaker as compiler gives it new life, new significance and value (politically and aesthetically) (2012).

The American artist Dara Birnbaum was one of the early pioneers of video re-appropriation using mass media film and television footage to bring new political and aesthetic consideration to mainstream representations. Birnbaum's single screen video work *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–1979), viewed on a monitor, but often now digitally projected, constituted both a critique of dominant culture as well as an attempt to resist the underlying ideologies contained in images of femininity (Baetens 2011: 276). A key influence on the British scratch video movement of the early to mid-1980s, Birnbaum edited found TV footage into fast-paced montages that attempted to disrupt the naturalised codes of mass media. Birnbaum's insistence on repeating the same swirling gesture of Wonder Woman's transformation in order to reveal its originary signification is underscored by her textual analysis of the 1978 pop song *Wonder Woman in Discoland* in the latter half of the video. The sexual innuendo of the lyrics expose the erotic formulation of the Wonder Woman imagery as it emerges from patriarchal culture. However, while Wonder Woman swirls in a dizzying spectacle of largely ineffectual action, there is also an ambiguity in the work that simultaneously allows it to be read in the current era as a 'positive image of a strong, postfeminist woman' (Baetens 2011: 276, Demos 2010: 2).<sup>113</sup> Thus, in post-feminist frameworks, Wonder Woman appears as the new affirmative model of femininity and a precursor to the contemporary empowered woman who achieves both independence and sex appeal. T.J. Demos suggests it is this

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<sup>113</sup> This ambiguity was made apparent to me at a screening of the work at an MRes Art: Moving Image seminar at Central Saint Martins in 2012. While I, and others in the group, read the work as a critique of patriarchal imagery of women, several of the younger women saw the work as a depiction of an empowered woman in charge of her destiny.



ambiguity and exposure of the image's contradictory messages, which is key to the work's continued impact on audiences (2010: 7). In my opinion, this shift in meaning from critical deconstruction to celebratory affirmation reveals the agenda of post-feminism, which is to provide a veneer of female empowerment that legitimises the continuation of female objectification.

Forty years after Birnbaum's work, archive footage still has a valuable role in deconstructing dominant culture and exposing its underlying significations. *Passage à l'acte* (1993) by the Austrian artist Martin Arnold and *Mother + Father* (2005) by the South African artist Candice Breitz both employ Hollywood footage to reveal underlying tensions and contradictions in mainstream representations by means of reiterability. While both artists use the repetition of scenes from well-known mainstream films and famous actors and actresses in order to unsettle previously naturalised gender representations, they do so through different techniques. Arnold takes a short clip from one film and brutally re-edits it to uncover previously hidden and subconscious meanings. While the original clip from *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1962) depicts a seemingly natural family scene around the breakfast table, *Passage à l'acte*, a single screen 16mm film projection, utilises reiteration to create a jolting, fragmented visual aesthetic and soundscape. The intricate editing of the dialogue morphs the conversation into a violent and disruptive exchange that unveils the omnipresent patriarchal power held by the male head of the household and the son's emerging attainment of that dominant position. In contrast, the daughter valiantly attempts dissent as she shouts 'no, no, no' and the mother silently grimaces with anxiety and distress.



Fig. 49  
Film stills from *Passage à l'acte* (1993), Martin Arnold.

A key scene in Arnold's reworking of the footage sees the intensifying juxtaposition of the daughter sipping a glass of milk while her mother drinks tea so that their images almost morph into each other to the accompanying shouts of the son: 'come on, come on, come on'. Arnold points to the phallocentric transference of power from father to son that the daughter must disrupt in order to escape the oppression her mother suffers. The final scene of the work, however, holds out little hope: as the daughter rushes to leave for school she hugs her father and repeatedly kisses him on the cheek. With a quick call of 'bye', she dashes past her mother without a look. This can be read in two ways: firstly, that the daughter ultimately will assume her place within the patriarchal model of power, her youthful dissent ebbing away as she capitulates to masculinist authority. Secondly, that she will endeavour to assume phallocentric power herself by assuming masculine qualities in keeping with heteronormative ideology that still denigrates feminine attributes and thus the mother. As the current equality driven feminism Angela McRobbie warns of fights for access to the boardroom without revisioning the way that the boardroom operates (2009: 57), it is perhaps this model of power that the daughter, Scout, will eventually inhabit. The hope remains, though, that in line with her nickname, Scout will ultimately recognise the terrain of patriarchal ideology and search for new environments and modes of being-in-the-world.

Breitz's work uses a different methodology to similar effect. Comprised of two installations each containing six monitors in a concave formation, Breitz edits sections of scenes from well-known Hollywood films featuring famous actresses and actors into dialogues around motherhood and fatherhood.<sup>114</sup>

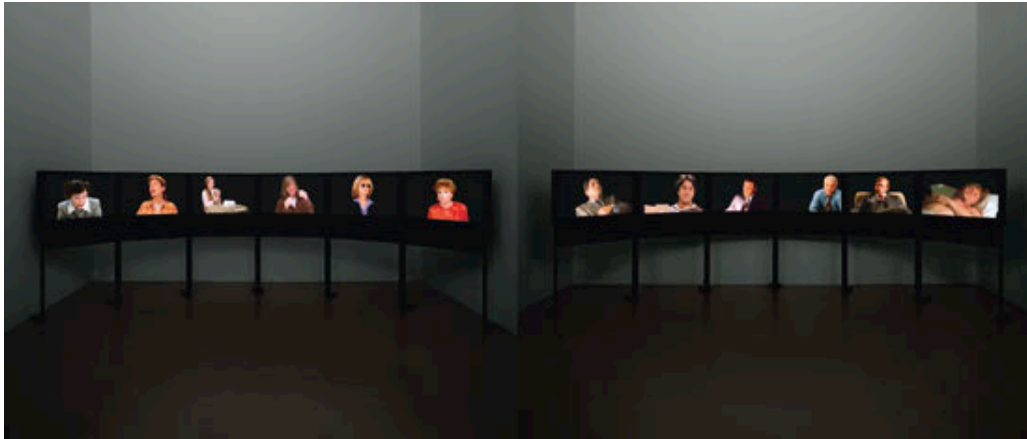


Fig. 50  
Installation view of *Mother + Father* (2005), Candice Breitz

In *Mother*, six actresses weep and hysterically laugh as they discuss their maternal anguish and relationship difficulties. In *Father*, six actors angrily deliberate on their daughters' potential relationships with men and proclaim their intention of maintaining their daughters' sexual innocence. T.J Demos observes:

The piece offers intimate and psychologically charged close-ups of neurotic mothers, tilting between self-pity, defensiveness, and hysterical breakdown; and angry and defensive fathers, obsessed with delaying their daughters' sexual blossoming (2007: 11).

Breitz focuses the viewer's attention on the ways in which these gendered characterisations are reiterated and normalised through Hollywood narratives that are widely disseminated for audience consumption. Breitz's use of repetition focuses the viewer's attention on the limitations of filmic characterisations and the underlying

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<sup>114</sup> *Mother* stars Faye Dunaway, Susan Sarandon, Meryl Streep, Diane Keaton, Julia Roberts, and Shirley MacLaine. *Father* stars Tony Danza, Dustin Hoffman, Harvey Keitel, Steve Martin, Donald Sutherland, and Jon Voight.

ideologies they convey with the result that they become defamiliarised and denaturalised.

In making *Know You're Mine* I aimed to investigate the coded significations in found footage by drawing upon Arnold and Breitz's editing strategies. I discussed this video work with the artist Mark Dean who manipulates fragments of film footage and popular music in his moving image practice.<sup>115</sup> Dean observes that in today's individualistic culture, it is easy to be judgemental of others and the choices they make. He suggests that the challenge for the artist is to initiate identification with the subject of the work while critiquing the cultural circumstances she or he finds her/himself in. Dean suggests that identification and compassion is pivotal to the success of *Know You're Mine*, otherwise the women's images used in the work are exploited and abused. He observes that there is pain in identifying with the female protagonists and that it is this discomfort that provides a catalyst to question the societal causes of their distress rather than debasing them. The mode the work operates from is uncontrollable and unstable, thereby speaking from a subject position that is unsafe and acknowledges both the precarity of speaking and the dangers of being voiceless.

## **Everyday spaces, cultural violence**

Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life Vol.1* (1984) and *Vol.2 Living and Cooking* (1998) explore familiar rituals and conventions that are performed in the public and private spheres. The texts reveal how these activities operate according to where they are enacted. De Certeau contends that 'the territory where the basic gestures of "ways of operating" are deployed and repeated is first of all domestic space' (1998: 145). Accordingly, fundamental constructions of self, gender and societal role are first and foremost

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<sup>115</sup> Dean's video works highlight the cultural context in which subjectivity is constructed and seek to represent identity through fragments of cultural material that Dean sees as *objets trouvés* (found objects). Dean states that he grew up in the context of feminist questions, which has had a marked impact on how he renders female and male subjects on the screen. Conversation with Mark Dean at Chelsea College of Arts, London, 1 July 2014.

learnt and performed in the home. These 'ways of operating' within the home inform how the individual constructs and departs her/himself outside of the domestic. De Certeau outlines the barrier between private and public space as 'fragile' and 'symbolic' (1998: 147); a border that has become increasingly permeable as the technological creep of office life has seen increasing numbers of people working from home both inside and outside of traditional working hours. Yet, even as homes become increasingly aligned with work environments, domestic space still retains associations of privacy, intimacy and shelter that are powerful and affective cultural signifiers. De Certeau fails to mention domestic violence, though, and the home can also be a place of terror, as a multitude of women will testify.

I explored the tension between these contradictory aspects of domestic space through the use of popular music in my video *Run For Your Life* (2012). The American academic Sut Jhally, Director of the Media Education Foundation, is unequivocal about the relationship between hyper-sexualised gendered narratives in music videos and male violence towards women in everyday life (2007). Many contemporary pop songs and accompanying music videos are now obviously steeped in sexism and misogyny and I wanted to explore the ways in which male violence towards women has been normalised within conventional pop culture by relating this to crimes against women that we read about in the news on a regular basis. In 2012, the free *Metro* newspaper ran the article, 'Husband admits killing cheating wife despite winning a retrial' (Crown 2012: 17).<sup>116</sup> The journalist described the man who battered his wife's head with a wooden block before strangling her to death as 'heartbroken' and 'ripped apart' by her infidelity. The premise of the article was that the Court of Appeal had quashed the murderer's conviction and ordered a re-trial, because a change of law meant that Dawn Clinton's infidelity

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<sup>116</sup> For a response to the article by domestic and sexual violence organisation Solace Women's Aid on the 18 September 2012, see: <http://solacewomensaid.org/solace-challenges-the-metro-newspapers-portrayal-of-domestic-violence/> [Accessed 25 November 2012].

could be used as a defence and constituted a 'qualifying trigger'. The defendant's decision to refuse this defence and plead guilty to his wife's murder was presented in a way that dignified his murderous actions. That infidelity can legally constitute a mitigating circumstance in the case of murder is deeply flawed reasoning. As I read the article, I was also appalled by the journalist's use of language that upheld the patriarchal logic of women's infidelity provoking a supposedly justifiable, albeit excessive, retribution that in turn was re-presented as an expression of how much the man loved his allegedly 'treacherous' partner. I would argue that it is this masculinist reasoning that allows for infidelity to be considered a defence for the killing of female partners and ex-partners.<sup>117</sup> The language and imagery of romanticised murder is evidence of a misogynistic patriarchal culture that should be consigned to history yet is still deployed by the news media and mainstream culture.<sup>118</sup>

The narrative of cheating women and their ensuing murder by angry partners has a long history in popular culture. One expression of this scenario I was familiar with was *Run For Your Life* by The Beatles. This song featured on *Rubber Soul* (1965), an album I regularly listened to as a teenager in the 1990s. I have always been troubled by its upbeat, sing-a-long qualities that operate to veneer and normalise the vernacular of male violence towards women. The Beatles, one of the most significant bands in the West during the 1960s, continue to be influential in popular culture and are upheld in the UK as a national treasure (Sandler 2014). I wanted to examine the ways in which we are surrounded by patriarchal narratives that

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<sup>117</sup> As mentioned earlier in the thesis, in the UK two women are killed every week by male intimate partner violence. Karen Ingala Smith started the Counting Dead Women project in 2012 in response to the lack of media reporting on the issue. Since Ingala Smith started the project: 128 women were killed in 2012, 145 in 2013, 150 in 2014, and 125 in 2015. Counting Dead Women names every woman killed and the circumstances of her death. See: <https://kareningalasmith.com> [Accessed 12 February 2016]. Ingala Smith, in collaboration with the charity Women's Aid, has also launched the Femicide Census database on the 12 February 2015. The database aims to provide a clearer understanding of domestic homicide and male violence against women in the UK. See: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/campaigning-and-influencing/femicide-census/> [Accessed 12 February 2016].

<sup>118</sup> The journalist Kira Cochrane writes about the prevalence of violent images of women in the fashion industry. See: Cochrane, Kira (2014), 'How female corpses became a fashion trend'.

find their way into our homes in the guise of seemingly harmless cultural artefacts, that are in turn, internalised as part of our system of values. I was also interested in the relationship between the cultural conditions of a fifty-year-old song released in the early days of the women's liberation movement and the politics of the present day that evince a continued need for feminist activism.

*Run For Your Life* consists of the viewpoint of a camera held at head height as the person holding it runs along the streets. This viewpoint is multiplied as different angles, speeds and intervals are overlaid to create a disorientating effect. Part of the way through the work, elements of the surroundings – fences, gates, shrubbery – are briefly focussed before disappearing back into the blur of passing scenery. The person running is embodied in the work through her movements controlling the camera's eye, the sound of her running feet and her ragged breath are edited into a series of fragmented gasps and hiccups. In contrast to the sounds of her distress, the jaunty instrumental version of *Run For Your Life* plays in the background. The lyrics are edited as text superimposed on the image and cut in time with the rhythm:

I'd rather see you dead little girl than to be with another man.  
You better keep your head little girl or you won't know where I  
am. You better run for your life if you can little girl (Lennon and  
McCartney 1965).<sup>119</sup>

The gasping breath and sound of running combines with the violence of the lyrics to act as a counterpoint to the upbeat melody of the song and the pop culture it represents. Unable to hide behind the saccharine vocals, the lyrical content stands exposed as a brutal account of masculinist possession and domination of a woman's body.

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<sup>119</sup> See Appendix 9 for lyrics.

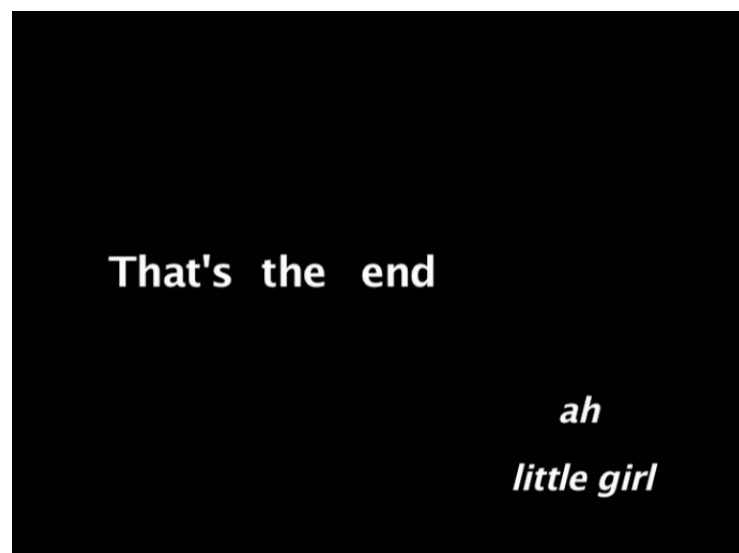
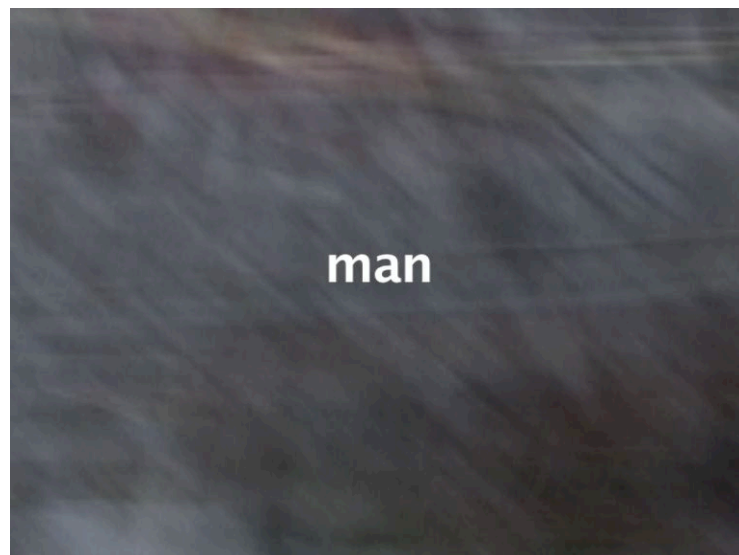
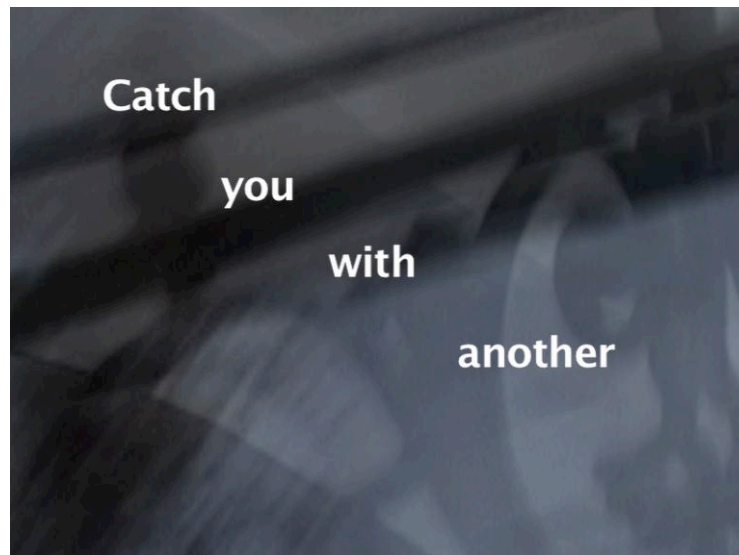


Fig. 51  
Video stills from *Run For Your Life* (2013), Catherine Long.



## Meat as an abject material.

My practice asks how can feminist artists disrupt the cultural loop of objectification and internalisation without merely reiterating the paradigm of heteronormative power. My video work with meat has been an attempt to do this through linking the objectification of women's bodies with the object to be consumed. Women's bodies are culturally aligned with the abject as Julia Kristeva identifies in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). In the West, women's bodies are represented as predominantly homogenous and sanitised; they must be stripped of body hair, odour and secretions in order to prevent their feminine abjection from spilling out (Roberts and Waters 2004).<sup>120</sup> Laura Mulvey calls the alignment of 'bodily fluids and wastes' with female corporeality the 'iconography of misogyny' (1996: 146). She observes that in response to social pressure, 'the female psyche may well identify with misogynistic revulsion against the female body and attempt to erase signs that mark her physically feminine' (1996: 146). Food is also abject when it borders 'between two distinct entities or territories' (Kristeva 1982: 75). It can represent the blurring between women as consumers and women's bodies to be consumed.<sup>121</sup> The affective qualities of raw meat evoke feelings of disgust and revulsion, even horror, irrespective of whether one eats meat or not. Yet, meat in all its abjection also provides nourishment for our bodies. To avoid this trauma, flesh is butchered and cleaned to avoid looking like the animal it came from; the

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<sup>120</sup> The sanitisation of women's bodies has been the subject of much feminist debate from Naomi's Wolf's *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (1990) to Holly Baxter and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett's *The Vagenda: A Zero Tolerance Guide to the Media* (2014). In 2010, the UK Liberal Democrat MPs Jo Swinson and Lynne Featherstone launched the Campaign for Body Confidence in response to the increasing 'pressure to conform to impossible stereotypes' (Campaign for Body Confidence n.d.). In protest at the increasing focus on feminine plastic surgery and, in particular, labiaplasty, UKFeminista held a 'Muff March' on the 10 December 2011 along Harley Street, London, where multiple cosmetic surgeons are based. While Dr Emer O'Toole, a feminist researcher and lecturer, has spoken out against the pressure placed on Western women to remove their body hair. In response to her decision to stop shaving her armpits and legs, O'Toole was invited onto ITV's primetime *This Morning* programme (4 May 2012), because her rebellion was deemed so shocking that it was newsworthy, which was summed up in Amanda Platell's article in the *Daily Mail*, 'A feminist statement? No, untamed body hair is the pits!' (2012).

<sup>121</sup> The feminist writer Carol Adams argues that women and meat are frequently used interchangeably in food advertising and reflects societal violence towards women (2010 [1990]: 64–91).

processes of stripping away fluids and hair, of 'improving' its cosmetic appearance, in many ways replicates the sanitisation of women's bodies that Mulvey calls the 'fashion fetish of the female as an eviscerated, cosmetic and artificial construction' (1991: 146).

