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**Performance Art Can Change Your Life!**  
**Shame Attacking and *Parrhesia* as Feminist Practices of Freedom**

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Goldsmiths, University of London  
Doctor of Philosophy

### **Declaration of Authorship**

I Oriana M. Fox hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: Oriana Maria Fox

Date: 18 July 2018

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## Abstract

This research project investigates the risky self-disclosure that certain feminist performance artists practise in their work in order to assess how it impacts their lives. Focusing on artists whose work blurs the boundaries between art and life, the personal and the political, it uses original interviews and first person, written accounts, close readings of artworks, alongside the author's own performance practice, to examine acts of self-exposure as critical forms of self-care. To assess the rewards and drawbacks of shamelessness, this thesis utilises Foucault's late theorisations on *parrhesia*, a risky form of truth telling, and a therapeutic technique called shame attacking, developed by the psychologist Albert Ellis. While Ellis prizes acting against shame because such action can lead to increased confidence and greater self-worth, Foucault values *parrhesia* as a form of transgression and critique. Bringing together the work of these two theorists for the first time, this thesis interrogates the imbrication of these distinct outcomes, which in turn compete and align for the artists whose work it analyses as case studies. The project's main practical outlet is a talk show, *The O Show* (2011 to 2018), which also explores this overlap by showcasing the author-qua-talk show host's self-disclosures and those of other artists, often alongside the insights of psychologists.

Thus the author's practice attempts to answer the same research questions but with a broader scope than this thesis, which looks closely at art that challenges norms of appearance. The work of Martha Wilson, Oreet Ashery, Cassils, Mark Aguhar and Katherine Araniello provides potent examples in exploring beauty, ugliness, masculinity, femininity, mental health and disability. By demonstrating the ways that each of these artists transforms shame into courage, this project stakes a claim in the numerous debates around the value of the personal and the therapeutic in feminist art, advocating for its importance.

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### ***The O Show (2010-18)***

(performance documentation, edited episodes, press materials and consent forms)

#### *The O Show Tour, Spring-Summer 2018*

- The O Show Tour - Press Release.pdf

#### *The O Show: Without Sacrificing Her Femininity – 2018 (forthcoming)*

- <http://orianafox.com/blog/2018/05/the-o-show-femininity/>

#### *The O Show: Business or Pleasure? – 2018*

- <http://orianafox.com/blog/2018/05/the-o-show-business-or-pleasure/>
- Video files

#### *The O Show: Time's Up, Penis Down: Masculinity, Sexuality and #MeToo – 2018*

- <http://orianafox.com/blog/2018/05/the-o-show-the-curtain-31-may/>
- Video files

#### *The O Show: Female Masculinity – 2017*

- <http://orianafox.com/blog/2017/05/the-o-show-on-female-masculinity/>
- The O Show on Female Masculinity - Rationale and Aims.pdf
- Video files

#### *The O Show: Killer Conversations – 2017*

- <http://orianafox.com/blog/2017/01/the-o-show-killer-conversations/>
- OShow-KillerConversations-flyer.jpg
- Video files

#### *The O Show: The Therapeutic Process and Performance – 2012*

- <http://orianafox.com/blog/2012/10/can-performance-cure/>
- <http://www.thisisperformancematters.co.uk/potentials-of-performance/words-and-images.post143.html>
- <http://www.thisisperformancematters.co.uk/potentials-of-performance/words-and-images.post158.html>

*The O Show: Mouse and Lovelace Looking for Love* - 2011

*The O Show: Scottee's Academia-phobia* – 2011

- <http://orianafox.com/blog/2011/07/the-o-show/>
- <http://www.thisisperformancematters.co.uk/potentials-of-performance/words-and-images.post125.html>
- Video files

*The O Show (pilot episode)* – 2011

- <http://orianafox.com/blog/2011/05/the-o-show-pilot-episode/>

### **Solo Performances:**

*Touch Cinema* – 2015

<http://orianafox.com/blog/2015/10/fan-club/>

*Remains* – 2015

<http://orianafox.com/blog/2014/11/remains/>

*Remote Control 'Touring Talk'* – 2012

- <http://orianafox.com/blog/2012/04/remote-control/>
- Video files

*Performance Art Can Change Your Life For The Better* – 2010-12

- <http://orianafox.com/blog/2010/09/performance-art-can-change-your-life-for-the-better/>

*How to Make Anyone Fall In Love With You* – 2010

- <http://orianafox.com/blog/2010/10/how-to-make-anyone-fall-in-love-with-you/>
- Video files

*Tableaux Vivants for One* – 2010/2011

- <http://orianafox.com/blog/2010/10/tableaux-vivants-for-one/>
- video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLP7HD2erpg>

*The No Pain No Gain Workshop* – 2010

<http://orianafox.com/blog/2010/01/the-no-pain-no-gain-workshop/>

## **Workshops (leader)**

Creative Families with the South London Gallery and Parental Mental Health – 2016

<http://orianafox.com/blog/2016/09/everyday-achievements/>

DIY 9: Live Art and Therapy Workshop – 2012

- <http://orianafox.com/blog/2012/07/diy9-workshop-live-art-therapy/>
- [DIY9-Report-Live-Art-Therapy-OFox.pdf](#)

## **Workshops (participant)**

Dora Garcia's Write and Perform a Monologue Workshop – 2012

<http://orianafox.com/blog/2012/08/write-and-perform-a-monologue/>

Method workshop with Sam Rumbelow - 2012

<http://orianafox.com/blog/2012/06/the-method/>

ArtsAdmin workshop with Marcia Farquhar – 2012

<http://orianafox.com/blog/2012/03/talking-about-myself-with-marcia-farquhar/>

Metal Comedy Lab with Oreet Ashery, Mem Morrison, Scottee, Caroline Smith and Owen Parry - 2011

<http://orianafox.com/blog/2011/10/metal-comedy-lab/>

'Entertainment Value' workshop with Scottee - 2012

<http://orianafox.com/blog/2011/09/entertainment-value/>

'Naked as a Jaybird' with Oreet Ashery - 2011

<http://orianafox.com/blog/2011/02/naked-as-a-jaybird/>

## **Other**

I was invited to keep a blog of my artistic activities from 2/2011 to 2/2012:

<http://orianafox.com/blog/2012/02/the-protagonist/>

I performed alongside John Kilduff (aka Mr. Let's Paint) on *Let's Paint TV* in 2010 and 2011:

<http://orianafox.com/blog/2011/03/lets-paint-tv-2011/>

<http://orianafox.com/blog/2010/06/i-am-mr-lets-paint/>

<http://orianafox.com/blog/2010/06/lets-paint-bbq-and-exercise-tv/>

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## Chapter One

### Context and Methodology: From the Personal to the Political and Back

Feminist and queer performance artists, like mainstream TV chat show guests, seem to have little to no difficulty self-disclosing, even when what they have to reveal defies expectations and norms. How do they do it? What gives them confidence in the face of potential rejection and criticism? What are the personal and emotional consequences of their shamelessness? How do their risky self-revelations function as a form of socio-political critique? My research attempts to answer all of the above through my art practice – in which I imbue the confessional with parody as an amateur talk show host interviewing fellow artists, cultural producers and psychological experts – and via this thesis which looks more closely at feminist and queer performance art that challenges norms of appearance.

Just as my artwork mixes up high and low cultural material, interviewing avant-garde artists whilst borrowing the format and tropes of mainstream TV, my thesis pits the scholarly philosophy of Michel Foucault up against the much more populist and accessible ideas of Dr Albert Ellis, the psychologist who invented Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) and his followers. More specifically, this thesis connects Foucault's late writing around care of the self and *parrhesia* (or free-spokenness) to Ellis' key therapeutic technique, shame attacking, which entails gaining confidence from acting against your inhibitions. In monologues to captive art audiences I often use the phrase "It works for me, it can work for you too" – which happens to be the subtitle of one of Ellis' publications on REBT (2004a). I say it with a knowing wink and a smirk because I cannot seriously offer myself up as role model both because I am flawed and because I do not want to be prescriptive, but at the same time I genuinely want to help people and to change the world for the better. This project therefore aims to lend some weight to this cliché by making accessible the actions of artists as life practices that affect them as people and which can influence the lives of others, whilst in parallel, taking the erudite theories of Foucault and relating it to the advice of a man who was known for his regular use of expletives. I am trying to translate the boldness that so many performance artists exhibit into lessons about what is at stake socially and politically and

what can be gained personally and therapeutically from revealing one's truth and turning shame into courage.

To further elucidate these aims and the focus and structure of this thesis, in this chapter I will explain the context for my research and define my key terms; explain my methodology and the rationale behind my choice of case studies; situate my project within the key literatures from which it emerges and departs; connect my theoretical pursuits to my practical work as an artist; and finally, outline the chapters that follow.

### **Performance, Performance Art, Feminist Performance Art**

My focus is primarily on artists who engage with the medium of performance as an *experiential* form and therefore use their own body and/or personal testimony. My case studies and chat show guests include a spectrum of types of artists including those that work within and across theatre, fine art or club contexts, and/or do performances to camera, i.e. without a live audience, and/or on the internet. I am investigating the way in which actions performed as *art* draw from, overlap with and impact the artist's *life* or become/inform their *life practices*. To this extent my research is ethnographic and therefore connects with the field of performance studies, not only making use of its "much-prized method", but in having to distinguish between art and life in the practices of artists who make it their practice to blur them (Schechner 2013, 2).

The artists whose work I analyse in this thesis fall within the genre of 'feminist performance art', which I define as originating in the mid to late 1960s when the social movement of feminism impacted on an art world that was entrenched with conceptualism and the dematerialisation of the art object. Though feminist performance art begins in the second wave period, roughly 1965 to 80, I use the term inclusively to describe the work of subsequent generations of artists who have either knowingly followed on from this legacy or who cover common ground.

My art practice prior to the start of my doctoral studies evolved within a specific cultural moment in which feminist art gained greater critical attention and institutional appreciation. The context out of which this project has developed includes my own event of feminist reenactments entitled 'Once More



with Feeling' (2009) at Tate Modern; the preceding Los Angeles MoCA exhibition 'WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution' (2007); and 'Re.act.feminism' (2008-14), the 'performing archive' which travelled across Europe.<sup>1</sup> For 'Once More with Feeling' I produced a series of unorthodox reenactments inspired by art works I had researched at the Women's Art Library held at Goldsmiths, University of London, in addition to inviting other contemporary artists to respond to archived pieces through their own playful recreations.<sup>2</sup> Contemporaneously with my project, curators Bettina Knaup and Beatrice Ellen Stammer produced 'Re.act.feminism', a temporary archive that featured works by second-wave feminist artists and younger artists with practices quite like my own, who were looking back at that material and creating new iterations.<sup>3</sup> In producing the publication that culminated their project, the curators abandoned the legacy model in favour of categorising artworks thematically regardless of whether or not the connections were intentionally made by the artists. This thesis follows their lead to the extent that it features artists who identify as feminist and/or queer, some of whom took part in or were consciously inspired by early feminist performance art and others whose performances bear an uncanny resemblance without making conscious allusions to work of the past.

Furthermore, this research project, like 'Once More with Feeling' and 'Re.act.feminism' before it, highlights performance art as a quintessentially feminist medium, or in the words of Knaup and Stammer, "the paradigmatic medium for gender-critical, feminist artistic production" because of the way the body and actions of the artist becomes the medium; how it blurs art and life, the private and the public; the challenge it poses to (formal) categorisation; the way it enabled women artists to become subjects rather than objects of art and to make work outside of traditional art spaces (Knaup 2014, 9-10). Moreover, I see performance art as "paradigmatic" because feminist and queer art more

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<sup>1</sup> In common with Re.act.feminism, my research rides the wave of institutional interest in performance art. I began my PhD studies as an associate researcher for the AHRC-funded project 'Performance Matters' (2010-2013), organised collaboratively by Gavin Butt of Goldsmiths, Adrian Heathfield of Roehampton University and Lois Keidan of the Live Art Development Agency.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on this project see my 2010 essay "Once More With Feeling" and my website [www.orianafox.com](http://www.orianafox.com).

<sup>3</sup> I attended the opening Re.act.feminism conference at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin in 2009 as part of my research for 'Once More With Feeling'.

generally tends to utilise “the artist’s own body [life and/or labour] as a central feature” and to focus on gender and gender-related content (Cowie 2015, 48).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, during the second wave, feminist art *had* to become feminist lives because no gallery was necessary; they presented their work in the public realm instead of waiting to be invited to take part in a male-dominated art world.<sup>5</sup> In tandem, as performance studies scholar Deirdre Heddon explains, her predominantly female students within drama and theatre departments, decades later, have turned to autobiographical performance, especially in light of the dearth of female roles in traditional theatre (17). Likewise, my own autobiographical work has always been made in response to a lack of representations in the public realm with which I could wholly identify.

The oscillation I experience between identification and disidentification with ‘women’ both fictive and real, and indeed the very identity position ‘woman’ is central to my feminist concerns and as such informs my understanding and use of the term feminism. Just as there is no definition of ‘woman’ that will suffice for *all* women, as queer theorist Judith Butler states, “[n]o one stands within a definition of feminism that would remain uncontested” (2004, 174). I therefore define it, for the purpose of this thesis, as a movement and ethos that seeks to challenge and diminish gender discrimination in its myriad forms and redress gender inequality. Gender discrimination although historically and to a large extent today signifies the social, physical and economic oppression of women, it also includes the maintenance of hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality that impact individuals of *all* genders. I therefore recognise that feminism must constantly be updating itself since the definitions of masculinity and femininity are historically contingent and “notoriously changeable” (Butler 2004, 10). These facts have informed my methodology and selection of case studies for this thesis, i.e. the inclusion of artists regardless of their gender.

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<sup>4</sup> Although I haven’t taken up the term ‘feminist-inspired art’, which art historian Griselda Pollock and artist Mary Kelly prefer, I recognise its validity in the sense that ‘feminist art’ may be too hegemonic because it contradicts the notion of a multitude of feminist subjects (Pollock 2008, 253).

<sup>5</sup> This paraphrases an observation made by Lynn Hersmann Leeson at a 2011 screening of her film *Women Art Revolution* at Whitechapel Gallery, London, in response to the question of why performance art was a medium taken up by so many women artists during the 1970s. Her response also mirrors feminist artist and writer Catherine Elwes’ statement: “performance is about the ‘real life’ presence of the artist. She takes on no roles but her own” (58).

## Practices of Freedom and *Parrhesia*

My project here is to analyse the self-disclosing practices of feminist performance artists as modes of acting in the world. To conflate the actions of performance art with modes of living is not always a simple matter since it can be argued that artists' works are *depictions* rather than a way of life in and of themselves. I am aware of this distinction; however opening up one's life/body/thoughts to public scrutiny vis-à-vis the work of art in the case of many artists is an act of self-disclosure worthy of investigation as such. Furthermore, the artworks I turn my attention to are either inseparable from lived experience, blurring the line between art and life, or they are the evidence of an activity, which although done in service of representation, may still have impacted on the life of the artist in significant ways, including those that they may not have been able to predict in advance.

The openendedness or unpredictability of the end-goal or *telos* of a given action or mode of self-care is definitive of what Foucault theorises as "practices of freedom". When I use this term I am referring specifically to his detailed explication of this concept in an interview entitled "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom" ([1984a] 1997, 281-286).<sup>6</sup> I am also referring to his definition of 'freedom' as he delineates it in relation to 'care of the self' in antiquity throughout his late lectures at the Collège de France (1980-84) reproduced in *On the Government of the Living, The Hermeneutics of the Self, The Government of Self and Others, The Courage of Truth and Fearless Speech* (1983) and again in additional late interviews, including one with Michael Bless entitled "Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual" (1980).

Notably, Foucault's phrase "practices of freedom" is one that also percolates throughout much of the recent scholarship of Foucauldian feminist theorists such as Cressida J. Heyes, Ladelle McWhorter, Jana Sawicki, Dianna Taylor and others arguing that his ideas on ethics and subjectification cohere with their own goals.<sup>7</sup> Following in their wake, my intention is to be another

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<sup>6</sup> He also refers to "practices of liberty" within another interview "An Aesthetics of Existence" ([1984] 1988, 50).

<sup>7</sup> For examples of these theorists' writing, see the 2013 special issue of the *Foucault Studies* journal on Foucault and feminism edited by Heyes. As Heyes explains in her introduction to the issue, these theorists, like myself, utilise Foucault's larger ideas towards feminist ends without

voice in the debates around the relevance of Foucault's work for feminism, considering his late work, interviews and posthumously published lectures to describe and interpret feminist ways of living vis-a-vis performance art. My study thereby distinguishes itself from much of the scholarship on performance art and feminism to date, which may "feature a slogan or two from Foucault's enormous output and then run an empirical analysis that would have been much the same without it" (Heyes 2013, 3).<sup>8</sup> In fact, not one of the art historians who have written seminal books on feminist art (i.e. Amelia Jones, Peggy Phelan, Rebecca Schneider, Jayne Wark, Clare Johnson, Jo Anna Isaak, Griselda Pollock and more) address Foucault's posthumously published work on ethics, care of the self, ancient Cynicism and *parrhesia* (*franc-parler*, 'free-spokenness' or 'free speech') in relation to self-disclosing, feminist art.<sup>9</sup>

To further explicate my reliance on Foucault's phrase 'practices of freedom', I must begin by sketching out the philosophical project that he was engaged in during the last years of his life. His project was a comprehensive and detailed genealogy of the modern Western subject or rather, in his own words: "how a human being turns him or herself into a subject" (1998, 3). Throughout his work, Foucault consistently rejects the notion of an *a priori* subject and posits that subjectivity can take many forms depending on the power relations within which one operates and the relationship one has with oneself. From 1980 to 84, Foucault shifts from his prior focus on domination (i.e. the impact of external power relations on the subject) into an exploration of 'care of the self' (i.e. the relation of the self to itself), by continuing to research the relationships between truth/'modes of veridiction', power/'governmentality' and the self/'subjectivation'.<sup>10</sup>

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worrying about whether or not he would approve (3). For more evidence of the usefulness of Foucault for feminism, see Taylor and Vintges' *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (2004).

<sup>8</sup> In Heyes' introduction to the aforementioned special issue, she states this to differentiate the essays therein from other scholarly work in the humanities and social sciences.

<sup>9</sup> Having extensively searched the scholarly literatures on feminist art/performance for references to Foucault, I found that his late (post-1980) writing is largely if not wholly absent. Moreover, when his work is used, it is *not* for the purpose of analysing artworks as it is within this thesis, but instead is applied either sparingly or indirectly to differentiate the authors' histories as fully contextualised and distinct from reductionist, linear ones; to back up a critique of authorial intent; or to explain the internalisation of relations of power as exemplified within his theories on the panopticon, which again predate the theories I utilise here.

<sup>10</sup> It's worth noting that English-speaking Foucault scholars differ in their translation of the French term *subjectivation*, which Foucault began using in the early 1980s specifically to distinguish between it and *assujettissement* (Milchman, 66). The latter term refers "to how one is objectified as a subject through the exercise of power/knowledge, including the modalities of

The crux of Foucault's intricate genealogy is the opposition he sets up between ancient modes of subjectivation, or the care of the self as a practice of freedom, and what he terms the hermeneutical self-relation, which is self-renouncing and obedient. The hermeneutics of the self, he explains, which originated in the early Christian period, forms the foundation for the human sciences and dominates our contemporary experience and understanding of subjectivity. The human sciences, and the biopolitical institutions (educational, political, social, etc.) that are informed by them, provide a set of norms and behaviours to which individuals must conform. As Foucault explains, the hermeneutical self-relation, and the investigative practices of subjectivation it entails, serves to exacerbate docility. To clarify, if who we are and can be is already defined for us, then all our self-examinations and the activities we engage in to become (or approximate) a subject must follow that directive, fundamentally limiting our skills, our potential and our self-knowledge. Regardless of what essence replaces self-sacrifice at the core of the (Christian) hermeneutical subject, the normalising effects of this self-relation remain in place.<sup>11</sup>

Foucault therefore questions whether we might alter the practices one carries out on oneself, what he terms 'self-technologies', as opposed to advancing an affirmative subject in place of a self-renouncing one. In his systematic investigation of the ancient 'arts of living' he attempts to locate the precedents for such alternatives. Through close textual analysis of classical sources from Socrates to Marcus Aurelius, Foucault explains that both truth and autonomy were key aims of the cultivation of the self throughout antiquity. His attentiveness to ancient ethics is precisely because they problematised freedom for eight centuries, although the actual ethical practices themselves changed

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resistance through which those power relations can be modified or attenuated, *subjectivation* pertains to the relation of the person to him/herself; to the multiple ways in which a self can be fashioned or constructed on the basis of what one takes to be the truth" (Milchman, 66-67). I therefore utilise the term 'subjectivation' throughout this thesis to refer to all types of self-relation. I use 'subjection' only when referring to ways in which subjects are objectified or determined by external forces.

<sup>11</sup> In his lecture "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self", Foucault summarises the hermeneutical self-relation as such: "Unconditional obedience, uninterrupted examination and exhaustive confession form in this way a whole, with each element implying the other two [...] But we must underline that this expression does not have as its end the establishing of sovereign mastery of oneself by oneself; what is expected, on the contrary, is humility and mortification, detachment with respect to oneself and the establishing of a relationship with oneself that tends towards a destruction of the form of the self" (Foucault [1980] 1997, 157).

and evolved over time (1997, 285). In so far as the Greeks saw freedom as the opposite of all forms of slavery, care of the self meant self-mastery or extricating oneself from both external tyranny and internal fantasies, appetites and whims. Despite, or rather because of this reflective focus on freedom, the ancient practices of self-care – notwithstanding “signif[ying] for us [in our contemporary context] either egoism or withdrawal” – became the foundation of “extremely strict moralities”(2005, 13). In other words, it is precisely through the autonomous and continual concern of the self with itself, not selflessness or self-sacrifice, that the subject maintains an ethical relationship to others.

Ancient *parrhesia*, which Foucault lectured on over the course of several years, was one such ethical practice. *Parrhesia* entailed modes of ‘veridiction’ (or subjectively verifying the truth) that were critical and defiant. This form of truth-telling is dependent upon the relationship that the speaker has to him or herself. The *parrhesiastes* or person who performs *parrhesia* binds him or herself to the truth and to their notion of themselves as a person who tells the truth. *Parrhesia* therefore runs counter to epistemology; the concern is not how to determine the correlation between what is said and what is real, but instead what qualities does the speaker have that guarantees their truthfulness. In antiquity the key ethical question was: What does a person have to do to gain access to the truth? While in our contemporary age an entirely different question is posed around truth and the subject: “How can the speaker be sure what he says is true?” The latter question, Foucault explains, is entirely foreign in ancient contexts (2001, 14). Unlike our modern understanding that the (rational) subject automatically has access to the truth, in antiquity it had to be earned via the transformation of the self, the self acting upon itself, often with the assistance or guidance of an authority figure or spiritual mentor. The *parrhesiastes* not only transforms him or herself into a moral subject by telling the truth, but also in turn mentors others with their truth telling. The only proof that demonstrates the *parrhesiastes*’ honesty is their courage since *parrhesia* necessarily entails great risk for the speaker because it is profoundly critical of the interlocutor (Foucault 2001, 14; 2011, 56).<sup>12</sup> Thus, Foucault describes

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<sup>12</sup> Due to limitations of length, I have distilled Foucault’s theorisations on *parrhesia*, which are complex and detailed not only because its forms varied over centuries of antiquity, but also because he takes care to distinguish it from other ancient forms of truth-telling as well as from performative speech acts, rhetoric, lecturing or pedagogical forms of speech.

*parrhesia* as a virtue, not a skill. Speaking freely, the *parrhesiastes* accepts the negative and even potentially life-threatening consequences of revealing what may be unwelcome information to the listener. Not knowing what the outcome of telling the truth will be means that this manner of speaking ensures the openness and “indeterminate potentiality” of the speaker, which is antithetical to the closing down of the hermeneutical self (Taylor 2013, 96).

In all of the examples of ancient *parrhesia* that Foucault addresses – whether it is relative conferring confrontational advice, a political advisor admonishing a tyrant or a woman reproaching the god who raped her – the commonality is chancy critique. Therefore it is unsurprising that there are parallels in Foucault’s account of *parrhesia* and his definition of ‘critique’ or the ‘critical attitude’ as a more modern activity. All are “akin to a virtue” and counter to the dogmatic, docile self. Foucault describes ‘critique’ as follows:

[C]ritique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth.[...] Critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability. Critique would essentially insure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth.” (2007, 43/47)

So in so far as *parrhesiastes* risk injuring their interlocutor, that is, someone who has power over them, they are operating within Foucault’s definition of critique, bound as it is to the politics of truth. Unlike the hermeneutical practice of confession, which pins us down and limits our capacities, *parrhesia* requires that the subject speak and act freely, and in this uncertain practice the *parrhesiastes* alters him or her self and their relationship with the world in unpredictable ways.

It is no great leap, therefore, to connect Foucault’s notion of *parrhesia* to what I define as feminist performance art since both are noncompliant forms of critique. At the same time, because *parrhesia* is an ancient practice that is historically contingent, I cannot simply equate or imbricate current modes of behaviour with it. Regardless, my analyses in this thesis rely heavily on Foucault’s linking of the politics of truth to subjectivity. Furthermore, Foucault himself stated that Cynicism, Stoicism, Skepticism and Epicureanism still exist “as an attitude, a way of being” rather than as a “doctrine” and suggested that it

would be worthwhile to locate and analyse their contemporary manifestations (2012, 178). Notably, he makes this suggestion about Cynicism in particular, which I take as a focal point, following his lead. Also, he begins to sketch out some possibilities for locating cynicism in more recent phenomena including, significantly, modern art (2012, 186).

He describes Cynic *parrhesia* generally as “scandalous behaviour that calls into question standards of decency, institutional rules, etc.”, which is not limited to speech, but encapsulates physical behaviour, actions and the presentation of the body. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that I find certain examples of ancient Cynic *parrhesia* provided by Foucault to be comparable to self-disclosing practices within feminist performance art (1983, 120-1).<sup>13</sup> Diogenes, the Cynic philosopher who walked into the marketplace and masturbated is possibly the first recorded example of a scandalously shameless form of bodily *parrhesia*, with VALIE EXPORT’s *Touch Cinema* (1968), Annie Sprinkle’s *A Public Cervix* (1988) and Lazlo Pearlman’s *The Barcelona Walk* (2010), among other feminist performance pieces, following on in his footsteps three millennia later.<sup>14</sup> While the meaning and weight of these artists’ work in relation to the critique of normative gender identity and the goal of sexual ‘emancipation’ might be secure, what remains open to investigation is how such provocations entail a therapeutic self-relation. Utilising Foucault’s analyses of ancient care of the self enables me to bring such a self-relation into sharper relief.

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<sup>13</sup> I am not the first scholar to compare the conduct of the ancient Cynic Diogenes with performance art, see also Thomas McEvelley’s essay “Diogenes of Sinope, Selected Performance Pieces” (1983).

<sup>14</sup> A brief summary of these works is as follows: for *Touch Cinema* (1968) VALIE EXPORT invited members of the public to feel her breasts through a curtained contraption that she wore over her chest in the streets of Berlin as part of a film festival; for “A Public Cervix” (1988) the sex-worker-turned-artist Annie Sprinkle inserted a speculum inside her vagina and provided a light to audience members who lined up and inspected her cervix as part of her solo show *Post-porn Modernist* first performed at Harmony Theater in New York; and for *The Barcelona Walk* (2010) trans artist Lazlo Pearlman walks nude through the streets of Barcelona unannounced whilst being filmed from afar, the walk is featured in a film called *Fake Orgasm* directed by Jo Sol. Foucault cites the example of Diogenes, which comes from Laetius’ *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, in both *The Use of Pleasure* ([1984] 1992, 84) and *Fearless Speech* ([1984] 2001, 122).



## Therapeutic Shame Attacking

It is my contention that, practices of freedom, insofar as they provide the possibility “to constitute, understand, and relate to ourselves differently”, can be therapeutic (Taylor 2013, 96). In light of Foucault’s serious objections to therapy and psychoanalysis in particular, however, I must explain from where I derive my understanding of the term ‘therapeutic’ (Foucault [1976] 1998, 113). The notion of the therapeutic that I am utilising comes from the principles of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), a psychotherapeutic paradigm equally adverse to psychoanalysis as Foucault’s philosophy. REBT founder, Albert Ellis’ critique of psychoanalysis, however, evolved approximately thirty years prior to Foucault’s and out of very different considerations.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, like Foucault, Ellis was not only skeptical of the merits of excavating the patient’s past to uncover the origin of their current problems, but also based his theories in ancient philosophy, specifically the Stoics.<sup>16</sup> Ellis took inspiration from Epictetus who said that “People are disturbed not by events but by their opinion about events” and therefore advocated various techniques with which his clients could change their thinking (and feelings) about their lives (Dryden 1997, 329). Unlike psychoanalysis, which attempts to uncover the hidden meaning of thoughts or the origin of behaviours in what Foucault would term an hermeneutical fashion, REBT entails a rational, administrative accounting of one’s thoughts alongside practical experimentation that challenges the patient to act against their own self-inhibiting beliefs. These activities find their origin in and are parallel to certain ancient practices of freedom.

Ellis’ form of therapy stresses autonomy and in enabling his clients to become self-reliant (i.e. not dependent on the therapist or other people generally), he advocates a self-relation similar to that of the *parrhesiastes*

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<sup>15</sup> Foucault was critical of the human sciences generally and psychoanalysis specifically because of their normalising and limiting operations, in other words, because they “ignored [their] own place in the network of power” (Dorfman 2010, 158). Ellis, by contrast, trained as a psychoanalyst in the early 1940s, initially utilising Freud’s methods. He started questioning the tradition in 1947 and definitively broke with it ten years later as he formulated his own practice of psychotherapy (Albert Ellis Institute website).

<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that, other than this thesis, there is only one other text that cites both Foucault and Ellis and that is psychotherapist Donald Roberston’s *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy* (2010). But, importantly, unlike this thesis, he does not actually address the two thinkers in connection with one another.

described by Foucault. Ellis also derides what he calls “Florence Nightingalism” or the notion of a self-renouncing or sacrificial self; and instead encourages tolerance and the pursuit of pleasure (2004, 73). Central to his theories is the notion of human fallibility (he describes himself and others as FHBs or fallible human beings), who because of their imperfections inevitably make mistakes (Ellis 1973, 2, 106, 186). Furthermore, according to Ellis, we FHBs are multi-faceted, complex beings who continually evolve over the course of our lives and therefore cannot be given a single, universal rating (Ellis 2005, 59, 79-81). To my view, this corresponds to Foucault’s assertion that the subject is not a substance but takes on many forms (1997, 290). In light of this multi-form, ever-changing and fallible subject, REBT entails practicing unconditional self, other and life acceptance (Ellis 2005, 19-22). Similarly to ancient arts of living described by Foucault, Ellis’ treatments revolve around a personal, ethical practice that looks outward, extending the tolerance we cultivate in and express towards ourselves to others and the world. In order to foster and express such tolerance in the face of our own and others’ inevitable failures, mistakes and foibles, Ellis recommends that we judge actions *not* selves (2005, 19). This brings to mind Foucault’s assertion that “[w]e judge the criminal more than the crime. And it’s the knowledge we gain of the criminal which justifies whether we inflict such and such a punishment” (1996, 25). Foucault, like Ellis, argues how misguided and problematic such a rationale is, whether it is one that operates externally through penal and mental health systems (as the former addresses it) or internally within our psyches (as Ellis elaborates).

Ellis explains, “one of the main functions of psychotherapy, it is usually held, is to enhance an individual’s self-respect (or ‘ego strength’, ‘self-confidence’, ‘self-esteem’) so that they may thereby solve the problem of self-evaluation” (2005, 37). He goes on to articulate that instead of asking how to help individuals to perceive themselves as valuable regardless of their performance, modern psychotherapy has instead asked “another almost antithetical question”:

Since the individual’s self-acceptance seems dependent on (1) her succeeding or achieving reasonably well in society and on (2) her having good relations with others, how can she be helped to accomplish these two goals and thereby achieve self-esteem? (2005, 37)

In answer to this question, the term therapeutic might then be defined as that which improves self-esteem; that is as Ellis highlights above, that which helps the individual to achieve success and popularity. By contrast, rather than see self-esteem as the goal of therapy, Ellis instead declares that self-*acceptance* be the aim and integral to that is the acceptance of the individual's own specificities and imperfections, freeing them from societal expectations and standards.<sup>17</sup>

One of the key techniques Ellis prescribes in order to avoid negative self-evaluations is called "shame attacking". This entails "clients deliberately seek[ing] to act 'shamefully' in public in order to accept themselves and to tolerate the ensuing discomfort" (Dryden and Ellis 2007, 63). There is therefore a relationship between Ellis' trademark 'shame attacking' exercises and the more extreme practices of the Cynics called *anaideia*, or shamelessness, which was also of interest to Foucault.<sup>18</sup> Foucault writes about Cynic acts of *anaideia*, or purposefully seeking out public humiliation as an example of truth-telling that calls into question standards of decency and institutionalised rules (Foucault 2001, 121). To practice freedom in Foucault's sense, in my view and Ellis', is tied to no longer judging one's worth against societal standards, or taking the risk of not living up to them. Ellis recommends therefore that people "give up all 'ego' concepts and have no 'self-images' whatever" – in other words, that they desubjectify (2005, 44). Coming full circle, to desubjectify, as described by feminist Foucauldian Dianna Taylor, "entails constituting, understanding, and relating to oneself in ways other than as a subject" or to practice freedom (2013, 89). While Ellis saw shamelessness as therapeutic, particularly when accompanied by 'unconditional self-acceptance', Foucault valued it as a form of transgression and critique.<sup>19</sup> In either case, acts of shamelessness are expansive and rely on a fluid and changeable notion of the self. Both Foucault

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<sup>17</sup> The common critique of REBT, and perhaps all forms of therapy, is that it point inward to individuals, making them responsible to accept themselves, as opposed to putting the onus upon society to do so. Another critique of REBT and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy is that the aim is not to help people to assess their values and wellbeing, but rather to get them back into the workforce and able to perform and hence produce capital. Whilst this *might* be true, the premise behind REBT in particular is to accept oneself regardless of performance and status, in other words potentially in ways that are wholly antithetical to capitalist values. These are topics I address more fully below in the conclusion to this thesis.

<sup>18</sup> Ellis, however, was unaware of the Cynic precedence for his treatment (Robertson 2010, 126).

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, according to Robertson, the Cynics valued *anaideia* for both reasons (2010, 127).

and Ellis thus theorise how to care for a self that is never static or fixed, but always potentially in flux.

## Methodology

Both Ellis' anti-shame exercises and Foucault's *parrhesia* necessitate virtue or a certain kind of ethics (that is often called courage) because they entail personal risk. By Foucault's definition, however, practices of freedom have no set end-goal, as opposed to Ellis' exercises that not only have specific therapeutic aims (i.e. gaining confidence and improved wellbeing), but also entail that the patient consciously practice unconditional self-acceptance.<sup>20</sup> So while I am arguing that these practices be recognised as in many ways analogous, I do not claim that they are interchangeable.

Just as every feminist performance art piece is not necessarily a "practice of freedom" in the Foucauldian sense, likewise they are not necessarily always therapeutic. The aim of my research is therefore to understand how exactly shame attacking and *parrhesia* are imbricated in the work of certain feminist/queer performance artists and to establish the emotional outcomes of their shamelessness. Do their norm-defying self-disclosures give the artists confidence or just require it? Are the acts of self-care they perform as art desubjectifying, i.e. do they transform the artists in unpredictable ways? What risks does their truth telling expose them to and do the negative consequences outweigh the positives?

To answer these questions I apply a feminist, philosophical, therapeutic methodology that includes critical analysis and practice. I employ Foucault's theories to assess whether or not the practices my case studies carry out are disciplinary or freeing. Practices of freedom, dictated as they are by cultural conventions, are shaped via varied processes from self-writing, diet and exercise to household management and the "elaboration of one's own life as a personal work of art" (Foucault 1996, 451). It is these same procedures that

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<sup>20</sup> Although I endeavour here to highlight the points of connection between Foucault's theorisations on practices of freedom and Ellis' prescription of shame-attacking as therapy, it would be a misrepresentation of REBT to suggest that it is a totally anti-normalising form of therapy. While it is true that shame attacking is a technique that can be harnessed toward these aims, other aspects of the therapy are deeply enmeshed with normalisation, for example, the categorisation of certain behaviours as 'healthy' or 'unhealthy'.

came under the scrutiny of feminists and the performance artists among them. My case studies include those artists who use their work to document actions and rituals that often underpin and uphold normative feminine (or, in some cases, masculine) appearance (such as the application of make-up, hairstyling and hair removal, dieting and exercise). In some cases the artist exaggerates or parodies the normative disciplinary procedure, and in others, they actively contradict or deconstruct it. In some, the differences between how these acts are lived as opposed to represented are virtually indistinguishable, save for their being recorded (and in our current confessional and highly surveilled culture this distinction is in turn fully contextualised and examined, particularly in the third chapter and conclusion). That said, from the outset, performance art proved to be fertile territory for feminist artists wishing to transform life itself and this is why a Foucauldian analysis of their work as self-technologies is particularly useful.

Throughout the histories of feminist performance art the personal ramifications of the art-making practices on the artists tend to go without mention or are derided as unimportant, just as the therapeutic aspects of art more generally tend to be undervalued.<sup>21</sup> However, as I will argue, the complexity and worth of self-disclosure as a method cannot be fully grasped without considering its impact on the lives of those who practise it. This investigation thereby functions as an intervention into the literatures of feminist performance art, which I respond to more directly below. To the extent that the personal outcomes of performance art are side-lined within academic histories, this thesis privileges autobiographical accounts and anecdotes from the

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<sup>21</sup> To give just one example, art critic Doug Harvey comments that “the most openly and widely despised paradigms for art making” is “the process-based therapeutic approach to art” (2001, 14). See also Sebastian Smee’s review entitled “Taking the pulse of ‘art as healing’ at Danforth Art”, which espouses a similar critique of art that serves a therapeutic or in fact any other social, as opposed to purely aesthetic, purpose (2014). For a challenge to these views, see Hogan’s *Feminist Art Therapy* (1997), which provides a positive valuation of the therapeutic potential of art. In the book’s forward, cultural theorist Deborah Lupton explains that there are two strands that make up feminist art therapy, i.e. an overtly political one and a personal one. By her definition, the artwork I address in this thesis falls within the former in that it serves “to express and critique the socio-political context in which pain, disability, illness or social stigmatisation or inequality are experienced” (Hogan 1997, 1). This distinguishes it from the latter, which entails the creative expression of emotion to remedy the individual (Hogan 1997, 1). In this way my case studies are distanced from whatever (potentially misguided) criticisms might be associated with the personal strand. However and crucially, Lupton states that the focus on feminism brings *both* strands “into the sphere of contestation and the political” (Hogan 2012, xii). In other words, she clarifies that therapeutic feminist art is *always* political even if it only serves to make individual women feel better.

practitioners themselves, hence the need for the interview as a method of research.

The in-depth qualitative interviews I have carried out for this thesis, as well as in preparation for my practical work, have entailed asking open-ended and often quite personal questions. I have purposely selected the artists for my case studies (and as the guests for my talk show) because they are *not* shy of talking about edgy matters and employ a great deal of candidness in their work. This is why a talk show, an arena notorious for ‘the confessional’, is a key part of my methodology. Specifically, I have created *The O Show* (2011-8) as the main practical outlet for my research, modeling it on mainstream, daytime, issue-oriented talk shows – produced primarily in the US and largely aimed at female audiences. This genre disseminates personal talk that is either lauded by media theorists and critics as upholding the feminist maxim of ‘the personal is the political’ or derided for being self-indulgent and without a wider political impact, i.e. ‘just talk’.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, the disputes around the value of TV talk show disclosures in many ways pointedly mirror arguments around the relevance of Foucault’s work for feminism (or indeed as a critical tool more generally), i.e. that his focus on ‘care of the self’ is too individualistic and therefore ineffective as political critique. These conflicts also echo the ‘not therapy’ debate that tore apart factions of feminists in the burgeoning days of the women’s liberation movement (Seigel 2007). The stance that individual transformation is less efficacious and therefore of less value than collective political action has been at the centre of heated arguments around consciousness-raising, which lent the feminist slogan, ‘the personal is the political’ “a distinctly defensive ring” (Seigel 2007, 40). Parallel tensions crop up in scholarly discussions around feminist forms of therapy. As feminist Foucauldian Margaret A. McLaren has observed, the debates among feminists around the correlation between consciousness-raising and therapy pointedly “mirrors the debate among feminists about the political utility of Foucault’s work” (2002, 145). Just as Foucault’s critics see his

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<sup>22</sup> For positive critical assessments of the talk show genre see Priest (1995), Taylor (1996), Shattuc (1997) and Gamson (1999). Notably, Shattuc’s analysis of the genre specifically employs the writing of both Foucault and feminist Foucaudian Jana Sawicki in her assessment of the disclosures on talk shows as either ‘self-actualisation’ or ‘self-regulation’ (1997, 10). For lukewarm to all-out negative appraisals of daytime chat shows see Bonapace et al. (1995) and Kurtz (1996).

turn to ethics as too individualistic, radical feminists believe that change at the level of the individual “was the gravy” but “political awareness” and collective action are the true purpose of feminist consciousness-raising (Perl and Abarbanell 1979, 24; cited in McLaren 2002, 157). This is why I address the conflicts among theorists about the germaneness of Foucault’s work for feminism in more detail below, situating this project within these debates. I also address feminist art therapy as a literature with which my research dovetails.

By delving into my own and other artists’ experiences, uncomfortably verges on judging us as people and undertaking a psychological evaluation. This begs the question, how do I avoid mirroring the pathologising of women in general? As art therapist Susan Hogan explains, “the defining characteristics of femininity are considered unhealthy”, to contest this one must view women’s “dis-ease as a valid and realistic reaction to their subservient position in society” (1997, 13/93). Women seem to be caught in a double-bind; normative femininity is thought of as unhealthy, yet defying such norms, as all my case studies do, opens one up to be judged as dysfunctional or abnormal. So the only feasible way forward is to do as Hogan does and recognise the extent to which this represents “a clash of values” and question the models against which mental health are judged. In other words, I must see my work as residing within a critical project taken up within the discipline of feminist art therapy and also by Foucault, that is, one that questions the way the social sciences and psychiatry in particular labels and diagnoses subjects, recognising how language produces and maintains subjectivity (Hogan 1997, 13).<sup>23</sup> This, again, is why I have chosen a Foucauldian feminist, therapeutic methodology.