Feminist artists have a long history of using raw meat as an abject material in their practices from Carolee Schneemann's performance *Meat Joy* (1964) in which the female and male performers cavort with raw chicken and fish and Nina Sobell's video artwork *Hey, Chicky!!!* (1978), described in chapter 2, to the British artists Helen Chadwick's lightboxes *Enfleshings I and II* (1989), featuring close up images of raw red meat, and Phoebe Colling-James's single screen video *Fleisch (Honey I'm Home)* (2013), showing successive close up shots of animal carcasses being butchered and prepared into joints. As discussed in chapter 2, Sobell uses the dead carcass of a chicken in relation to her own body to suggest the way in which western culture position women as meat, as objects to be consumed by the desiring gaze. More recently, the Gabonese artist Nathalie Anguezomo Mba Bikoro uses raw meat to invoke the processes of colonialism and its violent impact on women's bodies. In her live performance *We Have Landed* (2012), the artist ties raw meat to the soles of her feet and, using a broom for support, stands on a hot grill for twenty-five minutes. The smell of cooking and burning flesh becomes inextricably linked to her body and the violence carried out upon the bodies of women. Deborah Geis suggests the prevalence of meat in feminist artwork is because of 'the obvious cultural connections between food and the female body as object for consumption' (1998: 221). The American artist Suzanne Lacy explored the relationship between meat and society's treatment of women's bodies in her early performance, video and photographic works. The carcass of the (sacrificial) lamb, offal and blood play a prominent role in her deconstructions of violence and objectification. Similarly to Sobell in *Hey, Chicky!!!*, in *Learn Where The Meat Comes From* (1976) Lacy uses both performance to camera to make the connection between meat to be consumed and the treatment of

women's bodies in Western culture. Both artists use an excessive mode of performance to defamiliarise the activities they are performing and break down stereotypical treatments of femininity. Lacy points out cuts of meat on her own body and enacts an increasingly animalistic persona, mocks the popular cookery programmes and nutritional advice of the era that were overwhelmingly aimed at women.



Fig. 52  
Video still from *Learn Where The Meat Comes From* (1976), Suzanne Lacy.

The artist's increasingly grotesque and hyperbolic performance sees Lacy gnawing the carcass's leg with vampire-like false teeth and clambering onto its body in an excessive display of possessiveness. Other works by Lacy utilising meat explicitly make the connection between the sacrificial lamb and women's experiences of rape and sexual violence. The live performance *There are Voices in the Desert*

(1978) featured three lamb carcasses hanging by their necks each adorned like showgirls with feather boas and headdresses, their necks and torsos draped with beads similar to necklaces handed out to the audience. Prior to the performance, women were invited to write their experiences of sexual violence on the white walls surrounding the carcasses.



Fig. 53  
Documentation from *There are Voices in the Desert* (1978), Suzanne Lacy.

During my PhD research, I have made three video works with meat: *Breast Meat* (2012), *Meat Abstracted (belly flesh)* (2014) and *Meat Abstracted* (2014–2015). This series of work has been an exploration of the impossible conditions placed upon female corporeality in today's cultural environment, one in which, as McRobbie notes, the fashion/beauty complex enacts and enforces the



objectifying patriarchal gaze. Raw meat in my work becomes a liminal space operating between female physicality, consuming/being consumed and objectification. In *Breast Meat*, I removed the large breasts from a turkey carcass and stitched them onto a chicken carcass to give the smaller bird over-developed breasts. While I carry out the procedure, I soothingly talk about how I will improve the chicken's appearance by giving the bird larger breasts that will improve its desirability to the consumer.<sup>122</sup> Through the viewpoint of the camera, the raw meat and skin become suggestive of my own body as the tone and textures mingles with my hands. The work questions the conditions of contemporary culture that place emphasis on female breast size and shape to the point that surgical intervention is normalised (Young 2005: 75–96).

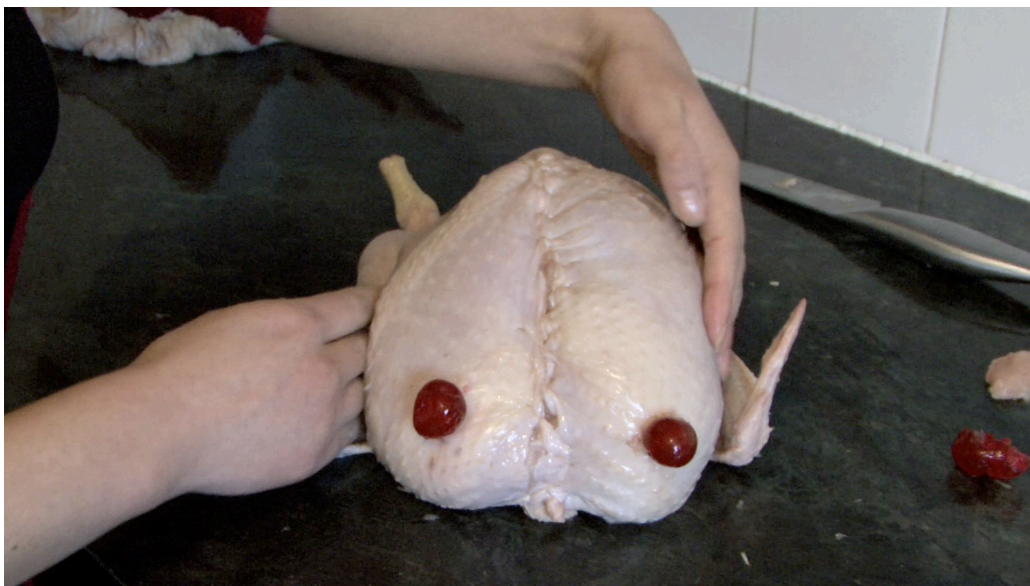


Fig. 54  
Video still from *Breast Meat* (2012), Catherine Long.

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<sup>122</sup> See Appendix 6 for transcript. The voice-over takes inspiration from the educational tones of BBC documentaries as well as from the British artist Bobby Baker's video work *Kitchen Show* (1991) in which the artist's voice-over humorously details her daily life as a housewife.

The work initially came out of my growing anger at being constantly confronted with targeted online advertising banners<sup>123</sup> for breast augmentation surgery when I used my hotmail email account throughout 2011. This invasive marketing strategy meant that I was constantly confronted with the image of a smiling woman in her underwear suggesting that I too could have the perfect body – for a price. While I was making this work, the PIP breast implant scandal emerged and reopened the debate on cosmetic surgery and the pressures upon women's bodies to conform to prescribed ideals.<sup>124</sup>

Iris Marion Young's essay *Breasted Experience: The Look and The Feel* (2005 [1990]), discussed in chapter three, gives an account of women's empirical experience of being-in-the-world in Western societies that place so much emphasis on their chests, 'in the total scheme of the objectification of women, breasts are the primary things' (2005 [1990]: 77). In today's commodity culture, women's breasts as well as their buttocks and thighs, are indexed by consumerist demands that equate feminine bodies with their ability to sell products. Naomi Wolf asks 'why is it always women who are treated as guinea pigs and their bodies like lab rats?' (2012). In answer to her question she suggests that it is the 'cultural assumption [...] that women deserve no accountability, especially if you can blame the issue on their "vanity"' (2012). The notion of feminine self-objectification leading to bodily self-harm is one that I investigated in

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<sup>123</sup> These are the glossy adverts that run down the side of the page, which are targeted and based on gender amongst other indicators. Targeted advertising works by email and search engine platforms scanning your emails and tracking your searches to determine your gender and interests. On the basis that I had not looked online for information about cosmetic procedures, I presume that I was targeted on the basis of my gender.

<sup>124</sup> In 2012 it emerged that implants manufactured between 2001 to 2010 by the French company Poly Implant Protheses (PIP), the third biggest global supplier of breast implants, contained non-human grade industrial silicone in order to cut costs and maximise profit. It is estimated that 300,000 women in 65 countries had PIP implants fitted. Pectoral, calf and testicular implants using non-human grade silicone were also manufactured for men although the numbers involved are not known. In the mainstream news and social media commentary, three prevalent responses emerged: a lack of sympathy for women who had breast enlargements and were deemed vain, a similar lack of sympathy marked by a particular mockery was reserved for the small number of men who had pectoral and calf implants, and finally sympathy for the women and men whose implants were the result of reconstruction following cancer.

*Meat Abstracted (belly flesh)*. The short video work consists of a close-up shot of wrinkled saggy skin, two young feminine hands enter the frame and gently stroke and squeeze the sagging flesh, like a woman examining her own stomach. There is barely any audio until suddenly, the viewer hears the sharp sound of a metal implement. At first it is unclear what is occurring, then gradually a blade enters the frame as the woman cuts the flabby skin away to reveal the flesh beneath it.



Fig. 55  
Video still from *Meat Abstracted (belly flesh)* (2014), Catherine Long.

The *Meat Abstracted* video takes a more formal approach; without a guiding voice-over, the performer simply cuts and sews meat into suggestive shapes. Chicken fillets are sewn into large bulbous breast-like mounds and held up for inspection. Pig tails are stitched together and revealed as a grotesque phallic crown that the performer wears on her head like a fleshy crown of thorns or a jester's hat. The preparation of meat is a domestic act particularly when performed by women who are still less likely to be either chefs or butchers and are more likely to be in charge of family food

preparations (Geis 1998: 216–236, Shaw 2012: 10)<sup>125</sup>. This quotidian and homely act is fused with another feminised domestic activity, that of sewing, in order to defamiliarise and transform these actions. The meat is carefully and painstakingly stitched in a peculiar labour of love. Taking inspiration from Martha Rosler’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) in which the artist demonstrates kitchen utensils and Jana Sterbak’s *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorexic* (1987),<sup>126</sup> a dress the artist made from raw flank steak, *Meat Abstracted* takes a full hour for the performer to transform chicken fillets into distended breast-like appendages. The intensity of this meticulous labour is important; I wanted to suggest the toil women undertake in order to transform themselves into the symbols of femininity, as well as the brutality of these procedures. The labour creates something disruptive and defamiliar: matter out of place and out of boundaries. Skin is stretched taut in some places, rumpled and pinned in others; flesh becomes bruised and defiled.



Fig. 56  
Video still from *Meat Abstracted* (2014–2015), Catherine Long.

<sup>125</sup> Martha Rosler makes clear the relationship between women’s body, consuming and domesticity in her collage *Body Beautiful, Beauty Knows No Pain (Hot Meat)*, depicting the side profile of a woman’s breast on the front of an oven, part of the series *Body Beautiful, Beauty Knows No Pain* series (1966–1972).

<sup>126</sup> Sterbak’s dress was imitated in 2010 by Lady Gaga who wore a dress made out of raw beef to the MTV Video Music Awards. The dress was subsequently exhibited in 2012 at the *Women Who Rock: Vision, Passion, Power* exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C., USA.



Michelle Meagher conceptualises a feminist aesthetics of disgust by means of an analysis of Jenny Saville's paintings<sup>127</sup> to suggest that 'disgust is an affect that forces us to confront our bodily existence [...] taking abjection into account reminds us that bodily existence is ambiguous and contradictory' (2003: 24). Meagher states her theoretical interest as being in 'how disgust might emerge from the recognition of a system of cultural ideals that often compels women to see their bodies in a distorted and negative manner' (2003: 25). As I argued earlier in the thesis, the culturally internalised scrutiny that women direct towards themselves is engaged in a dialogue with the seemingly endless manifestation of the image of an idealised light-skinned slender young woman. The mainstream cultural representation of women still operates to instil disgust at the material conditions of the female body that must be purified in order to be represented as either wholesome or desirable. Meagher contends that a feminist aesthetics of disgust can arouse the revulsion that the cultural context has instilled and at the same time question these values in order to 'alert the spectator to the ambiguous and difficult relationship that he or she may have with the object that disgusts' (2003: 38). The video works I made with meat invoke this disgust by aligning the female body with the dead flesh to be consumed while also signalling the sheer labour that goes into becoming the supposedly desirable object of patriarchal culture.

## **Re-enacting, re-working, re-reading**

The abject is an undercurrent that is present throughout my practice and finds different modes of physical expression; one of these being through re-enactment. Milena Tomic argues that 'the rise of artistic re-enactment over the past two decades calls for renewed

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<sup>127</sup> Saville makes large-scale paintings depicting primarily nude women. Many of the subjects are obese or are depicted with distorted flesh. In 1994, Saville spent time in the USA observing cosmetic operations, several of her paintings show women with pre-surgery marks drawn on the areas of their bodies that are going to be cosmetically enhanced.

interpretation' (2013: 437).<sup>128</sup> Re-enactment, Tomic suggests, is more than reproduction, simulation or repetition and can be viewed as a critical response to the appropriation art of the 1990s that merely re-iterated mainstream popular culture such as in the work of Jeff Koons.<sup>129</sup> The art of re-enactment in embodied practices seeks to initiate a re-looking through a 'reshuffling of identities and positions' (Tomic 2013: 453). It is this notion of re-representing identities that I have explored through my re-enactment work and in relationship to gender. In November 2012, on a research trip, I sat in the Elizabeth E. Sackler Centre for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum and watched *Thighing (Blue)* (1967), a 16mm film projection by Bruce Nauman. Part of the exhibition *Materializing "Six Years": Lucy Lippard and the emergence of Conceptual Art*, Nauman's video work stood out as a splash of blue green colour in a largely white, black and grey display.



Fig. 57  
Exhibition view *Materializing "Six Years": Lucy Lippard and the emergence of Conceptual Art* (2012–2013), Elizabeth E. Sackler Centre for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum.

<sup>128</sup> For further analysis of re-enactment as an artistic practice see: Tomic, Milena (2013), 'Fidelity to Failure: Re-Enactment and Identification in the Work of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy'.

<sup>129</sup> Koons makes reproductions of banal everyday objects such as enormous sculptures of blown up balloon animals, toys and cartoon characters. He also appropriates and re-enacts advertising and pornographic imagery.

Framed by the screen, Nauman's disembodied leg hung from the ceiling, truncated and dense, hairy and masculine. His leg was a material form for his experimental touch to mould and shape. With my own legs weary from walking around New York City in the winter, I stared at Nauman's colossal thigh with curiosity and took pleasure in the corporeality of the work and the uncanny sound of his sighs. For me, the work takes on an element of Kristevan abjection through the camera's brutal disembodiment and foreshortening of Nauman's leg that turns the limb into a lump of flesh, a material that is neither self nor Other. Similarly, the screened image offers a representation of Nauman's fragmented body that is also neither self nor Other, thus invoking a sense of defamiliarisation, alienation and even disgust. Watching Nauman pinch the meat of his thigh and work his fingers into his flesh, my interest became a questioning of how the work's signification would shift if the performance was translated onto a woman's body, contained as she is by the cultural noise, scrutiny and abjection that is particularly directed at female physicality.

Contemporary Western culture has long put pressure on women to cultivate slenderness and in the UK, in the winter of 2012, particular attention had settled on the issue of women's thighs and what is known as the 'thigh gap'.<sup>130</sup> Delineating the space between the top of a woman's thighs, ordinarily the fullest part of the leg's musculature, the gap has come to signify another breach between the women's subjective experience of their own bodies and the unattainable ideals of culturally designated feminine appearance. I consider myself a feminist who is reasonably aware of the ploys of consumer culture; yet, I find to my dismay just how hard it is to avoid internalising these unachievable body ideals. Rather than fending off the ideological barbs in the first instance, I catch myself in the

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<sup>130</sup> Although the 'thigh gap' has been discussed in women's magazine and fashion culture long before winter 2012, this was the point at which it became part of the newspaper debate on body image, culminating in Camille Hugh's self-help book *The Thigh Gap Hack: The Shortcut to Slimmer, Feminine Thighs Every Woman Secretly Desires* (2013). For a feminist response in the media see: 'How the thigh gap became the latest pressure point on a woman's self-image' by Rosie Swash (2013).

moment of self-loathing as I contemplate my own body and search for deficiencies.

As I watched Nauman play with and manipulate his upper leg, I thought about my own fleshy thighs and the aspects I struggled with: fat, hair, cellulite and dimples. I frequently look at my body with the external scrutiny described so succinctly in 1977 by Martha Rosler in *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*; 'she sees herself from outside with the anxious eyes of the judged who has within her the critical standards of the ones who judge'. Taking into account Kristeva's contention that the abject is something that is not self but not other, this could arguably describe the contemporary condition of women viewing their own bodies: an Othering of the self. Abjection constitutes not just matter that spills from the inside: vomit, excrement, saliva or mucus, but our own female flesh. Images of female thighs that are considered abject in our culture; that is, those that stand outside of the parameters of slim, toned, sexy bodies, are on the whole absent other than as markers of disgust.<sup>131</sup> Meagher suggests, 'the representation of the abject body speaks to the ways in which women experience social and cultural imperatives through self-surveillance, self-denial and constant control' (Meagher 2003: 38). Re-enacting *Thighing (Blue)*, a work that already contains its own abject qualities, was a way of exploring this tension between the double standards society applies to male and female bodies.

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<sup>131</sup> Since the early 2000s certain women's magazines such as *Heat* have featured paparazzi images of celebrity women with a red circle drawn around any offending body part. As a young woman I used to read these magazines until I looked through one issue that both applauded the socialite Paris Hilton for eating a hotdog because she was supposedly too thin and later in the same issue condemned her for the appearance of cellulite on her thighs.



Fig. 58  
Video still from re-enactment, *After Thighing (Blue)* (2014), Catherine Long.

It was important for me that the original work was not about gender identity but simply depicted the artist using his body as an abstract material that escaped being tied down to gendered readings of masculinity. My feeling was that the work's translation onto a female body would invoke a reading through gender identity that is not present in the original video. As Phelan notes, discussed in chapter one, the male figure represents the universal and is aligned with value. As the cultural norm, his image passes without judgment. In contrast, women's devalued bodies are subject to scrutiny and criticism. My aim was to expose the different regulations of masculine and feminine gender representation and explore whether it is possible to overturn the loaded signification of a woman's leg so that, like Nauman's thigh, it becomes simply an aspect of her corporeality. In my re-performance, it is the hairlessness of my upper thigh, slightness of my hands and the sound of my breath that mark the performer as feminine. The camera angle, greenish/blue lighting and abstraction of the thigh otherwise strip the leg of the markers of femininity and the leg could equally belong to a young man. While the cut up and abstracted body parts of women are common in

mainstream advertising images and usually depict the eroticism attached to certain parts of female anatomy, *After Thighing (Blue)* (2014) refuses the traditional reading of a woman displaying her body for male pleasure. The work, when translated onto a female body, is sensual and at the same time anti-sensual; the matter-of-fact exploration of the materiality of the thigh refuses a conventional sexuality and undermines the customary sensuality of the female body. The performance is not seductive and the viewer is unsure of what he or she is looking at and for whose benefit. The abstraction of the leg diminishes the potential judgement of the female performer's physique that often accompanies images of women's bodies. The re-enactment also speaks to issues of femininity in today's context; the way in which women check their bodies for defects and pinch their flesh to determine if they are overweight.<sup>132</sup> I explored this work further in *Me and Bruce* (2014), which comprises the original footage and my performance layered together and made partially transparent so that our legs and hands are seen through each other's; the audio is the combination of our breaths and sighs. Rather than simply layer the two works, I made two significant changes in the edit: firstly, I shifted the timing of each edit slightly so that the female performer frequently leads the movement and the male hands follow and secondly, I changed the timing and frequency of my breaths and sighs so that they were not synchronised with Nauman's breathing. These subtle changes compensate for the ways that Nauman's leg and hands can appear to overwhelm mine through their bigger size and the hairs on his thigh. This editing strategy also undermines attempts to privilege one body over the other and suggest their underlying independence from one another while at the same time indicating a synthesis between the performers.

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<sup>132</sup> One viewer commented that *After Thighing (Blue)*, on the one hand, reminded her of the way her anorexic daughter searched her body for any signs of fat, while, on the other hand, the performance provided a relief from self-scrutiny because of the way in which the work is performed with a sense of exploration and curiosity rather than as an act of violence towards the self.



Fig. 59  
Video still from *Me and Bruce* (2014), Catherine Long.

Subsequently, I re-enacted *Sorry Mister* (1974), a performance to camera work viewed on a monitor by the feminist artist Ulrike Rosenbach, in which the artist continuously slaps her thigh for twelve minutes to Brenda Lee's 1960 classic pop song *I'm Sorry*. Rosenbach's website refers to the work within the context of her 1970s practice, one that was 'dedicated to the critical presentation of cultural stereotypes and outdated images of women in society' (Rosenbach 2008). The simple repetitive gesture of Rosenbach's hand slapping her leg as the viewer hears the same pop song on repeat suggests the conditions of feminine internalisation and self-objectification. Just as Martha Rosler argued in *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* that the obligation for women to be a blank template that reflects male desires leads to the formation of culturally inscribed masochism, Rosenbach's performance proposes female masochism as a form of violence that is produced through normative gender conventions. While *Thighing (Blue)* contains a sense of exploration and curiosity in the way that the performer pinches and moulds his or her thigh muscle, *Sorry Mister* exhibits self-harm. The manner in which the work enacts this violence directed against the



self disturbs, for it appears both systematic and methodical and yet, at the same time, merely a reflex. A physical reflex is instinctive and automatic, a response to an external stimulus that is involuntary and subconscious. Likewise, Rosenbach's slapping of her thigh in time to Brenda Lee's *I'm Sorry* suggests an involuntary and sub-conscious response to mainstream narratives of femininity.

Writing in 2008 about women's artists' use of 'video as a medium of emancipation' in the 1970s, Annette Jae Lehmann contends, 'Rosenbach's video performances confront the patriarchal cultural condition and its image of women, using the media presentation of body images to reflect on the cultural and historical clichés related to stereotypical representations of femininity' (2008: 83). Originally performed as a Live-Video-Action work on the 27 July 1974 at the exhibition *Projekt '74 – Aspects of International Art in the Early 1970s*, the video frames the erotic spectacle of Rosenbach's thighs that become the site of violence.



Fig. 60  
Video still from *Sorry Mister* (1974), Ulrike Rosenbach.



In spite of the eroticism of the thighs, the work is not enjoyable to watch. Masochism, all too often associated with female pleasure, is disavowed as pleasurable, but rather presented as a product of a cultural context that eroticises violence against women. The build-up of bruising in response to the repetitive slaps indicates that it is their continual reiteration that causes injury beyond what one would usually expect from each strike. It suggests that multiple small instances of oppression can amplify to construct a much larger consequence. *After Sorry Mister* (2014) produces a different type of abjection to that invoked by *After Thighing (Blue)*, one that is based in the viewer's aversion to the sight of self-harm and the bruise developing on the performer's leg. The performance is painful, difficult and monotonous; viewing the work feels gruelling and unsatisfying. There is, after all, no resolution to the work.

In the original performance Rosenbach's pubic hair at the top of her thighs is not visible, I wanted to show the hair in response to the rigorous conditions imposed by current depilation trends, which depict pubic hair as unattractive and unhygienic (Li and Braun 2006: 7).<sup>133</sup> I wanted the appearance of abject body hair to lessen the eroticism of the thighs. I also changed the framing of the legs. While the original is shot in 4:3 ratio, I shot my footage in 16:9 with the intention of cutting in at the edges to replicate Rosenbach's framing. However, when I did so, I found the work picked up an erotic charge that I felt uncomfortable with.

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<sup>133</sup> The American artist Oriana Fox humorously address the dual standards of body hair trends for men and women in her video work *Body Hair Removal* (2008).

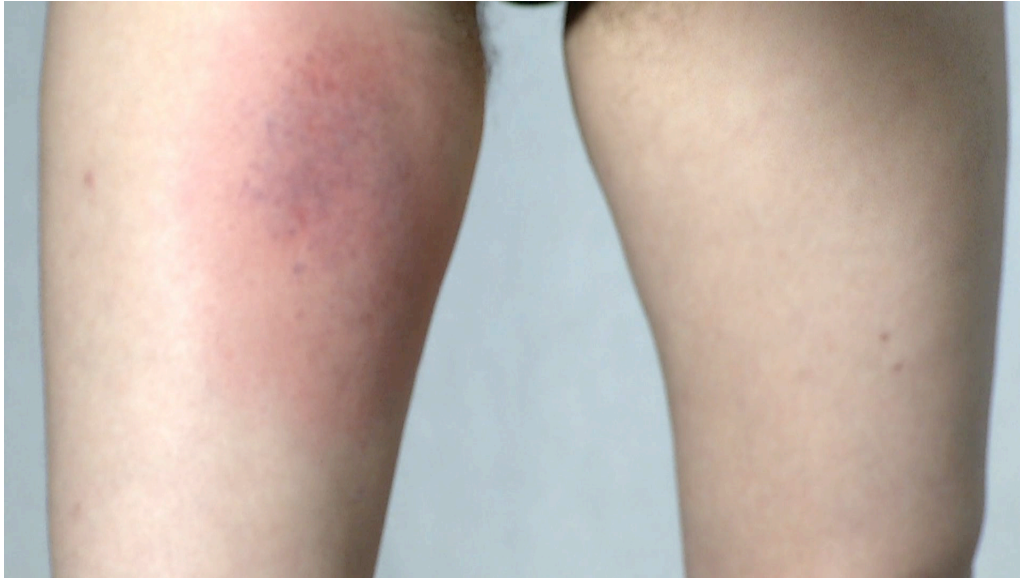


Fig. 61  
Video still from re-enactment, *After Sorry Mister* (2014), Catherine Long.

The commodification of the female body in contemporary times has seen an increase in the hypersexualised framing of women's body parts for the purpose of selling products. American Apparel's adverts are particularly intent on calling attention to the space between a woman's thighs as a void to be filled. When I framed my thighs like Rosenbach's original framing, in the contemporary context I am working in, I felt that my re-enactment started to slip into this sexualised arena. The decision to change the framing to the entirety of my upper legs, rather than just the inner thighs, had two consequences. Firstly, it showed the jolt and sway of my body as each impact is made and secondly, it makes apparent the way that my flesh bulges out with each impact. In today's mainstream culture, flesh that bulges and wobbles is held to be abject, a physicality to be reviled. The repetitive bulging has the capacity to invoke the aesthetics of disgust and the question of what is it about feminine flesh that we perceive as abject. Meagher suggests that Kristeva's work helps us comprehend both the 'experience of disgust and the fear of being disgusting' thereby allowing for a theoretical discourse founded upon disgust and ambiguity (2003: 30). 'An aesthetics of disgust founded on ambiguity offers an opportunity to both acknowledge and interrupt disgust reactions – which is to say that it allows us to feel disgust in order to interrogate its sources'. (Meagher

2003: 30). My work with re-enactment attempts to work in and open up this ambiguous territory.

Through my practice, I have engaged with issues that are of current concern to the politics of female equality while drawing upon formal strategies that have a feminist precedent in video art practices from the 1970's and 1980's. In line with my research questions detailed in the introduction, my practice has consistently explored the ways in which female gender representation and objectification can be deconstructed and challenged by feminist video art practice in a contemporary media landscape. I have investigated strategies that feminist artists were using in the 1970s and 1980s, which still have resonance today and I have experimented with these in my practice. In doing so, I have explored performance to camera, close-up, everyday action and gesture, narrative and embodying the camera. Through utilising deconstruction, re/appropriation, re-enactment and archive footage, I have explored the ways in which women are trapped in and by representation in dominant Western visual culture. I have found the strategy of embodied utterance particularly useful, whether this is through direct address, voice-over, dialogue or even just the sound of my breath. In working with these techniques, I have endeavoured to explore what a critical revisioning of female subjectivities might look like.

## Conclusion

Feminism will continue because women will continue to build alliances *as women* against a culture which discriminates against them *as women*, as an undifferentiated 'Other' whose subjecthood, even individuality, is denied and where the collectivity of women is forgotten (Deepwell 1995: 8, original emphasis).

This body of research has been concerned with addressing how the Western cultural framework of representation constructs and produces gendered identities that still position women as Other. Through re-examining feminist video art practices since the 1970s and the production of new video artwork, this thesis has critically engaged with issues concerning subjectivities, agency, objectification, internalisation and the masculinised gaze. From the outset, this research has asked the question, how can young feminist women learn from our feminist histories in order to challenge the patriarchal hegemony? Although much has changed in the twenty-first century, cultural hegemony still maintains structures that marginalise women in a myriad of ways. This research has been occupied with recuperating knowledge and strategies from historic feminist artworks and finding a place for feminist art practice today. My aim has been to reconstruct and develop progressive re-presentations of female subjectivities. Martha Rosler's contention that disruption remains essential in order to expose and challenge the boundaries produced by patriarchal culture has been foundational to this investigation into the dominant paradigm of representation (Rosler in Pachmanová 2006: 101). 'What can artists do when they are deeply bothered by situations like these?' Rosler asks before adding:

Artists can try to dispel stereotypical 'spectres' that inhabit our societies, occupy our minds, and support other people's suffering. Artists can remove the elements of myth-making from potent images that are signifiers manipulated by political figures, and ruling ideologies, and integrate them into the larger context of social life (Rosler in Pachmanová, 2006: 103).

Rosler describes the very paradigm of feminist art practices, which are primarily occupied with the attempt to shift the status quo and establish a 'redefinition of "all" power relations' (in Pachmanová 2006:

101). Hilary Robinson reminds us that such a redefinition of power must include a challenge to how society is gendered. To this end, feminist activists have looked beyond political and economic analysis to also insist on the validity of critiques of cultural production (Robinson 2001: 9). This thesis has argued that feminist art practices are pivotal to endeavours to disrupt the ideologies underpinning visual culture and that the issues feminist artists are grappling with often pre-empt the theory. The critique of dominant representation made by the video artworks discussed in this thesis demonstrate the radical potential at the heart of feminist art practices. Robinson underlines that 'feminism is after all a matrix of political positions, not an academic category, and the aim of political struggle is to win' (2001: 6). In line with Robinson's assertion, this thesis has examined how feminist art practices can disrupt the stranglehold of gendered representations that operate to uphold and maintain patriarchal heteronormative ideologies; this is a political project and the aim is to succeed.

Integral to this thesis is the argument that feminist artists working in the 1970s and 1980s were highly conscious of the ideological traps of representation and accordingly explored ways to re-present feminine imagery and disrupt the conditions of objectification. At a time when there was a burgeoning political consciousness among the general population, vast expansion of feminist literature and theory, along with extensive technological developments (Demos 2011: 5), women artists navigated these terrains to develop deeply politicised feminist art practices. 'The personal is political' was integral to the strategies that women artists were adopting whether it was from the position of women drawing on their own stories and experiences as the basis for their work or placing their own bodies in the frame of the video image. Feminist video artists developed and honed a wide range of deconstructive and reconstructive strategies, which, as discussed in the introduction and chapter four, included performance to camera, direct address, voice-over and dialogue, everyday action and gesture, narrative, embodying

the camera, embodied utterance, abjection, deconstruction, re/appropriation and humour. I suggest that the wide range of strategies and tactics employed by feminist artists operated in two key ways: one being to defamiliarise the norms and conventions of ruling ideologies, and the other being to introduce into this newly unfamiliar and unstable space a critical re-visioning of female subjectivities that through the conduit of the 'personal is political' continues to have radical political import.

This research started from a set of questions concerning how female representation and objectification can be contested through contemporary art practice; what strategies feminist artists in the 1970s and 1980s developed to critique depictions of women and whether the findings of this research can be utilised to further the feminist project of disrupting patriarchal ideology. In considering these questions certain problems have been identified and grappled with. The thesis firstly determined a set of issues inherent to the machinations of representation. Namely, who gets to be represented and how? These processes have critical implications, discussed in chapter 1, for those groups who do not hold power and do not have the means to produce their own representational imagery. Heteronormative patriarchal ideologies are deeply embedded in the economies of Western representation and stereotypes in ways that become naturalised and invisible and thereby masquerade as commonsense. This thesis has argued for the sustained deconstruction and exposure of these signifying practices through visual art practices as a form of visual activism.

In Amelia Jones' essay 'The Return of Feminism(s) and the Visual Arts, 1970–2009', she concludes that there is a marked difference between practices that appear to repeat historical feminist practices without actually being grounded in the politics and practices that continue the determined effort to expose the structures of power 'through which subjects are identified and so positioned in culture' (Jones 2010: 46). Jones argues that in line with Foucault's contention

that 'the body is the field through which power is simultaneously experienced, challenged, and given new forms', it is through challenging the signification of the female body that patriarchal hegemony will be disrupted (2008: 9). It is this tenacious uncovering of systems of power that is so vital to the political aims of feminism and which provides a thread weaving through the works I have discussed from the 1970s to the present day.

An underlying principle to this research has been the dialogic. Rejecting the cultural dismissal of women's conversation as mere gossip, dialogue has always been fundamental to the women's movement (Elwes 2005: 41). Kaja Silverman argues that:

Within dominant narrative cinema the male subject enjoys not only specular but linguistic authority. The female subject, on the contrary, is associated with unreliable, thwarted, or acquiescent speech. She talks a great deal; it would be a serious mistake to characterize her as silent, since it is in large part through her prattle, her bitchiness, her sweet murmurings, her maternal admonitions and her verbal cunning that we know her (1984: 131).<sup>134</sup>

As discussed in the introduction, by means of consciousness-raising as a dialogic practice, women were able to engender a radical analysis of their lived experiences within a wider socio-political and economic context thereby enacting and substantiating 'the personal is political'. The combined weight of multiple voices and narratives speaking of oppressions that are experienced as women and co-existent with numerous oppressions relating to race, class, age and ability, meant that women could add credence to their own experiences, which were previously dismissed as the personal complaints of individual women. This can be seen in works references throughout this thesis including Adrian Piper's *Cornered*, Martha Rosler's *Vital Statistics of a Citizen*,

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<sup>134</sup> The denigration of women's speech was discussed at the *Her Noise* Symposium held at the Tate Modern on the 5 May 2012. Anne Karpf observes that we perform and narrate gender through our voices; as a result, patriarchal culture deems that the female voice needs to be policed. Historically, this has meant that women's voices and mouths are associated with treachery and duplicitous characters. Theodor Adorno complains about women's insubstantial shrill voices in his 1928 *The Curves of the Needle* (1990 [1928]). Within systems of signification, Karpf adds, women's voices are held to be pure sound, while men's voices are pure meaning.

*Simply Obtained*, Howardena Pindell's *Free, White and 21* and Kaja Dahlberg's *Female Fist*. In each of these works the artist takes on the linguistic authority of the male subject by deploying the authorial voice-over of the narrator in *Vital Statistics of a Citizen*, *Simply Obtained* (Rosler) and *Female Fist* (Dahlberg) or the verbal command of the newsreader generated through the framing of their bodies and the eloquence and control of their speech in *Cornered* (Piper) and *Free, White and 21* (Pindell). In relation to Silverman and Karpf's observations that the female voice is associated with unreliable, cunning and treacherous speech, Piper, Rosler, Pindell and the activist in Dahlberg's video speak with clarity, determination and consideration. They insist on their right to speak of their lived experiences and to connect these to the cultural context in which they live and experience multiple discriminations.

In my video work *Turning Thirty* (2014), I looked outside of my own performance practice to interview three women about the pressures that are present in their lives at the age of thirty and which are also intertwined with what society tells women we should have achieved at this point. *Turning Thirty* in many ways stands as a rationale, even a visual thesis, for why I make works around the complexities of representation for women. The work stakes a claim for the ongoing importance of feminist art practices in contemporary times. Following an open call for female interviewees between the ages of twenty-nine to thirty-one years to discuss the challenges of turning thirty, I conducted a video interview with each participant directly facing and talking to the camera/viewer. I stood behind the camera and my questions are edited out of the final work.





Fig. 62  
Video still from *Turning Thirty* (2014), Catherine Long.

The interviews were largely based around the following questions: when you were a child what did you expect your life to be when you were older?; now that you are older how does your life compare with your childhood expectations?; do you feel there are cultural pressures upon you to achieve certain things, if so what are they? From the interviews I made a transcript of each conversation and used these as a basis to construct a dialogue between the three women. The women's answers brought up a range of concerns based around the markers of success: appearance, security, career and family. The work ends with Lucy telling the viewer:

I probably had this when I was younger as well; these ideas around 'oh you're thirty, you should be married'. Everyone on Facebook is having white dress weddings and children popping up all over the place. It's easy to think 'what's wrong with me?' because that's what our culture tells us is the plot we should follow.<sup>135</sup>

What the women describe is the incredible pressure they felt to present themselves in a particular way, a pressure that they felt was different and more intense than it is for men. In making this work, I was conscious of trying to avoid Lippard's subtle abyss and mitigate

<sup>135</sup> See appendix 7 for transcription.

the objectifying lens of the camera by foregrounding the women's subjectivity. I see this work as a starting point for further interviews and dialogic video works that examine women's experiences in contemporary culture. This work was inspired by the history of women's engagement with direct address as an auto/ethnographic mode that insists on the validity of the speaker's life experiences and asks the viewer to perceive and listen to experiences outside of their own. This work was particularly inspired by *The Politics of Intimacy* (1974) by Julie Gustafson, *Free, White and 21* (1980) by Howardena Pindell, discussed in chapter two, and more recently, *Nothing is Missing* (2006–2010) by the Dutch artist Mieke Bal and *Factum* (2009) by Candice Breitz. These works all use the strategy of direct address to tell one's own story and in the process unsettle the viewer's pre-held beliefs and judgements. At the same time, the subject's embodied utterance operates to mitigate their objectification.<sup>136</sup>

When I started this research, the terms 'consciousness-raising' and 'the personal is political' did not feature once in my research proposal. To me these were terms of bygone times: interesting but outmoded. Instead I wrote about the need for dialogue and trans-generational conversation. Initially my interest in the dialogic took the form of investigating the ways in which feminist artists in the 1970s and 1980s used formal strategies such as direct address and voice-over to insist on their own subjectivity and intellect, as well as to speak directly to the viewer. Over the course of my PhD research and conversations with my feminist supervisors as well as other feminist artists and academics, I began to perceive these techniques as further instances of consciousness-raising within the paradigm of 'the

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<sup>136</sup> Gustafson's *The Politics of Intimacy* is a single screen video work viewed on a monitor. The work was originally scheduled to be broadcast on Manhattan cable television, however, the slot was cancelled because of the controversial subject matter – female sexuality (Kaizen 2016: 119). Bal's *Nothing is Missing* is a multiple screen video installation on monitors, the number of monitors depends on the exhibition context. The monitors are installed in a living room setting and viewers are invited to sit on armchairs and sofas to view the installation. Breitz's *Factum* is a series of two channel and three channel video installations on monitors presented in portrait mode. The works feature interviews with identical twins and one set of triplets.

personal is political'. The historical artworks I have included in this thesis have, in many ways, provided a form of consciousness-raising for me mediated through video and online platforms and across generations, as discussed in the thesis introduction. In response, I have tried to articulate my own concerns and difficulties from within a postmodern and post-feminist culture that from the late 1980s onwards has continually found new ways to disrupt women's politicised conversations. Robinson observes, 'the main symptom of post-feminism is widely regarded as the depoliticizing of women's lives and issues' (2001: 442). This depoliticisation followed the disruption of women's conversations around topics deemed to be feminist and therefore retrograde and unfashionable. In the current resurgence of feminism, discussed in the introduction, we are witnessing a re-politicisation of women's lives and issues as 'the personal is political' and consciousness-raising re-emerge as concepts that continue to have currency in the struggle to radically disrupt heteronormative patriarchal ideology. This thesis is itself part of a renewed consciousness-raising in its effort to critically re-examine historical feminist artwork and both apply and disseminate its findings to contemporary feminist practice.

One way in which this is happening is through the Practice in Dialogue research group I co-convened in May 2014 with Rose Gibbs. The group, past and present, includes Miriam Austin, Alison Ballance, Ingrid Berthon-Moine, Cécile Emmanuelle Borra, Phoebe Colling-James, Lora Hristova, Ope Lori, Lauren Schneider, Abigail Smith and Nicola Thomas as well as Rose Gibbs and myself. Meeting bi-monthly, the group discusses historical feminist artworks and texts along with our own art practices, in relation to the contemporary cultural context. Questions that we are deeply engaged with are: what is the space that women occupy in our cultural landscape? What are the ways in which women continue to occupy the position of woman-as-sign and woman-as-body? Do we see with a female gaze? What about the processes of internalisation that admit an internalised masculinised gaze and provoke self-objectification? These questions

help us to formulate a coherent position from which to continue our attempts to intervene in visual representation and to disrupt dominant ideologies. As a group, we acknowledge the importance of allowing space for failure while also needing to recognise when interventions are merely recuperable and need revising. Following Griselda Pollock: we 'look back to recover forgotten and effaced histories of artists who were women in order to position and understand the stakes for women as artists in practice today' (2001: 15). We insist on the importance of connecting to historical feminist art practices and situate our work within ongoing efforts to shift the status quo of dominant power relations.

While endeavours are underway to excavate the continually suppressed and hidden histories of women's art practices, these efforts still need to attain a visibility in their own right within the wider umbrella of art history. I maintain the belief that this thesis is just the start for further research by a generation of practitioners and scholars who are eager to reconnect past feminist art practices to activism, scholarship, art practices today and in the future. This further research could take many forms including the necessary re-examination of historical and current feminist video artists who have been overlooked and continue to be marginalised and the publication of articles and monographs to address this issue. Further research also includes the continued making of video art works that have a feminist agenda and aim to critically expose patriarchal ideology and work towards a crucial revision of power. Future feminist exhibitions such as the *Feminist Practices in Dialogue* exhibition in December 2015 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and *Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s* exhibition in October 2016 at the Photographers Gallery, London, are pivotal in enabling feminist video art practices and the ideas encompassed in the art works to reach new audiences. Similarly, events such as the *Now You Can Go* programme, which included discussions, seminars, screenings and workshops revolving around feminist thought, art practices and activism held in December 2015 across four galleries in London: The

Showroom, Institute of Contemporary Arts, Space Studios and Raven Row, play a vital role in advancing feminist discourses and progressing the aims of feminism.

## Appendix 1

### Chronology of events referenced in thesis.

- 1851**      **Events:**
- Sojourner Truth's speech *Ain't I a Woman?* delivered to the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, USA.
- 1929**      **Texts:**
- *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf, UK.
- 1949**      **Texts:**
- *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, France.
- 1960**      **Pop songs:**
- *I'm Sorry* by Brenda Lee, USA.
- 1964**      **Artworks:**
- *Meat Joy*, performance by Carolee Schneemann, USA.
  - *Mario Banana No. 1 and No.2*, 16mm film by Andy Warhol, USA.
- Events:**
- Stuart Hall joins the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies until 1979, UK.
- 1965**      **Artworks:**
- *Fuses*, 16mm film by Carolee Schneemann, USA.
- Events:**
- Malcolm X speech at Ford Auditorium, Detroit, USA.
  - Emergence of video portapak. There is some discrepancy about the date with the portapak introduced to the commercial market slightly late than when it was first available. Nam June Paik acquired one of the first available machines and used it to film Pope Paul VI's visit to New York.
- Pop songs:**
- *In The Midnight Hour* by Wilson Pickett, USA.
  - *Baby I'm Yours* by Barbara Lewis, USA.
  - *Run For Your Life* by The Beatles, UK.

- 1966      Artworks:**
- *Body Beautiful, Beauty Knows No Pain (Hot Meat)*, collage by Martha Rosler, part of the *Body Beautiful, Beauty Knows No Pain* series (1966–1972), USA.
- 1967      Artworks:**
- *Thighing (Blue)*, 16mm film by Bruce Nauman, USA.
- Events:**
- New York Radical Women co-founded by Carol Hanisch, USA.
  - UK Abortion Act introduced with the exclusion of women from Northern Ireland.
- 1968      Events:**
- Judith Ford crowned Miss America 1969, USA.
  - Miss America 1969 protest organised by New York Radical Women and attended by approximately four hundred activists, USA.
  - Stuart Hall becomes Director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, UK.
- Texts:**
- *No More Miss America!* pamphlet by Women's Liberation, USA.
- 1969      Texts**
- 'The Personal is Political' by Carol Hanisch, USA.
- 1970      Conferences/talks:**
- National Women's Liberation Conference held at John Ruskin College, Oxford, UK.
- Texts:**
- *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* by Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, USA.
- 1971      Artworks:**
- *Representational Painting*, video by Eleanor Antin, USA.
- Events:**
- Jimmy Savile awarded an OBE, UK.

**Texts:**

- 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' by Linda Nochlin, USA.
- *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* by Antonio Gramsci translated into English and published in the UK.

**1972****Events:**

- International Wages for Housework Campaign co-founded by Selma James, Brigitte Galtier, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici, Italy.

**Texts:**

- *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger, UK.

**TV Programmes:**

- *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger, four-part series, BBC, UK.

**1973****Events:**

- Pina Bausch appointed director of Wuppertal Tanztheater, Germany.