Accusations of being ‘crazy’ or apolitical are two of many risks feminist performance artists potentially face in self-disclosing for their art and it is Foucault’s theorisations of *parrhesia* that emphasise both self-care and risk. Therefore the need for informed consent was a priority when carrying out my interviews. To that end, it has been my habit to brief all participants about the goals and overarching concerns of my work/research and to have them sign

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<sup>23</sup> Disability theorist Shelley Tremain, whose work I cite in chapter four below, also takes up a similar line of argumentation by using Foucauldian feminism to contest philosophical (mis)understandings of ‘disability’ that posit it as a “a personal misfortune, or pathology” instead of it being culturally constructed and therefore contingent upon existing power relations (2017, 19).

release forms to confirm they consent to the purpose and use of the interviews (recorded either as research material and/or as art).<sup>24</sup>

My methodology allows me to move from the personal outward to wider social and political concerns. For example, every episode of *The O Show* takes on a theme that is relevant to me personally. At the start of each show, since 2011, I present details from my life experiences in order to convey my relationship to the subject matter. Likewise, the selection of my case studies is also autobiographical and reflects the process that took place as this project unfolded. The structure of this thesis also moves from the personal outward. It stems from my own risky truth-telling and then moves on to locating other individuals who practice it, some of whom create and/or take part in social arenas in which this form of self-disclosure proliferates. In my conclusion, I then contextualise the effects of this practice in and beyond 'safe' spaces, in the wider world.

Additionally, all of the artists I take as my case studies and interview on *The O Show* are either based in or from the US, where I was born and raised, or the UK where I have resided since my early 20s. Because my work for many years prior to commencing the PhD looked to the art of the second-wave as inspiration, my thesis also begins by turning to work from that time by Martha Wilson. I first came across Wilson's work in 1996 at the UCLA/Armand Hammer Museum exhibition *Sexual Politics* curated by Amelia Jones, a pivotal moment in feminist art history when work from the 1970s was beginning to be reassessed, having gone out of favour due to debates over essentialism in the 1980s. It was also my first year at art school. My methodology permits me to mine these historically contingent and deeply personal occurrences for all that they are worth.

### **Countering Shame as a Feminist Politic**

I have selected my case studies because of the way I can read the logic of shame attacking into their work. Their works counter the negative effects of the affect shame or its sister affect, humiliation. Similarly to how feminism

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<sup>24</sup> See Appendix E for the consent forms for the artists interviewed for this thesis and a sample consent form for a guest on my talk show, *The O Show*. All further consent forms for *The O Show* (2010 to 2018) are included in my practice portfolio.



connects the personal and the political, the private and the public, shame is at once a highly personal and profoundly social. As queer affect theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains, one of shame's "strangest features" is that it is "both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating" (2003, 36). She goes on to say that this is "perhaps also" the aspect of shame "that offers the most conceptual leverage for political projects", and I would add particularly for feminist ones (2003, 37). "That's the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality" (Sedgwick 2003, 37). Kosofsky makes these assertions about the way in which an embarrassing or humiliating incident spreads the affective response (shame) with "suffusiveness" within the group that witnessed it, whilst simultaneously "delineat[ing] [the] precise individual outlines [for each member of that group] in the most isolating way imaginable" (2003, 37). I, instead, want to appropriate her insights around shame – as simultaneously social and individual – to highlight the way that it alerts the individual to the shared norms and expectations of their particular context. It performs this social function in a painfully "individuating" way.

According to theorist Sandra Lee Bartky, "shame is the condition in which women live and as such, it is virtually, unremarked, unfelt, unseen. Shame manifests in a pervasive sense of personal inadequacy that, like the shame of embodiment, is profoundly disempowering" (1990, 3). She writes: "women are in general less assertive than men, have lower self-esteem, less overall confidence, and poorer self-concepts" which manifests as "a demeanor [...] that [bears] the characteristic marks of shame, of a shame felt indirectly or anticipated: in their silence, the necessity for hiding and concealment; in the tentative character of their speech and in their regular apologetics, the sense of the self as diminished" (1990, 88/90). She highlights how this disempowering form of shame is profoundly different from the types of shame that moral psychologists claim are helpful in binding us to our genuine principles and moral beliefs.

Within moral psychology good shame is "true" shame that comes from failing to act in accordance with one's authentic values, while false shame is 'bad' because it "exerts pressures" to be a self that is not genuine (Bartky 1990, 94). In Western society women are given sense of shame about their bodies (looks, smells, size, sexual availability), which leads them to regulate their

bodies and present them in a manner that is deemed attractive or beautiful, whilst concealing the labour that is involved in presenting a normatively feminine body. This is then in conversation with a kind of feminist shame at caring about how one looks – that to care about and work towards achieving normative ideals around appearance and femininity is somehow compromising one's values as a feminist. It is incredibly difficult if not impossible for individuals to navigate these conflicting demands or to distinguish between true and false shame because our normative society produces subjects with conflicting ideals and desires, who are often at odds with themselves and therefore apply standards inconsistently (Bartky 1990, 94-95). In light of this, Bartky debunks the presumably 'neutral' (male) subject of moral psychology, arguing that in the case of women and other minorities, it is not simply that shame makes us better people, instead it is more often an internalised instrument of oppression. Bartky explains this in a passage that is worth citing at length:

But shame, for the shame-ridden and shame-prone, is not a penance that restores the miscreant to the proper moral equilibrium – this [is], for standard moral psychology, the normal and ordinary use of shame in ethical life. For such persons, there is no such equilibrium to which to return: 'Feeling inadequate' may color a person's entire emotional life. Under conditions of oppression, the oppressed must struggle not only against more visible disadvantages but against guilt and shame as well. [...] Better people are not made in this way, only people who are weaker, more timid, less confident, less demanding, and hence more easily dominated. The experience of shame may lend legitimacy to the structure of authority that occasions it, for the majesty of judgment is affirmed in its very capacity to injure. The heightened self-consciousness that comes with emotions of self-assessment may become, in the shame of the oppressed, a stagnant self-obsession. Or shame may generate a rage whose expression is unconstructive, or even self-destructive. In all these ways shame is profoundly disempowering. The need for secrecy and concealment that figures so largely in the shame experience is disempowering as well, for it isolates the oppressed from one another and in this way works against the emergence of a sense of solidarity (1990, 96-97).

In describing the experience of shame for minority subjects, this apropos excerpt confirms the value of countering shame as a feminist activity, or indeed as a form of activism that builds from the personal outward. For oppressed subjects shame attacking poses a challenge to societal norms and values and enables them to live and feel differently (possibly better) and to revalue themselves.<sup>25</sup> Bartky's assertions demonstrate the way in which norms are reinforced through shame, how such injurious feelings "lend legitimacy to the structure of authority that occasions it" (97). Therefore the act of shame attacking undermines and speaks back to power, making such a therapeutic practice simultaneously a critical one, thus again connecting Ellis' prescriptions with Foucauldian *parrhesia*.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Foucauldian feminist Jana Sawicki has linked the late Foucault with the 'reparative', highlighting how it counters the negative affect of shame. Sawicki compares Sedgwick's notion of "reparative reading", which allows "selves and communities" to "extract sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" with Foucault's 'practises of freedom' that harness conventional practises toward non-normative self-transformation (Sedgwick 2003, 150-1).<sup>26</sup> Both creatively rework existing aspects of culture in innovative and experimental ways and therefore comprise methods for "thinking [and being] otherwise" (Sawicki 2013, 75). Moreover, they do this in a manner that is pleasure seeking, of which Ellis would approve.

Beyond illuminating the parallels in Sedgwick and Foucault's thinking, Sawicki explains how the former engaged with the writings of the theorist of affect Silvan Tomkins who "did not understand shame, an especially important

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<sup>25</sup> Bartky's elaboration here also makes clear that there is a distinction to be made between shame attacking by minorities that this thesis evaluates and the shame attacking that might be carried out by a non-minoritarian subject. For example, if an individual feels ashamed because they abused power or committed a crime, this would be a result of feelings of guilt (for what one has done, as opposed to who one is) and therefore whilst admitting guilt and revealing one's shame and remorse would be a personal avenue for resolution/transformation, it would not necessarily have socio-political ramifications.

<sup>26</sup> In parallel, queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz illuminates a survival strategy he calls 'disidentification' that operates, much like Sedgwick's reparative readings, by transforming aspects of exclusionary mainstream culture into sustenance by and for minority subjects/groups (1999, 5). Importantly, Muñoz invokes Foucault's conceptualisations around practices of freedom to understand disidentification's strengths and weaknesses (1999, 178). In fact, what becomes clear from Muñoz's writing is that disidentification is worthwhile only when it is a practice of freedom as opposed to an act of self-sacrificing conformity, which it often risks becoming.

affect for both women and queers, as an emotional and behavioral response to disapproval or transgression, but rather as an experience of having one's interest or joy inhibited" (2013, 86). She continues:

Thus, when others do not respond in a familiar way to one's excitements and engagements, shame and reduction of interest can be the result. Humiliation can shut down curiosity and excitement. It can lead to defensive, rigid and paranoid postures, and to fear of making mistakes. Yet, it is also an indicator of a suppressed capacity for joy, excitement, and curiosity that might have reparative effects (2013, 86).

In this way, Sawicki not only highlights the connection between Foucault's and Sedgwick's respective strategies for critical engagement, their aesthetics of existence oriented towards pleasure and defiant of shame, but it articulates a more nuanced understanding of the affect shame itself. Shame is not simply the feeling that results from behaving in ways that counter societal norms, but it is the curtailing of pleasure, excitement and curiosity. By acting against shame, as Ellis' prescriptions invite us to do, we not only "risk being wrong" and open ourselves up to indeterminacy as Foucault would advocate, but also, according to Tomkins, we have the potential to gain inverse emotional and reparative repercussions, that is enthusiasm, joy and curiosity, which is undoubtedly also why Ellis values them (Sawicki 2013, 86).

Whilst the assertions of Bartky and Sawicki go some way toward describing the worth of shame attacking/truth-telling for feminists, queers and other non-normative subjects, its consequences are not always entirely positive. Although the artists that I focus on in this thesis act in defiance of shame, that does not mean that they necessarily avoid feeling it altogether. Therefore the experience of shame, exclusion and withdrawal is exactly what is at stake when feminist and queer performance artists so boldly self-disclose. Philosopher Kathleen Woodward warns that shame at its most extreme can become "traumatic" and "foreclose the possibility of any useful self-transformation" because in contexts of extreme intolerance it is so all-encompassing as to be impermeable, in which case it leads to "violence or to debilitating depression" (217-225). In addition to embracing joy, curiosity and the solidarity that can come from shared self-disclosure within an accepting social milieu, the revelatory work of performance artists can also entail experiencing quite the

opposite: humiliation and social exclusion. What is at stake when one acts against societal norms and shame is also, not coincidentally, what the *parrhesiastes* risks when telling the truth and is central to my investigation in the chapters to come.

## **Foucault and Feminism**

By employing Foucault's tools, this thesis testifies to the ways that feminism can benefit from the tensions that his thought brings to bear on its goal of 'emancipation'.<sup>27</sup> Foucault argues that it is not only possible but also necessary for the oppressed to overthrow their oppressors, but that specific dynamic does not account for the complexity of power relations. Absolute freedom for Foucault does not exist because power is everywhere. This is not to say that his theories preclude the possibility of resistance to power, as numerous feminist critics have posited, but rather that freedom is also everywhere. Resistance is therefore inevitable and, worryingly, can lead to new forms of oppression.<sup>28</sup> For example, feminists can critique the norms and ideals of patriarchy, whilst at the same time setting up a new (and arguably, equally restrictive) set of standards to which women must adhere and conform.<sup>29</sup> I find myself, as Heyes so aptly puts it, "located in a web of sometimes contradictory norms", "never within a seamless system, and [I'm hoping] the fissures and tensions between norms provide a conceptual entrée to [a] kind of critical work" (2007, 117). And like Heyes, I find Foucault's theories incredibly useful in disentangling the conflicting ideals and norms that feminist artists navigate in

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<sup>27</sup> As Sawicki asserts: "But even if Foucault questioned the possibility and desirability of thinking in terms of total revolution, and by extension the emancipation of women as a group, his critical approach continues to be indispensable for freeing us from habits of thinking and doing that limit us to specific and unnecessarily constraining relations of power/knowledge within the present" (2013, 77). Likewise, Grimshaw argues that Foucault's "theme of 'practices of freedom' seems to me to be an extremely important one for feminism", because "...it can never be assumed that any particular kinds of 'liberation' will establish freedom, equality or mutuality permanently or without ambiguity, either in women's relationships to men or to other women" (1993, 60).

<sup>28</sup> One example of this is the fact that Western middleclass women's desire to 'have it all' and escape the confines of the traditional role of woman as homemaker and mother meant that those jobs were then relegated to domestic workers, usually imported from lesser developed or eastern countries – with the formerly oppressed then becoming akin to the oppressor (Grimshaw 1993, 56).

<sup>29</sup> For evidence of this from lived experience see Lori Gottlieb's chapter "How Feminism Fucked Up My Love Life" in *Marry Him, The Case For Settling For Mr. Good Enough* (2010, 43-60). For a more theoretical discussion of this same issue see the first chapter of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in which she states "the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation" (1990, 2).

presenting their selves within their work. In the coming chapters I will evaluate the politically-motivated self-disclosure of performance artists in terms of its therapeutically freeing effects for the performer, questioning if it succeeds as a form of innovative self-creation or alternatively, if it results in pinning down or essentialising the subject. In keeping with Foucault's debunking of the concept of total liberation, my case studies demonstrate that it is not in fact possible to achieve complete liberation from the norms that constrain and define us, but nonetheless there are both risks and rewards for striving toward it.

I build off McLaren's Foucauldian perspective that feminist truth-telling can be akin to *parrhesia* as opposed to normalising, confessional speech by virtue of its critical orientation, political aims and context (2002, 160). McLaren states:

awareness of one's own situation as the result of oppressive conditions and not personal failure can foster self-confidence and empowerment in individuals that *may* help them achieve political action to promote social change. This, self-transformation *can* be an important step toward social and political transformation (159: italics added).

However, the value of both consciousness-raising and Foucault's ethics for feminism hangs on McLaren's words 'may' and 'can'. Her reluctance to concretely affirm the necessity or worth of personal transformation in and of itself – as well as the fact that she gives little in the way of examples of specifically feminist self-transformations – essentially opens up the field of enquiry for this thesis. I take on the challenge of valuing the shameless self-disclosure within feminist performance art as practices of freedom that can in fact be more than merely personal.

In line with this, my thesis counters the views of Foucault's detractors who see his turn to ethics as is too individualistic, masculinist or non-relational to be relevant for feminists.<sup>30</sup> To this end I align myself with Taylor and other Foucauldian feminists who argue that it is precisely in its foregrounding of the

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<sup>30</sup> For these critical perspectives, see Kate Sorper's "Productive Contradictions", Amy Allen's "Foucault, Feminism and The Self" and Lois McNay's *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (1992) as well her essay: "Self as Enterprise: Dilemmas of Control and Resistance in Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics*" (2009). Toril Moi and Martha C. Nussbaum also agree that Foucault's turn to ethics/self-care advocates an individualistic conception of liberation that ignores the wider structural determinants affecting women's lives (Ramazanoğlu 1993, 36; Heyes 2007, 113).

relationship with oneself as “ontologically prior” to care for others (i.e. that which makes it vulnerable to accusations of individualism) that ancient ethics becomes particularly relevant for women because women are socialised to put the needs of others before themselves (1997, 287).<sup>31</sup> In fact, the relationality of the female subject, which some of Foucault’s feminist critics claim his theories are ill-equipped to address, comes into sharper focus in the analyses that follow because it is precisely the characteristically ‘feminine’ desire to obtain love and feel a sense of belonging that can inhibit shameless self-disclosure for some of the artists I have interviewed. In fact, by focusing on works about physical appearance, my writing underscores the paradoxes and binds at the heart of normative femininity. Firstly, women live for the love of others yet (or perhaps because of this) are considered narcissistic and self-centred. Secondly, to employ self-technologies as a practice of freedom would mean taking ‘care’ of one’s appearance toward unknown goals, that is, not necessarily to be appealing, yet, in pursuing pleasure/love one aims to attract potential partners. In seeking out examples of self-care by feminist performance artists that exceed limitations at either end of the spectrums of self-renunciation/narcissism and desirability/autonomy, I demonstrate how pertinent and invaluable Foucault’s theories can be for feminism.

### **Histories of Feminist Performance Art**

The only text within feminist performance art literatures that I have found that connects the late Foucault with feminist performance art in a way that is akin to this thesis is Tanya Augsburg’s essay “Orlan’s Performative Transformations of Subjectivity” (1994) in which the author asserts that what art historian Lisa Tickner terms “transformations and processes”, that is those practices that “US feminist body artists of the 1970s” engaged with, Foucault would call “techniques of the self” (288). Augsburg’s text, like others addressing the work of the controversial feminist artist ORLAN, delves into the autobiographical more than most scholarly criticism in general. This is because

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<sup>31</sup> Taylor puts it as such: “that women are ‘naturally’ self-renouncing reinforces their subordination” (2013, 7). But instead of countering this by positing an active or agentic feminist subject, Taylor uses Foucault to advocate desubjectification in that it entails the practice of freedom without pinning down the subject (i.e. woman, as those who care for others over the self).

the self-inflicted violence of ORLAN's works in which she undergoes extensive cosmetic surgery on her face and body provokes questions about her own sanity.<sup>32</sup> To paraphrase Augsberg's argument, ORLAN's work presents a subjectivity that is at once defined externally by medical technologies, but also from within in her employment of these technologies to her own extremely unconventional ends, making it almost illustrative of the intertwining of Foucault's early "archaeologies" comprising "how subjects are constituted by institutions" and his late work on care of the self (Augsberg, 286). There is therefore a kernel in Augsberg's essay, which this thesis brings into fruition, around the ways that feminist and queer performance artists more generally rework techniques of the self "to make visible the tensions between one's social restraints and one's personal choices" and how this reflects/impacts the psychology of the artists (287). Augsberg states that if ORLAN "seems pathologically detached from her experiences, it could be as she claims: she insists that she is just as *curious* as we are concerning how her physical change will affect her – not only on the surface of her body but in terms of her sense of self-identity" (308: emphasis added). ORLAN takes an act that most people shamefully hide, that is, plastic surgery, and turns it into a spectacle because she is *curious* as opposed to ashamed about it. Shame and curiosity, which Tomkins highlights as being opposing affects, are elements touched on by Augsberg's analysis, upon which this thesis expands in relation not to just one practitioner, but to the wider genre of feminist performance art.

There are a handful of art historians and performance studies scholars who, although they do not utilise the late Foucault, illuminate the experiential nature of feminist performance art in ways that lay the groundwork for this thesis. More specifically, while many writers remark on the unidirectional flow of the personal to the work, only a selection concern themselves with the way in which the work might double back and impact the life of the artist or function as a vehicle for personal transformation.<sup>33</sup> Performance studies theorist Peggy

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<sup>32</sup> I discuss ORLAN's surgical works in comparison to the body-modifying practices of my case study Cassils in chapter three below.

<sup>33</sup> Within the preface to the exhibition catalogue *Pulse: Art, healing and transformation* – one of the few books about this topic, outside of the discipline of art therapy – the author/curator Jessica Morgan remarks on how the artists featured within it "have been influenced by a feminist practice of the 1970s that argued for a relevance both theoretical and political, that could be extrapolated from personal experience" (2003, 18). In other words, the theoretical and the political is "extrapolated from" the personal, rather than flowing back and forth.



Phelan comments that second-wave feminist performance artists utilised the medium to “remove the metaphorical structures of art to make it more direct”, “erasing the boundaries between art and life” by turning the practice of art making into “a state of mind” (2001, 29). Phelan’s observations are echoed in art historian Laura Cottingham’s essay “Are you Experienced?” in which she situates feminist performance art within its 1960s counter-cultural context and uses this to underscore lived experience as a goal of its practitioners. Her text deftly demonstrates how certain, iconic feminist performance artists in that period were after “a more direct engagement with life”, rather than simply acting in service of representation. I take Cottingham’s observations as a jumping off point for my own analysis. However my aim is decidedly different from hers in that she uses these artists’ work to make a case for the novelty of performance art as an avant-garde practice counter to Greenberg’s disinterested formalism and to combat accusations that the work was essentialist, thereby revaluing it within the field of art, which is already well-trodden territory.<sup>34</sup>

Whilst making significant contributions to our understanding of feminist performance art, the relatively detached analyses of Phelan, Cottingham and others respectively miss out on the ways in which performance affects artists’ lives. Highlighting the intermingling of life and art seems to be acceptable within art history only in so far as it is done in service of heralding women’s revolutionary contribution.<sup>35</sup> Instead of valuing feminist performance art as an aesthetic experience for viewers or evaluating its efficacy as a critical strategy, this thesis investigates the psychological and behavioural bi-products of performance art.

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<sup>34</sup> Amelia Jones and Jayne Wark similarly highlight the shift away from modernism towards a direct engagement with life as one of the identifying characteristics of the medium (Cottingham 2000, 119; Wark 2006, 56; Jones 1998, 3). Wark also argues in tandem with this thesis that feminist performance artists’ most distinctive contribution – i.e. the “merging art and life” – was “not to expand the aesthetic terrain of art but to change life itself” (2006, 56). This argument aligns my research with hers, however, my interpretation of specific works differs because she foregrounds the political and the collective over and above the personal.

<sup>35</sup> Part of the reason why art historians do not delve into the murky territory of artist’s lives and the therapeutic function art making might serve is because (arguably) it may say very little about the quality of the art. As cultural critic Sander L. Gilman explains in his essay “Art, Healing and History”: “bad art can have therapeutic effects for the producer, just as one doesn’t expect Shakespeare on the analyst’s couch” (Morgan 2003, 49). This serves as a pointed explanation for why art that serves a therapeutic (or perhaps any other utilitarian) purpose is so adamantly despised by the arbiter’s of taste who protect the value of art for art’s sake (like Greenberg, for example).

My intention is to unpick the web of forces acting simultaneously on the subject (i.e. specifically artists) in a way that distanced art historical evaluations have previously failed to do. I'm investigating the accounts of artists' personal experiences as a way of illustrating the success of their feminist strategies *for living*. In doing so I align my goals with those of curator Cornelia Butler who explains that the intentions behind the 'WACK!' exhibition were "nothing less than a complete reorganisation of cultural hierarchies" (21).<sup>36</sup> In other words, I'm judging this work by new standards that set aside the hierarchies of value upon which most prior aesthetic judgements have been based. However, I use personal testimony to complicate our understanding of self-disclosure, not simply to elevate it.

I'm also not solely interested in re-evaluating 70s feminist art production to exonerate it from charges of essentialism. Yet, using the work of Foucault necessitates emphasising the difference between authenticity and self-creation. Therefore my research inevitably touches upon the essentialism or 'Woman-as-Image' debates. The artistic intention of having 'authentic experiences' on the path towards self-creation has been misunderstood as being analogous to the project of creating more authentic *representations* of femininity or women's identities and roles. The goal of creating an accurate representation can be dangerously linked to the notion of a 'true' inner self and therefore, in Foucault's terminology, "runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic and social processes, has been concealed, alienated or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression" (1996, 433). It is my perspective, however, that many feminist projects were *not* about depicting a *true* identity and to this extent, I am in agreement with numerous feminist art historians who share this view. Rebecca Schneider, for example, also interprets feminist performance art as specifically anti-essentialist, arguing that its practitioners "expose not an originary, true, or redemptive body, but the sedimented layers of signification themselves" (1997, 2).<sup>37</sup> Likewise, I concur with art historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau's view that

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<sup>36</sup> Butler uses this phrase to explain her selection criteria for the exhibition as inclusive of artists who have been less influential, more ephemeral but whose work as activists is no less compelling. So in this way she touts the one-way traffic of the personal toward the political and yet again the aftermath on the personal life of the artist is absent.

<sup>37</sup> It must be noted, however, that Schneider's theoretical framework and interpretive methodology is very different from mine. The only personal narratives within her book *The*

the project of “excavat[ing] a primordial self” was “striking” in its “absence from work of the period” (2007, 339). Our arguments, however, take separate paths there. In answer to her pointed question: “On what grounds can we take the activity of self-representation to be a part of [feminist artists’] artistic project at all?” (2007, 344), I respond that in place of self-*representation*, I find acts of self-*creation*. The artists whose work this thesis advocates transform their *lives* (intentionally or otherwise) by making art.

In theatre and performance studies, many critics mirror the art historical inclination to downplay the personal outcomes that result from the medium. For example, in her book *Autobiography and Performance* (2007), Deirdre Heddon focuses is on the shared space of reception for performance work and how this “special form of mediation” impacts an audience, rather than the practitioners themselves. She also goes on to assert that autobiographical performance “provides a means for the critical analysis and questioning of our immediate social environments and their impact on everyday practices” (2007, 17). This alludes to the presumptions that underlie this thesis without outright stating them, that is, that self-disclosure within performance art can be an outlet for living in ways that are questioning of and counter to societal norms. In neglecting to articulate precisely this, she allows me to take up this perspective in greater depth here.

In allegiance with this thesis, Heddon highlights autobiographical performance as a means by which marginalised subjects, or those robbed of subjecthood, go from margin to centre (2007, 2-3). In doing so, Heddon demonstrates the “political necessity to claim an identity” in the face of “hatred, denial and derision” and at the same time identifies the potential risk of essentialism in such claims (2007, 36).<sup>38</sup> My interest, however, which is not explored directly by Heddon, is to weigh the therapeutic effects of belonging against that of autonomy/liberation for the artist. Is autonomy worth being

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*Explicit Body and Performance* are Schneider’s own, coming from the perspective of an engaged viewer unlike my writing here.

<sup>38</sup> This echoes Heyes’ summation of this conundrum: “it is both necessary and troubling to seek out a home as a gendered or sexual being: necessary because community, recognition and stability are essential to human flourishing and political resistance, and troubling because often those very practices too often congeal into political ideologies that are exclusive or hegemonic” (2007, 41).

without a home? Is political resistance possible without identifying as part of a group?

As another key point of departure from this thesis, Heddon's work only touches upon the therapeutic in her discussion of works that reflect traumas related to grand historical narratives. She recognises but doesn't focus on 'less public' pieces "that might be read from the framework of 'trauma' where performance equates with 'personal healing'" (2007, 54).<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, Heddon's writing combats the accusation that autobiographical performance is 'merely' an ego-show, which my thesis contests all the more emphatically in that I'm not dismissive of pieces that simply boost the performer's confidence, since that is one of therapeutic goals my research recognises as valid, in part because of the "juxtapolitical" relevance of such 'ego-trips'.

### **Other Key Literatures**

Affect theorist Laurent Berlant coined the term 'juxtapolitical' to describe that which "flourish[es] in proximity to the political" (2008, 3). The juxta-political or 'near to'-political is precisely the territory that both this thesis and Berlant's work mines in its revaluing of the personal as more than merely individualistic. In Berlant's words, "the autobiographical isn't the personal. [...] The personal is the general" (2008, vii). This contention as well as the centrality I give to affect (i.e. shame) potentially marks my project as a product of the wider 'affective turn' in cultural criticism of which Berlant is a leading figure. Appropriately, my writing builds from the concerns of several affect theorists whose ideas I cite intermittently in the pages that follow, namely Berlant, Sedgwick and Ann Cvetkovich.

In advocating for shame attacking as an individual therapeutic practice with (juxta)political aims, my work dovetails with Cvetokovich's study of depression in which she highlights the transformative potential of bad feelings

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<sup>39</sup> The exception being that Heddon addresses the therapeutic aspects of Spalding Gray's work, which because it is not informed by feminism, does not directly relate to my research (145). Another distinction between Heddon's book and this thesis is that I focus on artists who, like myself, primarily have a fine art, as opposed to theatre or drama background. Additionally, the works I analyse herein, apart from my own, do not narrativise, act out or verbalise the performer's autobiography and many have no spoken language at all, unlike the pieces about which Heddon writes.

insofar as they motivate us to imagine and craft different lives. I also draw upon Berlant's observations that 'women' are shaped by a longing to identify and belong "within the vicinity of a love plot" to highlight the specific conflicts that arise from acting in defiance of norms of feminine appearance (2008, 7).<sup>40</sup> Berlant's thinking around the allure of normativity mirrors that of Sara Ahmed who asserts that happiness itself is unhelpfully linked to normativity and that subscribing to it may necessitate conformity and hence malaise. Ahmed argues that the feminist troublemaker and killjoy serve to illuminate other *teloi* (possibilities or horizons for experience) that exist apart from the happiness obtainable through living out traditional/normative feminine roles. Those other possibilities come to the fore in this thesis because 'care of the self' ceases to be a 'practice of freedom' once a set objective (such as happiness) is given.

Affect theory is not in fact new, as Cvetkovich points out, since it evolved from precedents within feminist theory, following the maxim 'the personal is the political' (2013, 8). Even though it is not novel or unexpected for a feminist researcher to explore juxtapolitical terrain, as I have stated, to investigate how making performance art affects the lives of artists personally remains unconventional and counter to traditional, distanced, historical research in art and theatre, which is in part why my project is situated in the field of visual cultures.

As a visual cultures scholar my goal is to challenge the values implicit in traditional art historical methodologies. To do so, I appropriate some of the logic of visual cultures theorist Irit Rogoff, who argues that gossip, a feminised and often denigrated form of communication, very much akin to the first-person ethnographic accounts upon which this thesis relies, can play a key role in "unyoking [history] from the authority of empirically sanctified 'experts'" (2003, 269). Like Rogoff, my aim is *not* to simply valorise personal talk, but rather to use it to write a more complicated history of feminist performance art, one that "distrust[s] the false immutable coherence of master narratives, [and] also [inevitably] the false, immutable coherence of our identities and subjects and tellers of those narratives" (2003, 269/276).

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<sup>40</sup> I also refer to Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism", or the longing that binds us to fantasies of 'the good life' that prevent us from flourishing in my conclusion.

Also interested in the critical potential of feminist epistemology is Jane Gallop, whose seminal book *Anecdotal Theory* (2002) highlights how the personal and anecdotal can be used to “produc[e] knowledge [and theory] that better opens to the real” (2002, 9). Importantly, this opening up to the real, in Gallop’s view is not “a one-way street”, “as if we go from the personal to the professional and never go back the other way”, but is instead “a busy two-way traffic” (2002, 20). This reciprocal flow, that connects Gallop’s theories to mine, occurs in her book when theory is put into practice and vice versa, while in this thesis this mutual exchange occurs in the muddied waters of art and life that take place within self-disclosing acts of performance art. It is there that the political agendas of the artists come into play as life, delineating the complexities and limitations of theory. It is precisely in practise where the personal and the political/theoretical come into question, in Gallop’s estimation and my own, “a knotted, thorny, troubling question” (2002, 23).<sup>41</sup>

### **Practice as Research**

In solo performances, group workshops and my talk show *The O Show* I attempt to answer “thorny, troubling” questions, like those I address in this thesis, but in a much more provocative, broad and hands-on way. While this thesis addresses physical appearance in particular, my artwork touches on this and other subject matter. *The O Show* specifically investigates how the shame-attacking acts of artists might be used in everyday life (by non artists too) and what personal and collective ends they might serve. Departing from this thesis, my talk show opens out to include artists, entertainers and psychologists whose work speaks to the show’s range of subject matter.<sup>42</sup>

*The O Show* has developed alongside my doctoral research and therefore the initial episodes, which were created before its key premise and methodology was fully conceived, reflect my initial, more general enquiries

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<sup>41</sup> Additionally, Gallop’s predilection towards the anecdotal is echoed by Cynic doctrine, according to Foucault, in that they made use “not so much of a theoretical, dogmatic teaching as of above all models, stories, *anecdotes* and examples” (2012, 208: emphasis added).

<sup>42</sup> The selection of guests is not limited except due to finances or availability, which means they are primarily London-based.

about self-disclosure in performance art and the media.<sup>43</sup> For example, two of the initial *O Shows* (2011), respectively featuring the club performer Mouse and artist Kristen Lovelock (billed as 'Krystyn Lovelace') in one and the entertainer Scottee in another, only hint at shame attacking as a therapeutic tool.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless they touch upon topics that arise in the ethnographic interviews and analyses carried out for this thesis. However, unlike subsequent incarnations of *The O Show*, on both of these episodes an artist reveals a problem that is then addressed by *The O Show's* staff psychologist, that is, my mother (who is a licenced psychotherapist). On the first of these two shows, Kristen Lovelock – a video artist who does sexualised performances to camera – describes her recent breakup and receives my mother's and my advice to use performance in a consciously therapeutic manner, that is, by acting as if she is worthy of the love she seeks. On the following episode Scottee presents himself as suffering from 'academia-phobia', or what he explains is actually an intense anger toward academics as a result of having been expelled from school at the age of 12 due to his sexuality. My mother congratulates Scottee for his success as an artist and suggests that he recognise his achievements in earning the accolades of academics and encourages him to express his healthy anger at academia through his critical artistic work. Scottee then defies his self-inhibiting irrational belief or fear of not belonging in academia by reading out an academic paper – an act of shame attacking.

The 'televised' therapy session with my mother highlights the ways that Scottee was already using his work to overcome personal setbacks. The shame attacking paper he followed this with, like the behavioural tactics suggested to Lovelock to find a suitable mate in the prior episode, demonstrate how performance might be used therapeutically. This two-pronged approach, looking backwards and forwards, was the subject of a professional development

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<sup>43</sup> The very first *O Show* (2011), which took place at the Performance Studies International conference in Utrecht (and was broadcast simultaneously online), is decidedly different from subsequent shows. It was made in a much more collaborative way with fellow 'Performance Matters' researchers Vikki Chalklin, Owen Parry, Jay Stewart. As a consequence, it operated as a satire of daytime TV talk shows, poking fun of its cliché narratives of personal transformation and the artist/queer as a sociopathic spectacle. On it the guests play stereotyped characters, as opposed to just being themselves.

<sup>44</sup> I have written about the Mouse and Scottee episodes more extensively on the 'Performance Matters' website ([www.thisisperformancematters.co.uk](http://www.thisisperformancematters.co.uk)). The interview with Mouse is also transcribed in the article "Half Man, Half Woman and Half Bear: Club performer Mouse Interviewed by Artist Oriana Fox on The O Show" (2011) in *Dance Theatre Journal*.

workshop I lead for six performance artists entitled ‘Live Art and Therapy’, supported by the Live Art Development Agency and Abandon Normal Devices.<sup>45</sup> I approached the workshop wanting to help the participants to tackle personal problems by using performance, specifically by prescribing the making of reenactments or doing shame attacking, yet my mother approached it (in a much more traditionally psychoanalytic way) by looking at the artist’s work as already responding to, or stemming out of the artist’s psyche and personal life/upbringing. I then made *The O Show: The Therapeutic Potential of Performance* (2012) as an opportunity to contrast differing approaches to psychological wellbeing. The three guests each advocate for a particular form of therapy; my own past therapist, the former actress Bernadette Ainsworth endorses REBT; Liz Bentley the comedian/therapist defends a psychodynamic approach; and method acting mentor Sam Rumbelow lauds Jungian psychoanalysis.

The upshot of my chat show experiments from 2010 to 2012 was that I arrived at the premise for subsequent series, mirroring my thesis: to discuss with my guests prior examples of shame attacking and *parrhesia* in their work and lives (made without any awareness of the theories) and to turn that into tips and advice. In the episode entitled *The O Show: Killer Conversations* (2017) that advice is then literally put to work by two volunteer audience members who are filmed doing so and also report back during the live episode.

My performance as host also entails my own form of shame-attacking/*parrhesia* in the autobiographical opening speeches. I present *The O Show* as an alter ego that is for the most part genuinely me, but also reminiscent of the stereotypical American TV chat show host – think Oprah.<sup>46</sup> My persona provides distance and helps to mediate the risks I’m taking to self-disclose.<sup>47</sup> In character, I am authentic to the extent that my interview

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<sup>45</sup> For more on this workshop, see my LADA DIY 9 report (2012) in the portfolio of practice.

<sup>46</sup> I created the character of the host in 2010 as a way to present myself in lectures I was invited to give about my work, see chapter three below for more on this. I developed the initial idea to make a talk show in 2010 after having created performances in homage to the artist John Kilduff (Mr. Let’s Paint) who has his own web series on which he multitasks (i.e. paints, cooks, exercises and other activities). His motto “Embrace Failare” [sic] encapsulates his brand of shame attacking and explains my admiration for him. In 2010 and again in 2011 I made guest appearances on his web TV show, filmed in Van Ness, California (see documentation included in portfolio of practice).

<sup>47</sup> This is an insight that I have only arrived at from doing this research and making this series. I’m particularly indebted to Eva Sajovic for pointing out this benefit.



questions, remarks and reactions as well as the autobiographical details I reveal are my own, yet my appearance visually reflects an idealised femininity that I do not live up to in my daily life. The self-presentation I perform as the host is probably not too dissimilar to the performance that my past guest Lovelock might do were she to take the advice to act as if she was deserving of her dream lover, albeit a retro 1980s version. In the words of the L’Oreal campaign: “because I’m worth it!” As the host I am acting as if all the self-help I have done has enabled me to become the normative ‘ideal’ of a perfectly coiffed blonde, layered with cosmetics, sporting a power-suit. Ironically, all the self-help I have done and the work of this thesis is (hopefully) more seriously aimed at making me (and others) more comfortable with *not* living up to an ideal. To this end, during the *Killer Conversations* (2017) episode, I reveal my idealised image for the illusion that it is, with a jokey remark.

My decision to reveal the host as a fiction is inspired in part by responses from audience members. One particular viewer came up to me after an *O Show* screening when I was no longer wearing my wig and asked where the host of the show went. Likewise, a participant in my interactive piece *No Pain No Gain Workshop* (2010) believed I was an actual life coach who had just flown in from the states.<sup>48</sup> In other words, people believe in the character I present as my self, despite my feeling on the inside that what I am doing is very much a parody that shows up the idealisation for the farce that it is, with my theatrical appearance serving to make my intentions clear.

By contrast, another *O Show* audience member explained to me that she understood the parody of my performance and she even thought my baby was fake – all part of the ‘act’ of portraying the woman who ‘has it all’. Additionally, when I performed one of my opening monologues, *without* donning the makeup and costume, during a workshop on writing and performing monologues by the artist Dora Garcia in 2012, she curtly described it as “confession dressed as satire”.<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, both of these viewers saw that my performance was at least aimed at parody, prompting me to further question why I utilise this form, especially since audiences have not always successfully recognised and understood my critique. The Dora Garcia workshop also made me realise that

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<sup>48</sup> See portfolio of practice for a description and documentation of different iterations of this workshop.

<sup>49</sup> See my blog post “Write and Perform a Monologue” ([www.orianafox.com](http://www.orianafox.com)).

although I am able to talk to anyone as the host, that is, within the safe confines of art, this confidence is not something that always carries over into my real life, where I continue to be shy a good deal of the time. Hence I made the decision to produce the *O Show: Killer Conversations*. In this episode I subtly reveal the character of the host as separate from my 'real life' self and talk about the limits of shame attacking as a persona. Even though I am aware of these limitations, I still aim at personal transformation to the extent that it is plausible. The tongue-in-cheek nature of my performances as *The O Show* host attempts to undercut the truth/authenticity-claims inherent in self-expression, destabilising notions of a coherent self, (hopefully) without denying other more complex truths with which the audience relates and identifies.<sup>50</sup>

I have had other opportunities to more earnestly present the material that I normally reveal in character, which have informed my thinking around the questions of this thesis. Namely, in leading workshops with mothers with mental health difficulties and their young children in collaboration with the South London Gallery and the Parental Mental Health NHS team for a project called Creative Families, I presented my "Unconditional Acceptance Pledge" not with humour as I do in performance lectures and as *The O Show* host, but as something I came up with to think about/recite "when I am feeling troubled".<sup>51</sup> But I found that when presenting it this way the word 'troubled' tripped over my tongue like a lie. In fact, I was not telling the whole truth. That would entail stating something along the lines of: I have been in therapy in the past and found that REBT practices help me cope with various difficulties and insecurities, but in my work I make fun of self-help (and REBT) by making my

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<sup>50</sup> For a critical response to my work that focuses on the way I mix sincerity and parody to reveal possible, ambiguous truths, see Marianne Mulvey's "Is there sincerity in hollow speech?" (2009).

<sup>51</sup> The decision to present the pledge in this way was down to ethical considerations; the support worker felt that I would need to ask prior permission to present an artwork as an alter ego. For another discussion of how the creation of alter egos can be used "to manufacture and affirm an alternative brand of 'truth' and "becom[e] a strategy for empowerment", see Julia Austin's essay entitled "Better Than Therapy: Alter Ego Performance and Being-Togetherness" about the use of alter egos in Oreet Ashery's socially engaged project with lesbian asylum seekers entitled *Staying* (2010, 19-20) and the discussion of this project in the interview with Ashery transcribed in this volume (Appendix B). Austin's essay paraphrases Lois Weaver's (2009) writing about the role of lying in therapeutic, socially engaged 'creative truth' theatre work that she carried out with Peggy Shaw in prisons in the UK and Brasil, which in many ways parallels my work. Presenting my work in this context brought up many ethical questions worthy of further investigation specifically around what it means to make fun of therapists and therapy in a therapeutic context in which vulnerable people are involved.

audiences repeat the self-acceptance pledge and chant “USA, USA, USA!” In the context of Creative Families, however, I wanted the women participants to take the pledge seriously and not lose its meaning with such a convoluted explanation. My colleague Heather Kay from the South London Gallery, who was aware that I employ the alter ego so as to permit me to be more genuine, believed the sincerity of my statement and said that she thought it was *more* revealing for not being in character. Once again, this brought to the fore the idea that all presentations of self are partial whilst not necessarily being untruthful. To me, my ‘genuine’ self was more disingenuous than my characterisations. As Heddon points out, vis-à-vis the insights of Derrida: it is simply not possible to present an unmediated self.

In addition to *The O Show* and other work that connects self-help/therapy to performance, I have also continued to create pieces in response to feminist performance art precedents such as my take on VALIE EXPORT’s *Touch Cinema* and *Remains* my rewriting of Kathie Amatriek’s “Funeral Oration for Traditional Womanhood” (both originals from 1968, redone in 2015), to name two examples. At first glance one might think that my practical work differs strikingly from those artworks I take as inspiration for my re-dos and as my case studies below. Indeed, many of those works, as Phelan describes it, “remov[e] the metaphorical structures of art” (2001, 29). It might even be said that in some of my homages I take those acts and put the structures of art right back in, but perhaps my work just serves to highlight how mediated the original performances actually were.<sup>52</sup> I like to think of myself as employing what Rebecca Schneider absurdly titles “remimesis”, a kind of replay that retains the “riddle” of female representation, “a mimesis conscious of itself as a mimesis. A mimesis replayed” (2014, 83).