**Texts:**

- *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* by Sheila Rowbotham, UK.
- 'Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse' by Stuart Hall, UK.

**1974****Artworks:**

- *A Budding Gourmet*, video by Martha Rosler, USA.
- *Gestures*, video by Hannah Wilke, USA.
- *The Politics of Intimacy*, video by Julie Gustafson, USA.
- *Sorry Mister*, video performance by Ulrike Rosenbach, Germany.

**Exhibitions:**

- *Projekt '74 – Aspects of International Art in the Early 1970s* exhibition in Cologne, Germany.



**Events:**

- The Combahee River Collective founded, a black feminist lesbian organisation in Boston, USA. The group was active until 1980.
- Angela McRobbie joins the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, UK.

**Pop songs:**

- *Scullery* by Clifford T. Ward, UK.

**1975****Artworks:**

- *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, video by Martha Rosler, USA.

**Conferences/talks:**

- National Women's Liberation Conference, Manchester, UK.

**Texts:**

- 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' by Laura Mulvey, UK.
- 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex' by Gayle Rubin, USA.

**1976****Artworks:**

- *The Ballad of Dan Peoples*, video by Lisa Steele, Canada.
- *Learn Where The Meat Comes From*, video performance by Suzanne Lacy, USA.

**Texts:**

- 'The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art' by Lucy Lippard, USA.
- 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism' by Rosalind Krauss, USA.
- 'Where do We Come From?, Where are We?, Where are We Going?' by Hermine Freed in *Video Art: An Anthology* by Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot, USA.

**1977****Artworks:**

- *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, video by Martha Rosler, USA.

**Events:**

- Eaves for Women founded, a charity to support vulnerable women and campaign against male violence to women, UK.

**Texts:**

- 'What's Wrong with "Images of Women"?' by Griselda Pollock, UK.

**1978****Artworks:**

- *Make Up Make Down*, video by Sanja Iveković, former Yugoslavia.
- *Hey, Chicky!!!*, video by Nina Sobell, USA.
- *Light Reading*, film by Lis Rhodes, UK.
- *Kontakt*, contemporary dance by Pina Bausch and Wuppertal Tanztheater, Germany.
- *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*, artist's film by Dara Birnbaum, USA.
- *There are Voices in the Desert*, performance by Suzanne Lacy, USA.

**Texts:**

- 'Woman as Sign' by Elizabeth Cowie published in the feminist theory journal *m/f*, co-founded by Cowie, Parveen Adams, Rosalind Coward and later joined by Beverly Brown. The journal published 12 issues between 1978–1986, UK.

**Conferences/talks:**

- National Women's Liberation Conference, Birmingham, UK.

**Magazines:**

- *Hustler* pornographic magazine features an upside down woman being ground up by a meat grinder with the caption: 'we will no longer hang women up like pieces of meat', USA.

**Pop songs:**

- *Wonder Woman in Discoland* by The Wonderland Disco Band, USA.

## 1979

### Artworks:

- Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979), USA.

### Events:

- Southall Black Sisters founded, London, UK.
- Circles, the first women artists' film and video distribution network. Founded in 1979 by a small group of artists including Felicity Sparrow, Lis Rhodes and Annabel Nicholson, UK.
- Cinema of Women founded from the feminist discussion group Cinesisters, UK.

### Texts:

- "'And What is a Fact Anyway?" (Discussing a Tape by Martha Rosler)' by Amy Taubin, USA.

### ○ Conferences/talks:

- Socialist Feminist Conference, London, UK.

## 1980

### Artworks:

- *Free, White and 21* by Howardena Pindell, USA.

### Exhibitions:

- *Dialectics of Isolation: Third World Women Artists of the United States* curated by Ana Mendieta at A.I.R. Gallery, New York City, USA.
- *About Time, Video, Performance and Installation by 21 Women Artists* curated by Catherine Elwes, Rose Garrard and Sandy Nairne at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK.

### Conferences/talks:

- 'Is the Personal Political?' panel discussion with Martha Rosler in conjunction with the exhibition *Issue: Social Strategies by Women Artists* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, UK.

### Texts:

- 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience' by Adrienne Rich, USA.

- 'Encoding and Decoding' by Stuart Hall in *Culture, Media, Language* by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Love, Paul Willis, UK.

**1981**

**Texts:**

- *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, UK.
- *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* by Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, USA.
- 'Representation versus Communication' by Elizabeth Cowie, Claire Johnston, Cora Kaplan, Mary Kelly, Jacqueline Rose and Marie Yates in *No Turning Back: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement 1975-80* by the Feminist Anthology Collective, UK.

**1982**

**Artworks:**

- *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue*, video by Martha Rosler, USA.
- *Rosas danst Rosas*, contemporary dance by Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker and Rosas, Belgium.

**Events:**

- Black Audio Film Collective founded by John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, Reece Auguiste, Trevor Mathison, Edward George and Claire Joseph. Joseph left in 1985 and was replaced by David Lawson. Black Audio Film Collective ran to 1998, UK.

**Texts:**

- 'White Woman Listen! Black feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood' by Hazel Carby in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70's Britain* by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham, USA/UK.
- 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator' by Mary Ann Doane, USA.

- *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* by Julia Kristeva, France.

**1983**

**Events:**

- Sankofa Film and Video Collective founded by Isaac Julien, Martina Attille, Maureen Blackwood, Nadine Marsh-Edwards and Robert Cruz, UK.

**Texts:**

- *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* by Alison Jaggar, USA.

**1984**

**Artworks:**

- *The is a Myth*, video by Catherine Elwes, UK.

**Texts:**

- *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* by bell hooks, USA.
- *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde, USA.
- *The Practice of Everyday Life; Vol. 1* by Michel de Certeau, France.
- 'Mythologies and Militarism: Just Some Women Trying to Change History' by Lisa Steele, Canada.
- 'Dis-Embodying the Female Voice' by Kaja Silverman in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* by Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, USA.
- 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' by Donna Haraway, USA.

**1985**

**Artworks:**

- *The Man Who Envied Women*, feature-length film by Yvonne Rainer, USA.

**Events:**

- The Guerrilla Girls founded in New York City, USA.

**Texts:**

- *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* by Annette Kuhn, UK.

- *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* by Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe, UK.
- 'I Say I Am: Feminist Performance Video in the '70s' by Chris Straayer, USA.
- 'Through Deconstruction to Reconstruction' by Catherine Elwes, UK.

**1986**

**Artworks:**

- *Emergence* featuring Sutupa Biswas, Mona Hatoum, Audre Lorde and Meiling Jin by Pratibha Parmar, UK.
- *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much*, video by Pipilotti Rist, Switzerland.

**Exhibitions:**

- *Sonia Boyce* at A.I.R Gallery, New York City, USA.

**1987**

**Artworks:**

- *Sexy Sad I*, video by Pipilotti Rist, Switzerland.
- *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorexic*, dress made from raw flank steak and photo of the artist wearing dress, Jana Sterbak, Canada.

**Texts:**

- *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* by Teresa de Lauretis, USA.
- *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-85* by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, UK.

**1988**

**Artworks:**

- *Cornered*, video installation by Adrian Piper, USA.
- *Cold Draft*, film by Lis Rhodes, UK.

**Texts:**

- *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, USA.
- *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* by Elizabeth Spelman, USA.

- 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory' by Judith Butler, USA.
- 'Masquerade Reconsidered: Further Thoughts on the Female Spectator' by Mary Ann Doane, USA.

**1989**

**Artworks:**

- *Enfleshings I and II*, lightboxes by Helen Chadwick, UK.

**Events:**

- Kimberlé Crenshaw coins the term intersectionality, USA.

**Texts:**

- *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* by Trinh T. Minh-Ha.
- *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* by Diana Fuss.
- 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' by Kimberlé Crenshaw, USA.
- 'Sexuality and Video Narrative' by Chris Straayer, USA.

**1990**

**Events:**

- Jimmy Savile knighted, UK.

**Texts:**

- *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* by Judith Butler, USA.
- *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* by Carol Adams, USA.
- *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* by Patricia Hills Collins, USA.
- *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* by Naomi Wolf, USA.
- *Women, Art, and Society* by Whitney Chadwick, USA.

- 'Breasted Experience: The Look and the Feel' by Iris Marion Young.

## 1991

### Artworks:

- *Kitchen Show*, video performance by Bobby Baker, UK.

### Events:

- Anita Hill sexual harassment case against Clarence Thomas, USA.
- Michael Warner coins the term heteronormativity, USA.
- Circles and Cinema of Women merge to form Cinenova, UK.

### Texts:

- *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* by Donna Haraway, USA.
- 'Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet' by Michael Warner, USA.
- 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color' by Kimberlé Crenshaw, USA.
- 'The Catacombs: A temple of the butthole' by Gayle Rubin in *Leather-Folk: radical sex, people, politics and practice* by Mark Thompson, USA.
- 'A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman' by Laura Mulvey, UK.

## 1992

### Artworks:

- *Vampire S Eat*, video installation by Katharine Meynell, UK.

### Exhibitions:

- *Judith Goddard, Katharine Meynell, Monica Oechsler: Three Video Installations commissioned by Kettle's Yard* at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, UK.

### Texts:

- 'Black Boxes and Art in Time and Motion' by Marina Benjamin in *Judith Goddard, Katharine Meynell,*



*Monica Oechsler: Three Video Installations*  
*commissioned by Kettle's Yard, UK.*

**1993**

**Artworks:**

- *Passage à l'acte*, 16mm film by Martin Arnold, Austria.

**Texts:**

- *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* by Judith Butler, USA.
- *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* by Peggy Phelan, USA.
- *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* by Susan Bordo, USA.
- *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* by Barbara Creed, Australia.
- *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* by Stephanie Coontz, USA.

**1994**

**Artworks:**

- *Selfless in the Bath of Lava*, video installation by Pipilotti Rist, Switzerland.

**Texts:**

- *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* by Elizabeth Grosz, Australia.
- "'They Said We Were Trying to Show Reality – All I Want to Show Is My Video": The Politics of the Realist Feminist Documentary' by Alexandra Juhasz, USA.

**1995**

**Texts:**

- *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art* by Lucy Lippard, USA.
- *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies* by Katy Deepwell, UK.
- 'Border crossings: womanliness, body, representation' by Hilary Robinson in *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies* by Katy Deepwell, UK.
- *Reshaping the Female Body : The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* by Kathy Davis, Netherlands.

**1996**

**Texts:**

- *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* by Marsha Meskimmon, UK.
- *Diverse Practices, a critical reader on British Video Art* by Julia Knight, UK.
- 'The Pursuit of the Personal in British Video Art' by Catherine Elwes, UK.
- *Fetishism and Curiosity* by Laura Mulvey, UK.

**1997**

**Artworks:**

- *Rosas danst Rosas*, dance film version by Thierry de Mey, Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker and Rosas, Belgium.

**Conferences/talks:**

- *Representation and the Media* by Stuart Hall at the University of Westminster, lecture and educational video, UK.

**Texts:**

- *The 'Can Do' Girls: A Barometer of Change* report funded by the Body Shop, UK.
- *Women Filmmakers of the African & Asian Diaspora: Decolonizing the Gaze, Locating Subjectivity* by Gwendolyn Foster, USA.
- *Back to Reality?: Social Experience and Cultural Studies* by Angela McRobbie, UK.

**1998**

**Artworks:**

- *VB35*, performance and video documentation by Vanessa Beecroft, Italy/USA.

**Events:**

- Smoking Dogs Films founded by John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul and David Lawson, UK.

**Conferences/talks:**

- *The Body Politic: Whatever Happened to the Women's Movement?* at the New Museum, New York, USA.

**Texts:**

- *I Say I Am: Women's Performance Video from the 1970s* by Maria Troy, USA.
- *The Practice of Everyday Life, Vol. 2, Living and Cooking* by Michel de Certeau, Pierre Mayol and Luce Giard, France.
- 'Feeding the Audience: Food, Feminism and Performance Art' by Deborah Geis in *Eating Culture* by Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz, USA.

**1999****Texts:**

- *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* by Catherine Russell, USA.
- *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, USA.
- *A History of Experimental Film and Video from the Canonical Avant-garde to Contemporary British Practice* by Al Rees, UK.
- 'The *Ism* That Dare Not Speak Its Name' by Mira Schor, USA.

**2000****Texts:**

- *Looking in: The Art of Viewing* by Mieke Bal, introduction by Norman Bryson, UK/Netherlands.
- *Video Loupe: A Collection of Essays by and about the Video Maker and Critic Catherine Elwes* by Catherine Elwes, UK.
- *Antigone's Claim* by Judith Butler, USA.
- *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* by Patricia Hills Collins, tenth anniversary edition, USA.
- 'Dancing Bodies in City Settings: Constructions of Spaces and Subjects' by Valerie Briginshaw in *City Visions* by David Bell and Azzedine Haddour, UK.
- *Feminism and Film* by E. Ann Kaplan, USA.

**2001**

**Conferences/talks:**

- *Rebranding Feminism* talk with Geethika Jayatilaka at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK.

**Texts:**

- *Looking Back to the Future: Essays on Art, Life and Death* by Griselda Pollock, UK.
- *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation* by Michael Pickering, UK.
- *Feminism–Art–Theory: An Anthology 1968–2000* by Hilary Robinson, UK.
- 'Opening Up Spaces within Spaces: The Expansive Art of Pipilotti Rist' by Peggy Phelan in *Pipilotti Rist* by Peggy Phelan, Hans–Ulrich Obrist and Elisabeth Bronfen, USA.
- 'Video' by Julia Knight in *Feminist Visual Culture* by Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska, UK.
- *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* by Sarah Gamble, UK.

**TV programmes:**

- *What Not to Wear*, Trinny and Susannah (2001–2005), series, BBC, UK.

**2002**

**Texts:**

- *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology* by Kate Crehan, USA.

**2003**

**Texts:**

- *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the histories of art* by Griselda Pollock, UK.
- *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* by Lisa Duggan, USA.
- 'Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust' by Michelle Meagher, Canada.

## 2004

### Events:

- REWIND research project (ongoing), a research resource to address the gap in historical knowledge of the evolution of electronic media arts in the UK, focusing on the first two decades of artists' works in video.

### Texts:

- *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* by Anita Harris, Australia.
- 'Disavowing social identities: What it means when women say, "I'm not a feminist, but..."' by Alyssa N. Zucker, USA.
- 'Pina Bausch Choreographs Blaubart: A Transgressive or Regressive Act?' by Meg Mumford, Australia.
- 'Self-Objectification and That "Not So Fresh Feeling": Feminist Therapeutic Interventions for Healthy Female Embodiment' by Tomi-Ann Roberts and Patricia Waters, USA.

## 2005

### Artworks:

- *Mother + Father*, multi-screen video installation by Candice Breitz, South Africa/Berlin.

### Texts:

- *Video Art: A Guided Tour* by Catherine Elwes, UK.
- *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* by Ariel Levy, USA.
- *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery* by Virginia Blum, USA.
- *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing like a girl" and other essays* by Iris Marion Young, USA.
- *Don't Play in the Sun: One Woman's Journey Through the Color Complex* by Marita Golden, USA.
- *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism* by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, USA.

**TV programmes:**

- *Ladette to Lady* (2005–2010), series ITV, UK.

**2006****Artworks:**

- *Female Fist*, video by Kajsa Dahlberg, Sweden.
- *R1 Reiteration to Resistance*, video by Amanda Egbe, UK.

**Texts:**

- 'Martha Rosler: Subverting the Myths of Everyday Life' by Martina Pachmanová in *N.Paradoxa*, Czech Republic/USA.
- 'Transcript of Interview with Howardena Pindell' by Lynn Hershman Leeson, USA.
- 'Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate Vanessa Beecroft' by Julia Steinmetz, Heather Cassils and Clover Leary, USA.
- *Cultures of Masculinity* by Tim Edwards, UK.
- *A History of Video Art: the development of form and function* by Chris Meigh–Andrews, UK.
- *Video Art* by Sylvia Martin, Germany.
- *Video Art* by Michael Rush, USA.

**2007****Exhibitions:**

- *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, USA.
- *Global Feminisms* at the Brooklyn Museum, New York City, USA.
- *It's Time for Action* at the Museum of Fine Arts in Bilbao, Spain.
- *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism* at the Museum of Fine Arts in Bilbao, Spain.

**Events:**

- Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art opened at the Brooklyn Museum, featuring Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979) as its permanent centrepiece, USA.

**Texts:**

- 'I'm Not a Feminist, but...' by Jessica Sinsheimer, USA.
- 'Feminism, Art, Deleuze, and Darwin: An Interview with Elizabeth Grosz' by Katve Kaisa Kontturi and Milla Tiainen, Australia.
- *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain* by David Curtis, UK.

**Documentaries:**

- *Dreamworlds 3: Desire, Sex, Power in Music Video* by Sut Jhally and the Foundation for Media Education, USA.

**2008****Artworks:**

- *Wrestling Women*, painting and etching series by Eldi Hablo (2008–2011), UK.
- *Body Hair Removal*, video by Oriana Fox, USA/UK.

**Events:**

- ArtFem.TV founded by Evelin Stermitz, Austria.

**Texts:**

- *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* by Patricia Hill Collins, USA.
- *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women and the Moving Image Since 1970* by Andrea Barnwell Brownlee and Valeria Cassel Oliver, USA.
- 'Vidcorebels: Actions and Interventions of the German Video–Avant–Garde' by Annette Jael Lehmann in *After the Avant–Garde: Contemporary German and Austrian Experimental Film* by Randall Halle and Reinhild Steingröver, Germany.
- *California Video: Artists and Histories* by Glenn Phillips, USA.
- *Film and Video Art* by Stuart Comer, USA.
- 'What Not to Watch (On Trinny and Susannah)' by Alexandria M. Kokoli, UK.

- *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It* by M. Gigi Durham, USA.
- *Pina Bausch* by Norbert Servos, Germany.
- *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* by David Harvey, UK.

## 2009

### Artworks:

- *Lobe of the Lung*, multi-screen video by Pipilotti Rist, Switzerland.
- *Alors tu m'aimes?*, video by Ingrid Berthon-Moine, France/UK.
- *Factum*, multi-screen installation by Candice Breitz, South African/Berlin.
- *I am here*, photographic project by Andrea Luka Zimmerman, Lasse Johansson and Tristan Fennell, (2009–2011), UK.

### Exhibitions:

- *Elles: Women Artists*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France.

### Conferences/talks:

- 'The Domestic Spaces of Video Installation – television, the gallery and online', paper by Catherine Elwes at *Expanded Cinema: Activating the Space of Reception*, Tate Modern, London, UK, 17–19 April.

### Texts:

- *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* by Angela McRobbie, UK.
- *Why Feminism Matters: Feminism Lost and Found* by Kath Woodward and Sophie Woodward, UK.
- *A Decade of Negative Thinking: Essays of Art, Politics, and Daily Life* by Mira Schor, USA.
- *Visual and Other Pleasures* (second edition) by Laura Mulvey, UK.
- *One Dimensional Woman* by Nina Power, UK.
- *Cosmetic Surgery: A Feminist Primer* by Cressida J. Heyes and Meredith Jones, Canada/Australia.



- *Witchcraft allegations, refugee protection and human rights: a review of the evidence* by Jill Schnoebelen for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, USA.
- *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture* by Stacy Gillis and Joanne Hollows, UK.

## 2010

### Artworks:

- *Perdón*, video by Anna Jonsson, Sweden/Spain.
- *Nothing is Missing*, video installation by Mieke Bal, Netherlands.

### Events:

- Formation of Conservative-led coalition with the Liberal Democrats, UK.
- Jimmy Mbenga killed by G4S guards while being deported from the UK.
- *The International Journal of Screendance* founded by Claudia Kappenburg and Douglas Rosenberg, UK/USA.
- Campaign for Body Confidence for launched by Liberal Democrat MPs Jo Swinson and Lynne Featherstone, UK.
- UK Feminista founded by Kat Banyard, UK.
- Lady Gaga wears a dress made out of raw beef to the MTV Video Music Awards, USA.

### Texts:

- 'Choice Feminism and the Fear of Politics' by Michael Ferguson, USA.
- 'Third-Wave Feminism and the Defense of "Choice"' by Claire Snyder-Hall, USA.
- *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* by Natasha Walter, UK.
- The Return of Feminism(s) and the Visual Arts, 1970/2007 by Amelia Jones in *Feminism is Still Our Name: Seven Essays on Historiography and Curatorial*

*Practices* by Malin Hedlin Hayden and Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, USA.

- *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist–Vegetarian Critical Theory* by Carol Adams, twentieth anniversary edition, USA.
- *Delusions of Gender* by Cordelia Fine, Canada.
- *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust* by Sonja Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel, USA.
- 'Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)' by Sara Ahmed, UK.
- 'Fed-up with Blair's Babes, Gordon's Gals, Cameron's Cuties, Nick's Nymphets: Challenging Gendered Media Representations of Women Political Leaders' by Sharon Mavin, Patricia Bryans and Rosie Cunningham, UK.
- *Dara Birnbaum: Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* by T.J. Demos, UK.
- *The Equality Illusion: The Truth about Women and Men Today* by Kat Banyard, UK.

## **2011**

### **Artworks:**

- *The Art of Aging*, video by Evelin Stermitz, Austria.
- *iTouch*, video by Ingrid Berthon-Moine, France/UK.

### **Exhibitions:**

- *When is a human being a woman?* at Hollybush Gardens, London, UK.
- *Pipilotti Rist: Eyeball Massage* at The Hayward Gallery, London, UK.

### **Events:**

- Peter Rippon, former BBC Newsnight editor, stops an exposé of Jimmy Savile on the grounds that the only evidence they have is 'just the women and a second-hand briefing', UK.

- David Cameron, UK Prime Minister, states his support for same-sex marriage.
- Muff March protest organised by UK Feminista along Harley Street, UK, 10 December.