Carrying out the analytical work for this thesis has meant both distinguishing between art and life practices and demonstrating how the theatrical and the real overlap. In the work of my case studies and mine, self-disclosure takes on many forms from parodic fictions to unadulterated documentation, and as Cvetkovich states – after succumbing to memoir as a

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<sup>52</sup> This may be down to the assumption that second-wave feminist work is on the whole (more) earnest and lacking in humour and parody (than the work that followed). For evidence to the contrary, see my essay “Once More With Feeling” (2010, 108). See also Rebecca Schneider’s account of Carolee Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll* in which she describes the piece as “acting out [her own dismissal as an artist] as if it were a joke” (2014, 84).

research method of her own – “to dismiss or champion it in some monolithic way seems misguided given its multiple possibilities” (2013, 74). Regardless of the level of artifice involved, my work informs my way of being in the world in a way that I will argue is akin to how other self-disclosing feminist artists’ work has impacted on them. Establishing the ways that performance art has affected change, versus how much change it was intended to enact, is one of the questions my research is attempting to answer. This and other questions will be put to work in the following chapters in relation to my case studies, utilising the methodology and theoretical frameworks outlined above.

## Chapter Outline

I originally envisioned that this thesis would address shame attacking/*parrhesia* by artists who grappled with a range of feminist subject matter or aspects of life problematised by gender. I had imagined that each chapter, like episodes of *The O Show*, would focus on a different theme and so I began with beauty ideals (make up and hair) intending to move to sexuality and perhaps the domestic. However, my analysis of Martha Wilson’s work ended up expanding to the length of an entire chapter, which led to the decision to make ‘appearance’ the central focus of this thesis in its entirety.

I use Wilson’s work to articulate the connections between Ellis’ therapeutic anti-shame exercises and Foucault’s *parrhesia* in chapter two. I also address certain works by Oreet Ashery that deal with appearance in part because her work was informed by feminism but also, and perhaps more importantly, because she happened to contact me (while I was in the midst of writing about Wilson) to ask that I remove images of her work that I had commissioned for ‘Once More With Feeling’ from my website.<sup>53</sup> Reflecting on this incident, and the work by Ashery that it revolved around, provides a productive foil to my celebratory analysis of Wilson in that it forced me to more deeply consider the pressures on minority subjects to conform. Ashery’s work also prompted me to discuss female masculinity, which both Wilson and Ashery

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<sup>53</sup> Ashery produced the first incarnation of *Hairoism* (2009) in response to Antin’s *The King* (1972) for my event. Underscoring the relevance of Ashery’s work in the context of intergenerational feminist performance art, *Hairoism* (2011) graces the cover of the catalogue for ‘Re.act.feminism’.

have explored in their respective work, but which I had previously overlooked. This led me to questions about the varying levels of risk that attend shame attacking/*parrhesia* for different individuals.

In chapter three I move onto an analysis of the work of Cassils, which manifests both 'masculine of centre' identity and the influence of second-wave feminist art, in addition to revolving around the artist's bodily appearance. Starting off with a critique of the mainstream makeover paradigm, I look at how my own work and that of certain feminist artists as well as Cassils' pose a challenge to its narrative of quick, painless and normative self-transformation. While many feminist artists depict self-technologies employed to transform the body/self as a form of consciousness-raising, only some use self-care to practice freedom. I therefore investigate Cassils' work and the life-activities presented within it as exemplary of feminist practises of freedom in the sense that it opens up the artist's identity, as opposed to shutting it down. In this way, I demonstrate that Cassils' trans ethos is a contemporary manifestation of ancient Cynicism that challenges the gender binary. However, I also address the ways in which Cassils' mediates the risks they take, which very much informs the focus of the subsequent chapter.

In chapter four I concentrate on the work of Mark Aguhar, including many posts from the blog she kept in the two years preceding her suicide. This chapter culminates my discussion of ugliness and the Cynic's valuation of it, begun in chapter two in relation to Wilson's work. I elaborate all the ways in which Aguhar flaunted her 'ugliness', or rather her intersectional alterity, which leads me to deliberate over the artist's death as an act of *parrhesia* and self-care. Although I take pains to understand her death according in her own terms, I of course, ultimately cannot advocate it. I therefore turn to the work of Katherine Araniello, particularly around assisted suicide and discrimination, to find points of connection and distinction to Aguhar's work and to challenge the individualism of both shame attacking and *parrhesia*.

In my conclusion, I address our contemporary context in which risky self-disclosure continues online, with Aguhar's work being exemplary in this respect. I also address the implications of my research within our current political context of neoliberalism.

## Chapter Two

### Makeup and Hair: Martha Wilson and Oreet Ashery

“Let’s be shameless.” - Naomi Wolf ([1990] 2015, 291)

In the introduction to the 2015 reprint of her seminal tome *The Beauty Myth* Naomi Wolf laments how little has changed in terms of the unrelenting litany of harmful effects beauty ideals wreak on women. At the same time Wolf also commends the new waves of feminist activism that have arisen since the book was first published in 1990. According to feminist Foucauldian Cressida J. Heyes, painful, self-surveilling and judgemental “psycholog[ies] persists even in the face of ‘raised’ consciousness” (2007, 108). In other words, Wolf’s book continues to be needed more than ever and this is not only because of the ever-increasing proliferation of images of female visual ‘perfection’ disseminated in the mainstream media and across the internet, but also because the raising of consciousness that her book executes and much feminist work consists of is not enough to create the kind of change Wolf and most feminists want to see. Significantly, to get “beyond the beauty myth”, as she outlines in the final chapter of the same name, Wolf advocates shamelessness. In order to champion “a reinterpretation of ‘beauty’ that is *noncompetitive, nonhierarchical, and nonviolent*”, significantly Wolf advocates: intergenerational collaboration over competition, truth-telling about the realities of life as a ‘beautiful’ woman and “play and pleasure-seeking” (2015, 286/290: emphasis in original). While it’s potentially problematic that Wolf hopes such actions will unearth a new “pro-woman definition of beauty” because of the difficulty of defining ‘woman’, I find parallels in her other assertions about shamelessness, “play and pleasure-seeking” and truth-telling with what I would commend as a feminist way of life or ‘aesthetics of existence’ that takes up a critical attitude towards mainstream beauty norms and indeed any codified views of how women *should* look.

Wolfe describes how the beauty myth serves to make slaves out of women, inhibiting their freedom by “*always actually prescribing behaviour and not appearance*” (2015, 14: emphasis in original). It is therefore fitting to address it via a behavioural approach such as REBT as well as an ethical one that problematises freedom and seeks pleasure, in keeping with Foucault. As

Heyes points out, feminism problematically sets up new norms that can be equally difficult to uphold because they also inhibit freedom or cause shame. Exemplifying this, Heyes asks: “How many feminists work on their bodies in secret, too embarrassed or ashamed to admit that they aspire to norms they theoretically abhor?” (2007, 108) In light of such a phenomenon, she advocates a different kind of working on the self, a kind of therapy that entails awareness of how suffering and desire are mutually constitutive, and are perpetuated not only by reiterated demands external to the subject, but also by her own internalized cyclical self-criticism [...] A process of disidentification from the self that will always strive to be self-improving, and fail, is a process that we might describe as both ethical and spiritual, requiring practices of the self that are somatic, meditative, and artistic as well as communal (2007, 108).

There are significant parallels between Heyes’ vision of a personal/communal therapy and Wolf’s endorsements of “shamelessness”, “truth-telling” and “intergenerational collaboration”. In tandem, both Wolf’s and Heyes’ respective commendations overlap with Ellis’ suggestion that we attack shame and “give up all ‘ego’ concepts and have no ‘self-images’ whatever” and hence accept our fallibility (2005, 44). I interpret these related yet distinct ‘solutions’ as suggesting that the key to finding one’s own way through internalised conflicts around how to care for one’s appearance as a gendered subject – and of countering both the beauty myth and the feminist injunctions to resist it – are to find alternative ways of relating to oneself and others. The premise of this thesis is that such practices reside in the crosshairs between shame attacking and *parrhesia* as exemplified in certain life/art practices of feminist and queer performance artists.

The questions that remain are numerous. Do those who follow Wolf’s recommendation to act shamelessly feel beautiful and desirable? Is embracing ugliness a worthwhile avenue to pursue in the face of beauty norms and the recalcitrant power they hold over us? What other ways can one practice freedom whilst caring for one’s appearance? It is my contention that the answer to these questions can be found in the accounts provided by feminist and queer artists whose art practices explore and defy norms of gendered appearance in ways that then inform their everyday lives.

To that end, this chapter centres around an analysis of several pieces by the American artist Martha Wilson (b. 1947) that address feminine appearance and in particular how cosmetics can be used to emphasise alternately beauty and ugliness. My investigation relies heavily on Wilson's account of how making these works both reflected and informed her self-presentation in real life. Following this, as a productive corrective to my analysis of Wilson, I then explore an anecdotal account and art works by London-based, Israeli-British artist Oreet Ashery (b. 1966) in order to highlight the risks of shame attacking, likening it all the more to Cynic *parrhesia* as Foucault defines it.<sup>1</sup>

### **Ugly Sacrifices**

Foucault's late lectures on Cynic shamelessness or *anaideia* (the brazen life), emphasise the courage that seems to be both its prerequisite and its effect.<sup>2</sup> The significant difference between Ellis' shame attacking and the Cynic's *anaideia* (shamelessness), is that what enabled the Cynics' courage was the renunciation of anything and everything that might inhibit their truthfulness/courage. In short, they had nothing left to lose.<sup>3</sup> Their lives entailed "laying bare, stripping down, excavation and violent reduction to its basics" which meant leading a life of "scandalous, unbearable, ugly, dependent, and humiliated poverty" (Foucault 2011, 188/259). The question is: what is wagered when feminist performance artists tell their truths? Is their bravado rewarded with the therapeutic results that Ellis promises for similar forms of attacking shame? Or are they instead making huge sacrifices on par with those that the Cynics made?

According to feminist theorist Kathryn Morgan, when a feminist refuses to conform to beauty norms (or even in fact when a woman simply ages), it can be

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<sup>1</sup> I describe Ashery an 'Israeli-British artist' because she has spent the majority of her life in the UK having emigrated from Israel in 1987 when she was 19 (personal interview and Khalef, both 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Foucault takes great lengths to explain that within ancient ethics truth and courage are inextricably linked yet, despite this, even Socrates himself cannot define courage (2012, 147-152).

<sup>3</sup> It may be that the Cynics did in fact have to practice some form of unconditional self-acceptance (though they did not name it that) and they also engaged in rational disputation following on from the teachings of Socrates and the Stoics. Ellis took inspiration from the Socratic method and Epictetus when he developed the practice of rational disputation (2005, 256/259).



a “kind of death”. In an article investigating the “politically correct feminist responses to [elective] cosmetic surgery”, Morgan asserts that refusal may entail sacrificing “the only kind of life-conferring choices and competences to which women may have access” (1991, 41-42).<sup>4</sup> She explains that the only way to account for the fact that women risk pain and other complications including death for the promised outcome of cosmetic surgery is that *not* having the surgery must feel life threatening (1991, 43).<sup>5</sup> In other words, refusing to conform to beauty norms, or choosing not to aspire to the feminine ideal, for some, can in fact be a sacrifice on par with those that the Cynic’s made.

Indeed, feminists who embrace ugliness are in some ways on a continuum with the Cynics who “introduced the value of ugliness into ethics” (Foucault 2011, 259).<sup>6</sup> Like the Cynics, they make a personal sacrifice in order to expose the cultural biases that construct ‘ugliness’ as that which is external to the norm or the perceived opposite of the ideal. Despite the clear disadvantages and potential losses it entails, Morgan insists that “the ugly has its own fascination” and advocates for the feminist valorisation of ugliness (1991, 45). In keeping with this, Morgan recommends that feminists create “Ms. Ugly competitions” for which contestants would permanently modify themselves by appropriating cosmetic surgery practices to become ugly, as a utopian form of feminist critique (1991, 45-46). Interestingly for this thesis, Morgan states: “*healthy* women who have a feminist understanding of cosmetic surgery are in a position to deploy cosmetic surgery in the name of its feminist potential for parody and protest” (1991, 45: emphasis added). She defines ‘healthy’ as those women who are not negatively affected by beauty norms, i.e. not anorexic

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<sup>4</sup> Applying her logic to dieting in place of surgery, the feminist who sacrifices the pleasures and rewards of conformity to the thin ideal is practicing such a form of feminist refusal, as Morgan articulates it, which strikes me as analogous to the kinds of sacrifices the Cynics advocate in their ethics. Although ironically, the feminist who refuses to aspire to be skinny and indulges her appetite (for example, a fat activist) is in some ways antithetical to the Cynics whose lifestyle entails living on minimal subsistence.

<sup>5</sup> ORLAN’s surgical works subvert this in more ways than one. She modifies her appearance so that certain features resemble the great beauties of Western art and as a result is pronounced ‘ugly’. She also exposes the brutal/ugly healing process and denies the pain involved. I return to ORLAN’s surgical works below in footnotes and again in chapter four.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault says remarkably little about the Cynic’s “paradoxical valorisation of dirtiness and ugliness”, although he states that it is “important” (2012, 259). I will return to a theoretical discussion of ugliness in much greater depth in chapter four of this thesis. Many feminist projects fall under this banner of ‘embracing ugliness’ including ORLAN’s aforementioned surgical works; Canadian artist Suzy Lake’s photographic series *Beauty at a Proper Distance /In Song* (2001-2002); Adrian Piper’s *Catalysis* series (1970-3); and group actions in the early 1970s by the radical feminist group The Redstockings.

women, nor those who are otherwise withdrawn or hysterical (1991, 45). It is ironic that Morgan who is advocating the critique of norms would then rely on normative scales of psychological wellbeing, believing feminists are (always) the “healthy” ones.<sup>7</sup> Heyes’ statement about the shame of the feminist dieter above clearly asserts that feminists are *not* immune to negative and ‘unhealthy’ self-judgment as a result of beauty ideals.<sup>8</sup> However, what Morgan fails to account for in proposing such a form of critique is the fact that making a statement may not be enough of a payoff for non-normatively altering one’s appearance even temporarily, let alone permanently, even for ‘healthy’ feminist women. There is usually someone or a group of select individuals for whom one wants to be attractive. All too often certain characteristics (and groups of people who possess them) are perceived of as ugly, even by those whose consciousness has been raised to the fact that such judgments are the result of cultural biases influenced by sexism, racism, ableism, fatism, ageism, colonialism, xenophobia or some other form of cultural bias or discrimination.<sup>9</sup>

The artworks I address below and the artists’ respective accounts of how making them influenced their lives, allow me to weigh up the costs and benefits of embracing a non-normative appearance or what some would define as ‘ugliness’. Both Wilson and Ashery emphasise qualities they possess that are considered ugly or unfeminine, rather than surgically altering themselves as Morgan recommends. They transform themselves in ‘uglifying’ ways to critique beauty and gender norms, albeit impermanently, through the use of cosmetics, hairstyling, comportment and clothing. I use their personal testimonies to assess when and if such transformations lead them to feel better about their appearance and their selves in relation to normative ideals. It is my contention that Wilson and Ashery have individually enacted some form of shame attacking in the process of making their works, though they have not named it

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<sup>7</sup> Some feminists might even argue that those who become anorexic, bulimic or withdrawn are not necessarily ‘diseased’, but rather their “dis-ease as a valid and realistic reaction to their subservient position in society”(Hogan 1997, 13/93).

<sup>8</sup> Gretchen E. Henderson author of *Ugliness: A Cultural History* (2015) argues that ORLAN with her surgical works in fact takes on a similar project to the one advocated by Morgan since (again) the operations have resulted in ORLAN being called ‘ugly’. Ironically, perhaps, in relation to Morgan’s point, by doing so ORLAN has also been pathologised by critics. In other words, it is quite common to assume that anyone who chooses to be ugly (or to emphasise their non-normative/‘ugly’ traits, for that matter) must be ‘crazy’.

<sup>9</sup> See the chapter “Ugly Groups: Resisting Classification” in Henderson’s book for an overview and examination of “shared but shifting ‘ugly’ characteristics associated with groups” (2015, 71).

as such. In order to demonstrate the similarity between these artists' self-disclosures in defiance of shame and the therapeutic tactic of shame attacking, as prescribed by Ellis, I must firstly explain how he developed the practice.

### **Shame Attacking, Its Origin and Its Risks**

Ellis originated shame attacking when he himself feared he could not get a date, so he set up an exercise to ask 100 women out. He had to be rejected by all 100 women; if one accepted, that one didn't count (1998, 8-10). He had to accept and value himself unconditionally undeterred by his 100 failed attempts. In other words, his example is proof that the self-reflection that shame entails can be used transformatively to give confidence and to provide the shame-attacker, in this case Ellis himself, with a new sense of who they are and of their capacities. I have argued in the introduction that this is akin to the (de)subjectification that Foucault values. Instead of seeking out some essential truth at the core of his identity, Ellis instead acted *as if* he was confident and in that leap he became someone he never thought he could be, that is, someone who has great courage in the face of rejection. In Ellis' terminology, he accepts and values himself regardless of the rejections, using them as a way to tolerate the discomfort of being rebuffed as well as to practice unconditional self-acceptance (or USA), his answer to avoiding negative self-evaluations (2005, 184-85).

Ellis also describes shame attacking as countering self-inhibiting irrational beliefs that are conveyed in the language we use when we talk to ourselves (1998, 32-35). In his example, the inference is "no one will go out with me", which leads to/is underpinned by self-inhibiting thoughts/beliefs such as "I'm a loser" or "I'm worthless" (1998, 35). Ellis is in a position to recognise and act against these 'false' beliefs through (behavioural) shame attacking and by practicing unconditional self-acceptance and rational disputation (cognitively). However, many individuals are not aware that the feeling they experience is shame, but instead live with a kind of generalised feeling of self-devaluation due to their gender, race, ability or other non-normative/minority status. Another

contemporary term for this form of shame is 'toxic'.<sup>10</sup> In other words, having internalised prejudice may mean that shame and the self-inhibiting beliefs that accompany it may not be fully articulated. The question is: can toxic shame also be addressed through shame attacking?

Both Martha Wilson and Oreet Ashery, who I have individually interviewed, make art to critique external ideals and prejudice. However, as I will go on to explain, in Ashery's case her wish to belong and to be desired in real life comes into conflict with the expression of her criticality within her work and the feelings of isolation and otherness that it inadvertently triggers. The notion of 'toxic shame' is therefore useful in that it highlights what can be so challenging about acting against shame as a minority subject. For Ashery, as I will elaborate on below, the shameless acts the artist performed, resulted in intensified shame and the desire to withdraw.

### **Martha Wilson Tells The Truth**

fig. 1: Martha Wilson *"I make up the image of my perfection/ I make up the image of my deformity"* (1974), digital print, 25.3 x 30.4 cm. Collection of MoMA, New York.

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<sup>10</sup> I'm echoing Bartky's description of generalised shame and Woodward's warnings about "traumatic shame" that I discuss in the introduction above. 'Toxic shame' is a parallel term for Bartky's "generalised shame", which is popping up regularly within psychological and coaching literatures, the media and among activists on the left. For more on toxic shame, see articles in the online magazine *The Body Is Not An Apology* by Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg (2013) and Lin Kaatz Chary (2018), respectively.

Martha Wilson became an artist by making art out of words whilst working as an English teacher at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NASCAD) in the late 1970s. Reacting against the conceptual art works of her male colleagues, whose work she felt bore no meaningful relationship to the real world, she explored everyday life as her material using the paired down aesthetic of the time. Although working initially in isolation – unlike many of her era who found their footing inside the consciousness raising groups of the contemporaneous women’s liberation movement – her critical perspective and output was still markedly feminist. She was ‘discovered’ by feminist curator Lucy R. Lippard, who included her work in the feminist exhibition “C. 7,500” at CalArts in Valencia in 1974. There are therefore important parallels between her work and others of her generation and because of her inclusion in feminist shows and her work as founder and director of Franklin Furnace in New York City, she had an impact on ones that followed. Her use of her own image in varying disguises and using makeup is an important precedent to the work of photographer Cindy Sherman who came to prominence a decade later. Wilson’s concern for appearance, the self and the identity ‘woman artist’ finds parallels in the work of her contemporaries Carolee Schneemann, ORLAN, Hannah Wilke and Adrian Piper.<sup>11</sup> The mark of her influence can also be read into the playful performance work of Karen LeCocq, Nancy Youdelman and Jan Oxenburg during their time at the Feminist Art Program run by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro at CalArts, where Wilson was invited as a visiting speaker (Wark 2001, 23).

I can read the logic of shame attacking into Wilson’s seminal work entitled “I make up the image of my perfection/ I make up the image of my deformity” (1974). The piece is comprised of two self-portraits, one in which the artist has done her makeup to look pretty (in other words, to conform as best she can to mainstream standards of beauty) and the other in which she wears makeup to look her worst. The creation of these portraits does not necessarily indicate how or if Wilson in fact wore/wears cosmetics in everyday life, it indicates that she uses (or used) conventional beauty norms to judge her own appearance and that she understands that the practice of self-creation using

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<sup>11</sup> I will touch upon these contextual connections where relevant below and also in footnotes.

makeup can be employed to achieve differing goals. However, an alternative usage of make-up towards *total* 'liberation' from beauty standards is not embarked on in this work, I would argue because this cannot be achieved. This points to the veracity of Foucault's contention that ultimate liberation is simply not possible. If feminists were to propose some alternative standard for beauty by which women should judge themselves, then this could simply become a new form of tyranny. Foucault argues instead that freedom can be practiced by taking up what he calls a 'critical attitude', described in a late interview as being comprised of three qualities: curiosity, innovation and refusal (Bess 1988, 12). Wilson's piece *I make up* or rather the act that it documents, demonstrates the artist's curiosity not only about the application of cosmetics but also and perhaps more importantly about the role that cultural ideals play in her self-judgement. Taking up an alternative, critical relationship to societal norms by *refusing* the ideal and trying out ugliness, she provides herself with an *innovative* experience of self-reflection and criticality.<sup>12</sup>

This experience has had an effect on Martha Wilson personally and in fact that effect may be one of the main purposes of the piece. The video version of the piece entitled *Deformation* (1974) in which she transforms herself from her 'best' to her most 'ugly' in real time, whilst providing a running commentary, clarifies the personal meaning and value of such an act. She says, "I'm going to deform myself in the way that I fear the most [...] I call attention to the things I fear the most, then I know that I really don't look this way most of the time". In other words, although she continually judges herself by societal standards, she can use the tools and techniques provided by makeup to face her "worst fears" and in this way comes closer to seeing herself as not failing quite as badly as she dreads. Wilson is not taking up the feminist strategy advocated by Morgan to valorise or reclaim "the domain of the 'ugly'", but is instead actually distancing her everyday appearance from the ugly by enacting it in her artwork (45). According to her account in the video, by her own estimation in her daily life Wilson fails at beauty. She perceives herself as failing in comparison to how feminine beauty is defined in her context and time (and to a large extent continues to be defined now). But her failure is not as profound as she fears it

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that feeling ugly is necessarily novel for Wilson, but rather the innovation comes specifically from the opportunity for self-reflection informed by socio-political critique. I am grateful to Catherine Grant for helping me to clarify this point.

could be and will inevitably be as she ages, since the ideal is defined as youthful. In *Deformation* she takes solace in that fact that the act she performs for the camera represents a step she has taken toward countering the negative global assessment that shame entails. In this way we can see how genuine, everyday feelings are impacted by acts carried out as performance art.

Significantly, Wilson continues this line of work in more recent series from 2008 to the present.<sup>13</sup> Acknowledging her failure to be (perceived as and see herself as) 'beautiful' is part of her on-going art/life practice and entails facing her fears with courage. It is a practice she begins with her early works and culminates in later life and art series. For example, she attacks the shame of having visibly aged in pieces like the fittingly titled *I have become my own worst fear* (2009, fig. 5). *I have become my own worst fear* is a larger than life, unflattering self-portrait of Wilson's head, with an open grin and grey hair slicked down to reveal the forehead and teeth, which she appraises so negatively in the running commentary of *Deformation*. In another of the recent pieces entitled *Makeover* (2015) she presents a series of images of her face, each one more digitally enhanced than the previous one, so that in the final image she is identical to a particular photograph of Catherine DeNuve from a 1970s advertisement that Wilson felt was definitional of beauty in her day, i.e. the 1970s. This new work therefore informs us of the ideal Wilson was comparing her face to when she made *Deformation*.

Before turning again to Wilson's recent work in greater depth, I want to firstly address another early performance, which actually predates *I make up* and *Deformation*. For *Stigma* (1973) the artist walked through the streets with her entire face covered in red lipstick, emphasising one of the embodied dimensions of shame: the blush.<sup>14</sup> This work pointedly bridges the gap between Ellis' shame attacking and Cynic *parrhesia*, in addition to bringing into relief the distinctions between art and life within Wilson's work. Ellis' quintessential shame attacking prescription is to do something bizarre in the public realm such as take a banana for a walk (Ellis 1998, 119; 2005, 229).<sup>15</sup> In taking place on

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<sup>13</sup> I am referring here to various works included in her solo exhibitions entitled "I have become my own worst fear" (2011) and "Mona/Marcel/Marge" (2015) at PPOW gallery in New York

<sup>14</sup> During our interview (3 March 2016) Wilson explained that the piece, which she referred to as *Redfaced*, was done with lipstick.

<sup>15</sup> For this and other anti-shame exercises see Ellis' *How To Control Your Anxiety Before It Controls You* (1998, 112-122).

the streets *Stigma* is therefore closer to Ellis' prescriptions because it tests what it feels like to physically (or behaviourally) embody shame or social stigma in public.

Furthermore, when she uses lipstick unconventionally, i.e. when she displaces it onto other areas of the face, it is reminiscent of the displacements performed by ancient Cynics as a tactic to critique social norms. Foucault explains that "[t]he Cynics employed the technique of displacing or transposing a rule from a domain where the rule was accepted to a domain where it was not to show how arbitrary the rule was" (Foucault 2001, 121).<sup>16</sup> He goes on to say that their displacements were not limited to rules, but also included practices; Diogenes "resolved to eat, sleep and speak in any place", not to mention masturbate or appear naked (2011, 253). Wilson *displaces* lipstick all over her face for *Stigma*, breaking the 'rule' that it should be applied only to the lips and perhaps also to the cheeks as rouge. The zoologist Desmond Morris hypothesises that the practice of reddening the lips and cheeks works to denote sexual arousal, since a facial and bodily blush are physical signals of such a state (Morris, 48). In other words, conventionally, the 'beautifully' made-up face approximates the aroused face, which Wilson subverts in *Stigma*. Her displacement points out the absurdity of the expectation that women walk around in public looking aroused. Why not any other physiological state? Why women as opposed to men? By *not* presenting herself as titillated, or titillating, but instead sporting a hyperbolic blush, Wilson attacks shame, defies conventions and highlights the arbitrariness of norms.<sup>17</sup> In this way the piece provides an answer to one of the questions Wilson's subsequent work *I make up* provoked me to ask the artist, that is, whether or not there could be some alternative aspiration besides beauty or ugliness towards which cosmetics could be applied. The answer is: to be purposely embarrassing, to shame the wearer

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Diogenes took the crown of pine usually placed on the heads of the winners of athletic contests and put it on his own head "because he had won a much more difficult victory against poverty, exile, desire and his own vices than athletes who were victorious in wrestling, running or hurling a discus" (Foucault [1984] 2001, 121).

<sup>17</sup> Feminist shame attacking, however, does not point out the *arbitrariness* of societal conventions, but rather their sexism or prejudice. Ellis' taking a banana for a walk is absurd and is used to point out to the practitioner the ways that they limit their behaviour according to societal rules that are arbitrary or if they serve some purpose, that that purpose is unimportant if it gets in the way of, as one Ellis follower puts it: "authenticity" or being true to one's self (O'Neill 2016). Cynic *parrhesia* similarly often points only to *arbitrariness* as opposed to prejudicial bias, which the feminist and queer shame attacking that interests me in this thesis serves to do.



and, as in the case of *Stigma*, to purposely attack that shame by consciously revealing it.<sup>18</sup> Such a practice reminds me of the shockingly bright red hair and colourful dressing style of the UK artist Katherine Araniello, whose work I analyse in chapter four below, who also happens to be physically disabled and uses an electric wheelchair. Since she is often the recipient of ogling in the public realm, yet she offers the public another excuse to stare.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, wearing makeup to purposely draw attention to and/or to humiliate oneself, aside from necessitating a certain level of nerve, is freeing simply because there are countless ways of achieving such a result.

However, there is more to *Stigma* than gutsy experimentation in the application of cosmetics. Art historian Jayne Wark's analysis of the piece emphasises the text that accompanies it, which describes how Wilson felt "treated like an outcast for confronting the public with her art" (2001, 18).<sup>20</sup> For Wark, therefore, the performance is the visualisation of Wilson's own sense of stigmatisation as a woman making art in the public realm in Nova Scotia in the early 1970s. Wark's interpretation may seem like a detour from the topic of this chapter, but it is relevant in that it prompts me to further contextualise Wilson's work and to elaborate on the connections between appearance and identity, as well as placing pressure on the binary opposition art/life.

As Wark explains, much of Wilson's early work is about performing her uneasiness in claiming the identity 'artist' as a woman (and one who was not trained in art for that matter) within her particular socio-cultural milieu. Wilson's academic background was not in fine art; she had studied English and, as stated earlier, began teaching it at NASCAD where she was allowed to audit art courses. This was how she became aware that artists were "making art with words" and also how she met Vito Acconci who introduced her to the writing of sociologist Erving Goffman, which greatly influenced her (Wilson 2016,

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<sup>18</sup> This is key to the REBT approach to treating anxiety: to reveal one's anxiety dissipates it.

<sup>19</sup> Araniello's example highlights the fact that there isn't always a *choice* to fit in or not and suggests that there are different stakes for specific individuals in certain contexts. I return to a discussion of this matter in the coming chapters.

<sup>20</sup> Wark's essay "Martha Wilson: Not Taking it At Face Value" (2001) is the only other scholarly text to provide a close analysis of Wilson's early work and it foregrounds both the (artistic) agency and institutional critique within it, countering previous (mis)understandings that her work centred solely around beauty myths and the performativity of gender.

interview with the author).<sup>21</sup> Through that experience, which Wilson also recounted to me during our interview, she began making her own conceptual art that soon became embodied in performances. Wark's analysis foregrounds the identity-making aspects of Wilson's early performances, highlighting the fact that her deconstruction of gender identity, which she acknowledges as uncannily "prefigure[ing] Butler's ideas about gender performativity", "ran parallel to her emergence as an artist" (2001, 9/4). She asserts that "[f]or Wilson, the process of self-objectification was paradoxically experienced as a positive, for it cleared a space that could be filled with her own self-determined visibility and agentic subjectivity" (9).<sup>22</sup> Thus, Wark stresses that Wilson's early work is more than a "parodic critique of female objectification", that it is "not about how to shed the prescriptive and oppressive models of 'ideal' femininity, but rather to understand how identity shapes itself through the performance of such models" (2001, 9). I would rephrase this in more Foucauldian terms: Wilson's work demonstrates that power is not merely oppressive, but also productive. Coming from that theoretical perspective, I interpret Wilson's work to be utilising disciplinary self-technologies (in several pieces, the application of cosmetics) as practices of freedom that unyoke them from existing power relations. Instead of being *subjected* or *subjectified* by power, she engages in *subjectivation*.<sup>23</sup> If *Stigma* is about the lack of recognition she received for her art, or rather functions as a bold testimony to her willingness to be humiliated for the sake of what she believed to be her art, then Wilson creates her self, if not as 'a work of art', then as an artist, through these highly visible, aesthetic means. If being visible as an artist and a woman in the 1970s was embarrassing, then she had to learn to embrace or accept that feeling whilst

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<sup>21</sup> This and all subsequent quotations by Wilson come from my interview with the artist on 3 March 2016, unless otherwise stated. (See Appendix A.)

<sup>22</sup> The work of Hannah Wilke stands out as an important parallel here in that she used her own image to imbue the 'beautiful model' with agency instead of object-hood. As Richard Meyer makes clear in his essay "Hard Targets: Male Bodies, Feminist Art and The Force of Censorship in the 1970s" in the "WACK!" exhibition catalogue, Wilke confronted the double standard that applied to female artists, especially, as in her case, as one who was openly exploring appearance and sexuality. She fought to be taken seriously as an artist whilst at the same time expressing her physicality and desire (Meyer 2007, 381). For another analysis of her work and its "radical narcissism" see Jones (1998, 151-195). I discuss Wilke's work again in the next chapter of this thesis.

<sup>23</sup> For an explanation of these terms refer back to my introductory chapter, footnote 10.

combatting the external biases that caused it.<sup>24</sup> To that end she performed *Stigma* and the result is a paradox akin to the radical reversal of philosophical values enacted by the Cynics. Just as unlimited poverty and dependence is “transvaluated” into total autonomy by Diogenes, shame is transvaluated into courage by Wilson. Shame is courage. It must also be stated that Ellis’ shame attacking also enacts this same transvaluation of shame into confidence.

As Foucault explains, the Cynic ethic of radical exposure paradoxically reverses the principles within the Platonic conception of the true life; the shameless life becomes the brazen life; “the unalloyed, pure and self-sufficient life” becomes the life of “ugliness, dependence and humiliation” (2012, 253/259). In other words, the Cynics take the principles of the true life to such an extreme that they become reversed or “transvaluated” (2012, 243).<sup>25</sup> The process of transvaluation is essentially one of inversion, which is what shame attacking performs; it takes the shameful, that which one wants to hide and brings it into the open, makes it known, moving from shame to pride. This is undoubtedly why Sedgwick, informed by Tomkins, writes:

shame effaces itself; shame points and projects; shame turns itself skin side out; shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove. Shame, it might finally be said, transformational shame, is performance. I mean theatrical performance. Performance interlines shame as more than just its result or a way of warding it off, though importantly it is those things. Shame is the affect that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality, between performativity and – performativity (2003, 38).

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<sup>24</sup> There are striking similarities between Wilson’s *Stigma* and Adrian Piper’s contemporaneous *Catalysis* series (1971-3) in so far as both were interventions in the street that entailed the artist confronting the public with their own unusual appearance. For the *Catalysis* series Piper altered her appearance in bizarre and disturbing ways. To give just two examples from the many iterations she made: for one she stuffed a red towel in her mouth so that her cheeks puffed up and it spilled out onto her chin; and for another she wore dirty, foul-smelling clothes that had been soaked in vinegar and eggs. During an interview with Lucy R. Lippard in 1972, Piper describes the piece as decidedly a conceptual life practice as opposed to performance. Piper’s series strikes me, similarly to Wilson’s, as acts of shame attacking enacted by an individual who already experienced herself as publicly ‘othered’ along intersectional lines of gender and race.

<sup>25</sup> The fundamental Cynic “principle of life” that underscores “transvaluation”, which Foucault analyses at length, is *parakharaxon to nomisma* or “change the currency” (2012, 241). I will discuss this precept in more depth in the following chapter.

Wilson's work *Stigma* theatricalises Ellis' therapeutic technique of shame attacking and both dovetail so well with Sedgwick's conceptualisations around shame and pride as "interlinings of the same glove". However, I think that while "transformational shame" *can be* "theatrical performance", it isn't limited to that because, as Sedgwick articulates it, shame "mantles the threshold" between "performativity and – performativity". Ideally, the practice of shame attacking after many repetitions ceases to be a "theatrical' performance, an act of 'faking it' or acting as if, and instead becomes performative to the point where it is an integrated part of the self, a copy of a lost original and one becomes a new kind of self. So what remains to be considered in more depth in relation to Wilson's work is the interplay between art and life.

When Wark interviewed Wilson and asked about the reception of her early work, Wilson replied: "There was no recognition that this *could* be art, let alone that it *was* art!" (2001, 30). Wark points out, however, that when Wilson made *Stigma* she had in fact just been recognised as an artist by Lippard. In my conversation with the artist, she explained that Lippard pronounced: "You're a feminist performance artist" and "gave me some terms to use to describe what I was doing". In other words, up until being named and validated by Lippard in 1973, Wilson was testing out the role of artist in front of cameras and in public with a mix of both uncertainty and determination. In Wilson's work *Premiere* (1972) she reads aloud a monologue to camera that explains the notion that the self is "nothing other than a dramatic effect" while attempting to convince the audience that she is an artist. Another similar piece called *Appearance as Value* (1972) concludes with the remark that her performance "makes fun of my projected image of myself as a confident artist, while I assert that that is in fact what I am". In other words, the best Wilson could do with her self-doubt was both to reveal it and to wilfully defy it, a kind of bluffing that I would describe in colloquial terms as 'faking it till you make it'. Or perhaps what she is doing is taking her self seriously as a joke.<sup>26</sup> I often use the phrase "fake it till you make it" when I describe Ellis' shame attacking because it entails acting 'as if' you have courage to do the thing that you fear, or in this case acting 'as if' you are who you want to be perceived to be, which is a risky form of truth-telling as

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<sup>26</sup> This phrase is one that my supervisor Gavin Butt used to describe the tactic I employ in my work as my alter ego, the host of *The O Show*.

opposed to the falsification of pretending to be something you are not. What is refreshing about these works is Wilson's admission of insecurity, her self-exposure as *not* mythically self-assured, serves to reveal that she is using her speeches to the camera not solely for the sake of art but also personally and therapeutically, as if Ellis had prescribed them.

Whilst Ellis's ideas in fact played no part in Wilson's work, both *Premiere* and *Appearance as Value* bear evidence of the impact of sociologist Goffman's book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). According to Goffman, identity is a "projection" that "interweaves" how one wants to appear with how one is perceived by others (Wark, 11).<sup>27</sup> He goes on to assert that both views are equally illusory and we are all "performing at all times in front of [...] audiences fictive and real" (Wilson 1972). In other words, Wilson's admiration for Goffman suggests to me that although there may be a clear delineation, in a sense, between how Wilson presents her self in 'real life' and how she appears in her work, Wilson's fundamental understanding is that *both* are performances, further complicating the process of separating out Wilson's life from her work.

Wark interprets Wilson's words in *Premiere* and *Appearance as Value* as signifying a tautology akin to conceptual art's "declarative aesthetics" (2001, 11). Wilson is an artist because she claims she is, just as Duchamp's *Fountain* is art because he says it is. Wark cites art theorist Thierry de Duve's observation that the "premise of declarative aesthetics becomes meaningless without a legitimating authority to center or deny status to such a claim" (Wark 2001, 11). This is how Wilson's work for Wark engenders its feminist critique, underscoring Wilson's perspective "that the locus of hidden power lay in the gap between the ease with which the authorial status of artist was granted to her male peers while her own remained dubious" (2001, 12). Women (performance) artists at that time therefore continued to soldier on with their unknown and uncertain status, playing around at the border between life and art, between their own attempts to be perceived as artists and their acceptance or denial as such by the institutions of art and their affiliates. A potent example of such 'playing around' is Carolee Schneeman's iconic *Interior Scroll* (1975) in which she defiantly removes a scroll from her vagina to read out a letter inscribed on

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<sup>27</sup> Wilson's work *Selfportrait* (1973) is a kind of literalisation of Goffman's ideas in that she stood in a gallery and asked the audience to write down their impressions of her.

it, addressed to an art critic who had attacked her work, provocatively flying in the face of his sexist bias by flaunting her female anatomy and sexuality (Schneemann 2003, 319).<sup>28</sup> Schneemann's work, like Wilson's, self-assuredly defies the perceived incompatibility of the terms artist/woman. In keeping with this, Wark's take on Wilson's art is that it was not simply about improving her tolerance toward the potential humiliation of making art within the context of a sexist (art) world, but rather that *the art world* (not the artist) was something that needed to change. I would add also that the insecurity Wilson expresses in *Premiere* and *Appearance as Value* is therefore a response to external biases, as opposed to being indicative of Wilson's inner self. Her "dis-ease [is] a valid and realistic reaction to [her] subservient position in society", as feminist art therapist Hogan more generally argues (1997, 13/93: emphasis added).

For decades Wilson hid her early work away under her mattress because of a lack of external recognition, or more specifically because of one particularly harsh rejection. Upon moving to New York from Nova Scotia in 1974, Wilson showed her work to the director of the OK Harris Gallery, Ivan Karp who yelled at her "Why are you showing me this!? This work is terrible! I would never show this!" In other words, neither Lippard's approval nor the shame attacking the artist had engaged in succeeded at preventing the decades-long hibernation of Wilson's early experiments.<sup>29</sup> Does this mean that shame attacking is not as successful a 'treatment' as Ellis contends?<sup>30</sup> It is not as though Wilson quit altogether, she continued to perform (solo satirical impersonations and collaboratively in an all-female, punk band called Disband) and to support the production of art as founder and director of Franklin Furnace in New York since

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<sup>28</sup> Several other artists who came of age during the second wave made work about the expectation that the identity of artist is synonymous with maleness/masculinity. Many of them countered this stereotype through a kind of shame attacking, by relishing in/revealing their own visibly female bodies whilst also performing or thus reifying their identities as artists, for example: ORLAN's *The Kiss of the Artist* (1977) in which she presents herself as a saint/virgin, whore *and* artist; Hannah Wilke's numerous nude self-portraits including the piece *What does this represent?* (1978) and her series *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* (1974-82, fig. 24); and Lynda Benglis' *Advertisement* in *Artforum* (1974), which I discuss at length in the following chapter. All of these examples radically invert or 'transvaluate' the depicted passive female object into an active *artist* subject.

<sup>29</sup> In fact, Wilson was invited to take out the images from under her bed because Lippard reproduced the slides of *I make up* in an article in *Ms. Magazine* (October 1975 issue), but they were not reproduced again until the late 90s and early 2000s when Jayne Wark and others were excavating second wave feminist artists.

<sup>30</sup> This is perhaps an unfair question because Wilson is not consciously practicing shame attacking in life, but rather stumbling upon it as a method in her work.

1976 to today. In other words, she responded to the rejection of a representative of the New York art world by creating her own space for art, an alternative venue in which her own work and that of others could flourish.

When I recounted to Wilson the origin story of Ellis' shame attacking (i.e. his own 100 amorous rejections) during our discussion, she replied: "So he established a problem, went out and did the action, but then his analysis didn't seem to be related to what was really going on in the world." Is it that in the face of (sexist) stigmatisation and rejection, Wilson is more aware than Ellis was of how powerful 'what really goes on in the world' can be? Would Ellis have arrived at shame attacking had he identified as something other than a caucasian, heterosexual male, or if his shame attacking had entailed behaving in a more challenging way towards society's norms? The Albert Ellis Institute website informs us that the purpose of shame attacking is to prove that an individual can withstand the negative judgements of others because it proves to the practitioner that:

- 1) Others either do not notice or do not care about the behaviour you are exhibiting;
- 2) If others do care, nothing terrible happens based on their judgments and you survive. (O'Neill 2014)<sup>31</sup>

However, institutionalised sexism (or any other form of derogatory bias, for that matter) may very well mean that something bad or even 'terrible' happens. Although one might be able to survive it, that does not mean one should do nothing other than accept it.<sup>32</sup> In Wilson's case, in the face of the established New York art world's indifference and/or outright dismissal of her art, Wilson did survive and started her alternative establishment. Wilson's trajectory from hiding her work to founding Franklin Furnace prompts me to reconsider Naomi Wolf's call for shamelessness from the start of this chapter. When our view of ourselves as beautiful, for instance, does not match up with how we are perceived, we either opt to recede into the background like Wilson's

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<sup>31</sup> This quotation comes from a very brief explanatory article on shame attacking on the Albert Ellis Institute website that is fittingly titled "Shame is in the eye of the beholder" (O'Neill 2014).

<sup>32</sup> Ellis' therapy is designed to help us accept ourselves, others and our lives, but that doesn't mean we should accept unfairness and wrongdoing. As Ellis states: "In tolerating the conditions of the world you can be in a position to go on and change it. Oddly enough, while you're terribly upset about things, you very rarely are an effective changer – of yourself, of others, or the world" (Campbell, Biaz and Ellis, 1970, 20).

slides under the mattress or we might seek out/create for ourselves a milieu in which our internal sense is mirrored back to us.<sup>33</sup>

Wilson's interpretation of Ellis' self-analysis, that is, that he paid little attention to "what was really going on in the world", proved more useful than merely pointing out the particularly crippling weight of sexism (or indeed any other form of prejudicial judgment). Instead of creating a chasm between Ellis' shame attacking and Foucault's *parrhesia*, the upshot of the discussion that her comment prompted served to strengthen my understanding of their similarity all the more. I turned Wilson's words back on her and asked how much did she have to "ignore what was really going on in the world" to make her work, to which she responded that she wasn't ignoring anything. She said, "I see my process as brutal honesty" (correspondence with the artist 29 July 2016). When Ellis went out and faced 100 rejections, he was not ignoring reality, he was facing it; those rejections, although painful, did not need to inform his perception of himself as much as his ability to withstand them. The truth was that 100 women and countless others did and would reject him, that was the ugly truth. In the case of Wilson, as she got older, she aged, that is the truth her recent work attests to and she attacks the judgments of others who see that as shameful. Shame, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

During our interview, Wilson also explained to me that as a young woman she "wanted to fit in and disappear" whilst at the same time she despised the idea of being perceived as *pleasant*.<sup>34</sup> She went on to say that

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<sup>33</sup> Within feminist theorist Jill Locke's essay *Shame and the Future of Feminism* (2007), she makes a parallel observation using the example of Hannah Arendt's biography *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* (1958). Locke argues that Arendt's book demonstrates that what Varnhagen – a Jew living in Berlin at the turn of the nineteenth century – needed was not privacy or self-scrutiny (which shame often entails) but rather to live in a world that was not anti-semitic. Since such a world did not exist in Varnhagen's lifetime, what saved her was the salon, "a radical counterpublic [...] 'on the fringe of society, [which] did not share any of its conventions or prejudices' (Arendt 1973, 59)" (Locke, 156). The point that Locke fails to make, however, is that what occurred in such contexts was in fact shame attacking. Furthermore, when Foucault "hypothesizes" on the "descendants of Cynicism", which, I add, could be found in Varnhagen's salons as much as in Franklin Furnace, he says that revolutionary activity of this ilk manifests itself in "the paradox of *secret* sociality [...] making itself *visible* in scandalous forms of life" (2012, 177/185: emphasis added).

<sup>34</sup> I also asked Wilson about if and how making *I make up* (and her work more generally) impacted her self-judgement and the way that she presented herself in everyday life. I also asked her about the dichotomy that the piece presents between beauty and ugliness and whether or not she found other ways (or a 'third way') to use cosmetics in art and life. She responded to the former question by reciting an anecdote from high school of overhearing her hockey coach describe her to her mother as "a pleasant person", which Wilson immediately, internally recoiled from and thought to herself: "fuck no!"



despite not knowing what to do with her youthful desire to be unpleasant she suspected the answer could be found in art, inspired as she was by the abrasive quality of Yoko Ono vocals. From her 30s up until 2008, Wilson used henna to transform herself from a blonde into a redhead because redheads are thought of as “volatile, alcoholic, anything but dumb and placid”. In her artwork during that same period, she painted her face red, made it up to be as ‘ugly’ as possible, attempted to pass as a man, impersonated a man in drag, a lesbian and several first ladies and performed in a band despite a total lack of musical ability, among other non-conformist activities. In other words, she may have taken unpleasantness to a greater extreme in her work than she did in her life and that is no doubt because the context and/or construct of art made it easier, particularly during that period of her life.<sup>35</sup> As she got older and inevitably, in her own words, “became her worst fear”, her ability to take risks in both art and life increased because, perhaps akin to the Cynics who could be shamelessly truthful because they had no earthly possessions or attachments, Wilson found herself either with less to lose, or with a self-relation that meant she was less prone to shame or rather, she cared less about the negative judgments of others. Perhaps it was also down to her having practiced shame attacking for so long that she was able to separate the judgements of others from her own self-evaluations.

fig. 2: Martha Wilson *Growing Old* (2008/9), pigmented ink print on hahnemuhle bamboo paper, 54 x 54 in.

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<sup>35</sup> During my interview with the British artist Kim Thornton on 13 April 2016, carried out as research for this chapter, she pointed out the cruel irony in the fact that young people (those in their teens and twenties) are most vulnerable to outside judgment (of their appearance and selves) because that is the age when one most wants to fit in, and yet in our contemporary moment they are the most likely to put themselves out there to receive it (by posting ‘selfies’ on facebook, for example). I will return to the risks of internet self-disclosures again in chapter four and the conclusion of this thesis.

fig. 3: Martha Wilson *Red Cruella* (2010), two colour photographs, text, 21.25 x 29.25 in.

The artist's current, unconventional manner of appearance – Wilson has half grey, half henna-red hair – is a direct result of her work, or rather is testimony to the reciprocal influence of life on art and art on life. I had immediately interpreted her 'look' as another example of a deliberate alternative to beautification or ugly-fication towards which one can embellish/care for oneself. According to the artist, her recent works entitled *Growing Old* (2008/9) and *Red Cruella* (2010) are the source of her unusual hairstyle. *Growing Old* is a series of photographs of Wilson's head as she grew out her dyed red hair over the course of one year, revealing the grey underneath. Wilson explained that walking in the streets of New York City with her 'new' grey hair "people were bumping into me like I don't exist, like I'm invisible." In response to this experience she made two works, *Red Cruella* (2010) and *Invisible* (2011). *Invisible* literalises her invisibility as a sexagenarian woman; it is a photograph of Wilson looking dowdy and androgynous in a beige hat and jacket, entering a cheap local amenities store, a visually chaotic environment in which she is practically camouflaged. *Red Cruella*, by contrast, is a diptych self-portrait as a "mad and glad" redheaded version of the Disney villain Cruella Deville who has half-toned black and white hair. Wilson explained to me that during the photo shoot for the Cruella images, "the photographer asked, 'are you gonna keep it like that?'" and [she] said "uh, I'm gonna keep it like that, yeah I think I'll keep it like that!" She went on to recount that everyday she hears "I like your hair!" from

different members of the public, “young black people, old white people, young transgender, everybody feels it’s ok to say something”. Her quirky look fits her ethos because it appeals to all demographics and because “I’m not invisible but I’m admitting my age”.

Wilson’s continued concern for appearance in her maturity as an artist/woman is performed shamelessly and with “brutal honesty”. Wilson is bold, despite the particular cruelty beauty norms inflict upon aging women, which she anticipated with trepidation in her 20s. One of Wilson’s early dressing up pieces entitled *Posturing: Age Transformation* (1974) has her posing as an older woman pretending to be a younger woman, a self-portrait that was accompanied by a text revealing her own fear of “‘past-thirty’ status in society”. Instead of becoming a deceptive woman like the one she impersonates in that early performance, Wilson’s recent self-portraits such as the piece *I have become my worst fear* (2009, fig. 5) described above, go out of their way to reveal her age. When I asked her if making the recent works gave her confidence, she replied:

[...Y]ou can gain confidence or courage perhaps by confronting your worst fears and not hiding from it, looking at it is the only way to get past things [...] People come up to me all the time and say “I admire your work” and I think what they’re saying is “you have a lot of nerve putting those out there” [...] to put your worst fears out there can work out to be freeing and liberating.

She therefore clearly confirms that the result of her “brutal honesty” is a form of confidence, but she was also equally adamant that what enables her to be so honest is *not* courage, but instead is the result of “not knowing where social boundaries are supposed to lie”. That, she insists, is down to her having been abused by her father as a child, an experience that profoundly affects her work as an artist.

fig. 4: Martha Wilson *Posturing Age Transformation* (1974), colour photograph and text, 51.5 x 36 x 3 cm

fig. 5: Martha Wilson *I have become my own worst fear* (2009), photographic print on canvas, 87 x 44 in.

At the start of this chapter I remarked that Foucault finds courage to be both the effect and the prerequisite of *parrhesia*. In fact, not even Socrates can “speak the truth of courage” nor define it, yet the courage of speaking the truth is profoundly embroiled with the theme of the truth of courage in ancient philosophy (Foucault 2011, 149/158). Yet, Wilson seems to know very clearly the source of her honesty, which she in fact denies is courage at all.<sup>36</sup> Wilson invites me (and others) to proceed with a Freudian analysis and conclude that she is defined by particular childhood events that make her perhaps ‘pathologically’ unable to judge the boundaries of propriety.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps as a result of the impact of such an experience, Wilson is a *parrhesiastes*, a truth-teller, who has bound her self to the truth in “a parrhesiastic pact”; she speaks the truth because she is one who tells the truth.<sup>38</sup> According to Foucault,

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<sup>36</sup> In fact, during our discussion she said to me: “It’s not courage.”

<sup>37</sup> In tandem, when Linda Montano interviewed Wilson for her book *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties* (2000), Wilson attributes her living in shop windows (one playing out of her attitude to boundaries) to the fact that her parents kept her in a Skinner Box (a see-through contraption) when she was an infant. Montano’s questions to all of the artists in the book are designed to probe (in a Freudian vein) into the backstories behind why artists do what they do.

<sup>38</sup> Foucault discusses the “parrhesiastic pact” in detail in the 1982-83 lectures (2011, 64-5, 66, 163, 177, 178-9, 203, 365).

memory served a particular function for Greco-Roman ancients (specifically for those from the Pythagorean, Stoic and Epicurean traditions respectively), which was not hermeneutical (i.e. serving to pinpoint a hidden origin of the self), but rather functioned as a kind of “administrative accounting” (2001, 148). In this process of looking back over the past (usually recent events but also from childhood) the individual “takes stock of things” as opposed to “pleading” before oneself in a “judiciary” way to “enable him [*sic*] to reactivate various rules and maxims in order to make them more vivid, permanent, and effective for future behaviour” (2001, 148-50). Wilson admits to having “repressed” the memory of her abuse, but what is clear and fresh in her mind is the principle that she instils in herself – that she believes herself to be someone who oversteps the boundaries of propriety and is brutal in her honesty.

### **Oreet Ashery Fits In, As An Imposter**

fig. 6: Oreet Ashery *Hairoism* (2009),  
photo: Christa Holka.

fig. 7: Oreet Ashery *Hairoism (Hairy  
Monster Me)* (2011), c-type print  
photograph, 110 x 139 cm.

fig. 8: Oreet Ashery *Hairoism* (2011), photographs, 34 x 42 cm.

In the process of writing about Wilson's work I received an email from the artist Oreet Ashery asking me to remove images and video from my website that documented the first incarnation of her work *Hairoism* (2009, fig. 6, fig. 13 and fig. 14), performed at an event of unorthodox re-enactments of feminist performance art entitled 'Once More with Feeling' that I had produced.<sup>39</sup> Ashery's email explained that the reason she wished me to remove the material was personal. When I probed further about her request, she admitted that she did not like the way she looked in them. *Hairoism* entailed Ashery having her head shaved by two assistants who then applied hair donated from the audience to her scalp and face, imitating the hair patterns of four male, middle-eastern political figures: Moshe Dayan, Mousa Mohammed Abu Marzouk, Avigdor Lieberman and Yassar Arafat. The first figure has the least hair and the last has the most, allowing her to become more hirsute as the piece progressed. After the Arafat hair pattern had been impersonated, her two assistants continued to glue hair to her face and body, with the goal of covering it entirely, making her appearance 'monstrous'.

For *Hairoism*, Ashery took inspiration from Eleanor Antin's *The King* (1972), a silent, 52-minute, black and white film in which Antin slowly applies hair to her face to become her male alter ego, her political self. In a recent interview, Antin states:

Role-playing was about feeling that I didn't have a self. And I didn't miss it... I just borrowed other people's, or made them up. And it's something that continued when I started working with personas because it was a

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<sup>39</sup> I wrote about the 'Once More with Feeling' event above in my introductory chapter.

very good way of dealing with a lot of the political and social issues that were of interest to me.<sup>40</sup>

In the catalogue 'Once More with Feeling' Ashery states that she shares Antin's subjectivity expressed in the above description and in taking on various characters for her work she addresses socio-political backdrops and challenges a sense of authority over herself (8). For Ashery, therefore, the piece is as much about a kind of desubjectivation or "treating oneself as something other than a subject" as it is about commenting on the divisive political leaders who have vied for power over the contested territory of Jerusalem in which the artist was raised (Taylor 2013, 89).

However, the result of this process of desubjectivation for Ashery was not increased confidence, as it has been for Wilson, but rather discomfort and the desire to withdraw. Ashery has not performed using her own body since 2011; a version of *Hairoism* was the final piece in which she did. In recent interviews she comments that "there was something essentialist about the work that made [her] feel too fixed"; "she felt exposed", that the work "was all about [her]" in a way that "limits the reading of the work" (Gogarty 2014, 381/Khalaf 2016).

During my interview with Ashery I paraphrased my understanding of Ellis' shame attacking and she replied by commenting on how idealised it is. She went on with a response that is worth citing at length:

It's quite weird because I've worked my whole life with minorities, so I know what it's like to be outside the mainstream and I know how empowering it is to work with art with people who feel marginalised. So I know the theory and I admire people who stand up and make work that is difficult, but *I feel personally for me, there is a very strong embedded instinct to fit in, that I think we all have.*

At some point you realise that you don't and then you either go to therapy, you kill yourself or you make art. Or you kind of modify yourself to fit in, which is really sad. Maybe a lot of people do that in the end, desperately trying to fit in. So I think for me, it's always that kind of conflict. Maybe also being born in Israel because you are really culturally

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<sup>40</sup> Interview between Antin and Art21 took place in the 2000s and is transcribed online: <http://www.art21.org/texts/eleanor-antin/interview-eleanor-antin-humor-personas-and-yiddish-theater>, last accessed 5/10/2016.

encouraged to fit in because of the army and the sense of threat all around, because the propaganda machine is all about you're part of a collective. Probably true of some other Asian countries and places, but that sense of being part of a collective, for my generation I think is profound. It's very strong, *so if you're different, you really feel it*. You really feel different in a sense that here [in the UK] I never felt when I came here when I was 19. I think again there's like an in-built thing in English culture about being eccentric or being an outsider, there's a different thing going on with that. I always have that unresolved and primal sense of doing this work despite myself. Maybe the voice of my parents or the country or patriarchy are like 'I need to fit in' and I don't believe that people don't have that voice, I mean, they must. It has to be there. *There's no way that we can condition ourselves to a place where our minority status sits so well with us that we're ok with it*. I don't think it's ever really quite like that. People's journeys are different, but on the whole I would be really surprised if people didn't have those kinds of feelings. It's a bit of both, making work that is difficult, I think it does make you stronger and it is healing in a sense for part of you, *but for part of you it's always just an evidence that you are different and that evidence is staring at you from every page of the internet* and you're like 'fucking hell, I just want to fit in, I just want to be like an office worker with a suit, you know.'<sup>41</sup>

Ashery's words demonstrate how impactful the judgments of others, or simply the perceived judgments of others, are on one's psyche and behaviour, and how powerful the desire to fit in and conform can be. In other words, it demonstrates how challenging shame attacking is as a practice. She went on to say that her decision to contact me and others to remove images and video of *Hairoism* from the internet was down to a feeling that "the work had gone out of [her] control", and because of "the sense of self-disgust" she felt at perceiving her own body as "abject".

It seems that it is only in looking back at certain documentation "staring at her from every page of the internet" that *Hairoism* became problematic and

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<sup>41</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, this and all further quotations from Ashery are from an interview with the author carried out on 21 July 2016 in London (emphasis added).



painful for Ashery. This perhaps gives some credence to Peggy Phelan's ontological assessment that "performance's only life is in the present", or rather that the only way it can resist containment is for it not to be documented (1993, 147). Or perhaps Phelan's assertion that performance's social and political value resides in the moment of creation, the 'presence' of the body and not in its recorded form, is true of shame attacking, although that may not be the case for performance art more generally.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, when an REBT client performs a shame attacking act in the public sphere, these are behavioural and psychological experiments that afterwards exist only in the memories of the client and those they encountered; they are not usually recorded and later disseminated in the way that performance art almost always is. That said, there are in fact numerous examples of anti-shame exercises that have been filmed and uploaded on to youtube for instructional purposes.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Ellis recommends that such exercises be performed in front of as many people as possible, so having a recording accessible at all times to millions of people world-wide would only strengthen the treatment, since it would provide further opportunities to attack shame and accept oneself, through a perpetual revisiting of the scene by the practitioner in the eyes of not only an imagined public.<sup>44</sup> The fact that Ashery was able to perform *Hairoism* publicly on several occasions and yet disapprove of certain images of it being disseminated on the internet suggests to me that for Ashery, perhaps unlike for Wilson, there is a relatively strong divide between what she sees as 'performance' and what she sees as the rest of her life. As Ashery says: she is "doing this work despite [her]self".<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Phelan's is just one opinion in a decades-long debate within performance studies about the efficacy of archiving performance. Both Amelia Jones and Rebecca Schneider, for example, argue in opposition to Phelan that setting up a hierarchy between the live and the archived is limiting and problematic, which I find to be more compelling, particularly in relation to this thesis.

<sup>43</sup> For example, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ea-qWW0QXdw> (accessed 10 July 2016).

<sup>44</sup> Indeed in Ellis' published writing he often reveals his own flaws, foibles and mistakes, and while he takes full responsibility for them, he adamantly refuses to feel ashamed (1973a; 1976 59-72).

<sup>45</sup> Notably, Ashery began making public interventions in her own life as a young girl walking the streets of Jerusalem, going places that were barred to her as both female and a child. She only later became aware that these 'interventions' were in fact akin to performance art. During our discussion I asked her about the continuum between those early interventions, her performances and her participatory, socially-engaged work, to which she responded: "Yeah, it helped me, those actions that I did, that I didn't call art; it helped me to do them at the time, like spontaneous interventions, but then the permission to call that art, is also very helpful because I think our perception of what practice is can be limited. To allow yourself the permission to say,

Therefore more important than the issue of liveness verses documentation, is that of intention. The impetus behind Ashery's work, like most, if not all of the other artworks I focus on in this thesis, is not to attack the artist's shame and to gain confidence, nor is it to benefit the artist by being in any way therapeutic, but rather the intentions are aesthetic, social, critical and political. The therapeutic affects, if they occur, are merely an accidental byproduct. In Ashery's case, she did not intend to attack the shame of being seen as other, that is a masculine, hirsute or 'beastly' woman. She wanted to explore the way in which facial hair and hairstyles connote differences in gender, ethnicity, class, status and religion. On the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art website, Ashery states: "My interest in masculinity and as such my own gender performances of male characters and the inclusion of male actors is set to explore the relationships between women and masculinity and women and cultural identity." Because it was not Ashery's intention to attack the shame of being (perceived as) 'abject', because she was not aware that that is how she would perceive herself in the documentation, but rather was focused on her political statement/critique, it was perhaps inevitable that the experience was painful. The risk she took in exposing herself, instead of being freeing was, again, in her own words: "essentialising" because the entire meaning of the piece can be boiled down to her own "biographical identity" as a "female, queer, Jewish, middle eastern subject" (email to the author, October 2016). Being essentialising, is perhaps the antithesis of the kind of truth production that Foucault theorises as *parrhesia*; instead of opening up the subject to indeterminate possibility, it limits the subject by revealing some hidden point of origin or essential truth. Or can that simply be one of the risks the subject takes in telling their truth?

Being forced to read Ashery's work as limiting rather than freeing urges me to ask if Wilson's works also risk being read in that way. Wilson may be brutally honest and by doing so may have gained some confidence, but she does not necessarily wholly avoid being perceived as stereotypically feminine. In fact, she invites us to psychoanalyse her and interpret her over-sharing as being a result of childhood experiences. As Wilson's career-long investigation of

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well that is an art practice, a life-art practice, that is a tool that you can definitely pass on and share in teaching and workshops generally."

physical appearance makes evident, she cannot completely cure herself of an incessant, self-critical surveillance and judgement, and because of this, to her audience she may appear to be superficial or narcissistic despite her frankness and modesty. In this way one could argue she performs in line with a normative feminine subject notwithstanding her attempts at critique. The question this raises is, what is more important within shame attacking/truth telling, the new sense of self that it provides the artist or the way that they may be perceived by others? Following the shame-attacking model, what others think is of no importance whatsoever; the entire point is to learn to live with the fact that other people “either do not care” or if they do “nothing terrible happens”. In terms of *parrhesia*, the interlocutor should be insulted, hurt and perhaps even enraged by the effrontery of the truth. The response to Wilson’s work (and Ashery’s for that matter) is not the latter, but much more likely that of laughter. This is apt, because in his discussion of the descendants of Cynicism, Foucault remarks that “satire and comedy were often permeated by Cynical themes, and even better, they were up to a point, a privileged site for their expression” (2012, 186).<sup>46</sup> Likewise REBT often utilises humour in its practice because seriousness can be defeating and lightness permits flexibility, a much-prized quality for Ellis (2005, 244-46).

Humour is not the only aspect of Wilson’s work that I have up until now neglected. Another blind spot in my account of her shame attacking *oeuvre* is her exploration of masculinity. The above analysis only mentions the artist’s ‘drag’ works in passing because it was only when Ashery confronted me with her own negative self-assessment following *Hairoism*, that I thought to consider the relationships between female masculinity, beauty norms and practices of freedom in more detail. Wilson’s early and late works in this vein, make it clear that appearing masculine as a female is not simply to appear ugly. If that were the case, the ‘deformation’ and ‘worst fear’ self-portraits would exactly mirror the masculine portraits, yet they do not. In fact, the more recent double portrait *Name = Fate* (2009, fig. 9) comments on the masculine privilege of appearing handsome although aging. The diptych includes a photo of former US president Bill Clinton alongside Wilson’s portrait in a drag impression of him, with their full

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<sup>46</sup> Again, as with the connection between ancient Cynicism and ‘ugliness’, Foucault says very little about Cynic satire and humour beyond this one sentence, but suggests it as an area of further study.

given names printed under each portrait. With a smirk Wilson implies that she too would be considered handsome and virile if there was no double standard for judging male and female appearance.

fig. 9: Martha Wilson, *Name = Fate* (2009), black and white photographs, text, 21 x 29 in.

fig. 10: Martha Wilson  
*Posturing Drag* (1972),  
Detail, colour photograph  
and text, 10 x 8 in.

fig. 11: Martha Wilson  
*Captivating a Man* (1972),  
Detail, colour photograph  
and text, 20 x 14 in.

fig. 12: Martha Wilson  
*Posturing: Male  
Impersonator (Butch)*  
(1973), photograph, 9 x  
4.25 in.

Furthermore, two of Wilson's early pieces perform an effeminate masculinity or rather embody a male attempting to achieve female beauty – in *Posturing Drag* (1972) she poses as man 'dragging up' to be a woman and in *Captivating a Man* (1972) she presents herself as her ex-boyfriend posing as Duchamp's female alter ego Rose Selavy. A third piece *Posturing: Male Impersonator* (1973), is effeminate simply because the youthful Wilson falls short in her intention to pass as male. My own prior exclusion of these works as well as their very content give credence to queer theorist Jack Halberstam's observation that male femininity is "accorded far more attention" in contemporary and historical thought than female masculinity, a fact made evident by the lack of "a parallel concept to 'effeminacy'" or a term that means the opposite of 'emasculation'; Halberstam points out that "[i]n fact, these two words mean the same thing" (1998, 273/269). Wilson's early 'drag' pieces multiply images of male femininity despite bringing in to play her own masculinity as a woman. According to Halberstam, this is commonplace, because "there is still no general acceptance or recognition of masculine women despite their public presence" (1998, 15).<sup>47</sup>

This forces me to ask: is female masculinity yet another way to present oneself that neither conforms to beauty nor to ugliness and is it therefore a viable method to practice freedom? Practices of freedom have no set end goal, so the aim of achieving masculinity might in fact be a limitation, although the myriad ways that Wilson enacts masculinity seems to prove otherwise. Furthermore, appearing masculine as a woman can mean being read as queer, trans or butch, instead of simply male, and as Halbertam's in-depth exploration of female masculinity accounts for, there are many "subtle differences between types of female masculinity" which even sexologists fail to differentiate, but that members of a queer community readily comprehend (1998, 77). In other words, female masculinity could very well be an avenue for the practice of freedom, but its implications for an individual depend not only on their sexual orientation but the social circles in which they operate. To hone one's female masculinity may mean giving off confusing social signals, depending on one's context and intention.

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<sup>47</sup> This was as true in the 1970s as it was when Halberstam wrote *Female Masculinity* and remains true outside of queer contexts today.

In light of this, it is important to disclose that in Ashery's email correspondance with me, in which she asked me to remove the images of *Hairoism* from my website, she explained that the reasons were "personal" and when I pressed her about them further, she admitted that she was starting to do online dating and she feared a potential match might encounter them in a web search. Therefore it was not just the act of looking back at these images, but being faced with the ubiquity of one's image whilst pursuing coupledness/sex in the age of the internet that heightened Ashery's self-consciousness, distress and anxiety. It strikes me as significant that Ashery's experience is a kind of inverse of the anecdote about how Ellis invented the therapeutic tactic of shame attacking, that is, challenging himself to face 100 romantic rejections. It begs the question: is there more at stake for women who shame attack whilst in the process of looking for love? Is the desire to belong and be desired the enemy of shame attacking and truth-telling? Ashery's account brings to mind affect theorist Lauren Berlant's writing in *The Female Complaint* (2008) on the particularly feminine fantasy of belonging and love.<sup>48</sup> Ashery shares with the heroines of sentimental US women's culture analysed by Berlant, the "desire of a complex person to rework the details of her history to become a vague or simpler version of herself, usually in the vicinity of a love-plot"(2008, 7). In looking for "the good life" in love, Ashery longs to be conventional, as she said in our interview: "I just want to be like an office worker with a suit". Berlant argues that the fantasy of normativity is "not only a disciplinary operation on how people imagine the good life, but as an aspiration people have for an unsharable suturing to their social world" (2008, 266). In light of this, it makes perfect sense that Ashery's initiation into online dating would draw upon and enhance her instinct to fit in. The sway that the utopian and normalising fantasy of "the good life" holds over women, who are "charged with managing the dynamics of affective and emotional intimacy", is profound (Berlant 2008, 170). Perhaps in advocating life long shame attacking, I am setting the bar too high by expecting feminists to always be 'heroic', instead of recognising the validity of the desire to fit in and be loved. We can't all be expected to withstand the sacrifices of the Cynics.

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<sup>48</sup> I am grateful for being instructed on this point by Gavin Butt.

Belonging is in fact a central theme throughout Ashery's work.<sup>49</sup> She is on record saying that one of the most exhilarating and satisfying experiences in her life was when she dressed as her alter ego Marcus Fisher, a generic orthodox Jewish man, and danced in an all-male celebration in north Israel during a festival called Lag Ba'Omer, which is chronicled in her video *Dancing with Men* (2003). She describes the experience as follows:

The feeling was tremendous; the high I felt whilst dancing and being accepted by those men was indescribable, a true connection, belonging in the sense of history and home. It seems one could only feel truly connected by being a 'cheat', an impostor, by not belonging at all. [...] I can only feel belonging through the experience of not belonging. It is the only true feeling I know of home" (Mock 2009, 34).

While Ashery's entrée into an all-male, highly religious context was undeniably risky, I cannot view it as shame attacking nor as *parrhesia* simply because she succeeded at blending in and concealing her gender. If some of the men in that context saw through her disguise then this would be both shame attacking and *parrhesia*. But because she was aware of being different and those around her during Lag Ba'Omer were not, the dual identity Marcus/Ashery was not made indeterminate in a public way, although she may have experienced her self as such.<sup>50</sup> Instead the performance reified her own personal truth – that she can only experience belonging by concealing that she is in fact an outsider. It was only in retrospect, for the viewers of the performance documentation that Ashery's act could be understood by others in the way she experienced it and at that point the artist is no longer at risk. This again points to the fact that shame attacking, like *parrhesia*, has its greatest

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<sup>49</sup> All of her work deals with migration "and the constant negotiation between outsiders and new spaces" (Khalef 2016). The brief biography in the *Re.act.feminism* catalogue states that Ashery's work "focus[es] on borders and territories as well as the associated *processes of (social) inclusion and exclusion*" (2014, 256: emphasis added).

<sup>50</sup> This said, it is wholly understandable that Ashery would not reveal the identity of Marcus Fisher to be an alter ego in such a context as to do so would undoubtedly risk a negative and potentially violent response. Distributing the video through the Live Art Development Agency brings her personal revelation and cultural critique to a likeminded art audience, underscoring the fact that certain contexts serve to provide a kind of safety net for complex and risky revelations. Additionally and importantly, one of the caveats of Ellis' shame attacking is that one should not risk bodily harm (Ellis 1972). This is a key point of distinction between *parrhesia* and shame attacking that becomes more central to my analyses in forthcoming chapters.

impact in the moment, or is fully realised at the moment it is enacted. They both can be practiced ritually and habitually, but not necessarily retroactively.<sup>51</sup>

Notwithstanding Ashery's predilection for fooling others in order to fit in, *Hairoism* did entail shame attacking. Her subsequent decision to no longer use her body in her work is not dissimilar to Wilson hiding slides under a mattress. The work Ashery makes now and will go on making is perhaps a greater indication of the worth of the risks she took in the past; she continues to self-disclose for her art, albeit through different means. During our interview, Ashery discussed her decision to no longer use her own image/body in her work and the fact that paradoxically she is discovering that her recent work entails disclosing in a more difficult way. She explained that she has realised that actually "there is a safety net" in working with your own body in terms of the reading of the work, or the relationship with the viewer, but she was not aware of that when she gave it up, she just knew she couldn't use her body any more.<sup>52</sup> She described the new works as "laying out a narrative" that is very revealing as opposed to just one's body. She explained that *Party for Freedom* (2010) revealed her political views more intimately than any other prior work and that her most recent web video series *Revisiting Genesis* (2016) is very autobiographical. The protagonist of *Revisiting Genesis* is quite literally disappearing. In other words, the piece literalises Ashery's ambivalence about self-disclosing within her work. Of this work, she commented "there's some kind of a price in terms of my own sense of exposure that is getting for me heavier and heavier". It strikes me that the shame attacking Ashery performed in *Hairoism* helped prepare her for the deeper self-disclosures within her current work.

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<sup>51</sup> It is interesting to consider this fact in relation to Wilson's works that are almost entirely photographic with the exception of *Stigma* and *Selfportrait* (described briefly in footnote 27 in the Introductory Chapter above and again in footnote 66 in Chapter Four below). My understanding is that for Wilson the photograph documents a performance that is to live photographically and to encounter an audience perpetually as a photograph or video. This has parallels to one incarnation of *Hairoism* from which Ashery produced a series of more staged portraits that she more or less comfortably exhibits as documentation of the work online.

<sup>52</sup> She clarified that it is not that body art is read more favourably, but rather that when she used her own body there was an expectation that this is exposing, while in her more recent works she was surprised to find that they made her feel exposed. I myself have experienced this in that I found my disclosures in the 2018 episode of *The O Show: Business or Pleasure?* to be more revealing and challenging than exposing my body in prior works.



## Conclusion

It is tempting to take Wilson's lead and attribute the very different experiences of shame attacking by these two artists to their respective personalities, cultural identities and upbringing. Is it that Ashery feels the pressure to fit in and belong more acutely because of Israeli propaganda and socialisation? Is Wilson brutally honest and unaware of normative, social boundaries because of childhood abuse?<sup>53</sup> Or is it because Wilson is American, white, heterosexual and part of a couple, as opposed to Middle Eastern, Jewish, queer and looking for love that the shame she feels, or the sense of societal isolation she experiences, is radically different from that of Ashery?

According to Ellis, none of these facts would effect the outcome of shame attacking as a therapeutic exercise following his method because whatever irrational beliefs the client holds, most likely in the form of internalised societal biases, would be countered with rational disputation. For example, Ashery feels she *must* fit in, but there is no rule in the universe that says this is in fact the case; while she may not like it, she is perfectly capable of going on living and not fitting in.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, she dislikes her work *Hairoism* because it makes evident aspects of her identity and body that society views negatively, which, importantly, she has had little to no control over and moreover, the perception of and response to which she is not in any way responsible (although as an artist it is her goal to change such perceptions/reactions). According to Ellis, she has the *choice* to personally refuse to believe in prejudicial and normative views or to allow them to affect her self-evaluations. In Wilson's case, Ellis' brand of rational disputation is unnecessary and in fact Ellis would recommend spending time with shameless people like her, that is, if in fact her audacity carries over significantly into her daily life, which is something

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<sup>53</sup> Despite Wilson's claim to not know when she is crossing a line, she most certainly felt and understood she was defying norms by being a female artist in Canada in the early 1970s. Moreover, the boundary crossing she performs is ethical because it causes no real harm to others, but rather performs a critical and consciousness-raising purpose, unlike the abusive acts she underwent as a child, which she herself condemns. Again, Ellis' anti-shame exercises contain the proviso that you *cause no harm to others*, get killed, beat up or arrested (the latter two being negotiable if acceptable by the practitioner) (Ellis 1973a).

<sup>54</sup> I emphasise the word *must* because Ellis would refer to this as "*MUSTurbation*", that is, when a desire is turned into a demand, which is usually inflexible, unhelpful and tends to cause distress (2005, 260).

about which I can only speculate (Ellis 1973a).<sup>55</sup> Although, Wilson subscribes to Goffman's notions of a constantly performing self and she defies convention everyday with her current hairstyle, it is undeniable that at least in her early career, "she had perhaps inadvertently been isolating her investigations within the safety of the artistic construct" (Wark 2001, 21).

Again, as I stated above, within Ellis' therapeutic model the shame attacker's experience is paramount and how others perceive them is irrelevant, but artworks are made to communicate to an audience. In my own work I reveal personal details that I would not necessarily share with strangers in my day-to-day life. I have viewed these admissions as serving a social and political, almost altruistic purpose, believing other people would hear and relate to my experience and perhaps feel better about themselves through an identification with me. I hoped and imagined that members of my audiences would have the feeling of being "not the only one". In other words, if I follow Ellis' view, what I had thought of as a noble, outward gesture was really only self-serving. Furthermore, I would be best served carrying out these admissions not in the safe haven of art galleries and performance venues, but in my real life, day to day, without donning a wig.<sup>56</sup> Not only that, I am projecting onto the audience my own feelings – *I* am the one who is ashamed, they may not be. What about those who neither relate to nor identify with me or my disclosures? Do they not matter in the end because ultimately the act of revealing attacks *my* shame and *I* gain confidence? In my honesty I might reveal to them details that further bind me to whatever stereotypical or normative view they have of someone like me, rather than disrupting their prejudices.

It seems that the work of shame attacking when it takes place in service of art, can be powerful when communicating to those who share the shame that is being attacked. The kinship of shame attacking takes place in venues like Franklin Furnace; at a feminist event such as my 'Once More with Feeling' where Ashery performed *Hairoism* for the first time; or the Live Art Development

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<sup>55</sup> Wilson, like Ashery, was extremely candid during our interview and in fact revealed details about her personal life that many people would be ashamed to admit to an acquaintance.

<sup>56</sup> In fact, REBT expert Windy Dryden informed me that performing shame attacking as a persona or in an overly exaggerated manner (as Wilson and I both have done) risks being "compartmentalised" as not authentic and therefore would have limited therapeutic impact (conversation with the author on 20 February 2017). I discuss my persona again in the following chapter and my conclusion below.

Agency, who published the dvd of Ashery's *Dancing with Men*, and among the 'community' of artists the organisation supports. One of the other artists who performed at 'Once More with Feeling' is the aforementioned Katherine Araniello, who subverts and critiques the norms of able-bodiedism and 'looksism' in her own work. The documentation of that incarnation of *Hairoism* captures Araniello's gleefully enraptured gaze as an audience member, viewing Ashery at her most monstrous and abject. Ashery may not feel pleased with the piece in retrospect, but at the time, it affected Araniello (and undoubtedly others) deeply. In a 2016 email correspondence about the piece, Araniello wrote: "I was fascinated by the physical transformation of female to male, because Ashery became something else that was not easily identifiable, and therefore made it difficult for the viewer to stereotype because it was a metamorphosis that doesn't fit into the everyday, acceptable norm. I am conscious of how society relates to a body that doesn't fit into the norm or conform to society's ideals of a 'perfect body'. As a physically disabled woman that society would rather regurgitate, abort or fix, the way I looked at the work was with acceptance of difference rather than resistance or repulsion".

figs. 13 & 14: Oreet Ashery, *Hairoism* (2009), photos: Christa Holka.

It strikes me that those individuals who benefit most from defying the notion of a true self are drawn to a form in which identity is expressed; those with the most at stake are the ones that choose to express the autobiographical. The impetus to contest essentialism is sometimes the very thing that binds one closer to it, as is the case with both *Hairoism* and *Dancing with Men*. This is the paradox at the heart of feminism articulated ad infinitum in the conflicts between varying strands of feminism expressing the "rupture[s] of

identification [that] must open the question of *whether feminism does, in fact, have 'a' potential constituency in 'all women'* (Berlant 1988, 238: emphasis in original). The risk of being pinned down as a subject can be part of the risk of acting against it. In Foucault's last lectures he asserts that alterity or otherness is the true life and whilst the 'others', namely the ancient Cynics, equate to our society's 'others' on a material level in their total poverty/dependence and they might be called 'deviant' today due to the animalistic way that they tended to their pleasures, nevertheless they were all male and factors such as race, age, ethnicity, weight and ability were *totally irrelevant* to the critique they leveled at their society. Therefore feminist, queer, disabled, trans and racially and ethnically diverse artists inevitably add new and crucial considerations to this discussion.

In summary, Wilson's lifelong ethos behind the creation of a body of work about appearance entails brutal honesty (*parrhesia*) and a willingness to withstand discomfort (shame attacking), the result of which is the transvaluation of shame into courage. Stemming from a discussion of her iconic dyptich *I make up* (1974) and public intervention *Stigma* (1973), I concluded that consciously embarrassing oneself, or trying to look embarrassed, can be one avenue for practicing freedom. The inclusion of an analysis of Oreet Ashery's *Hairoism* (2009) and her subsequent critical appraisal of the piece provided an opportunity to consider why inadvertent forms of shame attacking affect individuals differently and can enhance rather than dissipate the potentially harmful consequences of shame. Ashery's work also forced me to consider Wilson's drag pieces, giving insight into a second potential method of practicing freedom in relation to physical appearance: the exploration of female masculinity. Lastly, Ashery's reflections and experience complicate Naomi Wolf's advice in the epigraph at the start of this chapter; being shameless whilst seeking love and belonging is no simple task.

## Chapter Three

### Beyond 'Before and After': Cassils' Trans Aesthetics of Existence

In this chapter I will continue to relate feminist practices of freedom and self-care, as played out within the work of specific artists, to ancient Cynic precedents, as Foucault describes them. In particular, I liken the work and ethos of the Canadian-born, Los Angeles-based, trans conceptual artist Cassils to the practices and principles of the Cynics. More specifically, Cassils' exposure of their life within their artwork transforms norms and values in a manner akin to the Cynic's key principle *parakharaxon to nomisma* or 'transform the currency'. To make this argument, I begin by discussing feminist artworks that utilise shame-attacking, truth telling practices to confound and dispute the logic of 'before and after'. The artworks I address are my own work *Performance Art Can Change Your Life for the Better* (2010 to present), Cassils' piece *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011-3) and the feminist predecessor upon which *Cuts* is based, Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972).

### The Rhetoric of 'Before and After'

Ubiquitous via internet advertisement gifs and glossy magazines, 'before and after' images depict miraculous transformations and promise a quick fix. Not only do these images hide the technologies through which such results might take place or are constructed, but they also deny the reality of the material and affective labour that they require, if they are in fact achievable. 'Before and after' images present isolated, static moments of an otherwise fluctuating process of living, thereby obfuscating what is often an impermanent and ephemeral change. Furthermore, 'before and after' images and the makeovers they depict are tied to notions of an essential self and an unchanging inner truth.

Having studied specific manifestations of contemporary self-help culture such as the Weight Watchers dieting programme and the US TV show 'Extreme Makeover', from her perspective as a Foucauldian feminist, theorist Heyes explains that: "the makeover enables the recipient to achieve longstanding personal goals presented as *intrinsic* to her own individual authenticity (2007, 97). Reiterating this point, she states: "women who aspire to change their

bodies [...] apparently suffer because their bodies don't match the person they feel they really are" (2007, 108). In other words, at the core of the rhetoric of the makeover is not radical change, flexibility or the power to creatively self-fashion, but is instead a conservative hermeneutics of the self. So unlike the self-transformations that my research is addressing, which radically destabilise the conception of the self's fixedness through acts of desubjectification, these makeovers seek "to liberate a self that was always there" (Heyes 2007, 82).

fig. 15: Oriana Fox *Radical Makeover* (2010), photographs and text.