#### **Texts:**

- 'A Movement of Their Own: Voices of Young Feminist Activists in the London Feminist Network' by Finn Mackay, UK.
- 'Fans of feminism: re-writing histories of second-wave feminism in contemporary art' by Catherine Grant, UK.
- *Intimate partner violence during pregnancy* by World Health Organization, Switzerland.
- *Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism* by Laurie Penny, UK.
- *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* by Owen Jones, UK.
- *Erotic Capital: The Power of Attraction in the Boardroom and the Bedroom* by Catherine Hakim, UK.
- 'Dara Birnbaum: Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman by T.J. Demos' by Jan Baetens, Belgium.
- 'Lamenting Sexualization: Research, Rhetoric and the Story of Young People's "sexualization" in the UK Home Office Review' by Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood, UK.

#### **Music Videos:**

- *Countdown* by Beyoncé and Adria Petty, USA.

### **2012**

#### **Artworks:**

- Performance and video: *Punk Prayer – Mother of God, Chase Putin Away* by Pussy Riot (21 February), Russia.
- *The Unfinished Conversation* three-channel video installation by John Akomfrah, UK.
- *We Have Landed*, performance by Nathalie Anguezomo Mba Bikoro, London, UK.

**Exhibitions:**

- *Sanja Iveković: Unknown Heroine* at Calvert 22 and South London Gallery, UK.
- *Women Who Rock: Vision, Passion, Power* at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C., USA.
- *Materializing "Six Years": Lucy Lippard and the emergence of Conceptual Art* at Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, USA.

**Events:**

- Three members of Pussy Riot, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich arrested and charged with hooliganism motivated by religious hatred. Samutsevich is freed two months later. Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina remain in prison, Russia.
- Details of the PIP breast implant scandal emerged in the UK. Implants were made by a French company with industrial silicone not approved for human use.
- Everyday Sexism Project founded by Laura Bates, UK.
- Savita Halappanavar died on the 28 October after being denied a life-saving abortion at the University Hospital Galway, Northern Ireland.
- Conservative minister for women Maria Miller backed calls to reduce the UK abortion limit from 24 weeks to 20 weeks.
- Conservative Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt said his personal view is the UK abortion limit should be reduced to 12 weeks.
- Jimmy Savile dies, following his death allegations of extensive sexual abuse and cover-ups by public bodies emerge. He is now thought to be one of the most prolific sex offenders in Britain who abused individuals ranging from 5 to 75 years old.

- Newspaper article in the free Metro newspaper, 'Husband admits killing cheating wife despite winning a retrial'. Solace Women's Aid makes a complaint about the use of language, UK.
- Karen Ingala Smith starts the Counting Dead Women project in response to the number of women's murders and lack of media reporting, UK.

#### **Conferences/talks:**

- *Her Noise* symposium at the Tate Modern, London, UK, 5 May.
- REWIND book launch at the Tate Modern, London, UK, 25 September.
- "'I'm not a lesbo-feminist but...': forms of lesbian (dis)avowal in contemporary Italian culture' by Charlotte Ross, Italy.
- 'Reflections on the Colonial Compilation Film', paper by Laura Mulvey at Artists' Moving Image Research Network Seminar, *Documentary & Ethnographic Avant-Garde* at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, UK, 25 January.

#### **Texts:**

- *The Impact of Austerity on Women* by The Fawcett Society, UK.
- 'Kat Banyard: "We Were Sold a Lie on an Almighty Scale, That Equality Had Been Won, the Battle Was over"' by Decca Aitkenhead, UK.
- *Rewind: British artists' video in the 1970s and 1980s* by Sean Cubitt and Stephan Partridge, UK.
- 'Pipilotti Rist' by Catherine Elwes, UK.
- 'Survey' by Peggy Phelan in *Art and Feminism* by Helena Reckitt, USA/UK.
- 'A feminist statement? No, untamed body hair is the pits!' by Amanda Platell, UK.
- 'Suzanne Lacy: Chewing More Than the Fat' by Cameron Shaw, USA.

- “‘Damaged Goods”, “Slut” and “Spinster”: Sexist Labels against Women’ by Laura Bates, UK.

#### **TV programmes:**

- Dr Emer O’Toole interviewed about her decision to stop removing her body hair on This Morning, ITV, UK, 4 May.

### **2013**

#### **Artworks:**

- *Crème De Co*, video by Ellen Angus, UK.
- *I Want Me Some Brown Sugar*, multi-screen video installation by Ope Lori, UK.
- *The Stuart Hall Project*, single-screen film by John Akomfrah, UK.
- *Fleisch (Honey I’m Home)*, video by Phoebe Colling-James, UK.

#### **Exhibitions:**

- *I Want Me Some Brown Sugar*, Ope Lori at 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning, London, UK.

#### **Events:**

- Black Lives Matter founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, USA.
- Pussy Riot members Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich released from prison after twenty-one months, Russia.
- Sheryl Sandberg founds LeanIn, USA.
- East London Fawcett undertake ‘The Great East London Art Audit’ and find that the representation of women in galleries stands at thirty-one percent, UK.

#### **Conferences/talks:**

- *Twenty Three Percent* symposium at the Royal College of Art, Battersea, London, in conjunction with the *Sanja Iveković: Unknown Heroine* exhibition, 25 January.
- *Sex, Gender and Race, the Politics of Women’s Art* symposium at Chelsea College of Arts, London, UK, 5 October.

**Texts:**

- Feminism Meets the Big Exhibition: 2005 Onwards by Hilary Robinson, UK.
- 'White Feminist Fatigue Syndrome' by Brenna Bhandar and Denise Ferreira da Silva, UK/USA.
- 'Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In' by bell hooks, USA.
- 'Understanding patriarchy' by bell hooks, USA.
- *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* by Nancy Fraser, USA.
- *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* by Sheryl Sandberg, USA.
- *Gender: The Key Concepts* by Mary Evans and Carolyn H. Williams, UK.
- *Representation* by Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon, UK.
- *Sanja Iveković: Unknown Heroine: A Reader* by Helena Reckitt, UK.
- *Documentary* by Julian Stallabrass, UK.
- *The Reckoning: Women Artists of the New Millennium* by Eleanor Heartney, Helaine Posner, Nancy Princenthal and Sue Scott, USA.
- 'GQ's Men of the Year Covers – Spot the Odd One out' by Alex Hern, UK.
- 'Fidelity to Failure: Re-Enactment and Identification in the Work of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy' by Milena Tomic, Canada.
- *The Thigh Gap Hack: The Shortcut to Slimmer, Feminine Thighs Every Woman Secretly Desires* by Camille Hugh, USA.
- 'How the thigh gap became the latest pressure point on a woman's self-image' by Rosie Swash, UK.
- 'Expressionism?: 'Ausdruckstanz' and the New Dance Theatre in Germany' by Hedwig Müller in *The Pina Bausch Sourcebook* by Royd Climenhaga, Germany.

- 'Contextualizing Pussy Riot in Russia and Beyond' by Jennifer Suchland, USA.
- 'Menstrual Blood Art: Carina Ubeda Uses Period Blood In Her Work' by The Huffington Post, USA.
- 'The Sir Jimmy Savile Scandal: Child Sexual Abuse and Institutional Denial at the BBC' by Chris Greer and Eugene McLaughlin, UK.

#### **Podcasts:**

- Angela McRobbie on the Illusion of Equality for Women, Science Bites, UK, 3 June 2013.

#### **TV programmes:**

- Professor Mary Beard appeared on *Question Time*, BBC, and was subsequently subject to online abuse, UK, 7 November.

### **2014**

#### **Events:**

- Women's Aid launch *SOS: save refugees save lives* campaign, UK.
- Eric Garner choked to death by a Police Officer in New York, USA.
- Getty Images and Leanin.org launch the *Lean In Collection* of stock images, USA.
- Practice in Dialogue research group co-founded by Catherine Long and Rose Gibbs. Participants have included: Miriam Austin, Alison Ballance, Ingrid Berthon-Moine, Cécile Emmanuelle Borra, Phoebe Colling-James, Rose Gibbs, Lora Hristova, Catherine Long, Ope Lori, Lauren Schneider, Abigail Smith, Nicola Thomas, UK.

#### **Conferences/talks:**

- *Visual Activism*, San Francisco, USA, 14–16 March.
- Andrea Luka Zimmerman in conversation with Lucy Reynolds at the MIRA 2:2 issue launch at Chelsea College of Art and Design, 19 November.
- Historical Contexts of Black British Feminism at Goldsmiths, University of London, UK, 11 December.



**Texts:**

- 'Obituary: Stuart Hall, 1932–2014' by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Jeremy Gilbert, and Jean Fisher, UK.
- 'Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality: "I Wanted to Come up with an Everyday Metaphor That Anyone Could Use"' by Bim Adewunmi, USA/UK.
- *Secondary Analysis of the Gender Pay Gap: Changes in the gender pay gap over time* by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, UK.
- 'Rotherham Child Sex Abuse: It Is Our Duty to Ask Difficult Questions' by Slavoj Žižek, Slovenia.
- *Post-2015 Consensus: Conflict and Violence Assessment* by James Fearon and Anke Hoeffler USA/UK.
- *TV Museum: Contemporary Art and the Age of Television* by Maeve Connolly, UK.
- 'Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997–2013' by Professor Alexis Jay, UK.
- 'How Female Corpses Became a Fashion Trend' by Kira Cochrane, UK.
- *The Vagenda: A Zero Tolerance Guide to the Media* by Holly Baxter and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslet, UK.
- 'You Won't Believe What Bodily Fluid This Chilean Artist Uses to Create Her Art' by Esther Jang, USA.
- 'The Persistence of Patriarchy: Operation Yewtree and the Return to 1970s Feminism' by Victoria Browne, UK.
- 'Why is women's body image anxiety at such devastating levels?' by Laura Bates.
- *How the Beatles Changed the World* by Martin W. Sandler.

**2015**

**Artworks:**

- *Estate: A Reverie*, film by Andrea Luka Zimmerman, UK.

**Exhibitions:**

- *Feminist Practices in Dialogue*, Practice in Dialogue group exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK.
- *Now You Can Go* at The Showroom, Institute of Contemporary Arts, Space and Raven Row, London, UK.

**Events:**

- Formation of Conservative government, UK.
- Eaves for Women closure in October, UK.
- 'This Girl Can' campaign launched by Sport England, UK.
- Duncan of Jordanstone College at University of Dundee, home to the REWIND project, awarded £234,872 by the Arts and Humanities Research Council to undertake a two-year research project from March 2015 to February 2017 into *European Women's video art in the 70s and 80s*, UK.
- Karen Ingala Smith and Women's Aid launch the Femicide Census database, UK.

**Conferences/talks:**

- *Stories That Matter: Feminist Methodologies in the Archive* panel discussion and book launch of *Twenty Years of MAKE Magazine: Back to the Future of Women's Art* edited by Mo Throp and Maria Walsh with Griselda Pollock, Claire Hemmings, Maria Tamboukou with Maria Walsh and Mo Throp, chaired by Catherine Grant at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK, 22 November.
- *We are Anti-Capiphallicists*, Practice in Dialogue, research group, chaired by Helena Reckitt, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK, 18 December.

**Texts:**

- *Twenty Years of MAKE Magazine: Back to the Future of Women's Art* edited by Mo Throp and Maria Walsh, UK.
- *State of the Sector: Contextualising the current experiences of BME ending violence against women and girls organisations* by Imkaan, UK.
- 'Mocking Freedom: feminism and the false choices of neoliberalism' by Rose Gibbs in *Feminist Practices in Dialogue 01* by Rose Gibbs, Catherine Long and Practice in Dialogue, UK.
- 'Black Feminism Is Sadly Still Necessary' by Ella Achola, UK.
- *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* by Uri McMillan, USA.
- 'Abortion pro-life protesters are dragging UK down to America's level' by Kate Smurthwaite.

**TV programmes:**

- 'Dance Rebels: A Story of Modern Dance', BBC Four, UK.

**2016****Exhibitions:**

- *Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s* at The Photographers' Gallery, London, UK.

**Texts:**

- UN Women (2016), *Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation, Women in Parliaments* USA.
- *Video Art Theory: A comparative Approach* by Helen Weestgeest, Netherlands.
- *Against Immediacy: Video Art and Media Populism* by William Kaizen, USA.

## Appendix 2

Transcript of *Cornered* (1988), Adrian Piper,  
single screen video installation, colour, audio, 16 minutes.

I'm black.

Now, let's deal with this social fact, and the fact of my stating it, together.

Maybe you don't see why we have to deal with them together. Maybe you think it's just my problem, and that I should deal with it by myself.

But it's not just my problem. It's our problem.

For example, it's our problem if you feel that I'm making an unnecessary fuss about my racial identity, if you don't see why I have to announce it like this.

Well, if you feel that my letting people know I'm not white is making an unnecessary fuss, you must feel that the right and proper course of action for me to take is to pass the white.

Now this kind of thinking presupposes the belief that it's inherently better to be identified as white. It bespeaks an inability to imagine or recognize the intrinsic value of being black. Perhaps you even take my rejection of a white identity as a sign that I'm hostile to whites. If you think any of these things, then I would say you have a problem.

But if you then respond to me accordingly, as though I had somehow insulted you by refusing to join your racial club, then you make it our problem. It's our problem because your hostile reaction to my identifying myself as black virtually destroys our chances for a relationship of mutual trust and goodwill.

It is also our problem if you think I'm telling you I'm black in order to exploit an advantage, get publicity, or make it big as an artist.

If you think this, obviously you must be feeling pretty antagonized and turned off by what I'm saying. So I'd be interested in hearing more about exactly how you think antagonizing and turning off my audience is going to help me make it big as an artist.

But the larger problem would be your feeling antagonized and turned off at all. Why does my telling you who I am have that effect? Do you feel affronted? Or embarrassed? Or accused?

I think we need to look more closely at why my identifying myself as black seems to you to be making a fuss. I think we need to keep in mind that it's a fuss only if it disturbs your presumption that I'm white. So perhaps the solution is for you not to make that presumption. About anyone.

That certainly would be better for me, because I don't look forward to your confusion and hostility at all. I'd really prefer not to disturb you.

But you see, I have no choice. I'm cornered. If I tell you who I am, you become nervous and uncomfortable, or antagonized. But if I don't tell you who I am, I have to pass for white. And why should I have to do that?

The problem of passing for white is not just that it's based on sick values, which it is. It also creates a degrading situation in which I may have to listen to insulting remarks about blacks, made by whites who mistakenly believe there are no black present. That's asking a bit much. I'm sure you agree.

So you see, the problem is not simply my personal one, about my racial identity. It's also your problem, if you have a tendency to

behave in a derogatory or insensitive manner towards blacks when you see none present.

Now if you have no such tendency, then you won't regard my letting you know I'm black as a problem at all. Because you won't have to worry about being embarrassed or shamed by your own behavior.

In that case I'm simply telling you something about who I am, on par with where I was born or how old I am, which you may or may not find of interest.

Furthermore, it is our problem if you think that the social fact of my racial identity is in any event just a personal, special fact about me. It's not. It's a fact about us.

Because if someone can look and sound like me and still be black, then no one is safely, unquestionably white. No one.

In fact, some researchers estimate that almost all purportedly white Americans have between 5% and 20% black ancestry.

Now, this country's entrenched conventions classify a person as black if they have any black ancestry. So most purportedly white Americans are, in fact, black.

Think what this means for your own racial classification. If you've been identifying yourself as white, then the chances are really quite good that you're in fact black.

What are you going to do about it?

Are you going to research your family ancestry, to find out whether you're among the white 'elite'? Or whether perhaps a mistake had been made, and you and your family are, after all, among the black majority?

And what are you going to do if a mistake has been made? Are you going to tell your friends, your colleagues, your employer that you are in fact black, not white, as everyone had supposed?

Or perhaps you're going to keep quiet about it, and continue enjoying the privileges of white society, while inwardly depicting yourself as a 'quiet revolutionary' who rejects this country's entrenched conventions anyway?

Or maybe combine your silence and continued enjoyment of these privileges with compensatory social activism on behalf of the disadvantaged?

Or will you try to discredit the researchers who made this estimate in the first place?

On the other hand, what if your research into your family tree reveals that you are, after all, among the white minority, who really do have no black ancestry? Then what?

Will you find a way to mention this fact, casually, in the course of most conversations? Perhaps you'll narrate your European family history with great enthusiasm and detail at parties?

How will you feel about being certifiably white? Relieved? Proud? Will you get annoyed or irritated when someone mentions the proximity to Africa or Spain, France, Italy, Greece, and Israel?

Or will you feel disappointed, deprived of something special? Perhaps you'll even lie, and tell people you're black, even if you're not? That's a nice, subversive strategy for you! As long as you don't blow your cover when things get hot, which they inevitably will.

Or are you going to do no research, indeed nothing at all about your black ancestry? Are you going to just pass out of this room, after this

videotape is over – or perhaps even before – and into your socially preordained future?

Are you going to simply put this information about your black identity out of your mind? Or perhaps relegate it to that corner of your mind you reserve for interesting art experiences that bear no relation to your personal life?

Or maybe dismiss the whole business as just another hoax an artist is trying to put over on a gullible public?

Obviously, the choices that now confront you are not easy ones. They're so problematic that you may be finding it difficult to think seriously about them at all right now. It may not be penetrating, as you're listening to this, that you really do have some serious, hard decisions to make.

But remember: now that you have this information about your black ancestry, whatever you do counts as a choice.

So. Which choice will you make?

You may feel that no choice is required. You may believe that anyone who can pass for white has no moral right to call themselves black, because they haven't suffered the way visibly black Americans have.

Of course if we're going to distribute justice and moral rectitude on the basis of suffering, then happy idiots and successful Uncle Toms don't get any anyway, no matter how visibly black they are, right?

Besides, if you've been identifying yourself as white, and you think light-skinned blacks don't suffer enough, then you have nothing to lose by publicly affirming your own black identity. So why not try it? Just to test out your hypothesis the light-skinned blacks don't suffer enough?



Or you may think people like me identify ourselves as black in order to get the institutionalized rewards of being black – like affirmative action programs, while avoiding the daily experience of racism that visibly black Americans have to cope with all the time.

Well, let's see what we can do about that. Now that you know you're probably black, you, too, have the option of publicly proclaiming your black identity in order to get into affirmative action programs.

Lucky you. Are you going to do it? No? Why not? Think about all the 'institutionalized rewards of being black' you're passing up!

Obviously, there are much better reasons than that to affirm your black identity.

Of course you may disagree. You may have different values, different priorities. If you don't recognize the importance of black American culture, you may find it easy to reject.

And, if you're very attached to the rewards and privileges of identifying yourself as white, you may find it virtually impossible to reject those rewards and privileges.

If you feel this way, you may be reacting to what I'm saying here as nothing but an empty academic exercise that has nothing to do with you.

Let's at least be clear about one thing: this is not an empty academic exercise. This is real. And it has everything to do with you.

It's a genetic and social fact that, according to the entrenched conventions of racial classification in this country, you are probably black.

So if I choose to identify myself as black where as you do not, that's not just a special, personal fact about me. It's a fact about us. It's our problem to solve.

Now, how do you propose we solve it? What are we going to do?

[White text on black screen]

WELCOME TO THE STRUGGLE!

## Appendix 3

Transcript of *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977),  
Martha Rosler, single screen video, colour, audio, 39:20 minutes.

### Act one

**Martha Rosler voice-over:** This is an opera in three acts. This is a work about perception. There's no image on the screen just yet. It isn't about the perception of small facts. It isn't about the physiology of perception. It's about the perception of self. It's about the meaning of truth. The definition of fact. This is an opera in three acts. Or it's a kind of opera in about three acts. This is a work about being done to. This is a work about learning how to think. This is an opera in three acts. The first act is in real time and ends in a montage. Act two is symbolic – what is the same, what is different, what is outside, what is inside. Like Nana's chicken only here we deal with eggs. Act three is tragic, horrific, mythic. It is a documentary record. It's about scrutiny on a mass level. About what has been and what could be.

I needn't remind you about processing and mass extermination. You remember about the scientific study of human beings. This is a work about coercion. Coercion can be quick and brutal. That is the worst crime. Coercion can also extend over the whole of life. That's the ordinary, the usual crime. Bureaucratic crime can be brutal or merely devastating, we need not make a choice. Sartre says, 'evil demands only the systematic substitution of the abstract for the concrete'. That is, it demands only the derealisation of the fuller human status of the people on whom you carry out your ideas and plans. Statistics.

For an institution to be evil it need not be run by Hitler. As Steven Kurtz has observed, it need only be run by heartless people, sometimes called intellectuals or scientists. In the name of responsibility native peoples have been colonised and enslaved. The lives of women, children...

**Scientist: Next.**

**Martha Rosler voice-over:** ...workers and subject people regulated in every degree, for their own good.

Scientist: Have a seat please.

**Martha Rosler voice-over:** This is a work about the tyranny of expectation.

**Scientist:** Your sex?

**Martha Rosler:** Female

**Scientist:** Age?

**Martha Rosler:** 33

**Scientist:** Race?

**Martha Rosler:** Caucasian

**Scientist:** And ethnic background?

**Martha Rosler:** Austrian and Russian

**Scientist:** Okay, will you remove your shoes please and stand against the wall.

**Martha Rosler voice-over:** She's being told how to think, what to think. The nature of action. She's being instructed in what to feel. This is a lesson in sinking or swimming. Which sinking or swimming have a lot in common. Her body grows accustomed to certain prescribed poses, certain characteristic gestures, certain constraints and pressures of clothing. Her mind learns to think of her body as something different from herself. It learns to think, perhaps without awareness, of her body as having parts. These parts are to be judged. The self has already learned to attach value to itself. To see itself as a whole entity with an external vision. She sees herself from outside with the anxious eyes of the judged who has within her the critical standards of the ones who judge.