Through a parody of the makeover paradigm, my own artwork pokes fun at the idea of 'becoming who one really is'. For my performance lecture/artist's talk entitled "Performance Art Can Change Your Life For The Better" (2010 onwards) I present an artist persona, which is identical to my *O show* host personality. Sporting my shoulder-padded, floral power suit, a head of short, wavy blonde hair (a wig) and heavy makeup, I relay the story of how becoming a feminist performance artist transformed me from a shy and mousy, sensitive painter/sculptor into the fabulous, confident woman I am today. To this end, I begin by showing a 'before' image which is a slightly blurry photograph of myself in my early 20s, sitting behind a sewing machine in everyday attire with

no makeup and my brown hair tied in a loose braid. Then I switch over to a blank slide, save for the word 'after' written at the top, and catwalk back and forth in front of it. The humour of my performance lies in the familiarity the audience has with various clichés, for example the promise of happiness equated with obtaining the feminine, physical ideal and (usually monetary, career or family-related) 'success' and the way in which feminism critiques such an equation, in addition to how feminism, in certain contemporary forms, seems also to be mired in neoliberalism and (its) narratives of individualism and self-improvement.<sup>1</sup> While I want to claim that the confidence I exhibit in my performance lecture is real, I also know it's a carefully crafted performance and the butt of a joke. I hope that the audience perceives and takes stock in some, if not all, of these facets of my work, even without knowing the whole backstory.

Around the time that the 'before' photograph I use in this lecture was taken, I would never have thought I would become a performance artist. A radical shift took place in the intervening years, which was deeply indebted to taking feminist and queer culture and theory seriously. My artistic and personal development happened in a messy and not so linear fashion, as it is with life. However in my lecture, which is also an artist's talk, I present highlights of my work from 2001 to the present, bending and consolidating the truth into clear narrative arc of transformation informed by feminism, culminating hyperbolically in 'self-actualisation'. In other words, I use my hard-won confidence, gained through the practice of shame attacking, and my own life story and artwork to parody idealised femininity and its makeovers. At the same time, the artworks I show and the descriptions I provide about their making, make clear how much work it in fact took to cultivate my performances and my self, that is, revealing the labour that 'before and after' images normally conceal.

Around the time the 'before' photo was taken, I had a conversation with my then painting tutor Sabina Ott in which she pointed out that the way I approach my appearance was either aimed at or presumed invisibility, which

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<sup>1</sup> Prancing back and forth saying that feminism has transformed me could be understood to imply that I've bought into the "I can pay my bills" and wax my bikini line brand of post-feminism or the neo-liberal feminism of American technology executive Cheryl Sandberg. But I'm making a joke out of all of these things, not just to ridicule them per se, although I am highly critical of Sandberg's *Lean In* (2013), but also to lay bare my own confusion about what to (aspire to) be and what is both possible and livable in the current climate. For a critique of Sandberg's book and political views see Dawn Foster's *Lean Out* (2016). I will return to how my work and the forms of shame attacking/truth telling theorised in this thesis relate to a critique of neoliberalism in my conclusion.

immediately struck me as accurate. She said to me that in her 20s she had aligned herself more with what I would call a Hannah Wilke type of feminism, defending the subjecthood and agency of the model. In other words, even within feminism there was freedom to choose what feels right for me, if only I knew who I was and what I really wanted. But instead of taking the path of hermeneutically or psychoanalytically seeking out that truth, I chose to test out different possibilities, not to become someone else or a more genuine me, but to follow what gave me pleasure and allowed me to question the relationship I have with the portrayals provided by my culture with which I am expected to identify and belong. In that process the shame attacking I performed (at first unaware of Ellis's theories and then later consciously informed by them) gave me confidence and had the unexpected (but also hoped for) result of helping me to tackle aspects of my social anxiety. This enabled me to expand as an artist by performing not just in front of cameras but also to live audiences big and small, but this has not been the straight-forward or simplistic transformation from A to B that I present in my lecture, because I am often still shy and my performances are never perspiration free. In everyday life I bear a much greater resemblance to the 'before' image than the idealised 'after' one I perform in my lecture.

fig. 16: Oriana Fox *Performance Art Can Change Your Life For The Better* (2010), performance still.

So when I strut in front of the blank slide that says 'after', I want to reveal my confidence as both real and a farce because that is my truth. I do not wish



to fool people or shame them with my own showing off; I want their empathy and their identification, or at the very least their knowing laughter. Instead of creating yet another ideal to be strived for or to compare oneself to, I hope the audience recognises the fiction and parody in my characterisation. To this end, I go on to present an array of self-portraits culled from my videos and performances in which I have tried out various 'selves' informed by visual culture. My aim with the lecture (and my work more generally) is to demonstrate that Western normative ideals around beauty and success continue to have a hold on me, despite my feminist consciousness. In other words, my life/work is an attempt to hone my critical attitude and practice freedom. Like many feminist artists, it was because of a desire to depict my self more accurately and thereby counter stereotypes and misrepresentations that I took risks akin to anti-shame exercises. I took the risk of self-disclosure, albeit protected by a persona, and despite the use of disguise, parody and humour, my performance lecture aims to *reveal* a desubjectifying, constantly evolving and multiple self. In this way, I counter the logic of the mainstream makeover, which, as I have explained, is embroiled with notions of inner truth and authenticity. I therefore follow in a long line of feminist artists and theorists who have not only critiqued such notions, alongside their bedfellow essentialism, but who also employ shame attacking to criticise the false promises of 'before and after'. In fact, countering the rhetoric of 'before and after' seems to be part and parcel of the legacy of second-wave feminist art.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For example, significantly, Martha Wilson also made a piece that exposes the lie at the heart of conventional makeover images. Her photographic work entitled *Before and After* (1974/2011) consists of one photograph of the artist's naked torso when she was in her 20s and a second photograph of her naked torso as a sexagenarian. The reality of her corporeal transformation from a youthful body to an aged one tells the truth about ageing and thereby becomes a joke we understand from perpetually being presented with the opposite, that is, images of a wrinkled or fat body miraculously transformed into a smooth or thin one. It is important to also note, that although disillusionment with false narratives of 'before and after' and speaking truth to their power manifests in the work of many feminist artists, not all of them succeed at countering essentialism or practicing freedom, as I will elaborate below.

fig. 17: Cassils *Day 1 of Time Lapse (Front)* and *Day 161 of Time Lapse (Front)* (2011), archival pigment prints. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

'Before and after' signifies an "instantaneous transaction", one that the artist Cassils would say is indicative of the "microwave mentality" that capitalism perpetuates (Gavin 2016). Cassils' artwork uses their body as sculptural material, not only highlighting its malleability, but also the fact that it is analog. As such, their work underscores the inevitably slow and incremental way that the body can be transformed, "through repetitive action" (Gavin 2016). In other words, their work upends the logic that what happens between the 'before' image and the 'after' is something fast and easy and without work or pain. Cassils' work discloses the labour that such images both conceal and deny.

The piece Cassils made that catapulted them to critical acclaim was called *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011, fig. 17), and in this work the artist makes evident *all* of the effort entailed in their self-transformation from an athletic build to a significantly more muscular one, replete with a fake tan. Importantly, aspects of this piece pay homage to Eleanor Antin's pivotal feminist artwork *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972, fig. 18), which is comprised of a grid of 144 photographs of the artist's naked body, taken daily from the front, side and back in order to document the results of her crash dieting over the course of 36 days. Cassils' work emulates this prototype by including, among its many components, a similar photographic grid, but with one key difference being the adding on of 23 pounds of muscle rather than the shedding of 'excess' pounds. In addition to the full body photographs, *Cuts* as a body of work also includes the durational performance, i.e. the six months of training that it took to achieve Cassils' physical goals. During that time Cassils also

videoed their weightlifting regime; produced a stop-motion animation of the quantities of food required to amass the bulk; and made slow-motion videos of themselves tearing apart a steak with their teeth and having raw eggs falling into their open mouth. Finally, they employed fashion photographer Robin Black to take glamour shots of them at the culmination of the process, among other playful multi-media outputs from the durational, all-encompassing endeavour.<sup>3</sup> The artist also recorded in writing, through a blog on Huffpost.com, their initiation to taking steroids for the final weeks of the project. In other words, the reality of the process and the constant work on the self/body that it entailed was laid bare. In doing so Cassils demonstrates its long-term unsustainability as a way of life and thereby produces a potent critique of the capitalist system and its perpetuation of false hopes, encapsulated as they are in 'before and after' images.<sup>4</sup>

fig. 18: Eleanor Antin *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972), Detail, 148 silver gelatin prints & text, 7 x 5 in. each. From the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

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<sup>3</sup> Descriptions and documentation of each aspect of this body of work can be found on the artist's website: <http://cassils.net/portfolio/cuts-a-traditional-sculpture/>.

<sup>4</sup> One could argue that this way of life is one that many body builders do in fact 'sustain', however, it requires constant work and high caloric intake and thus substantial financial support. These facts, coupled with the toll such extreme exercise takes on the body, make it a lifestyle that is unlikely to continue into mid life or old age. Cassils articulates their work as a form of capitalist critique to numerous interviewers from mainstream and art media alike. See interviews with the artist by Elio Iannacci for *macleans.ca* (2016); by Francesca Gavin for *Kaleidoscope* (2016); and with Priscilla Frank for Huffpost.com (2016), among other press. See also McTavish's reading of Cassils' work *Hard Times* (2010) which explains how Cassils' body building artwork critiques capitalism (2015, 103).

Cassils, like her predecessor Antin, *reveals* rather than *conceals* the exertion entailed in achieving physical beauty, albeit respectively aiming towards very different manifestations of the ideal. Antin's artwork uses the dieting body and photography to approximate the perfection of the classical female nude sculpted in marble, as the piece's subtitle and accompanying text conveys.<sup>5</sup> Antin's personal motivation to diet is irrelevant because her aim is to critique the seemingly timeless demand that the actual female body equate to the visual (to be looked at) aesthetic ideal. Furthermore, in terms of how the piece has been evaluated by feminist art historians, whether Antin has acquiesced to patriarchal demands to transform her figure is irrelevant to the work's meaning. For example, Abigail Solomon-Godeau argues that *Carving* is "fundamentally deflationary of an ideal, not revelatory of an authentic self" (2007, 341). In other words, whether Antin wishes to obtain the ideal for personal in addition to critical/artistic reasons is unimportant. The feminist truth-telling that the work elicits is the revelation that ideals of feminine beauty require effort, i.e. are not 'natural' and "are also bound up with aesthetic theories and ideologies of artistic production" (Solomon-Godeau 2007, 343).<sup>6</sup> In Foucauldian terms, the piece depicts in a very literal way the internalisation of the disciplinary surveillance applied to female bodies and the way in which self-technologies, in this case, dieting and photography, can be deployed coercively to objectify and limit the female body in the process of normative subjectification. The revelation/depiction of this process is where Antin's feminist critique resides. Antin attacks the shame of having to work (or in this case, have the willpower to go hungry) to approximate the ideal. Therefore, what *Carving* and *Cuts* share is that they respectively combine shame attacking and truth telling to debunk the myths of 'before and after'.<sup>7</sup> However, Antin's

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<sup>5</sup> The accompanying text describes "an archetypal Greek sculptor cutting away and shaping stone to produce his ideal statue" (Solomon-Godeau 2007, 341).

<sup>6</sup> In Solomon-Godeau's text "The Woman Who Never Was" (2007), which I cite in the introductory chapter of this thesis, she argues against the notion that second wave feminist art (and specifically photographic work) was attempting to depict a true or essential female subject, but instead addresses the way in which femininity and the female self is socially and culturally constructed.

<sup>7</sup> Significantly, Peggy Phelan considers Antin's *Carving* to be an important "precursor" to the French artist ORLAN's surgical works from 1990 to 1993, the first of which was entitled *The Reincarnation of Saint ORLAN* and the last *Omnipresence* (Phelan 2007, 71-72). For these pieces ORLAN publicly staged and disseminated operations that transformed her own face and body. Phelan compares Antin's *Carving* to a particular installation ORLAN displayed on the walls of the Sandra Gerig gallery in 1993 that was comprised of a series of self-portraits each taken on the 40 days following one facial operation. This string of 41 images of the artist's

form of truth-telling lacks the level of risk that would make it akin to *parrhēsia*; she knew the endpoint at the start of the process. Therefore Antin's life-performance for *Carving* did not entail the desubjectification or creative self-fashioning that *Cuts* demanded of Cassils, which this thesis champions.<sup>8</sup> Antin's work is a form of consciousness-raising, as opposed to a practice of freedom.

### **Cassils: Always in Transition**

It is my contention that in creating *Cuts* Cassils practices freedom in Foucault's sense of the term, despite employing dieting and exercise to achieve a pre-defined end goal, that is, to pile on 23 pounds of muscle. During my interview with Cassils, when we discussed the piece, they commented that due to the rigour of the regime, paradoxically, "there was absolutely no freedom in it at all".<sup>9</sup> While it is true that Cassils' aim was both precise and physically taxing to the point of being almost incarcerating, it was freeing to the extent that it was not normalising. In fact, the work strikes me as proof of Cressida J. Heyes' assertion that "achieving greater freedom often involves discipline" (2007, 88). In tandem, Foucauldian Margaret McLaren also comments on how "discipline both enables and constrains", citing the muscular female as exemplary of this phenomenon (2012, 59). Unlike Antin's *Carving*, the personal motivations and the subjectivity behind *Cuts* are crucial to the (feminist) meaning of the work. What motivates *Cassils* is not only a dual critique of capitalism and the limitations of gender norms/aesthetics, but also the longing both to embody masculinity and to exploit the "opportunities for criticality" and "political resistance" that gender-nonconforming, trans identity entails (Gavin 2016). For

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bruised and puffy face as it recovers over period of weeks again, much like Cassils' *Cuts*, refutes conventional "before and after" images and the effortless erasure of pain they depict, that is, despite ORLAN's adamant testimony that the surgeries have caused her no pain.<sup>8</sup> In this respect one might consider ORLAN's surgical works to be more comparable to Cassils' than Antin's *Carving* because ORLAN is engaged with acts of creative 'self-fashioning', turning her self (or at least her image) into a work of art, albeit in a much more literal way. Importantly, Heyes zeroes in on the fact that ORLAN's motivation to have cosmetic surgery was that she did not feel "at home" in her body and she desired to transform her appearance to better accord with her identity (2007, 60). In other words, whilst ORLAN might be engaging in an aesthetic self-transformation, she is still caught up in a hermeneutics of the self. It is also notable that ORLAN has gestured to transsexual body narratives, describing her project as "woman to woman transsexualism" (Donger 2010, 87). ORLAN's statement points again to a limiting of the self in keeping with the notion of an essential truth at the core of identity, which is the stark opposite of Cassils, who counters such essentialising narratives of transsexuality, as I will explain in detail below.

<sup>9</sup> This and all further quotations come from my interview with Cassils on 25 November 2016 (see Appendix C, unless otherwise indicated).

Cassils, again dissimilarly to Antin, experience is “paramount”, not subservient to “the stable artwork”; in fact “they’re one and the same”. In other words, experiencing and living with the manifestations of their artistic process is as much a part of *Cuts* as the critique its documentation elicits.<sup>10</sup>

*Cuts* documents Cassils’ process of building muscle and approximating the ideal of a ‘cut’ bodybuilder, an ideal that, notably, is applied differently to male and female body builders. While *Cuts* reverses *Carving* in terms of adding instead of subtracting weight, it is not true that *Cuts* inverts *Carving* along gender lines, with Antin approximating the feminine ideal and Cassils estimating the masculine one. Because Cassils identifies not as female or male, but as something in between, as trans, the transformation they aimed to accomplish with *Cuts* is non-normative.<sup>11</sup> To the extent that Cassils did not wish to become a *female* bodybuilder, nor do they intend to fully transition and become a trans man, the end goal of their process remained largely indeterminate and unclassifiable. Conventional female bodybuilders, while seemingly contradicting expectations of femininity as passive and weak, actually adamantly re-inscribe and emphasise their traditional femininity through styling and comportment. As Jack Halberstam asserts, “[e]ven women who are involved in the most masculine of activities, such as boxing or weightlifting, attempt to turn the gaze away from the own potential masculinity” (1998, 270). Similarly, art historian turned figure girl, Lianne McTavish explains, female bodybuilders opt for breast implants to replace the mammaries that their muscle building has depleted and their poses and glittery bikinis highlight their femininity (2015, xx). Chiming in with these voices is Foucauldian feminist theorist Honi Fern Haber, who argues that the female bodybuilder’s image, which is accessorised and performed to highlight femininity, risks being coopted as another “outlet for male desire” and thereby becomes “complicitous in its own objectification” (2010, 149). In other words, were Cassils to have aspired to the norms of a female body builder, they would risk recuperation and objectification. However, unlike the majority of female boxers and weightlifters, Cassils does not deflect attention from their own masculinity or protest that their sportiness and/or musculature are simply

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<sup>10</sup> In their blog and in our interview, Cassils described the reactions their new appearance engendered from “passing more” to the laughter of misrecognition. I will return to this aspect of the work below.

<sup>11</sup> I do not mean to imply here that the desire to become a man or a woman is always automatically normalising. See Kate Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw* (1994) and Julia Serrano’s *Whipping Girl* (2007).

an expression of their femininity. Cassils does not hide and thereby emphasise their breasts as feminine by wearing a bikini top, but instead reveals them as pectoral muscles, just as a male body builder would. Although, undeniably, Cassils also does *not* do this as a male body-builder would, because they have breasts, their nipples are pierced and their spray tan reveals that they had been wearing a bikini top when it was applied. Cassils' masculinity is also coyly undermined by other features of the images the artist produced at the end of their training regime for the project, with the assistance of Robin Black entitled *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis* (2011). Any reading of their image as either male or female is disrupted simultaneously by their anatomy; the use of bright red lipstick accentuates the femininity of their facial features; and the jock strap that functions much like the bikini top on a female bodybuilder, to both protect and divulge the sexualised and gendered bulge (or lack there of) underneath it.<sup>12</sup>

fig. 19: Cassils, *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis* (2011), c-print 40 x 30 in., edition of 3.  
Photo: Cassils with Robin Black.  
Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

Cassils is seeking some alternative end that does not entail meeting the requirements of either female or male body builders. In tandem, they defy the

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<sup>12</sup> I will return to the topic of the phallus/its lack in the section on 'Cassils' Cynic Principles' below.

potentially normalising narratives of female-to-male transgender identity, which might be summed up in a 'before and after' image where the 'before' is conventionally coded female and the 'after' as male.<sup>13</sup> Cassils does not wish to *become* a man, but instead “performs trans *not* as something about crossing from one sex to another, but rather as a continual becoming, a process-oriented way of being that works in a space of indeterminacy, spasm and slipperiness” (Cassils in Albracht 2013: emphasis added). In other words, *Cuts* documents a short segment within a larger life process that renders Cassils' gender identity constantly in flux.

Moreover, *Cuts* emerges from a web of identifications; in reading this work, the artist's desire to learn from and to some extent embody prior feminist art works is just as important as the quest to achieve a more muscular, masculine body. In this way, Cassils' representations/life are evocative of the understanding of trans identity and its variability as described by FTM performance artist Jordy Jones, which is cited by Halberstam in *Female Masculinity*. Halberstam writes that “Jones objected to the very idea that transsexual experience could be represented in any totalizing or universal way” because, as Jones asserts, “[n]ot everyone who experiences gender dysphoria experiences it in the same way, and not everyone deals with it in the same way” (148-149). Importantly, Halberstam goes on to argue that “Jones's understanding of transgender variability produces an almost fractal model of cross-gender identifications that can never return to the binary models of *before and after*, or transsexual and nontranssexual, or butch and FTM” (149: emphasis added). Cassils' critique of our culture's “microwave mentality”, often epitomised in before and after images, is made manifest formally in *Cuts*, but also, as the activities entailed in making such a work attests to, it also plays a role in how the artist lives their life as an embodied, gendered being.

Cassils chooses to remain perpetually in transition without the use of hormones and self-defines as “gender non-conforming trans masculine”(artist's website). Without judging other trans people who choose a more bio-medical path and transition by taking hormones, Cassils explained in our interview that

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<sup>13</sup> Relatedly, in her essay “Skirt Chasers: Why the Media Depict the Trans Revolution in Lipstick and Heels”, cultural theorist Julia Serrano writes about the mainstream media's insistence on portraying trans as 'class' transcendence, most often depicted through oversimplified narratives and exaggerated 'before and after' images, particularly of male to female transsexuals, where the 'after' is hyper-feminised.



they are a bit more critical of that approach, asking: “What does it mean for everybody to be taking the exact same hormone into their body? It’s made from horse urine in a factory. What does it mean and how is that going to interact with us long term?” Cassils explained that their concern had to do with a particular level of sensitivity they have about their body and their dubiousness about the medical industry, informed by having been very ill as a child (also mentioned in Iannacci 2016). Alongside and of equal importance to such apprehensions is Cassils’ socio-political rationale. In a 2017 panel discussion at The Marlborough Theatre in Brighton, Cassils confirmed this, stating “*for me*, I have a problem with the capitalisation and the big business of embodiment”, and went on to assert that, “I like to think of other ways of thinking about this, possibly, perhaps my body or our bodies are not the problem, but society’s perception that is the problem, and rather than making these drastic changes to fit one end of the spectrum or another, we should be pressing upon the dominant forces of power and asking them to be more self-conscious”.<sup>14</sup> Conforming to the prescribed ‘treatment’ for people who want to embody a certain physical or gender norm was not something Cassils felt comfortable pursuing because their ethos is a risky, critical one, akin to what Foucault formulates as a “critical attitude” comprised of “refusal, curiosity and innovation” (Bess 1988, 12). Cassils’ states, “I am *curious* as to what ideas and questions can come from continual transformation” (Cassils and Grey 2016: emphasis added). In other words, Cassils’ process is open-ended and their life/work is an on-going, dynamic process.

During our interview, Cassils and I talked about the experience of taking steroids for *Cuts*, how it impacted their bodily sensations and feelings, but also day-to-day interactions in the street. Cassils used the words “dysphoria” and “dysphoric” to describe it, stating: “It was as if the inner compass and the connections I had within my own body were off centre”. They also remarked that they were a lot quicker to respond to people with anger and rage, when normally their tendency is to be self-protective and their ethos is pacifist. It is striking to me that Cassils used the terms “dysphoria” to describe their feelings

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<sup>14</sup> Cassils emphasised the words ‘for me’ here because, as they also explained, their unique position with regard to medicalised transitioning is an unpopular one that “the trans community frowns upon” since it is potentially “a barrier to care”. In other words, as I will go on to highlight below, Cassils’ trans identity, and the particular way they embody it, allows them to occupy a position of otherness, not only beyond, but also within the trans community.

specifically because “gender dysphoria” is the term used to define the psychological illness that trans people are said to occupy *before* ‘successfully’ transitioning to their desired gender. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), which classifies ‘gender dysphoria’ in biomedical terms as “a condition in which someone is intensely uncomfortable with their biological gender and strongly identifies with, and wants to be, the opposite gender” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).<sup>15</sup> It is strangely paradoxical therefore that Cassils felt dysphoria as a result of the steroid-induced sensations they experienced producing *Cuts*, in that the artist succeeded at either “passing more” or inducing confusion in others during street encounters both of which were undoubtedly part of their goal (interview with the artist 2016 and Wagley 2011). In other words, if ‘gender dysphoria’ is the discomfort that certain trans individuals experience *prior* to transitioning, then why is it that the feeling Cassils experienced when getting closer to the desired end point of the training regime entailed in making *Cuts*? The answer lies in the fact that, again, Cassils does not conform to the definition of ‘gender dysphoria’ or the narrative arc that it implies, i.e. that a subject suffering from it has a relatively clear path they would follow towards ‘wellness’ or toward relieving the pain of wanting to be read as the opposite gender. Furthermore, it is safe to say that Cassils not only intellectually relishes the socio-political criticality that their trans identity provides (not only in relation to binary gender norms but also within the trans community), but also is someone who is at ease with both that identity and their body. My focus on Cassils’ use of the term ‘dysphoria’ in light of this biomedical terminology serves to point out how successfully their work undermines normalising definitions and narratives. While *Cuts* has a clear structure and goal in terms of the amount of muscle the artist had to build, the impact that it had on their sense of their self did not follow a parallel path from start to finish, but rather included intermittently achieving both a novel and unexpected experience of dysphoria and the satisfaction of passing, tinged by

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<sup>15</sup> Significantly, the DSM-5 has altered both the name and the definition from the previous edition in which it was called “gender identity disorder”, a shift in emphasis that reflects the “recognition that the disagreement between birth gender and identity may not necessarily be pathological if it does not cause the individual distress” (Parry 2013). In this way, it reflects the view that “distress in gender dysphoria is not an inherent part of being transgender” but rather, “arises as a result of a culture that stigmatises people who do not conform to gender norms” (Parry 2013).

the sensation of feeling “out of character” or against one’s own best interest and ethics from being quicker to anger and aggression.<sup>16</sup>

By refuting the limitations of binary norms, Cassils’ self is always in transition. Likewise, their “artistic methodology is trans” in that their aesthetic ranges from a paired-down, serious and highly formalist approach to humorous, pink-spandex-sporting, camp frivolity.<sup>17</sup> These vying facets of their life/work become aligned around the concept that Cassils’ calls “periodisation”, which the artist described as follows:

It’s this notion that I never really do the same thing forever, because a) it’s boring and b) it’s not good for you. So I’m constantly finding new things to become interested in and this is in terms of art and in terms of physicality and all sorts of aspects. For example, there was the *Cuts* project and then I went into the *Becoming an Image* project, which required a completely different kind of training protocol.

In other words, Cassils as a person, much like the non-binary gender they live within and the aesthetics they employ in their artwork, is always in transition and in this way calls for a specific way of working on and caring for the self.<sup>18</sup>

### **Cassils’ Cynic Principles**

The physical and conceptual contests that Cassils takes on in producing their work/physique is constantly developing with the aim of not getting bored and avoiding being pinned down, in addition to challenging societal norms. Moreover, their artwork documents processes that they undertake as life practices. In other words, Cassils’ trans ethos is lived, not merely represented

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<sup>16</sup> In our discussion, Cassils said, “having a surge of testosterone on account of having the steroid, and it wasn’t like that ‘roid rage’ thing, it was subtle, but it was enough for me to shift and it was also probably as a result of the increased strength and size and just more physical competence, if someone just came at me, or started being aggressive with me, I felt like I was matching their aggression more.” It is interesting that Cassils’ artistic process brought them in touch with the more negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity, that is a quickness to rage and propensity for physical aggression, although not acted upon, and that the artist’s subsequent works such as *Becoming an Image* (2012 to present), *The Resilience of the 20%*, (2013) and *The Powers That Be* (2015) and *Indistinguishable Fire* (2016) deal to such a great extent with violence. For more information on these works, visit the artist’s website.

<sup>17</sup> Gavin Butt made the comment that Cassils’ “methodology is trans” during Cassils’ lecture at Goldsmiths, University of London on 10 November 2016.

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that the self-care Cassils employs and their ethos are comparable to those entailed in the practice of REBT, with its emphasis on the ever-evolving status of the human subject at the heart of its theorisations and which advocates flexible thinking as central to wellbeing (Dryden 1997, 65).

and in this way likens them to the Cynics who, as Foucault explains, pioneered “a form of life in the most concrete and material sense of the word; bearing witness to the truth by and in one’s body, dress, mode of comportment, way of acting, reacting and conducting oneself” (2011, 173). Foucault goes on to assert that the Cynics applied their philosophical “principles to life itself, rather than merely maintaining them as an element in the *logos*, by the fact that they give a form to life, just as the coin’s effigy gives a form to the metal on which it is stamped” (Foucault 2012, 244). It is striking that this description, which alludes to the Cynic precept *parakharaxon to nomisma* or “change the currency”, lends itself to a sculptural metaphor, making it all the more fitting as a point of comparison to Cassils’ life/work. The artist states: “I see my body as a material, just like paint or clay”, while at the same time they adamantly assert: “you can’t use a body of a person as a formal brushstroke. You can’t separate someone’s identity and just say that’s its form” (Iannacci 2016). In other words, corporeality is malleable to a point but is also inseparable from life/identity. Therefore when Cassils cares for and trains their body, following their trans philosophy of periodisation, they are also helping to form their *self* in keeping with their aesthetics of existence. Importantly, the word for ‘currency’, that is *nomisma*, in the ancient Greek phrase, has a double meaning and also signifies “*nomos*, the law or custom”. Therefore the “principle of altering the *nomisma* is also that of changing the custom, breaking with it, breaking up the rules, habits, conventions, and laws”, which again speaks to Cassils’ non-normative life, work and self (Foucault 2012, 242).

The specific way that Cassils lives as a trans masculine, gender non-conforming person means that they occupy a position of alterity in relation to binary gender norms. As Cassils explains,

Because I chose not to take hormones or have surgical alteration to my body, people tend to read me, depending on the amount of muscle I have on my frame, sometimes as an aggressive lesbian and sometimes as a trans person. Very few people can occupy that perfect seamless adherence to what that binary fulfils. In the lack of fulfilling that position, you are always on the outside, which offers opportunities for criticality (Gavin 2016).

In this way Cassils articulates trans as a form of political resistance and criticality similarly to how Foucault explains the alterity of the Cynics as the

cornerstone of their truth telling. Foucault states, “there is no establishment of the truth without an essential position of otherness; the truth is never the same; there can be truth only in the form of the other world and the other life” (2012, 287/356). In living a gender identity that cannot be pinned down as either male or female and which, as I have explained, also defies normalising narratives of transgender identity, Cassils artfully occupies a position of otherness within our contemporary Western context, similarly to how the Cynics did in their era as Foucault describes. In courageously occupying and representing an ever-changing articulation of a non-binary gender, Cassils lives the other life and helps to usher in an *other* world.

Additionally, in highlighting how bodies rarely “adher[e] to what the binary fulfils”, Cassils evokes the words of Judith Butler and her assertion that “materialisation is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled” (1993, 2). To clarify, Butler makes this statement to support her theory that gender is performative but not voluntary, because sex “is what Foucault has called a ‘regulatory ideal’” with “the power to produce – demarcate, circulate, differentiate the bodies it controls” (1993, 1).<sup>19</sup> Therefore, according to Butler, gender is not something that an individual can take on and off like a dress, but is instead a series of norms that in their repetition are open to the possibility of “rearticulations” that call into question those very norms, which is what Cassils’ life and work achieves.<sup>20</sup> Whilst Cassils does not have *total* control over their body and its appearance, nor can they wholly determine how they are read, to the extent that it is possible to self-fashion, the artist employs *askesis* toward non-normative ends, in keeping with their critical and innovative, feminist *mathesis* (theoretical

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<sup>19</sup> It is unsurprising that a Cynic principal, as lived out by Cassils, would evoke the work of Butler, since the theorist’s work is so heavily informed by Foucault. Butler’s theories of gender performativity are indebted to Foucault and his conception of the power-knowledge nexus and “the complex interplay between what replicates the same process and what transforms it” (Foucault 2007, 58; cited in Butler 2004, 27).

<sup>20</sup> This relates back to my point about Wilson transvaluating shame into courage, for *Stigma* she visualises shame, manifesting it through make up, but in that process takes herself seriously as an artist, takes the risk of presenting herself as an artist. She is both ashamed and an artist; that’s her truth. But instead of simply repeating/reaffirming that women can’t be artists without being an embarrassment, she produces a ‘rearticulation’ that questions the norm of proud male artist. She proves that artists are not just self-assured males, but are also insecure/courageous women.

knowledge).<sup>21</sup> The *askesis* themselves are still determined by our culture, yet the manner in which Cassils applies and performs them is where their freedom is exercised, no pun intended.

In Butler's theory of gender performativity, the temporary reversal of the mimetic and the real, privileges the former, not simply to replace it, but in order to open up to contestation the dominant authority of the latter. In this way, performative challenges to the gender binary parallel the Cynic precept "changing the currency", as interpreted by Foucault. The Cynic life, according to Foucault, is a radically "scandalous" life that "reveals other lives [...] to be no more than counterfeit coin with no value" (2012, 244). In other words, the Cynics' act of *parrhēsia* serves to radically undermine authority by exposing themselves and their lives as a scandal of truth. But that exposure is not simply an act of forgery (as the Cynic principle 'change the currency' is often misinterpreted to imply) in which the copy is privileged over the original, but instead denies the basis of any authority that attempts to dictate the difference for everyone. Cassils' radical position vis-à-vis gender and the particular self-representations that it has spawned therefore further underscore the connection between the Cynic precept 'change the currency' and Butler's theories.

fig. 20: Cassils *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis* (2011), c-print, 40 x 30 in., edition of 3  
photo: Cassils with Robin Black  
Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

fig. 21: Lynda Benglis *Untitled* (1974), Detail, colour photograph, 26.5 x 26.5 cm.

fig. 22: Robert Morris *Untitled* (1974), offset lithograph, 94 x 61 cm.

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<sup>21</sup> When Foucault describes his concept of an 'aesthetics of existence' he explains it as an art of living (*techne tou biou*) practiced through *mathesis* (theoretical knowledge) and *askesis* (practical training) ([1984] 2001, 143).

In an interview in which Cassils discussed the work *Cuts*, and specifically in *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis* (2011) produced at the project's culmination, the artist remarked, "I wanted my body to become the phallus" (Wagley 2011). Cassils created the image in homage to Lynda Benglis' infamous *ArtForum* advertisement (*Untitled* 1974, fig. 21) in which the artist posed nude in a 'pin-up' style pose, provocatively holding a double-ended dildo. Counter to the bulging jockstrap in Cassils' rendition and its implication of a desire *to have*, the reference to Benglis alludes to a desire *to become*. To clarify, Benglis' image is at once a parodic hyperbolisation and a subversion of the phallic female, as she is defined within psychoanalytic discourse. According to that discourse and its definition of fetishism, the female body is idealised in order to disavow the threat of castration by hiding her lack (Mulvey 1999, 840). Further elucidating this mode of interpretation, Amelia Jones states, the "female body must, paradoxically have no orifice, no actual sex" – or any implication of the woman's own capacity for pleasure – to *become* the phallus (2012, 65/110). In Benglis' advertisement, however, instead of being fetishised by hiding her 'lack', she brandishes a fake penis whose double head both suggestively implies her own pleasure and, according to Jones, undercuts the penis' mythic status (1994, 34). Jones analyses Benglis' image in relation to another advertisement image made the same year by the artist's then lover Robert Morris (fig. 22). In that image Morris poses in a studded collar and heavy chains with a hard cap on his head, but with his own penis notably hidden, conflating the male artist (himself) with the mythic 'phallus' (Jones 1994, 34). For Jones, it is Benglis' inclusion of the dildo and its "deflation of the pretensions of the male organ that empowers [Benglis], endowing her with provisionally phallic power" (Jones 1994, 34). Thus Benglis simultaneously defies the (mis)conceptions that to be an artist and to experience sexual pleasure, one must be male. Cassils' image with its bulging jockstrap attempts, similarly to Morris' advertisement, to conflate her body with the phallus, while at the same time, in keeping with Benglis' precedent, empties the penis of its representative power.

Notwithstanding such a convoluted interpretation, in constructing this image Cassils' realises another potentially more disruptive task of working on

the self as something other than a subject, that is, of desubjectifying.<sup>22</sup> Cassils aimed to accomplish the kind of bewilderment that Benglis' image achieves for them. They described it as "a confusing image.[...] You can't tell if Benglis is screwing herself, screwing her audience, play-acting masculinity or just parodying it" (Cassils in Wagley 2011). By denying the reading of their personhood as belonging within a particular sex/gender, Cassils creates a similar confusion and also denies the phallus its role as the ultimate signifier. In her book *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Judith Butler scrutinises psychoanalytic theories of sexual difference and in particular the way they ascribe to the phallus the power to institute norms of sexuality, gender and race, asserting that sex is a norm by which one becomes a viable subject. Cassils' scandalous truth debunks the phallus/penis (or its lack) as the determinant of both gender and personhood.<sup>23</sup> It is not that Cassils' masculinity is a forgery of the real thing, but rather that the authority of the phallus/penis is rendered vacant and impotent. This is simultaneously made literal and parodied by the empty jockstrap.<sup>24</sup>

Regardless of Cassils' status as having or becoming, during our interview I explained to the artist that I often perceived them as embodying a super-hero-like perfection and bravado, to which they replied: "So maybe you see me as a superhero, but I feel in that moment that there's a discrepancy, and this is something that happens everyday, there's a discrepancy between how I feel and how I'm read. So to disclose that to a certain extent with just the

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<sup>22</sup> 'Desubjectification', as I explained in the introductory chapter, is the term Foucauldian theorist Dianna Taylor uses to signify any self-relation that "entails constituting, understanding, and relating to oneself in ways other than as a subject" (2013, 89). Also note, that I am *not* implying that individuals who identify as trans are without subjectivity or agency, but rather that Cassils enacts a refusal of the heterosexual matrix, which is a way of treating oneself as something other than a subject or of desubjectifying.

<sup>23</sup> Cassil's work therefore challenges those viewers whose sense of selfhood is aligned unquestioningly in conformity with normative, binary gender roles, which perhaps explains (but by no means excuses) the fact that Cassils' work engenders hateful and censoring responses from some members of the public. This makes Cassils' work all the more akin to *parrhēsia*, which necessarily entails great risk for the speaker because it is profoundly critical of the interlocutor (Foucault [1984] 2001, 14; 2011, 56). I will return to this point again below.

<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Cassils' image is at once a serious and potent assertion of trans identity and an homage, that is as playfully camp as its predecessor, that is, it is an original and at the same time a copy. In this way Cassils literalises yet another 'change of currency', that is, the temporary reversal of mimesis and the real. They do this through visual, aesthetic means, in addition to through physique and embodiment. Cassils *Advertisement*, much like Benglis' precedent, uses the tropes of pornography, yet they are both staking their claim to be works of art. Again, such 'changing of the currency' serves to deny the authority of those who attempt to distinguish between pornography and art, or between low culture and high art.



act of revealing, to me that's an act of vulnerability."<sup>25</sup> The discrepancy between my perception of Cassils and the artist's own internal feelings strikes me again as in keeping with the Cynics in that Cassils has 'transvaluated' vulnerability into bravery. Again, Foucault uses the term 'transvaluation' when discussing the Cynic "principle of non-concealment" (2012, 253). Like the Cynics, Cassils' level of exposure necessitates a kind of courage. However, Cassils' courage would not be perceptible were it not for their inherent vulnerability; it therefore becomes impossible to disentangle the two since both vulnerability and courage describe the action, becoming almost synonymous whilst at the same time being polar opposites.

Significantly, Foucault explores various interpretations of the Cynic phrase 'alter the currency' by describing how it originated as a Delphic oracle pronounced by the gods to Diogenes, founder of ancient Cynicism, comparing it to the prior oracle 'know thyself', offered to Socrates (2012, 241-2). Foucault cites the historian Julian's account of the connection between these two commands as follows:

the person who knows himself [sic] will know exactly what he [sic] is, and not merely what he [sic] *passes* for being. So the meaning Julian gives to the juxtaposition and coordination of these two precepts would be the following: the fundamental precept is 'revalue your currency'; but this revaluation can only take place through and by means of 'know yourself', which replaces the counterfeit currency of one's own and other's opinion of oneself, with the true currency of self-knowledge. (2012, 242: emphasis added)

It is striking that Foucault uses the verb *to pass* in this context as it corresponds exactly with the language we use today to describe an individual who has succeeded in being perceived as another gender, class, sexuality or race. Cassils knows themselves, not just what they *pass* as or are perceived as being, and in that knowing and through their truth-telling revalues the currency of the self. It is important to also state, that while Cassils has and, indeed, gains self-knowledge, this does not mean that their self-care follows a hermeneutics of the

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<sup>25</sup> Importantly, Cassils made this remark specifically about the level of vulnerability entailed in making their work *Tiresias* (2010-2013). *Tiresias* is a durational performance in which the artist pressed their naked body against a bust of an idealised male torso sculpted in ice, which functions as a metaphor for the pain the artist feels in wanting to inhabit another appearance, to be read differently as a body.

self, but rather that Cassils shapes their own existence through “the continuous application of a care of self as practice of freedom” and “exposes that life as a scandal of truth” (Foucault 2012, 353/253).<sup>26</sup>

Cassils’ actions can be compared in particular to Foucault’s description of the Cynics, which states:

one risk[s] one’s life, not just by telling the truth, and in order to tell it, but by the very way in which one lives. In all meanings of the word, one ‘exposes’ one’s life. That is to say, one displays it and risks it. One risks it by displaying it; and it is because one displays it that one risks it (2012, 234).

Such exposure is a form of *parrhēsia* and what is at stake for its practitioner is not only indeterminacy, but also social exclusion and ridicule. The negative and hateful responses to Cassils’ artwork make these latter risks apparent. Haber, mentioned above, who warns of the potential for images of muscular women to be objectified and coopted, also alternately cautions that the muscular female risks non-acceptance, i.e. being “ostracised and hence disempowered” (2010, 149). The public reception of Cassils’ work confirms and illustrates this point.<sup>27</sup> In addition to the iconic *Advertisement* image, Cassils produced a glossy magazine called *Lady Face/ Man Body* (2011) in which numerous pin-up portraits taken by Black are reproduced. In the shots, Cassils strikes varying poses and wears variable amounts of makeup and clothes. After disseminating these “trans positive” images on the internet via Huffington Post’s Gay Voices section, they “were met with a litany of hatred, confusion, and phobic comments” (artist’s website). In other words, in accordance with the defining features of *parrhēsia*, Cassils artworks were perceived as and responded to as an attack on the interlocutor or viewer, who in turn attacks back. Another negative response to the artist’s work occurred in 2016 when *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis* was featured as the lead promotional image for a travelling art exhibition in Germany entitled “Homosexuality\_ies”, the railroad company

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<sup>26</sup> To clarify this point, I would like to return to my comparison of Cassils’ acts of self-creation to those of ORLAN begun in footnote 7 above. ORLAN’s motivation with the surgical works is to better accord her appearance with her identity (i.e. in keeping with her self-knowledge) through permanent changes, i.e. surgical alterations that cannot be undone. By contrast, Cassils cares for their self through ever-evolving practices, characterised as ‘periodisation’, which contribute to their self-knowledge rather than accord with it.

<sup>27</sup> I refer to Cassils as depicting a muscular woman here because, although I read their image as trans and the artist now refers to themselves as trans, at the time that they made *Cuts*, they still referred to themselves as Heather Cassils and as a woman (Wagley 2011).

Deutsche Bahn AG, banned the image and had it removed, stating that it was “sexualised” and “sexist”. This act of censorship, like the aforementioned “phobic comments”, treats Cassils’ work as if it is shameful and immoral and thereby makes evident its power as a form of *parrhēsia*.

In response to the censorship of the images, a press release from the Schwules Museum, where the exhibition was hosted, stated that they “consider the allegation and the resulting advertisement ban wrong and inappropriate.... It is interesting that the Deutsche Bahn AG has no problems showing people – with nudity – in advertisements when they conform [to] heterosexual norms. Yet an image that obviously questions such norms is being ‘censored’ and considered unacceptable for public display” (Durón 2013). In other words, it is precisely the way Cassils’ work “chang[es] the custom, breaking with it, breaking up the rules, habits, conventions” of the gender binary, and the heterosexual matrix on which it depends, that it was received as a threat and censored.

As Butler points out, censorship is a form of violence since it “is one strategy for providing the social death of persons” (2004, 29). In Butler’s assessment of what motivates trans and homo-phobic violence, she writes: “The person who threatens violence proceeds from the anxious and rigid belief that a sense of world and a sense of self will be radically undermined if such a being, uncategorizable, is permitted to live within the social world. The negation, through violence, of that body is a vain and violent effort to restore order” (2004, 34). Butler’s words further solidify the link between Cassils’ self-disclosure and Cynic *parrhesia* in that both are radically non-normative to the point of eliciting violent responses, if only, in Cassils’ case, non-physical violence. Additionally, Butler’s word ‘rigid’ immediately brings to mind the inflexible and irrational beliefs that REBT therapists seek to counter in their patients and in this way begs the question of how such Cynic acts overlap with shame attacking.

### **Shame Attacking, *Adoxia* and *Parrhēsia* with Caveats**

Cassils responded to the hateful remarks and the censorship of their work with creative rebuttals and refusal. Specifically, Cassils produced a series of images called *Disfigured Pin-ups* (2013) defacing their own glamour shots, visualising with ink, paint and razors the aggression and bile with which the

images were met by the online public. In other words, the insults and inflammatory remarks (or 'trolling') their images received on Huffpost.com was an attempt to humiliate the artist, which Cassils rejects whilst recognising the power of such hateful responses by literally defacing their own images with such commentary. In tandem, in response to the censorship of their work, Cassils' uploaded the *Advertisement* image online and invited people to print it out themselves and paste it over any images that they find 'sexist' in an act of defiance against trans/homophobic censorship.

fig. 23: Cassils *Disfigured Image: Cut Up: Comments From Huffington Post Article* (2013), photo paper, marker, gouache, razor etching, 17 x 11 in. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

In exposing their life through self-disclosing acts that challenge societal norms, Cassils risks retaliation in the form of humiliating "ridicule, scorn, contempt, or other degrading treatment at the hands of others" (Klein 1991, 2). The clinical psychologist Donald C. Klein, who wrote two lengthy studies on humiliation, explains that it is often affectively experienced identically to shame, including blushing, sweating, raised heart-rate, lowering one's face and other forms of physical retreat, yet the significant difference is that it is felt to be an *unjust* insult as opposed to shame, which is more private and feels deserved (Klein 1991). Importantly, Klein explains that humiliation is a highly social affect that is used to "maintain conformity" and therefore "is a major weapon in the oppression of women, people of colour, and other stigmatized groups" (Klein

1991, 2). This coincides with REBT expert Windy Dryden's assertion that the key "shame-avoidance behaviours" are concealment, conformity, inauthenticity ("not taking the risk of expressing one's real views") and submissiveness (1997, 26-31). Therefore attacking or defying humiliation not only elicits antithetical behaviours, but can serve critical, socio-political aims, not just therapeutic ones by giving minority subjects a voice. The experience of social stigmatisation or humiliation, however, does not line up perfectly with the definition of 'shame' in the literatures of REBT. The negative feelings that accompany scorn, ridicule and gawking are experienced as shame, according to both Ellis and Dryden, *only* when triggered by an underlying irrational belief and a set of unmet and inflexible demands. When one is called a derogatory name or treated as less than human, one can *refuse* both the naming and the treatment, which is what Cassils does.<sup>28</sup> Therefore Cassils attacks humiliation rather than shame.

The fact that Cassils' continues to proliferate their images and their activities in the face of censorship and ridicule, however, likens their practice all the more to the most advantageous and effective practice of shame attacking, as Dryden outlines it, which entails repeating the behaviour "until the 'dire' response is elicited, in order to prove one can handle it" (1990, 70). In other words, when it is practiced therapeutically, it needs to be done over and over again until the imagined response that the client fears most and therefore (usually, irrationally) seeks to avoid actually occurs and they learn that they can withstand and live through it. Significantly, it is on this point that shame attacking aligns almost uncannily with Cynic practices. As Foucault explains, the Cynic's purposely cultivated *adoxia* or dishonour, by "actively seeking out *humiliating* situations, because first of all there is the side of exercise, of the *reduction of opinions*, and then there is also the fact that, within the *accepted* humiliation, one is able to turn the situation around, and take back control of it" (2012, 261: emphasis added). Just like therapeutic shame attacking, Cynic *adoxia* aims toward the *acceptance* of humiliation for what it is – a wrongful, as opposed to accurate, evaluation of one's self. In other words, both shame attacking and *adoxia* strive for a kind of self-determination and control by seeking out and withstanding negative external judgments. However, what

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<sup>28</sup> Again, the artist's responses to attempts to censor and insult them, point outward to challenge the irrational beliefs of society, as opposed to one's that the artist may have internalised. Therefore Cassils' feelings do not fall within the definition of shame, as defined in the literatures of REBT, i.e. to "fall short of [one's] *own* ideals" (Dryden 1997, 9: emphasis added).

differentiates shame attacking from Cynic *adoxia*-seeking *parrhēsia*, is that the client is never encouraged to do anything that might mean harm comes to them, such as losing one's job, becoming a target of violence, getting arrested or jeopardising one's friendships, etc. (Ellis 1973a; Dryden 1997, 101).<sup>29</sup>

While it is probably safe to assume that Cassils will relentlessly counter discrimination, bigotry and hatred and the irrational beliefs *of others* that underpin them *ad infinitum*, they are also aware that the risk they take within their work and in the public realm as a gender non-conforming person is largely metaphorical and representational, as opposed to eliciting a violent response in the flesh. During our discussion, Cassils mentioned the varied reactions of strangers in the street and the "policing" they experienced as a result of their gaining muscle for *Cuts*, which meant that they were "figuring out that was happening in a really public way". However, Cassils also recognised that their safety would have been far more compromised were they to have been "dropped somewhere out west in the middle of nowhere" as opposed to the progressive and safe "enclave" of Silverlake, Los Angeles. In this aspect, Cassils' work/life might be more akin to shame attacking than to Cynic *parrhēsia* in that safety precautions are taken. Cassils does not seek out humiliation precisely the same way the ancient Cynics coaxed *adoxia*. Regardless, Cassils performs a kind of *parrhēsia* by relentlessly risking non-acceptance, if only at a safe distance.<sup>30</sup>

That said, Cassils' recent works *Becoming an Image* (2012 to present), *The Resilience of the 20%* (2013), *The Powers That Be* (2015) and *Indistinguishable Fire* (2016) all bring to light and admonish hate crimes and violence, not only those committed against trans people, but against all of society's others. These works allude to the harsh reality that being in a position of alterity is *not* always livable. In order to make that point and to challenge our/their own complicity in violence, Cassils made the work *Indistinguishable Fire* that literally put their body at risk through an act of self-immolation, which was as "reckless" as the artist has been because, as they explained "one

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<sup>29</sup> Shame attacking aims to counter the *irrational* beliefs that prevent a person from being themselves, whereas it is totally *rational* to fear violence, imprisonment and the loss of work or social ties. That said, for some individuals in order to be themselves or to practice freedom, it would likely be necessary to ignore the warnings of REBT. This point is central to the concerns of the next chapter.

<sup>30</sup> This point about the safe distance provided by photography and the art world verses the risks of the 'real world' echoes points I made earlier about Martha Wilson's work in Chapter Two above.

cannot train for fire”. At the same time, Cassils did *learn* how to do this and performed alongside other trained stunt professionals, performing the act (at least once for the camera and) one time only for a live audience, due to constraints of finances and insurance. A Cynic, who lives in abject poverty without any social ties, has no need of such precautions.

So just as Cassils art/life practices only imperfectly align with Ellis’ shame attacking in their countering of humiliation as opposed to shame, they are also similar but not wholly equivalent to the life-risking *parrhēsia* that the Cynics performed. The chancy, embodied truth-telling that Cassils’ work achieves is not necessarily personally therapeutic because internalised self-depreciation is not what motivates it and therefore increased confidence, while it might be a happy bi-product, is not what is at stake. Despite referring to the self-improvement narratives of neoliberal, self-help culture through appropriating the ‘before and after’ paradigm, self-assurance is beside the point. Cassils’ life/art practices are outward directed, magnanimous acts of socio-political critique in which they are personally implicated. Although pursuing such a way of life is chancy, the safety precautions the artist puts in place to ensure that their daring stunts are “not reckless” differentiate them from those of the ancient Cynics who put their lives on the line. However, such precautions are necessary to enable the artist to continue their practice of countering norms and attacking humiliation, likening it all the more to shame attacking as it is prescribed by Ellis/Dryden. In order for *parrhēsia* to be like shame attacking in its repeatability, it must be sustainable and life affirming, that is, quite distinct from the Cynic version.

### **Conclusion: Second-Wave Feminist Art as Resource**

During the aforementioned 2017 panel discussion, Cassils wore a t-shirt of Barbara Kruger’s 1989 artwork “Your Body Is A Battleground”. The t-shirt’s message, made by Kruger in response to American political debates over abortion and ‘a woman’s right to choose’, is strikingly fitting to Cassils’ agenda as someone who not only uses their own body instrumentally to tackle gender norms, but who is also openly critical of how the medical industry capitalises on sex reassignment. The text on the Kruger t-shirt also notably mirrors the writing scrawled across Cassils’ torso in their *Disfigured Image: Cut Up* (see fig. 23

above). No doubt prompted by the t-shirt, an audience-member at the panel discussion asked, “How important is feminist art history to your work?” Cassils’ unwavering response was, “It’s a huge influence. Most of my work is in dialogue with specific feminist artists. I’m deeply informed by feminist art practice.”<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, Cassils work forges a connection between the concerns of second-wave feminism and their own contemporary trans politics and gender re-imaginings. Cassils’ homages to both Antin and Benglis in *Cuts*, like the act of wearing the Kruger shirt, bring to the fore the shared experience of having a body that is subject to forms of control including that of the law, surveillance, humiliation and shame. Cassils’ direct allusion to Antin specifically bridges the gap between feminist and trans subjects around the lived experience of having a body that does not conform to one’s desires, informed as they are by external norms and ideals. In other words, Cassils’ reference to *Carving* emphasises the solidarity that Foucauldian theorist Heyes articulates between individuals who at first glance might seem to be on opposite ends of the feminist spectrum. Heyes argues that “feminist solidarity after queer theory” is possible because “very different experiences can motivate very similar feminist goals” (2007, 62). Myriad subjects feel the pressure to conform to one gendered physical ideal or another and suffer to achieve it, including people with body dysmorphic disorder, anyone who regularly diets, those who elect for normalising cosmetic surgery and trans people.<sup>32</sup> Heyes understands and recognises the objections that might be raised by her alignment of such experiences, that is, from trans people who “see their struggles as unique, far from the triviality of cosmetic surgeries or dieting” (2007, 62). However, Cassils’ homage to Antin defies such objections, highlighting that both artists “feel the weight of a culture where identities and bodies are supposed to line up” (Heyes 2007, 62). While Antin and Cassils made work out of the pressures to align their bodies with gendered ideals, Benglis fought against the art world’s biased alignment of the identity ‘artist’ with the male body (and, in parallel, the phallogocentric view that sexual pleasure is male), as did many of her contemporaries. Whether the source of

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<sup>31</sup> If this statement does not testify to the impact of feminist art on Cassils’ creative development, what further cements its influence is the fact that Cassils attended CalArts (renowned for the 1971-72 feminist art program lead by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro). Moreover, Cassils also worked with Martha Wilson at Franklin Furnace in the years after they had studied at NASCAD, where Wilson herself had begun her artistic career.

<sup>32</sup> Heyes chapter, entitled “Feminist solidarity after queer theory”, specifically counters heteronormative feminist responses to trans identity, written in 2007, that is, before Cassils produced *Cuts* (45, 51).



the pressures these artists respectively face(d) is old-fashioned, top-down sexism or the complex web of forces that is normalisation, the upshot for Cassils, Antin and Benglis is the same. As Heyes puts it, “despite [their] deep differences [they] share the goal of making our existence as gendered critics of gender livable, while opening possibilities for new kinds of lives” (2007, 62). The self-exposing risks the second-wave generation took, literally paved the way for the lives and art of Cassils’ and my generation.

Furthermore it is our identification with and admiration for those precedents that enables each of our current, critical work. Our experience is therefore very much in keeping with Foucault’s observation that throughout antiquity, access to the truth and the transformations of the self that *parrhesia* granted, most often took place with the assistance or guidance of an authority figure or spiritual mentor (2001, 6). Second-wave feminist artists are our mentors. Like Cassils, my own self-transformation, which I relay with camp sincerity in my performance lecture *Performance Art Can Change Your Life For the Better*, was comprised of a mixture of truth telling and shame attacking informed by feminist art.<sup>33</sup> At the beginning of this chapter, I explained how my performance in this lecture serves to undermine the rhetoric of ‘before and after’ not only through parody but, equally, because of the way my work/life entailed desubjectification through a pleasure-seeking yet critical relationship to my personal and cultural heritage. More specifically, like Cassils, my development involved my own recreations of prior feminist performance art. For example, within my first forays into performance for the camera, I re-enacted Hannah Wilke’s *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* (1974-82), a series of self-portraits in which the artist strikes fashion-model poses with tiny chewing-gum vulvas stuck to her face and body. In another early video, I sported crotch-less jeans and wielded a (fake) machine gun, following the model of VALIE EXPORT’s *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) in which the artist dared the live audience at a pornographic cinema to take a look at the real thing. Similarly to Cassils’ referencing of Benglis, I chose to redo Wilke and EXPORT’s respective works because I saw them as defiant and empowering acts of self-representation and

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<sup>33</sup> “Camp sincerity” is a phrase coined by Ann Pellegrini in response to Sontag’s “Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964) to describe “camp’s moral seriousness” (2008, 174). I first came across it in Schneider’s “Re.Act.Feminism” catalogue essay “Three ‘Artists’ Walk Into A Museum” where she describes Carolee Schneeman’s work *Interior Scroll* as feminist and queer “camp sincerity”, that is “theatrical, literalising, distancing, ironic and yet simultaneously deeply serious” (2014, 85). In this way, my work is aligned all the more to second-wave precedents.

I wanted to take ownership of their respective critiques by situating it within my own experiences and cultural references.<sup>34</sup> My re-dos, like my more recent lectures, were done in a mode of camp sincerity from the perspective of a fan. Art historian Catherine Grant articulates this form of emulation as such: “[r]ather than an appropriation strategy that privileges irony and distance, the action of a fan focuses on attachment and desire” (2011, 269). In other words, despite using humour, my homages stage identifications with EXPORT and Wilke, and highlight what I perceive as our proximity. Although Wilke’s and EXPORT’s individual works of feminist body art were made in separate contexts and employed differing tactics, media and affective registers (in Wilke’s case, flirtatiousness and in EXPORT’s, anger), I understood them both as ultimately challenging the way in which women’s identities are reduced and limited to sexualised objects through the patriarchal gaze.<sup>35</sup> The narratives of the videos I created as the context for my re-enactments express the shared meaning of the original works. In retrospect, I see that their common purpose of attacking shame and humiliation is in fact what re-performing them enabled me to do for myself.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Specifically, I re-enacted Wilke’s work within my video *Tale of Narcissus* (2003, fig. 25) in which I play the characters from the TV show *Sex and the City* and lip-synch to the show’s dialogue. My recreation of EXPORT’s act was part of my film *Consciousness, Understanding ‘N Trust (C.U.N.T.)* (2004) which borrows its soundtrack from a range of sources such as *The Stepford Wives* (1964) and Laura Cottingham’s documentary on second-wave feminist art *Not For Sale* (1991).

<sup>35</sup> Both artworks have been written about as employing a Medusa-like power. For an in-depth analysis of Wilke’s work see Amelia Jones’ chapter “The Rhetoric of The Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art” in *Body Art Performing the Subject* (1998). The reference to EXPORT’s “Medusan power” is from Griselda Pollock’s essay “What is it that Feminist Interventions do? Feminism and Difference in Retrospect and Prospect” (2008, 268). Pollock differentiates EXPORT’s live intervention from the photographic documentation, stating that the latter is “susceptible to symptomatic readings” because of the artist’s averted gaze, teased hair and fetishistic gun. In this way, she problematises my remake for the camera, although my stare, unlike in EXPORT’s photo, is fixed on reciprocation of a prospective viewer through the camera lens. While I concur that my re-performance is far less bold than the original, I also agree with Jones’ praise for those same images for their “brazen show of female empowerment” (2013, 170).

<sup>36</sup> A character in my film *C.U.N.T.* describes the experience of being demeaned, of being seen as just sexualised body parts and as she speaks the image cuts to her with the gun and crotchless trousers in homage to EXPORT. In *Tale of Narcissus* I have the SATC character Samantha take nude self-portraits *à la* Wilke, making the chewing gum vulvas very prominent so as to be seen despite the rapidness of the editing. The super-confident character of Samantha, who couldn’t care less about the judgements of others who might perceive her as vain or narcissistic, reminded me of Wilke. However, more fitting to my own insecurities, which I had to overcome to pull off such a performance, is Wilke’s description of the chewing gum as symbolic of “internal wounds that we carry within us, that really hurt us. You know, having to ‘be pretty’, or, being pretty, and being thought of as stupid” (Jones 1998, 183).

In my videos I exposed my body in an attempt to value my self (and women more generally) as more than just a body and an image, which was part of a process that has led to my more recent venture as a talk show host, which challenges my irrational belief that I have nothing of value to say. In this way, Wilke's and EXPORT's own shame-attacking self-exposure enabled mine and gave me confidence not just as an artist and a performer, but as a person. It is worth noting that at the start of this essay, I also referred to Wilke as a certain variety of feminist, who fought for the agency of the model, which opposed my own youthful preference for modesty or invisibility. Therefore in striking her poses, I tested out a mode of comportment that defied who I thought I was as a shy, non-attention-seeking person. In these early videos, as with subsequent live performances and my current persona as a talk show host, I continue to investigate not just "having to 'be pretty', or being pretty and being thought of as stupid", but also the frightening task of taking pleasure in my own body (Jones 1998, 183).<sup>37</sup> In other words, much like Wilke, I approach my appearance in a non-normative and pleasure-seeking manner, which despite my/our conformity to Western, gendered beauty ideals, is nevertheless a practice of freedom.<sup>38</sup> In other words, my work employs shame attacking as a practice of freedom.

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<sup>37</sup> In a 1983 interview Wilke states: "Asking people to take pleasure in their own bodies puts them in fear more than anything else" (cited in Jones 1998, 173).

<sup>38</sup> As Foucault highlights, it can be difficult to differentiate between ancient practices of freedom and hermeneutic practices because they often seem the same on the surface, because they utilise the same technologies or follow similar rules. What distinguishes them is the *mode d'assujettissement* – or the way in which different ethical subjects apply the same rule with different ethics and rules (1984, 353-4).

fig. 24. Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* (1974), one of 35 b/w photographs in "Mastification Box", each 5 x 7 in. Photo: Les Wollam. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

fig. 25. Oriana Fox *Tale of Narcissus*, video still (2003), Detail.

However, unlike Cassils, my relationship to ancient Cynicism is less pronounced, perhaps because I have not shown my vulva or held a real gun to a live audience, as EXPORT did, and because, like Wilke, my work risks the very objectification I wish to counteract.<sup>39</sup> In writing about Cassils' avoidance of co-optation, absorption and consumption for the heteronormative male gaze, I realise now that I am highlighting a form of criticality that they and perhaps other artists have easier access to than Wilke and I.<sup>40</sup> The risks I take to expose my self and my body are in certain ways undeniably less hazardous than those taken by Cassils because I do not occupy the position of alterity that their trans embodiment and politic more readily ensures. I cannot make co-optation-proof self-representations, which Cassils' identity seems at this point, at least within certain contexts, to guarantee.<sup>41</sup> And while all feminist artists, myself included,

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<sup>39</sup> As some of her critics have written, "[i]t seems [Wilke's] work ends up by reinforcing what it intends to subvert" (Barry and Flitterman 1980, 39; cited in Jones 1998, 172).

<sup>40</sup> It is worth noting that Wilke fought against the reception of her work as both narcissistic and too easily falling back into that which it critiques, particularly in the final series of self-portraits of her life entitled *Intra-Venus* (1994). Jones' critical response to (early and late) Wilke's work also deflects these limiting readings.

<sup>41</sup> It may be that the visibility of trans and genderqueer aesthetics/identities leads to it becoming even more saleable. In fact, there is evidence that this is already happening since it has been

strive not only to critique existing representations of women/gender, but also to create new representations (if not lead new lives), only some are recognised as new.<sup>42</sup> A poster of my artwork could not be plastered over a mainstream advert as an oppositional stance, showing up its (hetero)sexism. In other words, while I attack the shame of being sexualised by virtue of being female and assert my desires in defiance of the norms of both passivity and objectification, I have as yet not found a way to subvert or prevent the re-absorption of my images. Moreover, because of the fluidity of the worldwide web, some of my work has been linked to porn websites aimed at heterosexual men. Likewise, Vimeo users have added my videos to compilations clearly aimed at titillation. In the face of this unwanted reception, I have been tempted, like Oreet Ashery, to remove work from the internet (or password protect my videos), thus obliterating or severely limiting their online presence, but have not made those efforts. I have simply continued to try to make work that speaks to my own desires, which also critiques the objectifying heterosexist gaze, although thus far not always succeeding at repelling it entirely. However, following the prescriptions of REBT, the re-appropriation of my imagery is simply one of the feared responses to which I have become accustomed and must continue to face.<sup>43</sup> That is one lesson I have arrived at through the analysis of Cassils' work.

Writing about Cassils' work in relation to Cynic principles and their connection to the notion of passing has also forced me to consider why my own talk show host persona at times *passes* for the ideal. Without trivialising Cassils' experience, it strikes me that the discrepancy the artist describes between how

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appropriated within popular culture, with Cassils appearing in a Lady Gaga music video in 2010, for example. Also, Cassils own commercial success is another way in which such imagery becomes monetised, if not co-opted.

<sup>42</sup> As Butler points out, trans and queer identities have always existed, but “[b]ecause the norms governing reality have not admitted these forms to be real, we will, of necessity, call them ‘new’ (2004, 31). I would argue that instead of being ‘new’ much of my work parodies and therefore reiterates with a critical difference mainstream depictions of normative/idealised femininity, borrowing the definition of parody from literary theorist Linda Hutcheon as “repetition with a critical difference” (2000, 64).

<sup>43</sup> While Wilke's work could not be so easily misappropriated, having been produced in a pre-digital era, it was nevertheless the subject of vehement disapproval by other feminists blinded to her critique by her conventional beauty, which Wilke reacted against with artistic expression, namely her poster *Beware of Fascist Feminism* (1977) (Jones 1998, 307). Interestingly, Jones argues that Wilke's “radical narcissism” and self-love meant that she “need[ed] no confirmation of her artistic ‘value’”, stating this *only* as a “metaphorical” claim (179/308). I would add, however, that although Jones is correct that the poster demonstrates that Wilke was not “actually impervious to criticisms levelled at her work”, her adamant, continued self-exposure, despite such criticisms, functions stubbornly and self-assuredly as a reparative counter attack on the attempts to devalue her both artistically and personally (308).

they feel and how they are read is in some ways akin to the distinction between how I feel and how I am perceived when I am performing in my power suit. Those viewers who believe that image fail to perceive the self-doubt that I have had to overcome to get up on stage or, in fact, the persistent insecurities that necessitate I don a disguise. Perhaps naïvely, I've believed people would see through the character and recognise the insecurities under the surface, but when they don't, I become the idealised image that I am trying to critique. Similarly, when I looked at Cassils standing in their underwear on the stage of The National Theatre before they were to be set on fire for their piece *Indistinguishable Fire* (2016), I saw an idealised body. Before me was a fearless performer about to carry out an incredible, death-defying stunt, and I was blinded to their vulnerability in that moment. In other words, I fell into the trap that my own audience falls into of believing a partial image that is more constructed by the projection of societal ideals than what is in front of us in reality. In other words, I am aware that it is the perfection of Cassils' sculpted physique that informs my perception of them, not simply their risky, embodied free-spokenness. In other words, while I recognise Cassils' exposure in the act of revealing their nonnormative body, which inevitably is the focus of scrutiny, policing and potentially, also violence, in that moment I am more in awe of their ability to achieve the sporty ideal and seeming tranquillity in the face of impending danger, not to mention the kudos of performing in such a renowned venue to a sold-out audience. Likewise, part of the reason why my host character is read as genuine as opposed to the subtly layered critique I intend it to be, is because of how easily I can play that particular idealised role. In this way, my work is vulnerable to the same criticism leveled at certain factions of the second wave feminist movement (and many of the most well known artworks that came out of it), that is, that it fails to address its own privilege.

As discussed in the previous Chapter, the Cynics lived in abject poverty and were often publicly naked, wore rags, rarely bathed or shaved. This was a stark contrast, not to mention scandalous, to other members of Greek society who were "so attached to the values of beauty, to plastic values in the human body and actions, in the bearing and posture of individuals" (Foucault 2011, 259). The Cynic "aesthetics of existence" is decidedly anti-aesthetic and champions ugliness, which is categorically distinct from the approach of all the artists mentioned in this chapter who in varying ways expose their own

bodies.<sup>44</sup> Cassils, Antin, Benglis, EXPORT, Wilke and I respectively maintain and depict our appearances in ways that are considered attractive, regardless of our varying levels of gender conformity. We are also all privileged as Western, Caucasian, educated, middle-class and able-bodied.<sup>45</sup> Despite making our work to undermine the forces that privilege certain identities and characteristics over others, or that define some people as beautiful and others as ugly or plain, it is not possible (or indeed always desirable) for each of us to obtain that position of radical otherness that the Cynics occupied in their time by virtue of their shameless dishonour, ugliness and poverty. This leads me to question if there is a greater inherent emotional riskiness in the exposure of a body that does not and cannot conform to *any* or at least fewer normative ideals. The focus of the next chapter is therefore whether or not such heightened stakes makes the self-disclosure of certain individuals more akin to Foucault's *parrhēsia* than to Ellis' shame attacking and how that impacts its therapeutic and political efficacy respectively.

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<sup>44</sup> Wilson and ORLAN, who feature only in the footnotes, are exceptions to this. Their respective works reveal parts of their anatomy that are perceived as ugly or abject.

<sup>45</sup> Wilke, Antin and I all share a hidden ethnic difference since we are all of Jewish descent.

## Chapter Four

### Liveable Lives: Mark Aguhar and Katherine Araniello

Sometimes a normative conception of gender can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life. Other times, the experience of a normative restriction becoming undone can undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has greater livability as its aim.

- Judith Butler (2004, 1)

According to Butler, transgressing norms is profoundly transformative; 'sometimes' it makes life more liveable and 'other times' it is wholly self-defeating. The goal of this chapter is to attempt to distinguish between the 'sometimes' and the 'other times' in Butler's assertion. When does breaking with a norm lead to one's flourishing versus one's demise? What conditions facilitate these totally opposing outcomes? Through desubjectifying practices of freedom that break with norms, feminist artists make themselves vulnerable to internal incoherence and indeterminacy as well as external criticism and ridicule, if not hatred and violence.<sup>46</sup> In the best-case scenario, as a result of their self-exposure they prove to themselves and the world that they are strong enough to withstand such negative ramifications and go on leveling their critique of norms and the hierarchies and limitations they enforce to the extent of their motivation and/or the end of their lives. In this way they "inaugurate" newer conceptions of themselves "with greater livability as [their] aim". Alternatively, other artists' non-normative disclosures lead them to only later self-censor, recede, or even more tragically, take their own lives. In the face of these diametrically divergent endpoints, how does one determine what to disclose and what not to, what level of exposure is necessary and tolerable and what isn't? Where does one draw the line?

For REBT therapists the answer is relatively simple, as mentioned in the previous chapter, they advise that their clients *not* do anything that might mean certain harm comes to them, such as losing one's job, becoming a target of

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<sup>46</sup> To reiterate, 'desubjectification' is the term Foucauldian feminist Dianna Taylor uses to signify any self-relation that "entails constituting, understanding, and relating to oneself in ways other than as a subject" (2013, 89).



violence, getting arrested or jeopardising one's relationships (Ellis 1973a; Dryden 1997, 101). However, the fact is, many individuals cannot be authentically themselves, and cannot speak their truths, without incurring one or many, if not all, of these risks. Despite authenticity being one of the prized values of REBT and the stated goal of its therapeutics, it also has to conform to legality as well as standard classifications of mental disorders, which define certain behaviours as unhealthy.<sup>47</sup> According to Foucault, the Cynic *parrhesiastes*' goal, by contrast, was to defy all codes, transform norms and rules, and therefore they had no such need for precautions. Their ethos required that they risk their sociality and wellbeing in order to live life or die as "a scandal of truth".

Throughout this thesis so far, I have read the logic of shame attacking into certain artists' work, but clearly the artists are not necessarily engaging in rational disputation or unconditional acceptance exactly as Ellis would have prescribed it. In other words, clients of REBT have one experience of anti-shame exercises, supplemented as they are by specific ways of thinking about the self and valuing one's life, whilst performance artists have quite another. Moreover, as explored in the previous chapter, some artists are not fighting an internalised self-depreciating shame, but attack humiliation, or the wrongful judgments of others that are based on norms, in defiance of which the artist exposes their self. Whether or not one is attacking shame or humiliation, during that process the artist must decide, perhaps intuitively, what is necessary to reveal in order to level their critique and what to keep private in order to maintain one's own sense of personal boundaries. For example, during our discussion Cassils explained to me that because "inherently a lot of [their] work is quite vulnerable", such decision-making "is less of a thought out strategic thing. I don't think you need to hear the biography of my childhood or something like that, it's more about being vulnerable in the moment with people and through the image" (25 November 2016). This statement was in keeping with many of Cassils' answers to my more psychologically probing questions, which felt simultaneously guarded and candid. In other words, Cassils' approach to vulnerability would be defined within REBT as 'healthy', in that "disclosing when

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<sup>47</sup> See Windy Dryden's essay "What is Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT)?" (available on his website, last accessed 22 February 2018) for more on the differentiation between healthy and unhealthy emotions within REBT.

it is appropriate to do so” is the result of “sensible judgement”, which would be compromised by, if not impossible to achieve, when one is feeling ashamed (Dryden 1997, 75). Because Cassils in fact feels no shame about what they are revealing in their work, the attempts to humiliate them are more easily counteracted, as their creative responses make clear. If an artist were to attack shame (a feeling of internalised self-downing), as opposed to humiliation (which is not internalised), they potentially risk taking it too far and then ‘unhealthily’ feeling ashamed afterwards. This is perhaps when breaking with a norm can potentially, as Butler puts it, “undo one’s personhood”.

According to REBT expert Windy Dryden, “Yes, you may act courageously or shamelessly and then unhealthily feel ashamed because you went too far. There is a relationship between shamelessness and foolhardiness to be explored” (email correspondence 2017). To my mind, feminist and queer performance artists are clearly not foolhardy, but instead are fearlessly committed to countering societal norms, *sometimes* (echoing Butler again) at their own peril. Because keeping things private is not simply a matter of personal choice, certain artist’s identities are such that they cannot be themselves in the world without defying the life-preserving caveats of the therapeutic practice of shame attacking. *Sometimes* attending to the caveats within the prescriptions of therapeutic shame attacking renders individual’s lives unliveable in other ways.

According to Dryden the movement through negative feelings of self-devaluation, definitive of shame, towards something more positive, requires moving from shame to disappointment (1997, 54-61). It seems, however, that most feminist artists have bypassed disappointment and moved directly to anger and defiance in the face of those societal norms and biases that cause their own self-perception as flawed. The writer and activist Eli Clare articulates a politic that wrestles with the transition from shame to pride, specifically in relation to trans and disability:

... another important strand of naming at work in our communities – a strand that declares transness not a disease, gender non-conformity not a pathology, and bodily uniqueness not an illness – a strand that turns the word *dysphoria* inside out, claiming that we are not the ones dysphoric about our genders, but rather dysphoria lives in the world’s response to us. This naming acts as a necessary counterbalance. But I

have to ask, 'What about those of us who do in truth deal with deep, persistent body dissonance, discomfort, dysphoria?' A social justice politics by itself will never be enough to resist shame (2013, 263).

In other words, it is not always the case that one is able to deflect, refuse or rationally dispute external negative evaluations as merely false, even when one believes the norms upon which they are based are not simple wrong but discriminatory.<sup>48</sup> Shame persists despite raised consciousness, which is why invisibility, assimilation and conformity reign. For Clare, the path from shame to pride is rarely if ever definitive or complete, suggesting that we can join together to fight against shame, whilst nevertheless succumbing to those feelings, disappointingly, now and again. Ultimately, Clare argues for a type of collective work to bolster one's self-valuations, perhaps in keeping with the community building activity that Martha Wilson embarked on in founding Franklin Furnace.

Importantly, I first encountered Clare's writing on 'calloutqueen' the tumblr blog of Filipino American artist Mark Aguhar (1987 – 2012), in a post titled in all capitals "PRIVACY IS NOT AN OPTION" (Aguhar 2012; Clare 2013, 264).<sup>49</sup> Aguhar quotes the following passage by Clare, which forges a connection between various factions of identity politics specifically around privacy and shame, stating:

The ability to keep bodily matters private is a privilege that some of us don't have. Just ask a poor person on welfare, a fat person, a visibly disabled person, a pregnant woman. Ask a person of color [sic] whose ethnic heritage isn't seemingly apparent. Ask an African-American man who's been pulled over by the cops for 'driving while black'. Just ask a seriously ill person, a gender ambiguous person, a non-passing trans man or trans woman. All these people experience public scrutiny, in one way or another, of their bodies. In this culture bodily difference attracts public attention. For many of us privacy is simply not an option. (2013, 263-264)

My choice to focus this chapter on the work of Aguhar hinges on the insights in Clare's text, which unites people by virtue of their bodily otherness and the

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<sup>48</sup> Clare's point parallels that of feminist Foucauldian Heyes around the desire of feminists to stay thin despite having their consciousness raised about the beauty myth (see chapter two above).

<sup>49</sup> All quotations from Aguhar's blog "calloutqueen-blog.tumblr.com" are referenced with their date, please see the bibliography below for individual URLs organised by date.

denial of privacy that such otherness all too often prompts. While Clare advocates a communal response to the predicament of persistent shame, by contrast Aguhar used her solo practice to defy norms and foster and express pride and rage.<sup>50</sup> Her self-disclosure via her tumblr blog, live performances and multi-media art works, was both unremitting and prolific in the two years prior to her suicide in 2012. Aguhar's work fought against invisibility and discrimination through shameless self-exposure. In this way her work resided in the overlap of shame attacking and *parrhesia*. Her choice to end her own life therefore poses important questions about its efficacy as a strategy for fostering a liveable life. Is the shame attacking that feminist artists perform still therapeutic when the stakes are so high that they risk the life, livelihood or intelligibility of the artist? When artists are not able to or neglect to concede to the caveats that REBT places on anti-shame exercises, does the practice become so much more akin to *parrhesia* that it ceases to be therapeutic? Is shame attacking inherently more risky for those who defy normalisation across differing horizons of experience?

My aim in this chapter is to use Aguhar's work in order to venture a response to these questions. To do so, I begin by relating her position within her contemporary context to the Cynic's critical alterity in antiquity, as Foucault articulates it. Paying particular attention to the way in which Aguhar's work functions as a form of self-care, I relate it not only to Ellis' shame attacking but also to the ancient practice of *hupomnemata*, a diaristic and citational writing practice described by Foucault, which is evocative of queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of 'reparative reading'. I then debate the meaning of Aguhar's suicide as a form of self-care in relation to Butler's theorisations around liveable lives, thus complicating Ellis' therapeutic approach. Finally, for a productive comparison, I turn to the work of British artist Katherine Araniello (b. 1965) whose video and performance work from 2007 to 2011 focused on the controversial topic of assisted suicide. In this series, Araniello uses her characteristic wit and dark sense of humour to fight against the prejudicial assumptions that a life like hers, as someone who is severely disabled, is not

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<sup>50</sup> I am using female pronouns in accordance with previous texts about Mark Aguhar where I first encountered her work. It was towards the end of writing this chapter that I located a blog post in which Aguhar states a preference for the gender neutral pronoun 'they'. Rather than re-edit, I took the liberty of keeping the female pronoun, to emphasise her desire to be read as 'femme' and non-binary as opposed to an effeminate gay male. I also enjoy the dissonance created when Aguhar's masculine first name is paired with feminine pronouns.

worth living. I pit these contrasting approaches to art, life, non-normativity and suicide against one another to further explore the personal and political ramifications of the risky form of truth telling this thesis advocates.

### **Mark Aguhar's Ugly Alterity**

My work is about visibility. My work is about the fact that I'm a genderqueer person of color fat femme fag feminist and I don't really know what to do with that identity in this world.

- Mark Aguhar (artist's website)

fig. 26: Mark Aguhar, blog post on 17 January 2011, reproduced in *Call Out Queen Mark Aguhar*, a zine edited by Juana Peralta and Roy Pérez published by Gallery 400, Chicago, for the memorial exhibition *The Dragon is the Frame* (2012)

Aguhar's post of 17 January 2011 (fig. 26) features a video of the artist applying moisturiser to her upper body in a sensuous and seductive manner, squeezing her breasts together into a cleavage, with her eyes transfixed to meet the web-cam's gaze.<sup>51</sup> 'I wanna be adored', a song by Brit pop band The Stone Roses, plays in the background and relays the artist's intent. The action itself as well as Aguhar's look – with her hair-pulled back in a tight bun, her carefully mascaraed moustache above her ruby-red-lipstick mouth and multi-coloured manicured nails – further underscores the care she has taken in her self-presentation. This is the self-display of someone who not only wants to be adored, but feels they deserve to be. It brings to mind the flirtatious posing of Hannah Wilke and the L'Oreal advertising catchphrase "because you're worth it". In other words, Aguhar stages her femininity and attractiveness as a source of worth and one that she attends to, cultivates and from which she derives pleasure. The text Aguhar chose to accompany this video, "THE UNFORTUNATE REALITY THAT MY BODY IS A POLITICAL SITE AND MY SELF-CARE A RADICAL ACTION", however, takes a different tone to the provocative sensuality of the video. It is reminiscent of Kruger's "my body is a battleground" or Wilke's "beware of fascist feminism" in that it forces the viewer to reckon with the politics of representation and the artist's embodiment as defined by them. It also begs the question of why exactly Aguhar's body is a 'political site' and what precisely is 'radical' about her self-care.

Poring over the archive of her two-year stretch as a blogger confirms the fact that, like the ancient Cynics, Aguhar operated within a position of critical alterity. She did this purposely, like the Cynics, but also unwittingly as a result of aspects of her identity that were not a matter of choice. In other words, Aguhar's alterity was in some sense cultivated by the artist in the way that she crafted her appearance and other aspects of her identity and in her outspokenness and visibility, but also because she was 'unfortunately' not white, heterosexual, normatively gendered or thin. The Cynics cultivated their status as outcasts by transgressing boundaries of physical comportment, status and wealth. Aguhar's otherness, by contrast, is as much to do with where she fell along the axes of race, sexuality, gender and weight and the unique ways in which these identity

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<sup>51</sup> This is one of dozens of Aguhar's web-posts on the blogging platform tumblr in which the artist engages in a silent action with her gaze focused on the prospective viewer. It is also one of countless posts in which an act of self-grooming is featured.

markers intersect, as it was the result of her purposeful nonconformity.<sup>52</sup> As such, her otherness was something she both relished and resented in almost equal measure. Embracing her alterity was the on-going project of her work and it was a difficult process, as she attests to in her website statement: “It’s that thing where you grew up learning to hate every aspect of yourself and unlearning all that misery is really hard to do”. Therefore in caring for her self as both desirable and desiring, Aguhar attacks norms and those who defend them and in this way aligns her ethos with that of Audre Lorde who wrote: “caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare.”<sup>53</sup>

fig. 27: Mark Aguhar *Making Looks* (2011), gouache and glitter on arches paper, 22 x 30 in.

One of Aguhar’s most well known (and re-blogged) drawings entitled *Making Looks* (2011, fig. 27) states in purple shimmering letters “I’D RATHER BE BEAUTIFUL THAN MALE”. Thus it articulates the goal towards which her

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<sup>52</sup> The other key distinction that needs to be made, however, is the fact that the Cynics lived in a particular point in time, which meant the impact of their actions was profoundly different. Neoliberalism and the phenomenon that is the internet make it such that Aguhar’s life could be argued to be flattened out and *reducible* to other lives as mere data. This is a point to which I will return in the conclusion of this thesis.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Aguhar reblogged this Lorde quote on 13 December 2010.

self-care and accompanying *askesis* were aimed. The drawing subtly encapsulates Aguhar's two-pronged agenda, both to care for her self (wanting to be/feel beautiful) and to critique gender norms (which prevented her from being seen as beautiful). It does this by simultaneously asserting her trans ambition to be a beautiful non-male, and her misandry, by conveying that her own perception of beauty excludes maleness. This is not to say that Aguhar does not find males attractive (there are many drawings and confessional statements to prove otherwise) or that she altogether eschews masculinity (the opposite is evidenced by her often intentionally coiffured facial hair). Instead, due to her particular brand of queer feminism, she dis-identifies (beauty) with maleness.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, Aguhar subscribed to a form of misandry, which an anonymous fellow blogger going by the name of *angrywomancritic* describes as "basically, prioritizing your agency, autonomy and fellow women, over men in a society that teaches you that being feminine relies on giving into men's feelings of entitlement" ([saltmagazine.tumblr.com](http://saltmagazine.tumblr.com)).<sup>55</sup> The cruel irony in Aguhar's adamant distancing of maleness from beauty is that her everyday self-presentations in the public realm as a 'transquestioning' femme (to use her own terms), as well as her exposure of feminising *askesis* via her blog, led to her being seen by others, and commented upon, as ugly.<sup>56</sup>

It is in part because Aguhar did not (attempt to) pass as a woman, despite having presented and cared for herself as a femme, that she was seen and labeled as ugly.<sup>57</sup> But, as the drawing states, Aguhar would rather behold herself as beautiful and not male than conform to other's expectations of both beauty and gender (or to how they are assumed to heteronormatively align). Moreover, because of the dissonances between Aguhar's appearance and normative beauty standards for *all* genders, she was perceived of as ugly; instead of being thin and white, or aspiring towards either, Aguhar was fat and

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<sup>54</sup> In fact, in several posts she blogged about training herself not to desire white, cis-men. I will comment on this again below. See also Roy Pérez's essay "Proximity: On the Work of Mark Aguhar" (2017).