I needn't remind you about scrutiny, about the scientific study of human beings. Visions of the self. About the excruciating look at the

self from outside as though it were a thing divorced from the inner self. How one learns to manufacture oneself as a product. How one learns to see oneself as a being in a state of culture, as opposed to a being in a state of nature. How to measure oneself by the degree of artifice, the remanufacture of the look of the external self to simulate an idealised version of the natural. How anxiety is built into these looks. How ambiguity, ambivalence, uncertainty are meant to accompany every attempt to see ourselves, to see herself as others see her. This is a work about how to think about yourself. This is a work about how she is forced to think about herself. How she learns to scrutinise herself. To see herself as a map, a terrain, a product. Constantly recreating itself inch by inch. Groomed, manufactured, programmed, reprogrammed, controlled. A servile mechanism in which one learns to utilise every possible method of feedback to reassert control. Read from a work on cybernetic servile mechanisms. Read from a work on self-abuse. Read a list of items for the true sell. A list of gifts for the wedding guests to choose from. Read from a list of do's and don'ts. Read from a list of glamorous makeovers. Read from a list of what men do and what women do. Read from a list of girl's toys and boy's toys. Read from a list of average incomes of men and of women. Read from a book of resignations and defeats. Read from a manual on revolutionary society.

**Scientist:** Your waist is fifteen.

Foot length is nine three eight.

Stand up on your toes please.

Head back, that's it. Okay, on tips toes, head height, sixty-seven and a quarter. Please stand on tiptoes, keep your hands relaxed at your side.

Okay, on tiptoes to finger tip height, twenty-nine and three quarters.

Stretch your arms out, please. Arm span, arms extended sixty-four inches. Middle finger length, three and three eighths.

Take off your socks please... one and three quarters.

Hair length, twenty-three inches.

**Male voice-over:** There is a boy whom we shall call Tommy Smith. In nursery school he was a top member of his class. A happy, normal, healthy, highly intelligent youngster, but as he approached the age of five, the records begin to show a flattening of his growth curve. He lost weight and he stopped gaining in height. The staff nutritionist, calling at his home for a check up found that the boy's appetite had fallen off sharply, he was not eating enough, particularly not enough milk and a result was a shortage in his intake of proteins and minerals. Actually, the whole staff for some time had been noticing symptoms of retardation in this apparently healthy boy.

The psychologists had reported that Tommy had regressed in mind as well as in body. His IQ rating had dropped; he seemed tense, anxious, uncertain. His inner strains were reflected in his responses to the Rorschach Ink Spot Test, the Thematic Apperception Test and other psychological techniques. A clue to his troubles was disclosed by one of these techniques; doll playing. Three dolls representing a man, a woman and a small boy were placed on the floor together with an assortment of doll furniture and other household accessories. Tommy proceeded to play house and in his play, he sent the mother doll off to the office, put the father doll in the kitchen getting him the next meal and wondered aloud whether the little boy doll would grow up into a man? Maybe he speculated, the boy would become a woman and go off to the office like Mamma.

Here was the anxiety that underlay Tommy's loss of interest in food, his interrupted growth and his lapses in IQ. It turned out that the doll drama re-enacted his actual home situation. Tommy's mother had a job, which kept her away from home from early morning to late afternoon. The father, whose business hours were not exacting did many of the housekeeping chores, feed and dressed the boy and took him to and from school. Because the mother frequently came home exhausted, the father often put the child to bed. It was all very confusing to Tommy. He was at the stage in which a normal boy wants to identify himself with a male figure but his family setup was

such that he was not certain what the figure stood for and anyway he was not sure that he wanted to be that kind of a man. It was all very confusing to Tommy. He was at a stage in which a normal boy wants to identify himself with a male figure but his family setup was such that he was not certain what the figure stood for, and anyway he was not sure that he wanted to be that kind of a man. The child research counsel is not a clinic, does not treat diseases of this order, but when symptoms come to light in the course of its research it calls them to the attention of the parents and the family physician. In this case, the parents finally recognized that their son's disturbance stemmed from themselves. In this case, the parents finally recognized that their son's disturbance stemmed from themselves and they immediately made adjustments. The mother went on half time at her business and made it her main job to love and care for Tommy. The mother went on half time at her business and made it her main job to love and care for Tommy. The father relinquished many of his mothering services. The father relinquished many of his mothering services. Within a few months after this real change, Tommy was a much happier and better-adjusted boy. He was eating so voraciously that the family doctor had to advise cutting down on his carbohydrates. His height and weight resumed their growth and again he stood head and shoulders above his classmates and passed his tests.

**Scientist:** Will you remove your pants, please? Abdominals extension height is thirty-eight and a half inches. That's above standard. Can you remove those pants too, please? Okay, hip girth is thirty-six and three quarter inches – below standard. Hip height is thirty-four and a half – above standard. Mid-thigh girth is nineteen inches – that's standard. Put your hands to the side. The full crotch length is twenty-four inches – that's below standard. The vertical trunk, sixty inches – that's standard. Okay, crotch height to floor is thirty and a quarter inches – that's above standard. Knee girth is fourteen inches – that's standard. Ankle girth is nine and a quarter – that's standard. Step down just a moment. Please be seated. Stretch your legs up a little bit. Sitting spread girth is thirty-six and a half inches – that's below

standard. Sitting height erect, that's thirty-four inches – standard. Just relax. Sitting height normal, thirty-two and three quarter inches – that's standard.

**Martha Rosler voice-over:** Her mind learns to think of her body as something different from herself. It learns to think about awareness of her body as having parts to be judged. The self has already learned to attach value to itself. To see itself as a whole entity with an external vision. She sees herself from the outside with the anxious eyes of the judged who holds within her mind the critical standards of the one's who judge. She knows the boundaries of her body. She does not know the boundaries of herself. She's been carefully trained in the mechanical narcissism that it is a sign of madness or deviance to be without. Her body grows accustomed to certain prescribed poses, characteristic gestures, restraints and pressures of clothing.

**Scientist:** Just relax.

Vaginal depth relaxed, six inches – that's standard.

Okay, will you get up a moment? Come over here and lie down with your hips this end.

**Second scientist:** Feet all the way down, against the wall, arms on the floor, point your toes up. Toe height, nine inches. Hip height, seven inches. Pull your arm out please. Breast height, seven and a quarter inches. Head height, eight inches.

**Scientist:** Can you please stand up? Step over to the scale please. Weight, a hundred and nineteen pounds, standard is a hundred and twenty-four and three quarters – below standard.

**Martha Rosler voice-over:** To lick one's lips to make them wet. To cross or uncross one's feet or legs. To sit forward or back, upright or compressed. To think of sitting as disposing one's limbs. To keep thighs and knees pressed together. To tighten the muscles of the stomach. To cast the eyes down. Not to look too often into the eyes of the other. Not to glance sideways. To keep the brow smooth. To smile. To refrain from moving the mouth unnecessarily. To keep



hands together, to keep hands in the lap. To keep hands at the sides, not to let them dangle. To check stray hairs of the head. To tighten or untighten the muscles of the scalp. To remember the line of the neck. To pluck stray hairs. To draw on one's face. To add paint on top of flesh. A liquid mixture of thin mud, colored material, grease, tar derivatives and other unknown, artificial and derived substances. To add colored powder. To learn what is called the color of flesh. To see one's features from up close. To regard them as invisible, as in a raw state until outlined and painted over. To see some hairs as important and needed and others as bad, unwanted. To approximate an ideal. To add black paint to the eyelashes, to the eyebrows. To think of changing the color and shape of one's hair. To judge the body, always finding it faulty. To separate the idea of thigh and give it meaning. To need to be less or to need to be more. To have more appealing flesh. To see the body as a vehicle for the attainment of an imposed desire. To want things, to have to get them. To see one's parts as tools, as armament to be deployed strategically for the purpose of attaining things. The mind has learnt to thirst for a private self, to suppress the desire and fail to acknowledge the thirst, to welcome the respite provided by the privatized domestic space. But even here she is not immune from judgement. The total woman remembers to bathe every day, to manage her image in such a way that her personality disappears and her ability to absorb, to be projected upon, to present herself for delectation substitutes for private desires of the self as self, in which masochism is the definition of fulfilment. They say women are masochists by nature. What is nature? I say masochism is a crime against women.

To accept the idea that one takes one's place in a list of statistics. To accept the idea that there is meaning in measurement. To accept the idea that there's something to be learned about the self from measurement. Do you believe in Tommy Smith? What is the effect of negative expectation on intelligence? On performance? What is the effect of negative expectation on women's intelligence? On performance? On growth? Scientists who measure are not innocent.

Scientific human measurements have been used for education. To keep certain races and nationalities out of America. To keep women subordinate. To keep women in their place. Often the people who invented both the idea of testing and the test themselves, the one who declare the tests significant are often believers in the genetic superiority of their own group and the superiority of men over women. Testing to maintain social control. Sir Francis Galton, Lewis Terman, Henry H. Goddard, Edward Elthorne, Cesare Lombroso, Paul Popenoe of the eugenically inclined Human Betterment Foundation, H. H. Lockland of the Carnegie Foundation, Carlton Koons, Arthur B. Jenson, William Shockley. Many of these men are pioneers in the testing movement. All are on record testifying to the racial superiority of white, Nordic males, to their natural superiority over people of all other races and of course over women. The need for testing to keep control over society. To the fact that class differences reflect differences innate of ability. To the fact that sex difference determine differences innate of ability. To the absolute need to train people to fit their proper place. To accept the idea that one takes one's place in a list of statistics. To accept the idea that there is meaning in measurement. To accept the idea that there is something to be learned about the self from measurement.

Do you believe in Tommy Smith as reported by George W. Gray in Scientific American? Here the meaning of human life remanufactured by those dedicated to the so-called scientific understanding of human life. What is science? Science is a tool that amounts to the engineering of life by bureaucrats or worse. Those who invent measurements are not innocent. We continue with Tommy Smith as written up by George W. Gray in Scientific American in 1967. This is not an unusual case he reports. He goes on to quote Doctor Gene Denning, a paediatrician specialising in biometrics: 'we're all familiar with the fact that in junior high school the typical girl is much larger and more grown-up than the typical boy at the same age. She's not interested in dates with these small boys; she wants to go with older boys. It is interesting also to see how the curve follows the

personality pattern. The growth of a feminine type of boy with a soft rounded body and a greater interest in dolls than in baseball, for example, usually follows the typical girls' pattern. Similarly girls of the tomboy type usually have a growth pattern conforming to that of boys. The absolute need to accustom people to fit their proper place.

To take an example, only one example, Lewis Turman, one of the fathers of the testing movement wrote, 'in Germany there's the rather anomalous problem of an educated proletarian. Thousands of graduates from the classical gymnasium, which for the most part ignore the problems of real life, find themselves misfits in this industrial and political world and drift about discontentedly until finally they contribute to swell the now formidable army of German socialists. But in this country our more practical sense has brought it about that few of our secondary schools dish out formal studies to all indiscriminately. The result is that our high school graduate more frequently finds a place in the world where he can expend his energies, not only to his own profit but to the advantage of society as well'. The absolute need to accustom people to fit their proper place. Turman also wrote, 'it cannot be disputed that in the long run it is the races which excel in abstract thinking that eat well while others starve, survive epidemics, master new continents, conquer time and space and substitute religion for magics, science for taboos and justice for revenge. The races which excel in conceptual thinking could if they wished quickly exterminate or enslave all the races, notably their inferiors in this respect'. The absolute need to accustom people; women, blacks, orientals, those supposedly inferior in abstract thinking, to fit their proper place. To accept the idea that one takes one's place in a list of statistics. To accept the idea that there is meaning in measurement. To accept the idea that there is something to be learned about the self from measurement. The absolute need to accustom people to take their proper place. The absolute need to accustom people to fit their proper place.

### Act 3

Femicide, femicide, femicide, femicide, femicide, crimes against women, cliterodectomy, rape, cliterodectomy, brutalization, pornography, sterilization, forced motherhood, outlawed abortion, illegal abortion, woman battering, assault, insult, loathing, derogation, victimization, depredation, deprivation, femicide, femicide, crimes against women, bound bodies, bound lives, bound images, bound feet, bound bodies, bound images, purdah, immolation, suttee, starvation, infibulation, servitude, domestic servitude, forced labour, unpaid labour, chattelization, prostitution, objectification, slavery, domestic slavery, wage slavery, madness, madness, psychological assault, psychological brutality, child-birth torture, enforced docility, branding, abuse, beating, scorn, divisiveness, fear, femicide, murder, threats, warnings, cliterodectomy, rape, electric shock, tranquilization, enforced passivity, fetishization, pornography, depredation, deprivation, femicide, crimes against women, bound feet, bound bodies, bound images, purdah, immolation, suttee, starvation, infibulation, servitude, domestic servitude, forced labour, unpaid labour, chattelization, prostitution, objectification, slavery, domestic slavery, wage slavery, madness, psychological assault, psychological brutality, child-birth torture, forced motherhood, outlawed abortion, illegal abortion, enforced docility, job discrimination, discrimination, branding, abuse, shame, scorn, divisiveness, fear, threats, warnings, pornography, sterilization, rape, brutalization, cliterodectomy, murder, fear, divisiveness, sterilization, forced motherhood, illegal abortion, woman battering, assault, insult, torture, loathing, derogation, victimization, depredation, deprivation, femicide, femicide, crimes against women, bound feet, bound bodies, bound images, starvation, purdah, immolation, servitude, infibulation, suttee, domestic servitude, forced labour, unpaid labour, chattelization, prostitution, objectification, slavery, domestic slavery, wage slavery, madness, psychological assault, psychological brutality, child-birth torture, enforced docility.

## Appendix 4

Transcript of *Free, White and 21* (1980), Howardena Pindell,  
single channel video, colour, audio, 12:15 minutes.

**Pindell:** Oh when my mother grew up in Ohio her mother would bring in various babysitters, there were about ten children in the family and one of the babysitters happened to be white. My mother was the darkest of the ten children so that when this woman saw my mother's skin she thought she was dirty and took lye and washed her in lye. As a result of this my mother has burn marks on her arm.

When I was in kindergarten I had a teacher who was not very fond of black students. There were very few of us, possibly two in the kindergarten class out of a class of perhaps forty. During the afternoon hours we were given a time to sleep. Each of us had our own cot and we were told that if we had to go to the bathroom we should raise our hands and one of the teachers would take us to the bathroom. I raised my hand and my teacher flew into a rage yelling 'I can't stand these people' and took out sheets and tied me down to the bed. She left me there for a couple of hours and then finally released me. One of the students filed a complaint perhaps to a parent who did not know that I was black, perhaps the child did not know or had not learned to differentiate race at that time. I later found out that that teacher was fired for bothering a student; perhaps I was not the first one.

I went to a high school in Philadelphia, which is for girls, which emphasized academic achievement. Everyone was very competitive with one another for grades. I did very well in the history classes and asked that my history teacher put me in the accelerated class. She told me she would be happy with my grades to put me in the accelerated level, however, she felt that a white student with lower grades would go further therefore she would not put me in the accelerated course.

**White woman:** You know you really must be paranoid. Those things never happened to me. I don't know anyone who's had those things happen to them, but then of course, they're free, white and 21 so they wouldn't have that kind of experience.

**Pindell:** I went to Boston University and for my first year I lived in a dormitory. I was entered as a freshman student in January. I had been very active in High School running for various offices so I decided to run for an office in Boston University within my dormitory. The office that they had available was one where you would act as a liaison with other universities; you would act as a liaison with MIT or Harvard or Radcliffe. I did whatever was necessary to get my name on the ballot and just before the vote was to be taken, my house mother brought me into a meeting with the other officers of the house, all members of Boston Universities student community and I was informed that my name was being removed from the ballot because they felt that my being black and if, of course, I won, I would be highly inappropriate for that office.

**White woman:** Well, you ungrateful little... After all we've done for you.

**Pindell:** When I graduated from graduate school, I preceded to look for a job because I had not been able to find a job. Although I had applied to 500 schools for teaching positions I had received approximately 500 rejections so I decided to come to New York and go door to door looking for any kind of job. Someone suggested that I try Time Life and to apply for a job as a picture researcher. I went to the Time Life building and the personnel office was willing to see me because they saw that I had Yale University on my application. That I had graduated from Yale University. While I was waiting to be interviewed, I was sitting in the front office and a number of women came in looking for secretarial positions. The white women that came in looking for secretarial positions were told to fill out an application and they were told that after they turned in the application they

would be notified if a position became available and, you know, if they were interested in their qualifications. Any non-white woman who walked in, Hispanic women or black women, I did not see any Asian women come in looking for jobs at the time, were told that there were no positions available. They were not given applications, they were just told point blank we have no positions available and the women would leave. I eventually was interviewed and I was told that I would not be considered unless I came in with a slide projector.

**White woman:** Don't worry, we'll find other tokens. Don't worry.

**Pindell:** I was invited to a wedding at Kennebunkport, Maine. I was the only non-white at the wedding. One of the friends of the family owned an old house that had been built in, I believe, the early 1800s. She wanted to invite all of the members of the wedding party to her home for lunch. That included the five bridesmaids and the five ushers. When we entered the house she gave us a tour and finished the afternoon by giving us lunch. She seemed quite unnerved that I was a member of the wedding party and had her place changed from another table to my table where she could sit and watch me eat. At the end of the afternoon, as we were leaving, the men stood on one side of the door and the women stood on another side of the door. She shook hands with all the white women, skipped over me, shook hands with all of the white men and then came to me last.

**White woman:** You really must be paranoid. Your art really isn't political either. You know I hear your experiences and I think well, it's got to be in her art, that's the only way we'll validate you, it's got to be in your art in a way we consider valid. If it isn't, you know, used in a way, the symbols aren't used in a way that we use them then we won't acknowledge them. In fact, you won't exist until we validate you and, you know, if you don't want to do what we tell you to then we'll find other tokens.

**Pindell:** After the wedding ceremony, there was a party held for the bride and groom and for the members of the wedding and the guests. They had a live band and dancing. Of course, no-one asked me to dance until near the end of the party, the minister, who was a man in his mid-60s, he came over to me, winked, asked me to dance and then whispered into my ear, 'I come to New York often, why don't we get together? We can have some fun.'

**White woman:** You ungrateful little... after all we've done for you. You know, we don't believe in your symbols, you must use our symbols. They're not valid unless we validate them. And you really must be paranoid, I've never had an experience like that, but then of course, I'm free, white and 21.



## Appendix 5

Transcript of *Female Fist* (2006), Kajsa Dahlberg,  
single channel projection, colour, audio, 20 minute loop.

About two years ago, I and a few others decided that we would like to make a lesbian porn movie. It was going to be a porn movie made by lesbians and by political activists as a non-profit collaboration. We were a group of political activists who wanted to act in it and do the set design for the film. And the idea was that we would be an anonymous collective making this film as a contribution to lesbian culture. Because we think that lesbians are invisible and that lesbian sexuality is invisible and when we make its acquaintance it is only in the form of hetero-normative mainstream pornography in porn outlets. We wanted to see some pornography that we thought was hot and that was made by someone we knew was having a good time while making it. So, we started by doing some movie screenings in the Woman's House, in Copenhagen, where we showed some porn produced by women, just to see if anyone would be interested in participating in the project and to sort of start off by watching some porn together. And it was actually a pretty controversial thing, because in the Women's House in Copenhagen, there's this long history of antagonism towards porn. But the porn we brought in, one couldn't just antagonize against, because it was made by women. It was a commercial pornography, but it was made by women. The directors were people like Annie Sprinkle on Candide Royal. So, that was a first step; to watch some porn together.

The year after that, we in the porn group, made a casting, but nobody really wanted to be in the cast. We had already rigged the cameras, and I had gotten a 'fluffer'. In the porn industry, there's a function called a 'fluffer'. If the male porn actor can't get an erection, there's a 'fluffer', a woman, who helps him get an erection. And I'd gotten a female 'fluffer', but there wasn't really anyone to 'fluff'. Nobody really wanted to get in front of the camera. So instead we formed some

groups, dividing up all of us who were there. We were about 30 or 35 people, women. We divided up into small groups to discuss or talk about what this movie could contain. We tried to articulate our wishes for the action of the movie, for the contents and that was a lot of fun because we were all also different, we are so different. Some of us wanted a story, and some of us wanted no story at all. Some of us wanted a scene where the actors had clothes on and some of us wanted hardcore genital close-ups. So, based on this casting workshop, we gathered the ideas and desires of the movie. And then, last year, we shot the movie over a couple of days. At that point, the group had shrunk quite a bit. From being 35 or something, we were now five, or something like that. So we shot some of these scenes and we did that inside the Women's House. We used it as location for this lesbian porn movie. And we are about to start editing now and it's you, Kajsa, who is going to edit it, so that's just wonderful.

And when it's done, the idea is that you won't be able to buy it. You can have the movie if you've earned it! That is to say, it's like a relay-system. We make some master DVDs or videotapes, and then they're copied. Those of us who are in the production team have maybe 10 copies each, that we can give to our friends or whomever we think have earned the movie and they will all have to sign a contract. Everyone who gets a copy of the movie has to sign a contract not to show it to any men and not to sell it, or distribute it outside of the concept. And it will be legally binding. It is quite simply a deal between whoever gets the movie and us who made it. And the idea is for the movie to reach a lot of female users, who have the right to copy it further. That way, the whole thing is built on a system of trust. When you get the movie, you know that you're not supposed to show it to any men, and you don't buy the movie and can only get it if you get it from somebody.

The idea further is that, if you film your own porn, because we want more porn. That is to say, we want to look at some lesbian porn, made by lesbians. Both because I'd like to see that, it would probably

be arousing to see. I haven't seen any yet. Well, actually, I've seen some, almost nothing. I'd like to see some lesbian porn I think that would be great. So I hope that someone wants to send us some lesbian porn. But of course that's not the only reason, it's also to sort of democratize the project. I mean, lesbian culture isn't granted by nature. It's a room we need to take, because we don't have it. We need to form our own platforms, we have to take our own space. And it's sort of in that light one should see this project, apart from the fact that we also just wanted to see some porn. For instance, through this film project, but also through a number of other projects, I'm trying to find my way, my language and my way of performing sexuality, my way of representing sexuality. It's sort of like an attempt to return to, or winding the tape back to yourself. But this cultural programming is, of course, enormously difficult to liberate yourself from. But what you can do is to form platforms and networks and try, in that way, to create some free spaces.