<sup>55</sup> This form of 'misandry' is not reverse misogyny, but rather is based on what Aguhar calls "healthy cultural paranoia", which importantly is *not* founded in the belief in the superiority of one group over another. See Aguhar's blog post on 21 January 2011 entitled "Healthy Cultural Paranoia and why its not reverse racism".

<sup>56</sup> I use the term 'femme', which I understand to mean a self-identified queer person who presents the appearance of an exaggerated or hyper-femininity. However, there is much debate over what 'femme' really means, with its advocates presenting very varied definitions ([www.autostraddle.com](http://www.autostraddle.com)).

<sup>57</sup> Aguhar describes being misgendered by her peers as male on her blog on 23 September 2011.



'brown', and flaunted it.<sup>58</sup> Such flaunting served also as criticality; she presented her own image as one that she wanted to see affirmed in the wider world. But also at the same time, perhaps paradoxically, because her self-image countered and refused so many norms, she placed a positive value on ugliness, much like the ancient Cynics. Crucially, Aguhar prized ugliness for its critical potential and disregard for convention, just as the Cynics did in their time. For example, a post on 3 August 2011 reads: "I believe in the power of ugliness". However, unlike Aguhar, the Cynics refused beauty and embraced ugliness due to their abject poverty, which meant that they wore rags and neglected personal hygiene. As stated previously, this was a stark contrast, not to mention scandalous, to other members of Greek society who were "so attached to the values of beauty, to plastic values in the human body and actions, in the bearing and posture of individuals" (Foucault 2011, 259).<sup>59</sup> We are still attached to those 'plastic values' as a society, but ironically again, it is precisely Aguhar's attentiveness to them, to clothing, cosmetics, pampering and adornment that underscores her perceived ugliness and hence her alterity.

Another one of Aguhar's posts from 3 August 2011 clarifies this point: "I GUESS WHATS [sic] SO PUBLICLY PROVOCATIVE ABOUT MY CLOTHING IS THAT IM [sic] UGLY, SINCE MOST IF NOT ALL OF WHAT I WEAR ON A MORE ATTRACTIVE PERSON DRAWS LITTLE TO NO NEGATIVE ATTENTION." The assumption Aguhar is exposing in this statement is that

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<sup>58</sup> I will return to the issue of race and Aguhar's use of the term 'brown' below. Additionally, I use the term 'fat' as fat/queer activist Charlotte Cooper considers it:

a form of non-normative embodiment relating to the presence of adipose tissue. [...] I am unable to name a weight at which one becomes fat because this disregards the diversity of how people embody fatness, or are socially positioned as fat. Like all bodies, fat bodies are not static, they age, they get fatter and thinner over time, they may be changed by disease, decoration, or the life course, and they are socially constructed. There is no universal measure or mark that constitutes what is and is not fat; fat exists in context and experience; fat people know who they are and are known as fat by others... (2016, 18).

<sup>59</sup> Again, Foucault says relatively little about the Cynic's revaluation of ugliness, save for the fact that it was "important" because it introduced the "values of ugliness into ethics, the art of conduct and unfortunately philosophy as well, which have still not been abandoned" (2012, 259). Foucault gives no explanation for his use of the word 'unfortunately' here, but goes on to discuss Socrates' own warnings against prizing physical beauty, only to point out that the values he espoused were "merely relative" (2012, 259). In other words, Foucault seems to be concerned that the matter of 'ugliness', like that of beauty, is a matter of taste, as opposed to having a relationship to truth and ethics. Moreover, although the Cynics attempted to transvaluate ugliness into beauty, it seems safe to conclude that they did not quite succeed as they were called 'dogs'. Regardless, it was not a transvaluation that interested Foucault, as he "quickly pass[es] over the paradoxical valuation of dirtiness and ugliness, of hairy and unsightly destitution" (2012, 259). It strikes me that in order to explain Cynic transvaluation Foucault privileged terms that were absolutes (as Plato did before him).

someone who is 'ugly' *should* be ashamed of it and not draw attention to their appearance. To put it differently, Aguhar was seen as 'ugly' because her self-styling was *out of place* with the otherness her body was read as possessing. The perception of Aguhar as ugly thus demonstrates its contingency. In cultural theorist Gretchen E. Henderson's book *Ugliness: A Cultural History* (2015), the author explains: "ugliness is far from static or stereotypical, but rather operates relationally, constantly negotiating different meanings and challenging cultural stasis" (185). It is precisely for this reason that Aguhar 'believes in its power'. Moreover, architecture theorist Mark Cousins, who wrote extensively on ugliness, cites the anthropologist Mary Douglas' famous claim that "dirt is matter out of place" to make his parallel point that "the ugly object is an object which is out of place" (1994, 63). Cousins then claims that the ugly object is out of place because of its "ineluctable individuality" and "resistance to the ideal", asserting that those deemed ugly "are too strongly individual, are too much themselves" (1994, 61). This is undoubtedly true of Aguhar who, in being true to her self, was 'out of place' in both mainstream and queer contexts, as I will go on to explain in more detail below.

Aguhar was 'ugly' because both her body and her genderqueer identification precluded her passing as a ('beautiful') woman or a ('handsome') man; her lack of modesty was 'out of place' with her fatness; her 'brown'-ness was not whiteness.<sup>60</sup> In tandem, her nonbinary gender and sexuality broke with the heteronormative matrix. A post on 21 October 2011 speaks to this latter point and aligns Aguhar's appearance with another aspect of Cousin's definition of the ugly as "an obstacle to desire" (1994, 64). Aguhar wrote in her characteristically sardonic tone:

ARE YOU EVER IN YOUR FEMINIST THEORIES CLASS AND SOME GUY MAKES SOME OFF COLOR REMARK ABOUT NOT WANTING TO MOVE TOWARD A SOCIETY OF VISIBLE GENDER AMBIGUITY BECAUSE THEN HE WON'T KNOW WHO TO DESIRE AND HELL [sic] WANT TO FUCK EVERYONE AND YOUR LIKE \*FACE PALM\*, LIKE EW, LIKE, WHAT, LIKE, STOP

1. I'm in the room

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<sup>60</sup> Again, distinct from the Cynics, in terms of class, Aguhar, who was middle class, comes closer to the contemporary norm/ideal and acknowledges her own privilege in this respect (see her post on 13 July 2011). In terms of age and ability, Aguhar was also not in a position of otherness in her context, which privileges youth.

2. that just sounded stupid
3. no one cares about the state of your sex drive re: every person you've ever looked at, the relationship of that comment to the bell hooks reading seems tenuous at best

Aguhar's 'ugliness' is thus not *universally* obstructive to desire (as Cousins' account of the ugly asserts), but is more specifically an obstacle to heterosexual desire. While Aguhar was rightfully affronted by her peer's trans-phobia, the content of the comment serves to highlight the way in which trans-identity can be a productive obstacle to both hetero and homo-normative desire. Moreover, it is that particular form of alterity that Aguhar valued for its challenge to such norms.<sup>61</sup>

fig. 29: Mark Aguhar *Brown Femme Love* (2011), ink on paper.

Fig 28: Mark Aguhar, blog post with caption: "Halloween 2007, my first and most successful foray into my current lesbian desires", 22 June 2010.

Aguhar expressed her rage at sexual normalisation by trying to orient her own desires away from white, cis-men. In other words, she explores new pleasures in a desubjectifying or non-identitarian process. As she explains, "It annoys me that I'm attracted to men because I hate reproducing their privilege

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<sup>61</sup> What underlies Aguhar's dismissal of the comment is also her adamant (and profoundly Foucauldian) questioning of the notion that sexual desire should be the basis for a kind of coalition politics, because to do so would likely require the policing of desire. Her post from 31 January 2012 uncannily echoes Foucault's comments on gay liberation in which he advocates the attempt to define and develop a gay *way of life*; opening one's self up to pleasure, as opposed to liberating one's desire (1996, 390). Aguhar very much disidentifies with homo-normative gayness, as it is through that filter that her identity is most often misrecognised.

when I feel like they've only ever contributed to the destruction of my personhood" (16 January 2011). Aguhar puts this same sentiment in her ink on paper piece entitled *Brown Femme Love* (2011, fig. 29 above), which crudely states in text-speak "I HATE UR WHITE DICK". Then again online on 24 January 2011 she writes, "It hasn't actually been that hard for me to train my dick to go flaccid at the site of normative white masculinity". Another 2010 post documents her "first foray into [her] current lesbian desires" as a femme-identified genderqueer subject (see fig. 28 above). Taken cumulatively, these posts show that Aguhar consistently challenged normative desires and in so doing, denied the notion of a singular sexual orientation. In this way, she again takes up a position of profound alterity in relation to contemporary norms of sexuality.

Likewise, Aguhar's particular expression of gender variance, also defied binary gender identity in subtle, specific and desubjectifying ways. For example, on 4 March 2012, Aguhar wrote:

I just had this thought about how I want to work androgynous looks but that I want to be a girl androgyn who gets mistaken for a boy, not a boy androgyn who gets mistaken for a girl, which seems like a sort of silly but very critical difference

What this quotation asserts, aside from the artist's wish to appear androgynous in a way that further disconnects sex and gender, is Aguhar's adamant affirmation of femininity over and above masculinity, or "female masculinity" over male effeminacy, via a kind of butch identity ("the girl androgyn who gets mistaken for a boy"). Not only did Aguhar's genderqueer appearance 'other' her in most contexts, her privileging of femininity over masculinity meant that Aguhar was also 'othered' within queer contexts. In a mirroring of patriarchal society, femininity over masculinity is also denigrated within queer circles, thus contributing to Aguhar's alterity in those settings as well.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the queer community's purported status as progressive and accepting of difference, Aguhar admonishes how it simply adopts mainstream norms, not only in the devaluing of femininity, but also in the policing of fat

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<sup>62</sup> During my pre-interview with the gender variant visual artist Del LaGrace Volcano, a guest on the "Female Masculinity" episode of *The O Show* (2017) they testified to this point: "How could I remain letting people perceive me as female? It would probably be more transgressive, but I would definitely be more punished" (2017). Aguhar, having often received such 'punishment' regularly posted about what she termed 'femmephobia' in her blog.

bodies. A post from 3 August 2011 (fig.30) features Aguhar's own image alongside a text about her experience of fat-hatred within queer circles. In the photo, Aguhar poses for the camera on all fours wearing a white mesh halter-top and colourful shorts to reveal her rotund belly. The artist's face is awkwardly cropped out by the edge of the frame and her body is lit solely by a flash, both of which serve to reinforce the artist's belly as the image's focal point and adds to its ad-hoc quality. The minimal, grainy, throwaway aesthetic of the photo brings to mind Foucault's phrase "Cynic crudeness" (2012, 247).<sup>63</sup> In the text, Aguhar describes the "constant public derision for 3 hours straight" that she received for "the most egregious sin of the queer community", that is "being fat". The post culminates with her acerbic remark: "I'm glad my body continues to have such amazing public power; who else is as legendary as me?" Despite having dealt with being perceived and treated as ugly, defective and less than human, Aguhar attacked shame because of the critique it engendered. Instead of conforming or hiding, she revealed not only her body but also the reactions it received. In this way she derides and shames those who attempted to shame her, delivering a biting critique of those who uphold thin body aesthetics through insulting remarks and gestures that dehumanise those who deviate from it.<sup>64</sup>

fig. 30: Mark Aguhar, blog post 3 August 2011, reproduced in *Call Out Queen Mark Aguhar*, a zine edited by Juana Peralta and Roy Pérez published by Gallery 400, Chicago, for the memorial exhibition *The Dragon is the Frame* (2012).

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<sup>63</sup> "Cynic crudeness" for Foucault is the antithesis of the transcendental realm of truth in Plato's metaphysics.

<sup>64</sup> See also Aguhar's post on 16 January 2011 that speaks to this point.

The manner in which Aguhar angrily strikes back at those who attempt to demean her is again comparable to the Cynics. As Foucault explains, the Cynics were given the label ‘dog’ and were said to lead “a dog’s life” not only due to their lack of cleanliness and modesty, but also because they lived “a life which barks, a diacritical (*diakritikos*) life, that is to say, a life which can fight” (Foucault 2012, 243).<sup>65</sup> Aguhar, who significantly named herself ‘calloutqueen’ and originally titled her blog “noheretomakefriends”, used her life and work to *call out* discrimination and hatred. In this way, she is comparable to the “combatant” Cynic who “fights against the evils of the world” (2012, 283).

Aguhar was outspoken in her condemnation of racism, repudiating it with words and also by intentionally privileging images of herself and other queers of colour (i.e. purposely excluding white cis-men). Throughout many posts she relays how, as a Filipino American, she was in turn misidentified, fetishised, made fun of and ostracised.<sup>66</sup> Several of her posts comment on the undercurrent of racism within seemingly innocuous, everyday comments or the way in which whiteness is the unspoken norm and has the privilege of going unnoticed, without comment or perceived as human without a qualifier. At the same time she felt equally out of place within Filipino contexts and often within her biological family. As she comments in a post on 12 January 2011, her effeminacy in particular meant she was treated as an outcast within her ethnic community:

It’s hard for me to identify as Filipino American because it comes wrapped up in shit about how I relate with my mother, and also how I always felt like the weird sissy boy around my brother/cousins/family friends.

In elaborating Aguhar’s alterity within white hegemony as well as within her own homo/trans-phobic and androcentric Filipino culture, I pinpoint an intersectional category in which Aguhar may in fact have felt a sense of belonging, that is with other queer Asian or Filipino Americans. In a series of posts in Spring 2011 when Aguhar was taking an Asian American studies class, she reached out to others who shared this particular intersectionality, that is, specifically to other

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<sup>65</sup> The Cynics were said to lead ‘a dog’s life’ also because they did “in public, in front of everyone, what only dogs and animals dare to do, and which men [sic] usually hide” (Foucault 2012, 243).

<sup>66</sup> Aguhar referred to her ethnicity alternately as ‘Filipino American’ or ‘APIA’ (Asian/Pacific Islander American), but was often misread as belonging to another Asian nationality.

queer Asian Pacific Islander Americans, with the aim of creating a zine exploring how they are perceived and their approaches to appearance. Aguhar also widened her sense of belonging beyond this particular category. As she explains in the same post of 12 January 2011 cited above, “I prefer to just identify as brown. Because I can’t feel aligned with the community I grew up in, but I can feel aligned with all the other queer people of color.” However, despite feeling a sense of solidarity among queers of colour, a post on 19 April 2011 articulates that it did little to obviate her rage:

BEING IN BROWN QUEER SPACE MAKES ME FEEL  
SIMULTANEOUS JOY AND RAGE. JOY THAT I AM IN A SPACE  
WHERE I DON’T HAVE TO CHOOSE WHO I AM, AND RAGE AT HOW  
OFTEN I HAVE TO MAKE THAT CHOICE. RAGE THAT FOR ONE  
MOMENT I CAN FEEL BEAUTIFUL. RAGE THAT WHEN A WHITE  
PERSON APPROACHES ME THEY HAVE TO PREFACE OUR  
CONVERSATION WITH THEIR FETISHIZATION OF ASIANS, AND  
WHEN I LOOK AT THEM I JUST SEE A HUMAN BEING. RAGE THAT I  
CAN FEEL THE DIFFERENCE ON A DAILY BASIS BETWEEN WHERE  
I CAN FEEL SAFE AND WHERE I CAN FEEL AT RISK.

Even though “brown queer space” provided an oasis from everywhere else, Aguhar’s sense of herself as an ‘other’ was unrelenting. Although she may have felt beautiful in those arenas “for one moment”, her alterity was still palpable. On 22 March 2011 she bemoans the fact that fellow ‘queer of colour’ Audre Lorde writes “the most beautiful powerful words I have ever taken into myself and yet they are still words that are not meant for me”. Like matter out of place, her sense of her own otherness “is voracious, and through contamination, will consume the entire zone” (Cousins 1994, 64).

It is because of her ‘legendary’ otherness across various cultural milieus that Aguhar’s performances both to the camera and to live audiences strike me as achieving intense vulnerability much like that which Cassils’ described as inherent in their own work, that is, as occurring “in the moment with people and through the image”.

fig. 31: Mark Aguhar *Casting a Glamour: Peony Piece* performance still (2012).

To further elucidate this point I turn to Aguhar's performance *Casting a Glamour: Peony Piece* (2012) as described by Roy Pérez, a cultural theorist and one of Aguhar's friends. Only a single photograph documenting the piece exists on Aguhar's website and blog, therefore I will cite Pérez's description at length:

Entering the room, one encountered a soft spotlight illuminating a pool of silk peony petals. Once the audience was positioned, Aguhar walked in wearing a strapless lavender A-line dress in long and pleated chiffon, her hair lying wavy and relaxed down past her shoulders, her face made up with carefully arched brows, long lashes, and feline eyes. At the perimeter of the small space, at the edge of the spotlight, Aguhar removed a pair of platform boots, stepped her bare feet lightly into the center of the pool of petals, and slowly lowered herself to the floor, her dress whirling and clearing away the petals around her. Sitting, one leg extended and the other tucked beneath her, Aguhar proceeded to gaze at the audience, her expression alternatingly demure, beseeching, and hostile. After some length of time, Aguhar rose, leaving petals whirling



again in her wake, put the boots back on, and exited the room. (2017, 282).

Pérez goes on to comment that Aguhar's "gaze invited the audience to take inventory of its own feelings about her transition and her body. By making each person in the room the object of her returned gaze, Aguhar revealed all the vectors of interaction along which we construct the social world together" (2017, 282). As I have shown, Aguhar's self-exposure opened her up to great risk due to all the varying ways that she was othered in the specific cross-section of contexts she inhabited, making this piece a very vulnerable one "in the moment with people and through the image". *Casting a Glamour*, which entailed only Aguhar's manner of appearance, physical presence, affect and gaze, demanded an aesthetic judgement from the art audience who witnessed it. Such an aesthetic judgment is also simultaneously a social one.<sup>67</sup> Through eye contact, as Pérez describes, Aguhar pits her own self-perception as beautiful, femme art object against the perceptions of others.

Pérez concludes his account of *Casting a Glamour* by stating, "[t]he performance dared you to imagine yourself in a femme-empowered, brown-centering elsewhere" (2017, 282). This reminds me again of Cousins who argues that the ugly is *absolutely* out of place, stating, "this does not mean that there is a right place for the ugly object; there is no such place" (1994, 63). Aguhar, whose work and life aimed to challenge such a notion of absolute aesthetic judgment, by contrast, demands that we imagine a place in which she belongs. If we follow through on such a request, as Pérez has, we are forced to acknowledge our interdependence and contingency as subjects. In this way Aguhar's performance evokes Henderson's assertions about ugliness as a social construct; "ugliness reminds us that everything is interdependent" and that "we as perceiving subjects, might be matters out of place" (2015, 22/13). In

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<sup>67</sup> The comparison to Cassils' work can go a step further by interpreting *Casting a Glamour*, among other pieces by Aguhar, as a contemporary incarnation following on from the legacy of certain pieces by Eleanor Antin, even though Aguhar did not produce them as a conscious homage. For Antin's *Representational Painting* (1971), which was a kind of companion piece to *Carving*, the artist carefully applies "artificial" and "glamorous" make up to her face and "[i]n both works, the conventionally feminine activities of making up and dieting are aligned, respectively with painting and sculpture" (Solomon-Godeau 2007, 341). In other words, Aguhar, like Antin before her, presents her body and the work carried out in beautifying it, as a work of art, thus conflating aesthetic judgments about art with normative social perceptions about appearance and gender, with the artist/model as its centrepiece. *Casting a Glamour* is also strikingly similar to Martha Wilson's *Selfportrait* (1973) in which the artist sat in a gallery and, using printed note cards, asked the viewers to write their impressions of her, thus subverting the meaning of the term self-portrait (Wark 2001, 18).

“a femme-empowered, brown-centering elsewhere” those who perceive Aguhar to be ‘ugly’ become the ones who are out of place. Aguhar thereby succeeds at transvaluating ugliness into beauty, at least for some of us. After Aguhar died, many of her friends and followers posted tributes on tumblr; one by ‘sixtyforty’ fittingly stated repeatedly: “BE UGLY KNOW BEAUTY”. Aguhar is once again aligned with the Cynics not only in having ‘changed the currency’, but also because of their shared goal to live an “*other* life, not simply as the choice of a different, happy and sovereign life, but as the practice of a combativeness on the horizon of which is an *other* world” (Foucault 2012, 287).<sup>68</sup> As Butler contends, “[f]antasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home” (2004, 29).

### **Aguhar’s Survival Tools**

what i was thinking today is  
that art has always been a survival tool for me  
i’m USING art, i don’t think of my  
self as an artist before i think of myself as a person  
and if what i’m making isn’t art anymore  
i don’t really care  
because i’m doing what i need to survive in my own mind

- Mark Aguhar (aka calloutqueen)

In common with the other artists whose work I address in this thesis, Mark Aguhar’s ethic was both self-exposing and challenging to norms and thereby powerfully exemplifies the imbrication of *parrhesia* and shame attacking. This is made evident in the very title and pseudonym Aguhar selected for her tumblr account and blog. The name ‘calloutqueen’ refers to her political project to ‘call out’ varying forms of discrimination and bigotry; that is, to speak truth to power. While the title and subtitle “BLOGGING FOR BROWN GURLS:

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<sup>68</sup> In chapter two I suggested that the only effective way to counter the beauty myth, as Naomi Wolf articulated it, might be to find alternative ways of relating to oneself and others and perhaps only through such actions can alternative images (of beauty?) be produced. Aguhar’s performance seems to prove this claim in quite a literal way.

I'm starting a new blog and its all about self acceptance" alludes to her activities as self-help and also as aspiring toward collective affirmation, at least for those who identify as 'brown gurls'. The content of the blog reflects these combined purposes. As I have already elaborated, in it Aguhar exposed her self, her image and her acts of self-care in defiance of body fascism, sexism, transphobia, hetero/homo-normativity and racism, and also critiqued prejudice, giving an account of wherever she personally encountered it. As I have alluded to above, Aguhar relentlessly documented her appearance and its maintenance. At the same time, the blog was also a space for more cerebral musings, including critical replies to daily interactions in the street, at art school and to her online interlocutors; highly personal and diaristic rants in prose and poetry; citations of and responses to critical theory, feminist writings, pornography, mainstream TV and Hollywood cinema and other varied cultural source materials. It also occasionally featured reproductions of her drawings and documentation of her performances.

Aguhar posted to her blog on a regular basis from May 2010 to March 2012 in a manner similar to the ancient practice of *hupomnemata* that Foucault describes at length as:

... individual notebooks serving as memoranda. Their use as books of life, guides for conduct, seems to have become a current thing [in antiquity] among a whole cultivated public. Into them one entered quotations, fragments of works, examples, and actions to which one had been witness or of which one had read an account, reflections or reasonings which one had heard or which had come to mind. The constituted a material memory of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering these as an accumulated treasure for rereading and later meditation. They also formed a raw material for the writing of more systematic treatises in which were given arguments and means by which to struggle against some defect (such as anger, envy, gossip, flattery) or to overcome some difficult circumstance (a mourning, an exile, downfall, disgrace). (Foucault and Rabinow [1983] 1991, 364)

Foucault was interested in *hupomnemata* because they were a form of writing employed toward care of the self as a practice of freedom. They functioned as a kind of managerial, administrative and self-governing tool. As Foucault elaborates, their aim was "not to reveal the hidden, not to say the non-said, but,

on the contrary, to collect the already said, to reassemble that which one could hear or read, and this to an end which is nothing less than the constitution of the self” (Foucault and Rabinow [1983] 1991, 365). In other words, he saw them as functioning differently from confessional, hermeneutical accounts of the self. While it may seem that Aguhar’s blog is an entirely contemporary phenomenon made possible by the internet and the capabilities of the tumblr platform, the way Aguhar employed it is actually comparable to this ancient self technology.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, “accumulated treasure” aptly describes Aguhar’s blog, comprised as it was of anecdotes, citations and mini-treatises. It served the artist with a means for working through difficult feelings experienced as a result of both daily insults and the grief of her own sister’s suicide in 2011. Perhaps more importantly, Aguhar used it not as a confessional outlet but as a way to process what happened to her, to digest what she was learning and to fight back by honing her intentionality as an artist and a person. In this way it is all the more akin to ancient *hupomnemata*, as Foucault describes it.

Her posts exemplify the way in which contemporary self-technologies such as cosmetics, fashion, dieting and blogging itself could be deployed both as practices of freedom and a form of “reparative reading” in Sedgwick’s sense.<sup>70</sup> Aguhar made ‘reparative readings’ by seeking sources of identification, comfort and “sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain [her]” (Sedgwick 2003, 150-1). Affect theorist Tomkins, who Sedgwick cites to formulate her notion of the reparative, defines shame as inhibiting curiosity and joy (Sawicki 2013, 86). In keeping with this, it is my contention that instead of feeling ashamed about her appearance, pleasures and identity, Aguhar was *curious* about it, seeking out reflections of her self in the world around her, often locating them in the cultural output of pop stars like Mariah Carey and Adele; trans and queer of colour pornography; the poetry and prose of Audre Lorde; fashion photography; or in the youtube channels providing tips on cosmetics and hairstyling that Aguhar regularly consumed. If she had been feeling ashamed, it would have closed

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<sup>69</sup> Underscoring this point, Foucault states, “People have been writing about themselves for two thousand years, but not in the same way.[...] [the subject] is constituted in real practices – historically analyzable practices. There is a technology of the constitution of the self which cuts across symbolic systems while using them” (Rabinow [1983] 1991, 369). At the same time, it must be stated that the blog differs from *hupomnemata* most crucially in its publicness, which is how it merges its personal and political purposes.

<sup>70</sup> In this way her work affirms the comparison that Foucauldian feminist Sawicki aptly makes between Foucault’s practices of freedom and Sedgwick’s reparative, discussed above.

down these interests and inhibited the enjoyment she experienced in exploring them.

Aguhar's blogging bridges the gap between Foucauldian self-fashioning (via private *hupomnemata*) and self-help as Ellis prescribes it (to be enacted in the public realm). For example and more specifically, by exposing her body and taking pleasure in acts of self-care that include indulgent eating, flamboyant clothes and 'feminine' beauty treatments, Aguhar performs a kind of queer/fat activism that functions similarly to shame attacking. Aguhar asserts that she is no less valuable, no less sexy and no less suited to wearing revealing and feminine clothing, or to pursuing pleasure, than someone whose body more closely aligns with normative ideals.

In a post on 5 August 2011 Aguhar states: "TAKING CONTROL OF MY PHYSICAL BODY IS THE ONLY WAY FOR ME TO EXERT AGENCY IN A WORLD DESIGNED TO DEMOLISH MY PERSONHOOD". Aguhar uses the term 'agency', whereas 'practicing freedom' might be more accurate and it is worth differentiating them. The term 'agency' in the above phrase suggests the statement could be applied equally to Aguhar (and Cassils) as much as to anyone embarking on a diet or other physical self-help regime. In her essay on Weight Watchers, cited in the previous chapter, Heyes remarks in a confessional mode of address: "My deepest psychological motivations [for dieting] were oriented less around becoming conventionally attractive and more around gaining control of my body and having its form better express the person I considered myself to be" (2004, 65). In other words, Aguhar shares with Heyes a desire for some form of control and self-determination, that is, for *agency*. However, in contradiction to Heyes, Aguhar expressed it via a willful (or desirous) defiance of various norms of appearance, that is, as a *practice of freedom*. Heyes' goes on to repudiate the language of authenticity that her self-disclosing remark implies, following the Foucauldian logic that "care of the self as a practice of freedom requires that we reject the language of authenticity. That is, that we should not understand ourselves as seeking to liberate a self that was always there, but rather to invent ourselves as something new that is not yet imagined" (2004, 82). In a post on 17 February 2012, Aguhar asks, "is consistency and fixedness a mark of personhood?" This question, among numerous other posts querying (or queering) the logic of authenticity, posits that Aguhar's own acts of self-creation stemmed from a practice of

desubjectification, alongside refusal, criticality and innovation. In other words, Aguhar treated her self as if she is a work in progress, as not fixed or consistent, thus differentiating her self-care from *agency*.

As described above, the way in which Aguhar was ‘transquestioning’ as opposed to ‘transitioning’, as well as the way she wilfully thwarted her own desires toward conventionally attractive, white cis-men (i.e. by “training my dick to go flaccid” and taking “forays into lesbian desire”) are strong examples of such desubjectifying practices. Acknowledging the cultural determinants of her desires and refuting their recalcitrant hold, Aguhar reconstructed her personhood with a total disregard for sex, gender and sexuality, denying that these are in any way fixed or that the causal lines between them flow in a particular direction. By refusing the norms that contributed to the formation of her desires, she opened herself up to new pleasures. These are the positive and life-affirming ways that the blog served her as a contemporary *hupomnemata*. These are the “sometimes” Butler refers to when “the experience of a normative restriction becoming undone can undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has greater livability as its aim” (2004, 1).

### **Aguhar’s Cruel Vulnerability**

As much as Aguhar’s blog was a means for exploring new pleasures in a desubjectifying manner, it was also cyclical and repetitive. Ancient *hupomnemata* were not simply accounts of one’s enjoyment and identification in the process of creative self-fashioning, but as Foucault explains, were tools for self-governance, “to overcome some difficult circumstance”. In other words, the author was meant to revisit these records so as to make informed choices about the ideal manner of handling similar or reoccurring situations. Fittingly therefore, some of Aguhar’s posts repeat old content and comment on it anew, in this way again demonstrating the similarities between her blog and *hupomnemata*, which served “as memoranda” (Rabinow [1983] 1991, 364). On 28 Dec 2011, for example, Aguhar reblogs a post from 5 Oct 2010:

calloutqueen:

“I’m tired of being told to be strong or stronger or whatever because it feels like a lie

and it feels like a betrayal to even *suggest* that the people in my life who didn't survive were somehow not as strong as me

I don't need to be strong, I need for the world to stop being so fucking weak, that my sisters are being swallowed up before my eyes

the people who have gone before me are so fucking amazing and beautiful, I don't know how I am supposed to survive"

having any sense of futurity is a betrayal of my truest ugliest self

Significantly, Aguhar returns here to the matter of strength and survival. She uses the term 'sisters' to refer to people she knew personally or knew of who had committed suicide or who died tragically young. However, the statement that her "sisters are being swallowed up" also brings to mind two alarming statistics of which Aguhar was aware: firstly, that 50 per cent (and rising) of trans people attempt to commit suicide and secondly, Asian American women are more likely than any other group in the US to attempt suicide.<sup>71</sup> The remark also retroactively reads as a double entendre, referring also to Aguhar's older sister who took her own life in 2011, that is after Aguhar wrote the original post but just a couple of months before she reblogged it. In other words, her sister's death was undoubtedly why she returned to it. Therefore when she looks back at her words from the original post, confronted with how history is repeating itself, instead of finding a source of renewal in her own past words, she finds despair.

Aguhar often posted critical replies to messages in the mainstream media suggesting that a better future is in store for bullied and ostracised young people, with the implied condition being, if only they find the strength to hold out for it. These messages were particularly visible in the youtube-based and MTV-promoted 'It's gets better' campaign started by gay-activist Dan Savage in 2010 targeted at suicidal LGBT youth. The campaign was comprised of a series of short videos by lay people and celebrities providing their own stories of bullying and resilience, encouraging suicidal young people to keep faith in the idea of a better future. Aguhar is understandably disillusioned with the campaign's message, given not only the reality of her situation but because of her critical ethos.

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<sup>71</sup> Aguhar posted an article about a study by the University of Washington that confirms 16 per cent of Asian American women attempt suicide, compared to 13 per cent of all Americans, and discusses various explanations for why this is the case ([www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)).

To explain, in the above post Aguhar implies that she does not believe suicide is an act of individual weakness, but rather that it reveals the weakness of the world. “I need for the world to stop being so fucking weak”, she explains. For Aguhar it is not the world’s cruelty and power that demolishes individuals because ultimately the cause of such cruelty is weakness. This is in keeping with the Cynic transvaluation of independence into slavery. As Foucault explains, for the ancient Cynics, those who have high status and power are actually weak because they hold on to it by depending on things that are external to themselves.<sup>72</sup> This message can be found in the mythical encounter between the king Alexander and the Cynic Diogenes, dubbed “the king of derision”, which Foucault recounts to demonstrate how the worldly king depends on external sources for his own power (i.e. his army, his ancestry, his training, his sword) while the ‘true’ king, the Cynic, can never cease to be king because he depends on no one and nothing (2012, 275-6). In this “historical meeting” between Alexander and Diogenes, one of a few “matrix scenes to which the Cynics constantly refer”, Alexander famously said, “Had I not been Alexander, I would liked to have been Diogenes”, making the two “completely symmetrical” (2012, 275-6). The Cynic is a king, having achieved the transvaluation of total dependence and poverty, that is, slavery into sovereignty (Foucault 2012, 259-60). Therefore it is a testament to the autonomy of the slave Diogenes in having realised this transvaluation that the king Alexander finds in him his equal. I’m not suggesting that Aguhar was aware of this story, but rather that she understood its principles based on her experience and knowledge of alterity and power. She is aware, for example, that she has been discriminated against on the basis of her otherness, while those who more closely approximate norms more easily avoid prejudice, humiliation and shame. In other words it is normativity itself upon which confidence and self-worth all too often depends. Aguhar understood herself to be someone who had to value herself because others were not necessarily going to do that for her and yet her very otherness depended on the practices and conventions she wished to defy. The solution to Aguhar’s feelings of despair could therefore never be to believe

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<sup>72</sup> Alternatively, individuals/groups often hold themselves in high esteem through a comparison to others or *the other* to whom they hold themselves to be superior. Virginia Woolfe puts it as such: “Without self-confidence we are as babes in the cradle. And how can we generate this imponderable quality which is yet so invaluable most quickly? By thinking, if only by implication or deduction, that other people are inferior to oneself” (1929, 32).



she is (or must be) stronger than others because she recognises the *false currency* of self-esteem for what it is: either conformity, one-upmanship and/or (inter)dependency. In other words, highlighting that cruelty/power is weakness in one way of asserting that there is no absolute autonomy; we are all to some extent dependent on others/norms for our sense of self/worth.<sup>73</sup>

Having sacrificed all human ties and worldly comforts in order to live the true life, the Cynics' total in/dependence makes them immune to bribery and temptation and enables their truth telling because they have nothing, including no (personal) future, at stake. In keeping with this, as well as Cousin's assertion that "there is no such place" (where the ugly object belongs), Aguhar's response to the reblogged quote states: "having any sense of futurity is a betrayal of my truest ugliest self". In this way she links her ugliness, or rather her alterity, with her truth-telling and her inability to contemplate a different or better future. Aguhar displays her "truest ugliest self" because she has nothing to lose; she has no place in this world and no future. "[O]ne risks one's life, not just by telling the truth and in order to tell it but by the very way in which one lives. In all the meanings of the word, one 'exposes' one's life. That is to say, one displays it and risks it" (Foucault 2012, 234). In this way her risky truth telling is at once vulnerable and a show of assertiveness and autonomy. Just as the Cynic is both sovereign and slave, having sacrificed all human ties and material comforts, Aguhar is both brave and exposed, having sacrificed normativity to practice freedom.

Aguhar's paradoxically vulnerable strength reminds me of Butler's assertion that the body is a site where "'doing' and 'being done to' become equivocal" (2004, 21). Butler elaborates the "lively paradox" that is "bodily autonomy", with the phrase "my body is and is not mine". She argues that as infants we are "given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later and with some uncertainty, that to which I claim as my own"(20). But rather than suggest that as we age autonomy reigns supreme, she argues that our vulnerability persists, not only physically but also interpersonally as social beings. There is no better way to understand the fact that our self-representations, particularly

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<sup>73</sup> This is to some extent in keeping with Ellis' critique of the notion of self-esteem. Unconditional self-acceptance is his answer to the problem of self-rating which otherwise is *conditional* or reliant on achievements or norms.

for those who defy normativity, are at once “publicly assertive and vulnerable” (Butler 2004, 18). Therefore the extent to which our lives are liveable is not simply a matter of personal and bodily resilience, but is also socially determined, just as our self-construction takes shape through practices that are externally produced. As Butler explains, some norms “permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live” while others “restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life” and “[s]ometimes norms function both ways at once” (2004, 8). In Aguhar’s case they often did the latter. For example, embodying feminine beauty norms provided her with both enjoyment (identification) and pain (misrecognition/failure). Going against the conventions of stable sexual identity may have opened Aguhar to new pleasures, while at the same time functioning conversely as a mode of self-policing, closing down those desires (towards, for example cis-white men) that she nonetheless felt and could potentially have enjoyed instead of repudiated. “That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of possibility” (Butler 2004, 3).

That practicing freedom in relation to various norms was complex and conflicting – rendering life both more and less liveable – is one matter with which Aguhar had to contend. The reality of her grief was another. Ultimately, her survival tools were not enough to alleviate her pain. Is this because, as Butler’s observations allude to, making a liveable life is not just a matter of creative self-fashioning but also must entail world making? The criticisms of the “It gets better” campaign echo this point, that is, that it did not address the structural problems and social determinants that make life difficult for LGBT teens and it did not put the onus on bullies to stop bullying (Doyle, 2010). In highlighting the world’s weakness, Aguhar politicises the pain of those she has lost and her own. Aguhar is asserting, as the statistics around suicide allude to, that mental health is not a simple matter of *individual* wellbeing. As Pérez articulates in Aguhar’s defence: “Depression, anger, hopelessness and other ugly feelings linked to suicide are symptoms of a very ugly social world not an individual weak spirit”. These deaths are not the result of individual pathology or irrationality, but *call out* society and the cruelty of its expectations and norms and those who defend them. Aguhar rightfully wants to put the onus on someone other than herself for the pain she is feeling; in her re-blogged post

she argues that it is not her own strength that can and must save her, it is the world that needs to change, “to stop being so fucking weak”.

Aguhar was wary of others thinking they could try and “narrate [her] life”.<sup>74</sup> Because she treated herself as something other than a subject, attempting to explain her demise feels like a betrayal of her character. In detailing all the ways she was dehumanised and insulted, she and I are building up an argument that justifies her suicide on the basis of the world’s hatred of difference and intolerance toward people who cannot be pinned down. In this way, she/I risk negating her agency and make her into a victim. But, this is precisely what Aguhar’s refusal of circumscription protects her against. In keeping with this, Pérez warns, “[i]n scrambling to depict Mark as a victim we might accidentally overlook Mark as a thinker” (2012). Pérez goes on to say:

It seems important to see her suicide not primarily as the endpoint of victimization but as critique, her death itself as a political act, no matter how much we wish she had found another way.[...]Mark was not broken by her own lack of self-esteem; she was the reluctant but *explosively* visionary medium for a broken world that had routinely proved too weak to hold her up (2012; emphasis added).

Pérez invites us to understand Aguhar’s death as both an act of “self love”, bringing an end to her pain, and a form of punishment directed at the world, a critical act. Her death conveys the message that continuing to live and defy norms would only have entailed even greater losses and greater pain, especially if things don’t get better. She levelled that critique at *her* world and although her death undoubtedly affected those closest to her most directly and intensely, through her blog it reached a much wider audience, including me. In this way, her message was directed at the West, at America, at Aguhar’s on and off-line communities, the mentality behind the ‘It gets better’ campaign, her art school, in addition to real life friends and family for ‘being too weak to hold her up’.

Aligning Aguhar with the ancient Cynics serves to echo Pérez’s point in that her suicide can be likened to the *explosive* form of truth telling that they

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<sup>74</sup> In his essay “Mark Aguhar’s Critical Flippancy” (2012) Pérez cites a post in which Aguhar quotes from one of Ryan Trecartin’s films, stating “thinks he can narrate my life because I taught him about fire and wheels”. Pérez goes on to explain his own authorial anxiety, asserting, “it *should* feel difficult to write about [Aguhar]” because “declaratives about what she stood for and represented [...] are complicated by Mark’s own resistance to circumscription”.

practiced. In outlining the modern descendants of ancient Cynicism, Foucault proposes that both anarchism and terrorism “should be studied”, and considered

as practices of life taken to the point of dying for the truth [... they] appear as a sort of dramatic or frenzied taking the courage for the truth, which the Greeks and Greek philosophy laid down as one of the fundamental principles of the life of the truth, to its extreme consequence. Going after truth, manifesting the truth, making the truth burst out to the point of losing one’s life or causing the blood of others to flow is in fact something whose long filiation is found again across European thought (2011, 185).

Whilst Foucault scarcely drafts the relationship of politically motivated violence and terrorism to ancient Cynicism, he nevertheless lays the groundwork for considering Aguhar’s particular brand of cruel vulnerability as a form of *parrhesia*.

Aguhar’s post of 7 December 2011, “My Final Crit” describes another performance of cruel vulnerability in which she has several “people read a suite of my poems sight-unseen about dealing with grief and situating my reality”. Through the poems, a drawing and a performance, the artist reveals to her peers that her sister’s recent suicide was the reason she “had been so incapable of regular communication, had to drop classes, couldn’t turn in assignments on time, couldn’t bear to be a social creature with them.” Aguhar remarks, “[i]n many ways it was an act of supreme cruelty on my part”. She goes on to explain that what was cruel was her having isolated herself and thereby not having sooner revealed the fact of her sister’s suicide. Such an act of cruelty is “supreme” perhaps because it was punishing to the artist herself as well as to her friends, teachers and colleagues. However, she also goes on to write:

But by far my favorite thing so far was one of the faculty came up to me today and told me that my work was very powerful, but that it was also very mean.