These are utopias, of course, and very fragile spaces, but you can believe in them while you're in them. What I'm talking about is how you: instead of trying to be like the others, how do you survive? When you've sort of identified that okay, I'm not a heterosexual; okay, I'm left-wing, I don't advocate capitalism; okay, I'm not a Christian; okay, I have no intentions of getting married in church. When you've sort of found out that you don't fit into the norms for how you socialize yourself into society, what do you do then? There's nowhere to run. There's a long work of reflection ahead of you. And how do you manage that? How do you find yourself without operating with one of those essentialist notions of the self? For me, you do that by making some platforms; making some separatist rooms, some little, autonomous units, where you can just worship your deviance; and where you don't seek a dialogue. You want monologue; you want to be together with someone similar to yourself; to constitute an alternative to the rest of society. Not in order to be in dialogue with the rest of society, but just for its own sake.

Sometimes, we might have some operation or action which seeks dialogue; that is to say, where we, for instance, issue a press statement. But mostly we'll just be doing something from ourselves, because we need each other. We need to do things together and we need to live in a sort of illusory world, where the world is the way we'd like it to be and where we don't need to explain who we are, or no, maybe we do, but we do so together, but we don't need to explain why we deviate, we can just be allowed to worship our deviations. I'm not looking for a society where everyone is a lesbian, and everyone's a feminist. Well no, I guess it would be nice, obviously, if everyone were feminists. But some of the people I work with, they don't call themselves feminists. They don't call themselves women either, because they think if you say women, you think it into a man-woman dialectic, and they don't want to be associated with that.

So they say they're lesbians, they're a lesbian gender. And then they say that heterosexuality is an ideology, and that's why they can't use a word like feminist, because it operates with a man-woman dialectic. But I think one can be many things. One really shouldn't generalize, it's like when you experience that your own minority is repressive; that it reproduces some of the same repressive structures as the ones you've just survived, in the rest of society. It's a terrible thing because then; where are you free? And I know you're never really free, but how do you liberate yourself? How do you set yourself free from these repressive structures? And how do you find a way of being with others in a way which allows you to define yourself and identify yourself, based on yourself? It's an impossible project, and it's an impossible project to find a place where... where these repressive mechanisms don't exist. But I believe in it, I'm not one of these disillusioned people, quite the contrary.

I think you just have to keep fighting, and you have to discuss these structures of oppression, and you have to form these platforms, you have to worship your deviance. You have to seek – or: I would like to seek – to enter these separatist rooms. Not because I think they're

truer, or that they're going to take over all of society, or in order to be in dialogue with the rest of society, but just in order to work from a position. It gives me a sense of having the power to act. It gives me a sense of being able to define something myself. And maybe it is an illusion, or at least it's a very fragile space, but it gives me a sense of not just being hurled around in a culture which, at heart, despises all that I represent. But if I define or create a platform, then just the act of doing or saying that, makes me feel like I have a chance, for myself, to sort of reclaim a piece of land. Not because I should have a piece of land. One has to be careful with these common references. There's also something beautiful in not having a land; not having a home. There's an eternal negotiation for the possibility of being different. The world has many furtive spaces and if every now and then, one can create a room of one's own and for others, then, in that act, one can have the illusion of being self-appointed and it can be nice, believing this, together with others, well aware of the fact that it's a very vulnerable room, that might disappear the very next week.

## Appendix 6

Transcript of *Breast Meat* (2012), Catherine Long,  
single channel video, colour, audio, 4:52 minutes.

So, what we have here is a beautiful body: nice toned, shapely legs, a good torso, lovely little bottom, pert and high. She's got good skin: smooth and taut, lovely even tone and texture. Let's take a look at her arms. Lovely, no bingo wings. Such a beautiful little thing, almost perfect, just not quite sexy enough.

The problem, you see, are these. There's just not enough to go round. We all want a bit of breast and we need a good deal more meat than this. There isn't enough here to satisfy. So, I'm going to use the breasts of a bigger bird to enhance this little baby.

Here she is with her lovely big breasts, some really good meat here, nice and firm, high on the chest. So good to the touch, and believe me, they'll taste brilliant. But the problem with this bird is that really we want a nice compact and lean figure, not something so big and unwieldy. But still we want the breasts. The size of these big ol' tits, with a bit of added uplift, mind you, are just fantastic. And I say when we can create the best, why not have, why not be the best?

So first of all I need to remove these bazookas, nice and neatly. Right, here are my lovely fillets. Now let's get started and stitch these on.

This is the most important part where I get to give a good defining shape. That's what's what I'm aiming for – a nice firmness there. Now I think this baby could take a little bit more. I'm just going to ease a bit extra in there. Can you see the difference that makes? It adds that bit of extra firmness, pertness, just raises the breast up. It just adds that extra bit of wow factor.

You have to be careful when going up to this breast size that they don't flop out to the sides. We want them to really stand to attention, to jut forward. So, I'm going to have to do a bit of extra work here to really get the look.

I'm just going to make one more modification now I've got the perfect shape.

Wonderful. There we have it, a beautiful little bird with these gorgeous big firm breasts. Looks, feels, tastes better – look at that.

## Appendix 7

Transcript of *Turning Thirty* (2014), Catherine Long,  
single screen video work, colour, with audio, 12:59 minutes.

**Zoe:** I'm Zoe Susan McClain.

**Deniz:** Hi I'm Deniz.

**Lucy:** I'm Lucy Dickson

**Zoe:** I'm twenty-nine years old.

**Lucy:** I'm now thirty-one.

**Deniz:** So next week I'll be thirty.

**Zoe:** I work as the Learning and Access Manager at Wandsworth Museum.

**Deniz:** I'm from North Cyprus.

**Lucy:** I work for two charities in London. One is a feminist human rights charity where I do administration and the other one is a children's mental health charity where I manage a mental health service in a primary school.

**Deniz:** Currently I'm living in London and I'm doing a practice-led fine art research at Chelsea College of Art and Design.

**Lucy:** I think I've always been someone who dreamed a lot; I didn't have so many expectations but a lot of dreams about the future.

**Zoe:** Between the ages of about six and twelve, I really wanted to be a farmer, but actually, I think I really wanted to be a farmer's wife and sort of live this slightly idyllic lifestyle.

Deniz: Umm, yeah.

**Lucy:** When I was about ten I actually wrote a book called 'when I grow up', which I remember quite clearly and in that I owned an animal-themed shop with things for pets and sculptures and drawings and stuff like that.

**Zoe:** It wasn't really thinking about getting up at five in the morning to milk cows, it was more that I would be living in quite an idyllic countryside place. I'd have kids.



**Lucy:** So I was already quite interested in writing and reading and also psychology and thinking about the way we live and how people work.

**Deniz:** I didn't think of anything to be honest before high school but you know when you come to the level of secondary and high school and you start thinking, 'hey what am I going to do?'

**Lucy:** I also remember looking through catalogues and thinking, 'oh when I'm older I'm going to be able to buy all these things and have my house and choose all these things'. I don't know, that's probably quite a common thing for young children to do, I think.

**Zoe:** I never thought that I'd have some sort of grand house but I suppose I was thinking that there would be a few bedrooms and, you know, farm houses do tend to be not teeny but often not huge either. And I suppose I was thinking that I'd be living with my husband and some kids. Definitely thought I might have loads of kids if I was a farmer, living on a farm because why not?... living in the country... I don't know, I didn't really think that out very much or how much it might cost or anything.

**Deniz:** I don't remember imagining myself in Cyprus actually. I always thought that I'd be in Istanbul or somewhere else.

**Lucy:** We didn't have much money and we moved house a lot so I was often thinking about accommodation and designed a few houses for myself as I was growing up, including one really beautiful one that I think would be in Canada, which I based on architectural magazines that I was looking at, triangular shaped, made of wood and glass and always wanted to have pets and garden and be in the countryside.

**Zoe:** I think my current living environment is very different to my idea as a child of where I'd be living age twenty-nine.

**Lucy:** Yeah, as I've gotten older I've realised... it takes a long time to get to that place where that might be the right place for me to be.

**Deniz:** At the beginning I didn't feel like this is my home, but now I'm starting to feel after three, four years, starting to feel that I belong here... Sort of...

**Zoe:** Having to downscale to quite a small flat and pay over twice as much rent was a bit of a horrible shock. But equally we are quite

lucky compared to lots of people in London in that we do have our own flat and it does have a bedroom, a kitchen, a living room and a little bathroom.

**Lucy:** What I have now is I live in a shared house with five other people, and... yeah I probably didn't think that's where I'd be when I was younger, at this age. I probably thought that by then you'll have a stable relationship, a more stable home, a more stable job.

**Deniz:** I'm trying to survive in London 'cos I'm not working at the moment. I sometimes get small jobs but it's really hard.

**Lucy:** But it is a lot has to do with the choices that I've made and the priorities that I have and that has included wanting to work in mental health and in counselling and psychotherapy in particular, which is not a very practical career path.

**Deniz:** Before I moved to London I was in Istanbul. I studied there, I did my architecture degree and then I did Diploma.

**Zoe:** I've worked over the last seven or eight years in a range of youth and arts organisations so I've worked for councils, for museums doing youth work, doing arts engagement.

**Lucy:** In some ways I didn't realise how impractical it was, how few jobs there would be at the other end of that training.

**Deniz:** I think you feel that pressure if you are working in an architectural office or any kind of office-based place where you're dealing with lots of men.

**Lucy:** So I've reached... it feels like... still kind of a beginning point but I have reached a point where I have got a job in mental health and it's really interesting and challenging and I can see, I can see that going forward but it's much... slower and lower level than I had ever expected. It's a slow process in building up experience and making that a viable career.

**Zoe:** I am happy with my current job. I don't think it's a job that I want to do forever, but I feel that it's enjoyable, it's stimulating, it's quite tiring, but it's got lots of elements of the job that I'd want to do in the future.

**Deniz:** When you're working in an architectural office it means automatically you are agreeing to work overtime whether you get

paid for your overtime or not. You are expected to stay for, sometimes, stay like two days in a row if you are preparing a project for competition or something. You don't shower, you don't... you just drink coffee, you skip dinners, and that's the kind of commitment you have to give if you want to be an architect, if you want to be a really successful architect and be as good as the men.

**Zoe:** But it's very hard to get out of that feeling like you should work, work, work, money, money, money, you know. Maybe I'd be happier if I worked four rather than five days a week but if someone said 'would you like to work four days a week and take a pay cut', I'd be a bit like ooh er I don't know because I sort of think I need to earn the money to save for the future to have security.

**Lucy:** Something that a lot of people associate with security is around home and money and knowing that they'll have enough and knowing that their basic needs will be met in terms of home and shelter and...

**Zoe:** There's a general feeling of you should be on the career path and there's probably more pressure around career for men still and I think for women there's a bit more pressure to be, you know, in a settled relationship.

**Deniz:** The people mostly had problems, where I worked, were the ones that had kids or family that they had to go back and cook for them or take care of them.

**Lucy:** It was difficult finding work and... I guess I know that I have had to compromise a bit and that I may in the future be in a point where I have to compromise around the types of jobs that I'm doing.

**Deniz:** I think it's really hard to be... to work in an environment like that.

**Lucy:** And again my life sort of feels much more transitory than I had probably expected it would be at this age.

**Deniz:** Something I realise is, as I get older, I miss my grandparents and my parents and I really miss Cyprus.

**Lucy:** Yeah, I guess it's interesting distinguishing dreams from expectations and ideas around what you should do and what people do in general...

**Deniz:** Maybe I shouldn't compare myself with them but when I think of Cyprus everyone, all my friends, they're either engaged, or they got married. That feels a bit weird when I go to Cyprus to be honest. It shouldn't be that big... well, I shouldn't feel that, that's wrong but it's like oh 'what's wrong with me?'

**Lucy:** The 'happily ever after', saviour, Prince Charming kind of scenarios...

**Zoe:** I think there's much more talk about women turning thirty and the implications of family than there is about men turning thirty and the implications of career.

**Lucy:** I think we're fed a huge amount of prescriptions around what we should be, what we should want, what should make us happy.

**Deniz:** Well, the pressure is on me actually because I'm coming from a different cultural background. I'm Turkish Cypriot and you know when I go to Cyprus the first thing people, other people, ask me is like, 'oh show me your fingers. Oh you still don't have ring'. Ok so you still don't have ring and it means that you still, you're not going to be a parent quite soon and it's horrible you know.

**Zoe:** There is quite a lot of discussion, I dunno, between me and my friends to do with, between people my age particularly women, about the fact that they are sort of thinking, 'hmm if I want to have kids, I suppose I should really be thinking about it'. And maybe thirty is when women start to think, 'ah I should be thinking about it sooner rather than later'.

**Lucy:** There's so many opportunities to make yourself feel unhappy by comparing yourself to these ideas... when actually we're not kind of one-size fits all. Everybody is different.

**Zoe:** There's probably a bit of family pressure for some people...

**Deniz:** Pressure. My Grandma is still, she's asking me when I'm going to get married and... she's obviously, it's kind of emotional thing she's going through. She's saying, 'before we die we would like to see you get married and have a family' and that makes me really sad, you know, the thing that they say, 'before we die'. Ok, they are very old, I know they don't have much time but what can I do? If it doesn't happen...what can I do about it?

**Lucy:** I probably had this when I was younger as well but these ideas around 'oh you're thirty, you should be married', everyone on Facebook is having white dress weddings and children popping up all over the place. It's easy to think, 'what's wrong with me?' because that's what our culture tells us is the plot we should follow.

## Appendix 8

*Scullery* (1974), Clifford T. Ward.

You're my picture, by Picasso  
Lighting up our scullery  
With your pans and pots and hot-plates  
You'd brighten up any gallery

If I could paint a different picture  
Leafy lanes and flower scenes  
Buttermilk, your cooking mixture  
You still have ingredients that make you shine  
And when you take your apron off I know you're mine  
(Know you're mine)

You're my photogenic model  
From the glossy magazine  
In among your kitchen structure  
Soapy water, washing machine

I could take a different picture  
Rolling hills and flowing gowns  
How to make the foaming texture  
Dirty linen isn't all that starts to shine  
In rubber gloves and faded jeans you still look fine  
(Still look fine)

If I could paint a different picture  
Leafy lanes and flower scenes  
Buttermilk, your cooking mixture  
You still have ingredients that make you shine  
And when you take your apron off I know you're mine  
(Know you're mine)

You're my picture, by Picasso  
Lighting up our scullery  
With your pans and pots and hot-plates  
You'd brighten up any gallery

## Appendix 9

*Run For Your Life* (1965), The Beatles.

Well I'd rather see you dead, little girl  
Than to be with another man  
You better keep your head, little girl  
Or I won't know where I am

You better run for your life if you can, little girl  
Hide your head in the sand little girl  
Catch you with another man  
That's the end ah little girl

Well I know that I'm a wicked guy  
And I was born with a jealous mind  
And I can't spend my whole life  
Trying just to make you toe the line

You better run for your life if you can, little girl  
Hide your head in the sand little girl  
Catch you with another man  
That's the end ah little girl

Let this be a sermon  
I mean everything I've said  
Baby, I'm determined  
And I'd rather see you dead

You better run for your life if you can, little girl  
Hide your head in the sand little girl  
Catch you with another man  
That's the end ah little girl

I'd rather see you dead, little girl  
Than to be with another man  
You better keep your head, little girl  
Or you won't know where I am

You better run for your life if you can, little girl  
Hide your head in the sand little girl  
Catch you with another man  
That's the end ah little girl

Nah nah nah  
Nah nah nah  
Nah nah nah  
Nah nah nah

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## Artworks

- Angus, Ellen (2013), *Crème De Co* [single screen video], colour, audio, 4:42 minutes.
- Antin, Eleanor (1971), *Representational Painting* [single screen video], black and white, silent, 38 minutes.
- Akomfrah, John (2012), *The Unfinished Conversation* [three-channel video projection], colour, audio, 103 minutes.
- Akomfrah, John (2013), *The Stuart Hall Project* [single screen film], colour, audio, 103 minutes.
- Arnold, Martin (1993), *Passage à l'acte* [16mm film], black and white, audio, 12 minutes.
- Baker, Bobby (1991), *Kitchen Show* [single screen video], colour, audio, 2:33 minutes.
- Bal, Mieke (2006–2010), *Nothing is Missing* [multi-screen video installation], colour, audio, 25–35 minutes looped.
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- Berthon-Moine, Ingrid (2011), *iTouch* [single screen video], colour, audio, 30 seconds.
- Bikoro, Nathalie Anguezomo Mba (2012), *We Have Landed* [performance documentation], colour, audio, 25 minutes.
- Birnbaum, Dara (1978–1979), *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* [single screen video], colour, audio, 5:50 minutes.
- Breitz, Candice (2005), *Mother* [multi-screen installation], colour, audio, 13:15 minutes.
- Breitz, Candice (2005), *Father* [multi-screen installation], colour, audio, 11 minutes.
- Breitz, Candice (2009), *Factum* [multi-screen installation series], colour, audio, varying durations.
- Chadwick, Helen (1989), *Enfleshings I and II* [lightboxes].
- Chicago, Judy (1974–1979), *The Dinner Party* [ceramic, porcelain, textile, installation].
- Colling-James, Phoebe (2013), *Fleisch (Honey I'm Home)* [single screen video], colour, audio, 3:11 minutes.
- Dahlberg, Kajsa (2006), *Female Fist* [single screen video], colour, audio, 20 minutes looped.
- Hablo, Eldi (2008–2011), *Wrestling Women* [oil paintings and etchings series].
- Egbe, Amanda (2006), *Reiteration to Resistance* [single screen video], colour, audio, 9:45 minutes.
- Elwes, Catherine (1984), *There is a Myth* [single screen video], colour, audio, 9 minutes.
- Forshaw, Louise (1987), *Hammer and Knife* [single screen video], black and white, audio, 1:12 minutes.
- Fox, Oriana (2008), *Body Hair Removal* [single screen video], colour, audio, 5 minutes.
- Garrard, Rose (1980), *Beyond Still Life* [live relay performance].

- Gustafson, Julie (1974), *The Politics of Intimacy* [single screen video], black and white, audio, 52:20 minutes.
- Hoover, Nan (1983), *Landscape* [single screen video], colour, audio, 5:42 minutes.
- Hoover, Nan (1984), *Half Asleep* [single screen video], colour, audio, 16:43 minutes.
- Hoover, Nan (1984), *Eye Watching* [single screen video], colour, audio, 7:22 minutes.
- Iveković, Sanja (1978), *Make Up Make Down* [single screen video], colour, audio, 5:14 minutes.
- Jonas, Joan (1972), *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* [live relay performance video], black and white, audio, 17:24 minutes.
- Jonsson, Anna (2010), *Perdón* [single screen video], colour, audio, 3:50 minutes.
- Keane, Tina (1979), *Playpen* [live relay performance video], black and white, audio, 20 minutes.
- Keersmaeker, Anne de and Rosas (1982), *Rosas danst Rosas* [contemporary dance].
- Lacy, Suzanne (1976), *Learn Where The Meat Comes From* [performance video], colour, audio, 14:20 minutes.
- Lacy, Suzanne (1978), *There are Voices in the Desert* [performance].
- Lori, Ope (2013), *I Want Me Some Brown Sugar* [multi-screen video installation], colour, silent, looped.
- Memling, Hans (1467–1470), *The Last Judgment, Casting the Damned into Hell*, triptych, right wing [oil painting].
- Mey, Thierry de and Keermaeker, Anne de (1997), *Rosas danst Rosas* [film], colour, audio, 57 minutes.
- Meynell, Katharine (1992), *Vampire S Eat* [single screen video installation], colour, audio, looped.
- Nauman, Bruce (1967), *Thighing (Blue)* [16mm film], colour, audio, 4:36 minutes.
- Parmar, Pratibha (1986), *Emergence* [single screen video], colour, audio, 18 minutes.
- Pindell, Howardena (1980), *Free, White and 21* [single screen video], colour, audio, 12:15 minutes.

- Piper, Adrian (1988), *Cornered* [single screen video installation], colour, audio, 16 minutes.
- Pussy Riot (2012), *Mother of God, Chase Putin Away* [single screen video], colour, audio, 2 minutes.
- Rainer, Yvonne (1985), *The Man Who Envied Women* [35mm film], black and white, audio, 125 minutes.
- Rhodes, Lis (1978), *Light Reading* [16mm film], black and white, audio, 20 minutes.
- Rhodes, Lis (1988), *Cold Draft* [16mm film], colour, audio, 30 minutes.
- Rist, Pipilotti (1986), *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much* [single screen video], colour, audio, 5:02 minutes.
- Rist, Pipilotti (1987), *Sexy Sad I* [single screen video], colour, audio, 4:36 minutes.
- Rist, Pipilotti (1996), *Selfless in the Bath of Lava* [single screen video projection], colour, audio, 4:13 minutes.
- Rist, Pipilotti (1997), *Ever is Over All* [two channel video projection], colour, audio, 4:32 minutes.
- Rist, Pipilotti (2009), *Lobe of the Lung* [three channel video projection], colour, audio, 15:36 minutes.
- Rosenbach, Ulrike (1974), *Sorry Mister* [video performance], colour, audio, 11:51 minutes.
- Rosenbach, Ulrike (1975), *Don't believe I'm an Amazon* [live relay video performance], black and white, audio, 11:37 minutes.
- Rosler, Martha (1966), *Body Beautiful, Beauty Knows No Pain (Hot Meat)* [collage], part of the *Body Beautiful, Beauty Knows No Pain* series (1966–1972).
- Rosler, Martha (1974), *A Budding Gourmet* [single screen video], black and white, audio, 17:45 minutes.
- Rosler, Martha (1975), *Semiotics of the Kitchen* [single screen video], black and white, audio, 6:09 minutes.
- Rosler, Martha (1977), *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* [single screen video], colour, audio, 39:20 minutes.
- Rosler, Martha (1982), *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue* [single screen video], colour, audio, 25:22 minutes.
- Rubens, Peter Paul (1620), *The Fall of the Damned* [oil painting].

- Saar, Betye (1972) *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* [assemblage].
- Schneemann, Carolee (1964), *Meat Joy* [16mm film], colour, audio, 10:35 minutes.
- Schneemann, Carolee (1965), *Fuses* [16mm film], colour, silent, 29:37 minutes.
- Sobell, Nina (1978), *Hey, Chicky!!!* [single screen video], black and white, audio, 9:55 minutes.
- Steele, Lisa (1976) *The Ballad of Dan Peoples* [single screen video], black and white, audio, 8 minutes.
- Stermitz, Evelin (2011), *The Art of Aging* [single screen performance video], black and white, audio, 3:29 minutes.
- Úbeda, Carina (2013), *Cloths* [mixed media installation].
- Warhol, Andy (1964), *Mario Banana No. 1* [16mm film], colour, silent, 3:20 minutes.
- Warhol, Andy (1964), *Mario Banana No. 2* [16mm film], black and white, silent, 3:20 minutes.
- Wilke, Hannah (1974), *Gestures* [single screen video], black and white, audio, 35:30 minutes.
- Wilke, Hannah (1974–1982), *S.O.S Starification Object Series* [Gelatin Silver Prints].
- Zimmerman, Andrea Luka (2015), *Estate: A Reverie* [film], colour, audio, 83 minutes.
- Zimmerman, Andrea Luka, Johansson, Lasse and Fennell, Tristan (2009–2011), *i am here* [photographic installation], colour, Samuel House Estate, London.

## **Exhibitions:**

- Dialectics of Isolation: Third World Women Artists of the United States* (1980), A.I.R Gallery, New York, USA.
- Elles: Women Artists* (2009–2010), Centre Pompidou, Paris, France.
- Global Feminisms* (2007), Brooklyn Museum, New York, USA.
- Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s* (2016), The Photographers' Gallery, London, UK.

*Feminist Practices in Dialogue* (2015), Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK.

*It's Time for Action* (2007), Museum of Fine Arts, Bilbao, Spain.

*Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism* (2007) Museum of Fine Arts, Bilbao, Spain.

*Materializing "Six Years": Lucy Lippard and the emergence of Conceptual Art* (2012–2013), Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, USA.

*Ope Lori: I Want Me Some Brown Sugar* (2013), 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning, London, UK.

*Projekt '74 – Aspects of International Art in the Early 1970s* (1974), Kunsthalle and Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany.

*Pipilotti Rist: Eyeball Massage* (2011–2012), Hayward Gallery, London, UK.

*Sonia Boyce* (1986–1987), AIR Gallery, New York, USA.

*Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007), Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, USA.

*When is a human being a woman?* (2011–2012), Hollybush Gardens, London, UK.

Whitney Biennial 2014 (2014), New York City, USA.

*Women Who Rock: Vision, Passion, Power* (2012), Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C., USA.

*Sanja Iveković: Unknown Heroine* (2012–2013) Calvert 22 gallery and South London Gallery, London, UK.

## **Audio Visuals:**

Allbritten, Dub and Self, Ronnie (1960), *I'm Sorry* (1960) [song lyrics online]. Available at: < <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/brendalee/imsorry.html> > [Accessed 25 November 2014].

Cropper, Steve and Pickett, Wilson (1965), *In The Midnight Hour* [song lyrics online]. Available at: <<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/wilsonpickett/inthemidnighthour.html>> [Accessed 12 January 2013].

*Countdown* (2011) [Music video] [online]. Available at: < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XY3AvVgDns> > [Accessed 23 November 2015].

*Free, White and 21* (1963) [Film], Directed by Larry Buchanan, USA:  
American International Pictures.

Lennon, John and McCartney, Paul (1965), *Run For Your Life* [song lyrics online]. Available at: <<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/beatles/runforyourlife.html>> [Accessed 23 June 2012].

McCoy, Van (1965), *Baby I'm Yours* [song lyrics online]. Available at: <<http://www.metrolyrics.com/baby-im-yours-lyrics-barbara-lewis.html>> [Accessed 12 January 2013].

*To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1962) [Film], Directed by Robert Mulligan, USA:  
Universal International Pictures.

Ward, Clifford T. (1974), *Scullery* [song online]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBbjzApgh9w>> [Accessed March 2014].



# Catherine Long Artworks

2012–2015

## List of artworks in chronological order

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## *Breast Meat* (2012)

single screen video, HDV, colour, with audio, 4:52 minutes

See Appendix 6 for transcript



Video stills from *Breast Meat* (2012), Catherine Long.

*Breast Meat* is a single screen video viewed on a television monitor. The work is a response to the constant repetitive advertising women are subjected to, which infers women's bodies are not good enough and need surgery to enhance and make them feel complete. This piece takes a humorous angle to investigate this situation through performing cosmetic surgery on a chicken and sewing breast taken from a larger turkey bird onto the chicken's body. The work is performed and narrated by myself. The voice-over deploys the educational tones of a documentary presenter and uses the language of lifestyle, fashion and cookery programmes. The presenter handles both the birds and points out the desirable features and the faults of the chicken and turkey's physiques. The voice-over suggests that the small body of the chicken is nearly perfect and would be improved by the addition of the turkey's largest breasts. The performer proceeds to cut of the turkey's breasts and stitch them onto the chicken with the addition of some extra filling to give the chicken the 'wow factor'. Although the tone of the voice-over is educational, the narrator uses a range of slang for breasts: tits, bazookas, fillets. The work plays on the double meaning of 'bird' and 'chicken fillets'. In the UK, 'bird' is slang for young woman and 'chicken fillets' refers to the silicone inserts, which became popular in the early 2000s that are placed inside a bra to enhance cleavage. The audio combines the sound of the chicken and turkey carcasses being cut, stitched and their flesh wobbled, with the sound of a knife being sharpened at intermittent intervals.

*Run For Your Life* (2012)

single screen video, SD, colour, with audio, 2:24 minutes

See Appendix 9 for song lyrics



Video stills from *Run For your Life* (2012), Catherine Long.

*Run For Your Life* is a single screen video viewed on a television monitor. The work examines the way that violence and aggression against women is normalised, consumed and internalised in and by popular culture. I wanted to explore the underlying tension between the reality of two women being killed by their partners or ex-partners every week, and popular culture, which frequently perpetuates a version of this narrative that is romanticised and normalised. This work is concerned with deconstructing the cultural conditions that necessitate the continuation of feminist activism. The video work is set to an instrumental version of the pop song *Run For Your Life* by the Beatles, the lyrics are superimposed as text over the image. The footage is from a camera held onto my shoulder as I ran along the streets near my home. I have layered up the footage and audio multiple times and turned some of the images onto their side and others upside down. The different layers of footage are alternatively enlarged, slowed down or increased in speed. I wanted to create a sense of disorientation and panic, which is at odds with the upbeat melody of the song. Further audio is provided by the sounds of my breath and running feet, which I have spliced up to create a dissonant, broken sense of escape. I avoided showing the woman's fleeing body on the screen as I did not want to visually depict her as a victim. Instead through filming with the camera held onto my shoulder, I wanted to embody the woman's presence in the work but also subtly suggest that she can escape and find her own direction. She holds the camera in her hands and she has within her the power to determine her own agency, subjectivity and representation.



*All That Glitters Is Not Gold* (2013)

single screen video, HD, colour, with audio, 3:03 minutes



Video stills from *All That Glitters Is Not Gold* (2013), Catherine Long.

*All That Glitters Is Not Gold* is a single screen video projection.

The work is my attempt to consider the ways in which particular feminine behaviours are repeated and normalised and whether the over-repetition of these actions can be a disruptive element. I wanted to see if I could invoke an effect akin to that of semantic satiation, a psychological effect whereby a word repeated over and over again temporarily loses its meaning for the listener. I wanted to play with this effect in order to see whether my repetitious performance could similarly work to disrupt meaning. In this work, I perform to the camera a series of repetitive feminine poses while repeating the word 'woman' with each gesture. At intervals, I appear with increasing amounts of make-up on my face so that I go from no make-up to fake eyelashes and red lipstick and finally, almost clown-like big red blotches on my cheeks. I filmed the performance against a cream background, which was a similar shade to the colour of my dress. I manipulated the image in Final Cut Pro through using the limit effect to isolate the dominant image colour, which I adjusted using the saturation, luma and edge thin tools. To enhance the saturation of the image, I layered up two colour corrector 3-way filters. This gave the background and the dress the dazzling gold glitter effect. I also filmed the work in soft focus so that the performer is outlined by a nimbus effect similar to that of early video game avatars. I wanted the editing and visual effects to highlight the artificial nature of the performance and by implication, the category of 'woman'.



*After Thighing (Blue)* (2014)

single screen video projection, HD, colour, with audio, 4:46 minutes



Video stills from *After Thighing (Blue)* (2014), Catherine Long.

*After Thighing (Blue)* is a single screen video projection, which can be projected on its own or with the accompanying work, *Me and Bruce* (2014) projected at right angles or on the opposite wall. When exhibited together, the works are started at different times and looped. The work is a re-enactment of *Thighing (Blue)* by Bruce Nauman from 1967. The original work is a fixed camera shot of Nauman's thigh stretched out on the ground. Nauman's hands are visible as he pinches and pulls the flesh on his upper leg. In making the re-enactment, I wanted to explore how the meaning of the work changes when performed by a woman. In order to re-perform the work, I initially rehearsed while watching the video and taking my cues from Nauman so that I developed an embodied awareness of his gestural syntax. I also made a contact sheet of video stills that showed the exact positioning of actions and gestures at key moments. I made notes about the timings and the ways in which the actions were performed, for example: heavy, light, hesitant, forceful. From these sheets, I learnt the performance so that I could loosely perform *Thighing (Blue)* from memory; I purposely did not fully memorise the work. For my videoed re-enactment, I watched the original work as I performed and allowed myself to be led by my embodied response to the work. By partially learning the work, I was able to keep pace with Nauman and follow his performance without errors, while my lack of complete memory meant I also had to enter into a physical dialogue with the work at the moment of performing. This method increased the sense of tension and exploration as my hands pinched and pulled at the flesh on my leg. The work is edited at the same points as the original so that there are small jarring edits between gestures. The audio also follows Nauman's breathing in the original.

*Me and Bruce* (2014)

single screen video, HD, colour, with audio, 4:46 minutes



Video stills from *Me and Bruce* (2014), Catherine Long.

*Me and Bruce* is a single screen video projection, which can be projected on its own or with the accompanying work, *After Thighing (Blue)* (2014) projected at right angles or on the opposite wall. The work developed out of my re-enactment of *Thighing (Blue)*. I was using the original video as a guide in Final Cut Pro to ensure I correctly timed the edits and the slight variations of the position of my leg on screen. As I was moving back and forward between Nauman's leg and my own, I wanted to see how the meaning would change if the two versions were brought together in one image. Initially, I simply overlaid the two versions and set the image opacity to fifty percent. While I was interested in the impact of the two legs working together, it also became apparent that Nauman's performance dominated mine due to his larger size and the prominence of the hair on his leg. The deeper sounds of his breath also drowned out my own sighs. As a result I stopped following the original so faithfully and developed my own edit sequence. I experimented with the timing of the edits so that the person leading each movement changes and becomes more of a play between the two performers. I also experimented with and recorded the sound of my breathing so that rather than being directed by Nauman's breathing, I allowed my breaths to respond to effort and dynamics of performing the work.

*After Sorry Mister* (2014)

single screen video, HD, colour, with audio, 11:24 minutes



Video stills from *After Sorry Mister* (2014), Catherine Long.

*After Sorry Mister* is a single screen video viewed on a flat screen. The work is a re-enactment of the video performance *Sorry Mister* (1974) by Ulrike Rosenbach. The work consists of a close-up shot of Rosenbach's thighs as she slaps her right thigh for nearly twelve minutes in time to a looped section of Brenda Lee's hit song *I'm Sorry* from 1960. The repeated slaps cause a large bruise to appear and deepen until nearly the whole upper thigh is marked. I re-enacted this work by watching a monitor with the original video and performing in time with the beat of the music. Besides the monitor was a second screen connected to the camera so that I could make slight adjustments to my position if needed. Although the work was simple to re-enact, it was grueling to perform. In order to replicate Rosenbach's framing and reach the fleshy part of the inner thigh, I found it necessary to position my left leg forward and my right slightly back and lean forward at the waist. Over the course of nearly twelve minutes this position became increasingly painful to maintain and the right knee is gradually pushed backwards by the force of the slaps. Judging from the sound of Rosenbach's slaps in the video, I found it difficult to manifest and maintain the force that Rosenbach appears to use. Given this discrepancy, I was surprised at how quickly the bruising spread across my leg. I made slight changes to the re-enactment in the edit. I filmed the work in 16:9 and intended to crop the image to replicate Rosenbach's framing. However, as discussed in the thesis, in the current climate of hypersexualised advertising images, I was concerned that the cropped image conformed to current objectified images of women's thighs. By keeping the 16:9 framing, the viewer can see the sway of the performer's body with each impact and the bulging of the upper thigh with each slap. These details are removed with the smaller 4:3 framing and I hoped that by keeping them in I could increase the viewer's discomfort as he or she watches the work.



## *Turning Thirty* (2014)

split screen video, HD, colour, with audio, 12:54 minutes

See Appendix 7 for transcript



Video stills from *Turning Thirty* (2014), Catherine Long.

*Turning Thirty* comprises individual interviews with three women all around the age of thirty. The interviews are about their childhood hopes and expectations for the future and where they feel they are in their lives now. Each interview took place individually at the participant's home. I shot the interviews with the camera turned on its side to give the portrait framing. I sat directly behind the camera and conducted the interview from this position so that the participant's were encouraged to look directly at the camera throughout the discussion. The interviews are edited into a dialogue that gives insight into a range of issues faced by young women in contemporary western culture including home and security, careers, relationships and children along with external societal expectations, pressure and judgment. For the first minute of the work, through the edit, each participant is introduced individually with the other two sections of the screen kept black. In turns, they tell the viewer about themselves and appear and disappear from the screen in order to speak or allow someone else to talk. As the work progresses, the time each participant appears on screen increases so that two or three of them are on screen at the same time. When one person is speaking the other two nod in accord or just look at the camera, sometimes their image is freeze framed. The use of black screen also serves as an emphasis when one of the speakers is discussing something that I particularly want to draw the viewer's attention towards. The work ends with Lucy, on the left side of the screen, speaking to the viewer with the other two women looking out from the screen and nodding in accord. Through the edit, I wanted to produce a sense of the conversation building in momentum. This work has the potential to be extended with additional interviews and worked into an installation whereby participants also occupy different screens. I would like to carry out further interviews with women from different backgrounds.



*Meat Abstracted (belly flesh)* (2014)

single screen video, HD, colour, with audio, 3:40 minutes



Video stills from *Meat Abstracted (belly flesh)* (2015), Catherine Long.

*Meat Abstracted (belly flesh)* is a single screen video viewed on a large flat screen monitor. The work can be shown on its own or alongside *Meat Abstracted*. The short work depicts slight feminine hands caressing and rubbing sagging and wrinkled skin. She alternatively stretches the skin flat and rumples it up. This is interrupted when she picks up a large knife accompanied by a harsh metallic sound and uses the knife to cut away the skin from the flesh beneath. The work ends when the entirety of the skin is sliced off and dropped onto the floor. I filmed this work with a side of pork belly tied over my stomach and the camera directly facing my body in close-up. I wanted to give the impression that this could be my own body that I am touching and cutting into.

## *Meat Abstracted* (2015)

split screen video, HD, colour, with audio, 55 minutes



Video stills from *Meat Abstracted* (2015), Catherine Long.

*Meat Abstracted* is a single split screen video viewed on a large flat screen monitor. This is the longest work I have made at just under one hour long. I wanted the length of the work to be determined by the time it took me to undertake the given task. I filmed myself in both close-up and mid-shot performing two tasks. The first exercise was to stitch six chicken breasts into two bulbous breast-like appendages, which I stuff with additional fat so they are bulging at the seams. In the second performance, I sew ten pigtails together to form a phallic crown. The first task took nearly an hour and the second task took 35 minutes. I decelerated the speed of the second set of footage to 60 percent to match the length of time the first performance took. Towards the end of the work, each of the split screens freeze one after the other. The crown is frozen on my head, the pig tail detail is focussed on, the close-up of the chicken breasts freezes and finally, the top right hand screen freezes when I lift the breasts up for inspection. The audio of the chickens breast and pigtails being sewn together is very quiet as the stitching makes very little sound. I have layered up the stitching sounds that can be heard and half way the work started to edit these out of sync with the visuals. I also recorded the sound of the meat being moved about, which I edited into the work at intervals. Finally, I wanted to increase the sense of discomfort and revulsion and recorded the sound of two cats eating meat, which can intermittently heard throughout the work. Sometimes this is loud and unavoidably and other times the sound is a subtle backdrop. The sound of the cats eating gets louder as the work comes to an end.

## *Know You're Mine* (2015)

single screen video, SD, colour, with audio, 6:17 minutes.

See Appendix 8 for song lyrics



Video stills from *Know You're Mine* (2015), Catherine Long.



*Know You're Mine* is a single screen video viewed on a television box monitor. The work is constructed from five short excerpts of archive footage showing domestic scenes from the 1950s and 1960s and the crowning of Miss America 1969. The speed and pace of the edits is crucial to the work. The first two clips are played at 100 percent speed and depict a father figure and then a mother playing with her two children in a seemingly happy scene. From then onwards the majority of the clips are decelerated to between 10 to 20 percent causing a juddering effect as each protagonist haltingly moves through their everyday activities. An exception to the deceleration is the beginning section with the mother and children, which is made up of decelerated footage combined with fragments that are accelerated to between 300 to 420 percent. Many of the images are also increased in scale to focus on particular actions and generate further image distortion. The audio in this early section is the sound of the children's laughter and cries, which are spliced up and repeated into an intense soundscape of staccato shrieks and manic laughter. The mother's audio is an intermittent gasping sound played on loop for a few seconds at a time. The opening scene of the mother and children lasts for nearly two minutes and builds in speed and intensity both in terms of the visuals and the audio so that it comes almost as a relief when the section ends. The rest of the work is decelerated and accompanied by the song *Scullery* by Clifford T. Ward, which is reduced in speed to 75 percent. This gives the audio a deeper sound and a slightly more melancholy feel than the original, while the instrumental sections slip into a carnivalesque feel rather than the original pop beat. The audio accompanying the beauty queen is also slowed down so that the sound of clapping becomes like an earthquake and the beauty queen's own voice becomes a series of monstrous sounds that emanate from her mouth. The work ends with the clip of the woman in the kitchen doing domestic chores. For a split second it looks as if she might throw her iron across the room, but instead she puts it down and continues with the next domestic chore to be completed.

*In the Eye of the Beholder* (2013–15)

single screen video, HD, colour, with audio, 3 minutes



Video stills from *In the Eye of the Beholder* (2013–2015), Catherine Long.

*In the Eye of the Beholder* is a single screen video projection.

The work is a short exploration of looking into and beyond the camera lens. I wanted to create a sense of ambiguity, vulnerability and uncertainty, and raise the question of who is looking at whom. Some of the shots are in sharp focus and some of them are soft and almost disappear in the dark. The audio consists of slightly threatening banging sounds, the wind, slithering movements, intermittent bird song and the beating of wings.



## Exhibitions, screenings, conferences and talks

2015      *Feminist Practices in Dialogue*, group exhibition, Practice in Dialogue research group, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK.

*We Are Anti-Capiphallists: Feminist Art Practices in Dialogue*, panel discussion with Practice in Dialogue research group, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK.

*A Feminist Dialogue with the Camera*, one-day solo exhibition and accompanying talk, Cookhouse, Chelsea College of Arts, London, UK.

Presentation of research, 'Visual representation and the subtle abyss', Chelsea College of Arts, London, UK.

2014      *Sexism*, group exhibition, Indra and Samia Gallery, London, UK.

Presentation of research, 'The Art of Making Strange', Chelsea College of Arts, London, UK.

2013      *A Voice of One's Own*, group exhibition, ULU Playhouse Gallery, London, UK.

'Femininity Recontested', conference paper and screening of work, Re/contested Sites/Sights Research Conference, University of the Arts London, UK.

*All My Independent Women*, group exhibition, Brotherton Library Special Collections, University of Leeds, UK.

Presentation of research, 'The Body on Screen', Taking A Part Research Seminar, Central St Martins, London, UK.

'Representational violence', conference paper and screening of work, *State and Statutes in Art and Cultural Production*, Royal College of Art, London, UK.

'Representation, feminism and video art', conference paper and screening of work, University of the Arts London, UK.

2012 'A Feminist Dialogue with the Camera in a Moving Image Art Practice', conference paper and screening of work, University of the Arts London, UK.

Screening at Subjectivity and Feminisms Performance Dinner, Chelsea College of Arts, London, UK.

Screening at University for the Creative Arts, UK.

Screening at Towards Common Ground, Bread and Roses Festival, London, UK.

*Feminism: East Meets West*, group exhibition, Arebyte gallery, London, UK.

Screening at Artists Moving Image South, Curzon cinema, London, UK.

'Situating Feminism', panel discussion, Chelsea College of Arts, London, UK.

*Position Place Situate Locate*, group exhibition, Chelsea College of Arts, London, UK.

## DVD Breakdown

Total of eleven video works.

DVD 1: two video works

*Breast Meat* (2012), 4:52 minutes

*Run For Your Life* (2012), 2:24 minutes

Running length: 8 minutes

DVD 2: one video work

*All That Glitters Is Not Gold* (2013), 3:03 minutes

Running length: 3 minutes

DVD 3: three video works

*After Thighing (Blue)* (2014), 4:46 minutes

*Me and Bruce* (2014), 4:46 minutes

*After Sorry Mister* (2014), 11:24 minutes.

Running time: 22 minutes

DVD 4: one video work

*Turning Thirty* (2014), 12:54 minutes

Running time: 13 minutes

DVD 5: two video works

*Meat Abstracted (belly flesh)* (2015), 3:40 minutes

*Meat Abstracted* (2015), 55 minutes

Running length: 59 minutes

DVD 6: two video works

*Know You're Mine* (2015), 6:17 minutes

*In the Eye of the Beholder* (2013–2015), 3 minutes

Running length: 10 minutes