I’m happy someone acknowledged that yes, I was showing something that put me in an incredibly vulnerable position, and that’s fine, and that I have a great store of emotional power, but that the deployment of that can also be extremely cruel.

Aguhar's "favorite thing" is having literalised the courage of truth by having it acknowledged that witnesses to her vulnerability experienced it as an act of cruelty (if not violence).

As much as I might want to justify Aguhar's final act as a form of political critique that is 'supremely' cruel and powerful, or understand and empathise with it on the basis of her depression, no doubt confounded by the loss of her sister, and her having been the recipient of so much abuse and hatred (for being different and not hiding it or conforming), her friends, fans and I all wish she had found another way to express her rage and grief. We all wish that she could have *refused* to turn the external forms of violence she regularly experienced into her own self-inflicted, self/other-directed cruelty. We wish that she had found a healthier way to mourn the loss of her sister and to battle the evils of the world with a bit more self-protective distance and less personal risk, because we selfishly wanted to see what she would have become and what she would have gone on to make.<sup>75</sup> But asking her to do that would be a denial of who she was and what she wanted for herself. Being her "truest ugliest self" meant rejecting the healthy response and refusing to be strong in order to prove that being weak can be an 'explosive' show of power, if not strength.

What can be perceived as the ultimate act of self-determination, agency and autonomy is also simultaneously an act of total dependence. In this way, again in keeping with the Cynics, Aguhar transvaluates complete independence with total dependency. In punishing the world for its cruelty/weakness, Aguhar also reinforces her own dependency on the support of others. Her death can be understood to solidify her status as outcast and victim, proving that a life like hers is unliveable. Does it prove, as presumably she and Pérez believe, that a life like hers is unliveable under current conditions? Or does it prove what the haters would have us believe, that Aguhar's life was worthless? Aguhar and Pérez's point is a valid critique while the former tragically reiterates the status quo and everything Aguhar fought against. Her suicide violently reveals her dependency, that is, that she was not strong enough to hold herself up without more external support. Through her suicide, she attacked the shame of being dependent, revealing her need for social support in defiance of all life-affirming

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<sup>75</sup> I use the word 'selfishly' on purpose here, to mirror Aguhar's characteristic response to the familiar claim that suicide is selfish, which was to say, "telling someone not to kill themselves is an act of violence and selfishness"(10 February 2012).

precautions, as an act of *parrhesia*. A self-protective incarnation of this kind of shame attacking would simply have been to ask for help, but that would not have been an act of *parrhesia*.<sup>76</sup>

*Parrhesia* renders the *parrhesiastes* vulnerable because they must accept the negative and even potentially life-threatening consequences of revealing what may be unwelcome information to the listener, that is, the truth (Foucault 2001, 14; 2011, 56). Not knowing what the outcome of telling the truth will be means that this manner of speaking ensures the openness and “indeterminate potentiality” of the speaker (Taylor 2013, 96). Aguhar’s desubjectifying ethos, or her relentless “resistance to circumscription”, is bound up with her particular brand of cruel vulnerability (Pérez 2012). However, what complicates any reading of her suicide as *parrhesia* is the fact that its end-point was a *fait accompli*. Notwithstanding the idea that death is the great unknown, suicide eliminates both the risk and the potential of the *parrhesiastes*. Aguhar’s pain, like that of the suicide bomber, is finished, while ours has only just begun. The debate over suicide as critique verses resignation goes on, but her life’s potential is now void.<sup>77</sup> It wasn’t shame attacking towards self-transformation; it was an attack on shame in an attempt to transform the world.

Aguhar “grew up learning to hate every aspect of [her]self” and was unable to “unlearn” that because that lesson kept being instilled and reinforced. The world kept telling her she was worthless whilst at the same time imploring her to be stronger, to withstand insults and loss, and to hold out for the promised day when it would get better. Did the world need to change or did Aguhar need to be stronger? Which one would have saved her? Whatever the truth is, her suicide was neither shame attacking nor *parrhesia*, but created and called for something new.

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<sup>76</sup> That said, those who were following Aguhar’s blog, and no doubt those who knew her more intimately, would have read numerous posts contemplating or defending suicide and/or through other signs would have been alert to the fact that she was deliberating taking her own life. In other words, in a sense, she had asked for help. However, I do not mean to suggest that other people in her life were to blame, but instead wish to point to the necessity of an ethics beyond the individual.

<sup>77</sup> See Pérez’s 2012 article for a summary of the responses to Aguhar’s death on the web and other offline activism.

## Suicide as Care of the Self: Individual Responsibility Within Limited Choices

Aguhar's blog post of 5 October 2010 (fig. 32) lists 14 of her suggested ways to "stave off suicide for another couple of hours", including: eat fried cheese; watch "complicated movies about coming of age as a person of color in the 90s"; find a therapist; have "serious heart-to-heart conversations with people that you love"; and "remember that you are worthy". The last method listed is: "because YOU don't WANT to". That she had a *choice* and that she chose self-defeating actions over rational helpful ones, made demands on her self and the world, instead of being flexible and accepting, would no doubt be (at least part of) Albert Ellis' and his followers' stance on the matter. An REBT therapist would say that it was *not* how Aguhar was treated or the events that happened in her life, but rather the thoughts she had about that treatment that created her depression and lead to her suicide. In an interview in which Ellis is questioned about how he would approach a suicidal patient, he says that he would ask that patient:

What are you telling yourself to make yourself suicidal? You largely constructed your depression. It wasn't given to you. Therefore, you can deconstruct it. What do you think you're telling yourself to make yourself this way? We'd get the client to admit things like, 'I don't like my life,' and then we'd say, 'Yeah, but that wouldn't induce you to commit suicide. What else are you telling yourself?' And that's when clients say things like, 'It shouldn't be the way it is. It's terrible that I failed. I'm no good.' That's when we hear the shoulds, the oughts and the musts, and then we convince the client to abandon these irrational demands. Our slogan is, 'I will not should on myself today' (Epstein, 2001).

Could unconditional acceptance and rational disputation have successfully bolstered Aguhar against the pain she experienced as a result of her grief and her constant public derision? According to Ellis, these practices could have saved her life. To throw Ellis's repudiation of demands back at him, I ask, *should* she have had to take that sole responsibility? Her death forces us to question the imperative within our culture to focus on the individual and their actions as the *primary* means for coping with what are undeniably social crises.

To conclude that Aguhar's suicide was the result of what Ellis calls 'awfulising' and 'musterbation' strikes me as diminishing her experience and its complexity.<sup>78</sup> Yes, Aguhar could have said to herself 'I will not should on myself [or the world] today' and 'I will tolerate the hatred I am exposed to and eat some fried food, watch a movie, take a bath or phone a friend'. She could have gone on like this and it would have been just about tolerable, for at least a couple more hours. But is that all one can hope for? Is that what they're referring to when they say 'it gets better'? Ellis would say that it would have been beneficial to Aguhar to keep tolerating it because being alive is intrinsically valuable (2005, 62). Furthermore, he asserts: "In tolerating the conditions of the world you can be in a position to go on and change it. Oddly enough, while you're terribly upset about things, you very rarely are an effective changer – of yourself, of others, or the world" (Campbell, Biaz and Ellis 1970, 20). That Aguhar's survival depended on the world changing would not have been his conclusion, but instead he would offer that had she survived she could have better helped to change it.

fig. 32: Mark Aguhar blog post, 5 October 2010, reproduced in *Call Out Queen Mark Aguhar*, a zine edited by Juana Peralta and Roy Pérez published by Gallery 400, Chicago, for the memorial exhibition *The Dragon is the Frame* (2012).

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<sup>78</sup> Again, 'musterbation' is the term Ellis uses to describe when a desire is turned into a demand, which is usually inflexible, unhelpful and tends to cause distress (2005, 260).



Additionally, Ellis would have advised her to follow certain precautions when carrying out the shame attacking that she regularly practiced. Yet the fact that shame attacking as a therapeutic practice has caveats, implicitly recognises that departing from norms can in fact drastically alter or even threaten one's (social) existence, thus highlighting our dependence on certain norms and the necessity of conforming to them, at least to some extent. So Ellis' assertion that having the approval of others is merely a bonus and that we can tolerate isolation and not having the support of others, as well as being different and non-conformist, at least as self-sufficient adults, is only partly accurate. As a claim, it too is subject to exceptions. The tests Ellis and his followers have embarked on to prove this hypothesis correct have necessarily been and will continue to be confined by a life-affirming and life-preserving ethics. In other words, an ethics that Aguhar, the Cynic, did not follow, thus formulating a challenge to REBT.

Had Aguhar followed the recommended life-preserving precautions whilst attacking shame that would have meant not speaking her truth. From her own testimony, hedonism, pleasure (experienced in defiance of shame) and meaningful relationships ("heart to heart conversations") prolonged her life, while, combatting norms without mitigating the risks involved played a part in her taking her own life. In other words, regardless of whether it was therapeutic, her shame attacking was always an expression of truth. It helped her to experience and express her pleasures and find others to relate to, love and befriend. At the same time, in practicing freedom she became increasingly estranged from a social context in which she could feel a sense of belonging. Aguhar attacked the shame of being different and told the truth of those aspects of herself that did not conform, and in doing so she sought to expand the boundaries of the identity-based communities of which she was a part, whilst at the same time wanting to still be included, recognised and even loved, which was not only a difficult, but paradoxical task.

Dryden's suggestion, mentioned at the start of this chapter – that there is a link between foolishness and shamelessness to be explored – is worth returning to now. It is not that Aguhar was foolhardy and went too far, it was that she was willing to face the consequences of attacking shame without regard for any precautions, because for her the alternative was equally unliveable. Aguhar's death purposely problematises the claim that personal action alone is

sufficient in the fight against shame. In keeping with Butler, “It does not suffice to say that I am promoting a relational view of the self over an autonomous one, or trying to redescribe autonomy in terms of relationality. The term ‘relationality’ sutures the rupture in the relation we seek to describe, a rupture that is constitutive of identity itself” (2004, 19). Aguhar’s life/work and death also counter the premise within the literatures of REBT that shame only occurs when one falls short of one’s *own* ideals, as this fails to account for the fact that such ideals are not simply or straight-forwardly determined by individuals, but instead are collective, social and often compulsory insofar as they are constitutive of recognisable personhood.

According to Dryden, the first step toward “positive living” and “mental health” is “to assume personal responsibility” (1994, 1). He goes on to explain that “events in your life, particularly negative events, do restrict your choices of how you are going to think, but they rarely *cause* the way you think and feel” (1994, 2). Perhaps there is more to be made of the fact that life events “*restrict your choices* of how you are going to think” than Dryden suggests. Saying it is *rare* that they “*cause* your thoughts and feelings” suggests it is still possible for them to have that effect. But if we focus on the ways in which experience narrows our choices over and above the fact that there are choices available, personal agency is sacrificed, while social responsibility and the impetus to create wider changes become a necessity, despite being extremely difficult to achieve.<sup>79</sup> Aguhar perhaps had more (and better) choices than she realised. However, taking personal responsibility in the healthy sense of coming to the realisation that one’s perspective creates one’s feelings and then attempting to change one’s thoughts, to accept oneself, others and the world, to learn to better tolerate discomfort and hence to be psychologically stronger is as individualist a response as committing suicide. What were her other options? Were there more collective, socio-political/therapeutic avenues available?

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<sup>79</sup> For Ellis/Dryden it is worthwhile to attack shame so long as you don’t go too far, whilst for Foucault freedom is practiced within power relations that can never be escaped. In other words, the caveats of Ellis’ therapeutic shame attacking recognise the inescapable power relations in which we all operate as social beings.

## Katherine Araniello: A Life Worth Living

I now turn to an analysis of certain pieces by Katherine Araniello that are akin to Aguhar's in that they entail the presentation of self to counter the norms that render certain lives less liveable. However, Araniello is an outspoken critic of assisted suicide and the assumptions about non-normative lives that attempt to justify it. Equally importantly, Araniello employs decidedly more collaborative and less personally risky strategies than Aguhar. In fact, Araniello's oeuvre is markedly different from both shame attacking and *parrhesia*.

From 2007 to 2011, Araniello created a body of video and performance work addressing assisted suicide as a way of countering the assumption that her own life as a disabled person, who needs assistance in all aspects of her life, is not worth living. During my discussions with the artist she explained that her main impetus to make the series was not because she wanted to stake a claim in the debate for or against the right to die, but rather that she was "appalled" at the portrayal of physical disability as both unbearable and exceptional (i.e. unequal).<sup>80</sup> Araniello decried such representations as undermining of disabled people by contributing to the perception that they lack agency and control over their own lives. Araniello lives independently by orchestrating others to assist her and through the use of assistive technology, and she is frustrated and angered when people perceive her as a passive victim or as infantile, as mass-mediated portrayals of disability often falsely imply. Araniello is a staunch proponent of the social model of disability, which asserts that it is not individual, medial impairments that 'disable' people, but rather "social oppression, cultural discourse and environmental barriers" (Shakespeare 2019, 266).<sup>81</sup> As such, the social model counters the medical model by promoting accessibility to enable the full participation of all in social and public life. For Araniello, therefore, the idea that the 'solution' to being disabled is suicide is contradictory to this model and therefore to the fight for equality.

Despite her zeal, Araniello does not use her work to preach at her audience, but instead aims to challenge their assumptions through dark

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<sup>80</sup> This and all other quotes by Araniello, unless otherwise stated, come from interviews with the author that took place on 2 May, 9 August and 16 November 2017. (See Appendix D.)

<sup>81</sup> "The social model" is a term coined by academic and disability activist Michael Oliver to describe the ideology behind the campaigning of the UK organisation Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) which took place in the UK in the mid to late 1970s, advocating for desegregation of disabled people (Oliver 1990; Shakespeare 2010, 266-7).

subversive humour and parody. In her series on assisted suicide, for example, Araniello portrays herself as someone who is planning to obtain an assisted demise, satirically emphasising the fact of her being physically disabled as the sole motive. For her youtube videos *Suicide Message on Valentine's Day*, *Suicide Interview*, *Suicide Haircut* and *Suicide Mission* (all 2007), she employs the tropes of a vlog or video diary, speaking directly to the webcam/audience and giving a brief (but facetious) update on her life. In *Suicide Message on Valentine's Day*, the first in the series, she says, in a deadpan tone, "I'm going to tell you about how it is being disabled. Well, it's terrible, in fact I'd rather be dead." She explains that she plans to fly to Zurich to kill herself, but then recites a list of things she accomplished and enjoys in her life, i.e. her MA degree, her artwork, her awards, her relationships, her pet Chihuahua, her "lovely home", protesting that none of that matters because she has limited movement and is "a burden to society". She asks sardonically, "Can I scratch my nose?" "No, I can't", she answers. The video *Suicide Mission* follows in this vein, and again she lists positive aspects of her actual life, her genuine achievements and relationships, etc. and thereby subtly challenges the assumption that being disabled equates to a low quality of life, all the while satirically protesting otherwise. Her proclamations that she is a burden and wants to die are meant to parody commonplace representations of disability as the justification for assisted suicide. In this way she highlights the absurdity in the assumption that a life that defies ableist norms is unliveable. She invites her audience to question how important that aspect of her life is, that is, her limited physical movement, in light of not just her accomplishments, faculties and possessions, but her, for lack of a better word, normality (i.e. the ways in which she is similar to those whose lives are automatically assumed to have value). In fact, Araniello's lifestyle and accomplishments, as she portrays them in this work, are aligned with contemporary, neoliberal values in that she is productive and enjoys a middle-class lifestyle. In other words, she conforms to other, perhaps more powerful norms based on productivity and hence capital. This is in stark contrast to Aguhar who never purposely aligns herself with any norms.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> By contrast to these 2007 videos by Araniello, Aguhar's blog records ample time spent in leisure pursuits (sleeping and watching porn) that tread a more ambivalent line with respect to neoliberal values. Although, one could argue that Aguhar is a consummate neoliberal prosumer. It's also worth noting that Araniello's more recent vlogs perform boredom and anti-productivity

Araniello, like Aguhar, makes work in response to pejorative comments she receives from strangers and acquaintances on account of being physically different. For example, *The Dinner Party* (2011), a live, multi-media performance entails the artist portraying the “collected characters of Araniello’s experiences of being observed” (Araniello et al. 2014, 16). The piece consists of a live/mediated dinner party in which Araniello performs as the hostess (in person) and as all of the guests via pre-recorded videos, screened on TV monitors, whilst being served by a butler who imbibes the champagne for each of the guests, resulting in slapstick hilarity. More to the point, each of the “boxed” characters represents the personification of stereotyped responses to disability. The performance scholar Ella Finer describes the piece as follows:

*The Dinner Party* problematises the compulsion to categorise and define. By placing the perpetrators of such insistent categorisation into boxes, doomed to repeat themselves with no possibility of escape, Araniello is restricting those who have restricted her. (Araniello et al. 2014, 16)

It is that same problematisation of the “compulsion to categorise and define” that Aguhar aimed to achieve in her life/work, albeit by alternative methods and affects. Araniello makes fun of those who demean her, inviting her audience to laugh at them with her. In this way she gives her public the benefit of the doubt, acknowledging their ability to get the joke and recognise the patronising comments for what they are. Araniello’s work might be insulting to those who utter the kind of commentary she parodies, that is, if they are present and able see past their own prejudices to recognise themselves in her depictions. But, significantly, Araniello’s work is *not* made to address the prejudiced specifically or to call out discrimination per se. Instead it delineates an ‘in-group’ through the use of humour; those who get the joke form a kind of (temporary) community that is *inclusive* of her.

Moreover, when I questioned Araniello further about the audience for her work, her intended impact and, more specifically, why she makes work within live art, non-mainstream contexts, she said:

As artists surely we just want to push ourselves and push likeminded people. Why should we be the disciples of the world? Who are we?  
Ultimately, everybody is invited [...] it’s exasperating talking to people

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and her show *The Araniello Show* (2018) likewise refuses neoliberal values – see Paul Hughes’ review (exeuntmagazine.com, 2018).

who don't agree with you. And it's really stressful. I guess I choose to be around people who are going to elevate the way I think, not suppress me. I already live in a situation in which society oppresses everyone who is different.

Her statement is inclusive, "everyone's invited" but again delineates a group, "likeminded people", with her own role as instigator – not 'disciple', nor role model. In this way, Araniello's work delivers her critique whilst eliminating the personal risk that *parrhesia* requires. This is a stark contrast to Aguhar, who, like the Cynic, takes on the role of militant proselytiser (Foucault 2012, 284). Unlike Araniello, but similarly to the Cynics, Aguhar "barks" in a "polemical and bellicose" manner (Foucault 2012, 279). She "attacks [her] enemies, that is to say, [she] attacks the vices afflicting men[sic], affecting those [she] is speaking to in particular, but also humankind in general" (2012, 279). The affective registers of the two artists are entirely contrary, though their critique of normativity and prejudice is in many respects aligned.

During my discussion with Araniello, she recounted some recent examples of being 'boxed in' that had occurred in art contexts, with the expressions of pity having been delivered by art world elites. Her point in relaying such a story was to convey the fact that despite thinking of itself as progressive and open, the art world mirrors the wider world in its misconceptions about disability. This reminds me of Aguhar's parallel point that the queer community perpetuates the status quo in its policing of race and fat (and also, presumably, ability). However, despite this analogous critique, Araniello's anecdote pointed again to the difference in the two artists' tactics. While Aguhar would *call out* the injustice via her blog, through her art, or in person, Araniello chose not to confront face to face, but is determined to respond *indirectly* at a later date with her work or through a written response that she could take the time to compose.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> This was in part because according to Araniello's account, she was in a loud venue and didn't feel she could be heard. This highlights both the circumstances that lead certain individuals to be called 'impaired', and also the fact that some individuals in certain circumstances are more and less able to speak truth to power. Aguhar's blog/work provide testimonies of live confrontations, for example, her piece called *My First Denim Jacket* (2011), which takes the form of a monologue and describes an incident on the train and walking home after a night of clubbing. During the incident she protects her friends who are more wary of negative attention by drawing attention away from them onto her. She also says she is "always looking for a fight". In her readiness for battle, she again likens herself to the ancient Cynics. Foucault states, the Cynic mission is "a care relationship", but also a militant one, like the "life of the guard dog" (2012, 279/244). That said, there are moments of laughter in this piece from Aguhar and her

Both artists are confronted with assumptions and biases based on their appearances, albeit very different aspects of appearance, but the central premise behind those assumptions is the same at base: a life that “sits outside of the norm” is exceptional, and most often that exceptionality is interpreted as negative. Araniello and Aguhar respectively fight against their being perceived as worth less than others who equate more convincingly to the norm. During our interview, Araniello was insistent that her work wasn’t facing up to assumptions about ‘people like her’ but about “anyone who sits outside the norm”. In other words, she does not emphasise her own particularity, instead she highlights how commonplace non-normativity is. I can read *The Dinner Party* as subtly integrating this point; as the performance reaches its climax the able-bodied butler is rendered incapacitated or ‘disabled’ by alcohol, while Araniello’s salient wit and relatively motionless body is and remains fully ‘able’ throughout, although she also drinks her way through the piece. The message that comes across is that both the butler and Araniello are using their bodies to the best of their ability under the circumstances, at times appearing and performing more or less able, rendering the able-bodied and the disabled equal.

When I asked Araniello about this she denied my interpretation, asserting that she did not wish to “control” the butler, but in clarifying her intentions only served to affirm my perception. Her intention was to create a scene of chaos for the spectator and to allow the performer playing the butler to contribute. In the first incarnation of the piece Ernst Fisher brought an intensity to the role by fasting the day of the performance so that the alcohol affected him more. In this way Fisher contributed to Araniello’s overall vision and, at the same time, was true to his own goals. This again confirms again the collaborative (and interdependent) aspect of Araniello’s work. Moreover, it also underscores that the piece “is about breaking down conformist ways of doing things”, and turning norms on their head, in a carnivalesque display. In fact, in the second incarnation, the sign interpreter also drank alongside the performers. In this way, the performance was accessible, but, as Araniello explained, “in a less traditional way”. Moreover, in its bacchanalia, her work can be considered evocative of the Cynics. As Foucault remarks briefly, “satire” was

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audience, as she recounts rash and nonsensical insults hurled between her friends and their assailants. So Aguhar did occasionally make work that accessed (if only briefly and intermittently) the experience of shared laughter, that Araniello’s art more often elicits.

“up to a point, a privileged site” for the expression of “Cynic themes” (2012, 186). He then posits that Cynic themes permeate:

the literature studied by Bakhtin, who relates it particularly to the festival and the carnival, but which certainly falls under this manifestation of the Cynic life: the problem of the relations between the festival and the Cynic life (naked, violent life, the life which scandalously manifests the truth) (Foucault 2012, 187).

Therefore in the drunken disarray at the culmination of *The Dinner Party* norms are upturned, the able are disabled and vice versa, completing Araniello’s own brand of transvaluation. Such a transvaluation falsifies the authority (that is the historically contingent power/knowledge nexus) that categorises Araniello as ‘disabled’ and the butler as ‘able’ and thereby also critiques the social model. As the Foucauldian disability theorist Shelley Tremain asserts, the social model is based “around a structuralist distinction between impairment and disability analogous to the familiar feminist distinction between sex and gender” and that therefore its “universal applicability” can be critiqued (2017, 11).<sup>84</sup> In other words, within the social model, ‘impairment’ is understood as being a fact about/of the body, whilst disability is the societal disadvantage *imposed* upon the impairment. In keeping with Araniello’s work, however, Tremain argues that the impairment itself (i.e. the body itself) is also socially constructed and historically contingent (2001, 620).

During my discussion with Araniello, she gave a number of examples to place disability on par with ability, highlighting that we are all dependent on others in one way or another and that if we make it to old age, we will inevitably be increasingly so. Araniello also said that one’s level of reliance on others “depends on who you are or your situation in life. So for example, for someone who has mental health difficulties, they would need psychological support.” This highlights one omission in my above analysis of Aguhar’s self/work, that is, that insofar as she struggled with depression, Aguhar occupied a position of alterity also in relation to mental health and therefore to ability.<sup>85</sup> This further connects Aguhar and Araniello in that it underscores the ways in which both artists’ work

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<sup>84</sup> Similarly to how Butler’s theories of the performative, which undermines the sex/gender binary, aided me to demonstrate how Cassils’ work dislodged the organ of the penis from the power represented by the phallus, Tremain’s critique of the social model’s binary impairment/disability provides a framework to understand Araniello’s transvaluation.

<sup>85</sup> Depression is considered a disability (in the US and the UK) with its diagnosis dependent on the condition’s impact on daily functioning, social interaction and its persistence.



critiques the notion that ‘impairment’ (or ‘mental illness’) is a “personal misfortune or pathology”, as opposed to a culturally constructed category and/or a historically contingent circumstance (Tremain 2017, 19).

Yet, whilst Aguhar sees her life as radically other (and asks, “Who else is as legendary as me?”), Araniello’s perspective stresses her sameness and the dependencies that we all share. Both artists challenge norms, however, only Aguhar turns that into the recognition of herself as “legendary”. Araniello, by contrast, who is regularly perceived by others as ‘special’ and ‘inspirational’, makes work about this phenomenon, which she recognises as a subtle and socially accepted, but no less derogatory, form of discrimination.

fig. 33: Katherine Araniello, *A Miracle of Life* website (2016 to present).

For Araniello’s recent, long-term project entitled *A Miracle of Life* (2016 to present, fig 33) she has set up a crowd funding webpage in order to raise money to make an ‘inspirational’ music video. Her appeal for financial aid is listed on a website called “gofundme” which prominently displays a full-body photograph of Araniello smiling and seated in her wheelchair with the words “Help Katherine’s wish come true” displayed prominently underneath it. To the right of her image is the numeric amount she has raised of her £4K goal, which at my last viewing was £3286, with a giant ‘donate’ button below it, beckoning you. Following this header is a letter explaining why and for what purpose ‘Katherine’ requires your generosity. To confirm Katherine’s helplessness and invoke feelings of sympathy, the pitch for your donation is written not from

Araniello's perspective, but by her "helper and friend" Laura Dee Milnes. Milnes explains Katherine's chronic, deteriorating and incurable condition, Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) and provides details of how it makes "everyday a struggle". She states, "doing the very basics that you or I take for granted is a challenge [Katherine] must daily overcome", which is why Milnes purportedly finds her to be:

so inspiring, because she makes me feel grateful for everything I have.

When I look at her, my own problems seem to disappear and I tell myself that there are people who are far worse off than I could ever be.

In other words, the text plays into the conventions of what Araniello refers to as "inspiration porn". Disability activist Stella Young originally coined the term "inspiration porn" and, in her TED talk of 2014, she defines it as "those images [that] objectify disabled people for the benefit of nondisabled people. They are there so that you can look at them and think that things aren't so bad for you, to put your worries into perspective" (Young 2014). In keeping with the conventions of the genre, Araniello's 'gofundme' letter purposely emphasises Katherine's impairment; stressing that because of it she is not only different from the norm, but also disadvantaged. In the letter, Milnes describes the daily "challenges" Katherine faces and thereby objectifies and infantilises Katherine. In feeding the public's 'pornographic' voyeurism and thereby fulfilling their expectations about who someone like Katherine is, and the kind of life she leads, Araniello is laughing her way to the bank, having earned thousands of pounds in pity pay.

According to Young, 'inspiration porn' works because "we've been sold this lie that disabled people are exceptional". Young's TED talk speech, however, fails to acknowledge that upholding that lie is the ableist assumption that being disabled is not only challenging but also and more importantly worse than being able-bodied; disabled people are exceptional because they have had to cope with something 'unbearably awful'. Thus "inspiration porn" is 'pleasurable' to watch for nondisabled people because it reaffirms the unspoken consensus that able-bodies are preferable. In this way it contributes to what disability theorist Robert McRuer calls "compulsory able-bodiedness". McRuer asserts,

A system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the

unspoken question, “Yes, but in the end, wouldn’t you rather be more like me?” (2006, 9).

Attuned to the ableist message that such depictions of disability convey, Araniello was *inspired* to address inspiration porn in her work. ‘Inspiration porn’ is not only prevalent in the depictions of disability in the mainstream media, for example, in the advertisements for the Paralympics (which Araniello has also satirised), but also, perhaps more insidiously in the self-representations of various disabled ‘gurus’ who present themselves through ‘inspirational’ youtube videos and motivational speaking tours. *A Miracle of Life* is Araniello’s parodic take on these precedents.

Like much of Araniello’s work, *A Miracle of Life* entails a mixture of truth telling and lies/parody. The details of Araniello’s disability as presented on the ‘gofundme’ page are true; she has SMA and it does mean she has certain requirements to facilitate her daily life. As Araniello explained, the details have to be tied to the truth in order for the piece to be successful in its satire. However, these ‘truths’ are delivered with a spin that purposely undercuts Araniello’s very real agency both in her control over her life and her authorship of this artwork. The lie/parody is conveyed in the statement: “[h]er team of caregivers do everything they can to make her comfortable and happy, but her illness is so severe that there is nothing that Katherine can do on her own”. The reality is that Araniello lives independently and her personal assistants do everything she tells them to do. Furthermore, *the artist*, not Laura Dee Milnes, constructed the narrative and Milnes’ persona intentionally. In fact, Araniello’s way of living/working, if truthfully exposed, might transvaluate dependency into independence, like the Cynic “matrix scene” between King Alexander and Diogenes. Araniello is not at the whim of her caregivers (like a slave to her master) but is in control of her life through instructing them (like a benign sovereign); total dependence (or rather interdependence) for Araniello is autonomy. In her work, however, she uses satire to produce another type of transvaluation, that is, of the pity-prone into the pitied. *A Miracle of Life* invites us to laugh at those pitiable fools who click ‘donate’. Araniello is not suffering, but if giving money to ‘Katherine’ makes prejudiced people feel better about themselves, then the artist invites those who comprehend the real meaning of her parody to pity the prejudiced for falling prey to such ignorance. Ultimately, Araniello believes that disability does *not* make her special in negative or

*positive* ways, because to imply the latter only reaffirms ableist assumptions. Paradoxically, in playing the victim (by parodically reiterating norms), she refuses to be one.

During our discussion, however, Araniello also admitted to me that she believes her 'gofundme' appeal is actually largely funded by friends, other artists and supporters of her work and the arts more generally, i.e. not by those who pity her. In garnering the support of "likeminded people" who want to see the project come to fruition, Araniello's work again speaks to and creates a certain kind of sociality. Another example of this sociality is her video piece *A Beacon of Hope* (2016), made to accompany and promote the crowd funding campaign. In it Araniello further satirises the genre of inspiration porn by featuring vox pops of her parents, personal assistants, friends and her partner who relay how "inspirational" they find Katherine to be, how she motivates them not to take their own lives for granted. In other words, her intimates are in on the joke, having been easily prompted to convey these stereotypical messages. This is wholly contrary to Aguhar's methodology, which, despite addressing the collective that is 'brown gurls', primarily entailed working alone and in isolation. Or, as the example of her final crit described above demonstrates, utilised other people in a cruel way, a way that foregrounded her own "emotional power" and her independence. Aguhar relished her legendary status publicly, although she experienced it in solitude. Araniello has a wide (online and live) audience, just as Aguhar did, but dissimilarly to Aguhar, Araniello's work more heavily acknowledges and relies on points of connection, perhaps because her physicality demands that she recognise the necessity of depending on others.

But what do I make of the fact that Araniello admonishes being called exceptional? When I write at length above about Aguhar's alterity, am I not making the case that she was *especially* brave in her way of acting in the world? Have I fallen into a trap by doing so? Am I objectifying her all over again for my own and other's (perverse) benefit? What does it mean to make the case that Aguhar was special or 'legendary', or that her pain was unique? Arguments for the right to die are often presaged with the notion those who seek it are pitifully dependent – as Araniello's work on assisted suicide strives to critique – and/or that they are in insurmountable pain – as Aguhar's work and death could be construed to assert.

Including 'depression' and other forms of psychological distress or pain within the header of 'disability' also poses limitations to the social model in that according to it, impairment is defined as physical, resulting from the materiality of the body, as opposed to being socially constructed; but depression and pain are both biological and social. Disability theorist Tobin Siebers warns that pain is "a motive force [used] to justify disability oppression" (2010, 184). Following his logic, pain studies theorist Alyson Patsavas asserts: "Living without pain amounts to an imperative that captures the person in pain within a system of individual responsibility and 'compulsory able-bodiedness'" (2014, 210). Araniello's work is pitted against the framing of disability as exceptionally unbearable (or that those who are disabled are particularly strong in living with it), because, echoing Siebers and Patsavas, that way of thinking does not facilitate greater support to render lives more liveable, but instead reaffirms ableist prejudices. If the pain is thought of as physical (e.g. the result of brain chemistry) only, then this lessens the attention given to social determinations. In the worst-case scenario, it could be used to justify the annihilation of the disabled and those (assumed to be) suffering or in pain. Moreover, as Patsavas asserts, compulsory able-bodiedness exacerbates the experience of pain by equating it to personal failure. Patsavas, remarking on her own experience of chronic pain, asks, "How differently might I have felt the pain in a context where interdependence is acknowledged and valued?" (2014, 209). Aguhar felt the pressure of a culture that told her to be strong and hold out, or worse, that her problems were because of her 'disability', i.e. depression/brain chemistry, as opposed to a realistic response to how she was treated daily, no doubt further worsening rather than alleviating her pain.

When I attempt to justify Aguhar's suicide by asserting that her pain was beyond her control and in that sense insurmountable, my aim is to problematise the notion of individual responsibility and to point to the "structural violence and cultural conditions that turn pain into suffering" (Patsavas 2014, 211). But I am concerned that when I highlight her unique courage, as her self-portrayals invite me to do, I risk turning her into someone 'special', an inspiration, and that may work, counter to Aguhar's intentions and my own, to justify rather than rally against the devaluing (and annihilation) of lives like hers, of non-normative lives. Araniello's work has further attuned me to the risk that Aguhar's work could be misconstrued as a type of pity porn. When viewers approach her blog

questioning, 'isn't it awful to be like her?', they might come away with the affirmative answer, 'yes, it's unbearable'. Aguhar details the particularity of her suffering and victimisation with intense earnestness, and this is all too analogous to what Araniello's work parodies. As Araniello's friend and mentor, the live artist Marcia Farquhar states: "Without the humour, [Araniello's] accounts of some events would be so bleak as to be unbearable" (Araniello et al. 2014, 11).

The comparison with Araniello's art brings the riskiness of Aguhar's brand of truth telling to the fore, but also shows that it is possible to critique norms whilst foregrounding sociality and interdependence and thereby lessen the personal stakes. In this way, it returns me to a critique of both *parrhesia* and shame attacking for their inherent individualism, which will be central to the conclusion of this thesis below.

### **Conclusion: Generational Differences**

Lastly, I wish to return to Dryden's statement, "events in your life, particularly negative events, *do restrict your choices* of how you are going to think" and, more importantly, to the slant and emphasis I want to give to it. I am wondering what in Aguhar's experience restricted her to the particularly neo-Cynic path she took which culminated in her taking her own life. Aguhar was blogging whilst completing her MFA degree and therefore undoubtedly did have an awareness of and access to alternative modes of expression like parody and collaboration. In other words, perhaps Aguhar could potentially have found an alternative methodology that would have provided life-preserving opportunities for shared laughter and critique and the alternative sociality that they facilitate, as Araniello continues to do. However, instead of perpetuating suppositions, and to avoid individualising and thereby blaming Aguhar, I must take into account her context and how it restricted her choices. This points me to the fact that another key difference between Aguhar and Araniello, apart from nationality, ethnicity and physical ability, is age. Aguhar was 24 years old when she took her own life, while Araniello will turn 53 in September 2018.

For Aguhar self-disclosure online was a way of life. For Araniello, it is more of a novelty that she can distance herself from, having come to in adulthood rather than in her formative years. For Araniello's peer group, and

mine, the internet is not the primary realm for personal expression and social encounters, as it has become for subsequent generations. Aguhar is part of a generation that grew up with the web – a generation that has departed in significant ways from those that preceded it. Jean M. Twenge's *Generation Me* (2007) compiles findings from dozens of sociological studies, with data from 1.2 million respondents spanning six decades, in order to reveal the distinctive features of what has been called 'Generation Y' of which Aguhar was a member. According to Twenge, as a result of the rise in a sense of entitlement and self-focus within a context of hyper-competitive, contemporary capitalism, young people of her generation are more depressed, anxious and lonely than before, with suicide rising to become "the fourth leading cause of death for people aged 15-24" (2007, 147-8). These facts contribute to an understanding of Aguhar's choice and point to the urgent necessity to think more critically about neoliberal values and our use of individualising and often isolating technology. We therefore must heed this clarion call to take better care of our selves and others online and off. Therefore, in the conclusion to this thesis that follows I further explore the risks of self-disclosure via the internet and within the hyper-competitive and individualistic context of neoliberalism.

## **Conclusion: Ashamed? It could be political.**

### **Personal Preamble**

From the start, my art was personal; it was something I did for me and I didn't care what it meant for anyone else, especially not the community, whatever that was. As a result, I wonder if I am genuinely and truly narcissistic, or is it that I've swallowed advanced capitalism's party line – hook, line and sinker? Is it that I've been socialised to be a self-enclosed, autonomous individual who cares for herself first and foremost or am I just totally self-involved and there's no excuse?

Here are some excuses: I've been taught to pay attention to what's popular; to idolise fame and the things that money can buy; to compete to get my share; that happiness can be mine if I only work hard enough. At the tender age of 17, I was asked at a university scholarship interview, "What do you think the role of art is in the community?" My answer: "Uh, I don't know." The rewards of giving back escaped me, not just the full scholarship that seemed to depend on my response. And now I'm still figuring out if it's possible to use my tendency to put myself first to work for the greater good.<sup>1</sup>

My investigation within this thesis has led me to these highly personal yet highly political questions. This project starts with the self again, analysing my own approach to self-care, influenced as it is by psychotherapeutic paradigms and feminist art and theory, and moving outward to consider the work of other artists, to contend with their contexts, subcultures and political factions and (hopefully) expanding to reflect on the wider world, or at least Western society. The question of whether or not the self-disclosure I practice as an artist, or indeed that the other artists perform that I have selected to analyse herein, is therapeutic for the artist, could be viewed as evidence of the individualism of our contemporary moment, or, alternatively, of my own, potentially, pathological narcissism. It could be that I'm simply a narcissist and I've certainly been made to feel that way. But feminism's (and feminist art's) insistence that the personal is the political gave me encouragement to think otherwise or to continue to pursue these interests and questions despite such criticisms that target me personally. I feel the familiar burn of shame when describing my research

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<sup>1</sup> The above account is part of the opening monologue I perform for *The O Show: Business or Pleasure?* (2018), documentation from which is provided in my portfolio of practice.



interests to strangers, in particular straight cis-gendered male academics and most if not all non-academics and non-artists, fearing their negative judgements. That shame, ironically, might have stopped this project in its tracks, if it weren't for my acting *as if* these ideas were worthy of serious consideration, and not just the playful dressing up I do in the name of art.

The whole enterprise is an act of shame attacking; in that sense it's been a personal initiative. Importantly, however, it is the context in which I situate my project at the start of this thesis, the particular point in history when both feminist and performance art were beginning to be taken more seriously and revalued (the late 1990s to today), which in a sense provided me not only with encouragement, but also with mentors who showed me how to defy shame, including and beyond all of the artists whom I write about in this thesis.

Having to grapple with neoliberalism, that is, the less fortuitous aspects of the breeding ground for this thesis and indeed my own self, has brought the political dimension of my work and research to the fore. It is *not* that I'm a narcissist, it is that I've been socialised to be an individual and I've been taught to deny and undervalue relationality, interdependence and collectivity. I haven't been able to see those options as clearly as I do now as a result of going through the process of writing this thesis. Prior to drafting this conclusion even, I was unaware of the extent to which my interest in therapy and technologies of the self was bound up with neoliberal truths and values.<sup>2</sup>

### **Shame Attacking Within Neoliberalism**

I began this thesis with questions about the drawbacks and rewards of shameless self-disclosure as a feminist art practice. By imbricating Foucault's theorisations on *parrhesia* and ancient Cynicism with Albert Ellis' therapeutic anti-shame prescriptions, I have analysed the art/life works of a range of feminist and queer performance artists. The results cannot be reduced to a simple cost/benefit exercise; risk and self-care overlap, sometimes inseparably within these artists' self-technologies. Precisely because of the intense and sometimes life-threatening risks inherent in the self-disclosure of the artists

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<sup>2</sup> This marks my methodology as all the more Foucauldian, as he himself remarked: "The main interest in life is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning [...] The game [in love and work] is worthwhile in so far as we don't know what will be the end" (1988, 9).

evaluated in these pages, I am left with a greater appreciation of its worth. Relevantly, there are no signs that risky self-revelation is abating. Its forms and outlets are continually proliferating because of the internet. Due to the ubiquity of the latter, the risks are changing, perhaps multiplying. Therefore the need to define a methodology for its practice is all the more pressing. It is not only the reality of living our lives as an interconnected network of all too often isolated beings with which we must contend, but also the context of neoliberalism that demands us to be autonomous, self-mastering and competitive individuals. Both Foucault's late theories of care of the self and Ellis' therapeutic paradigm have been found wanting or problematic in relation to neoliberal individualism. Therefore it is to this context and those criticisms that I will respond in this conclusion.

I use the term neoliberalism, as cultural studies theorist Julie Wilson defines it: "a set of social, cultural and political-economic forces that puts competition at the center of social life" (2017, 1). Within neoliberalism "the market is no longer imagined as a distinct arena where goods are valued and exchanged; rather, the market is, or ideally should be, the basis for *all* of society" (Wilson 2017, 2). As Wilson explains, it is this context that breeds various paradoxes, one of which is particularly relevant to my research, that is, the fact that: "we are all very anxious and depressed, yet countless self-help guides and technologies promise to help us find health and happiness" (2017, 9). At the core of this paradox is the culturally constructed notion of "self-enclosed individualism" or "hyper-individualism", i.e. the idea that we all must take total responsibility for ourselves; "it's me against the world" (Wilson 2017, 3; Keating 2012, 171). Such individualism, as feminist theorist Ana Louise Keating describes it, is distinct from more positive forms of self-reliance such as autonomy, agency and self-determination. Being responsible for one's wellbeing in a world that prizes competition leads to increased (performance) anxiety and distress. To combat these negative feelings, the neoliberal subject is encouraged to look inward and invest in privatised solutions, whilst neoliberal economic policies undermine (through defunding and privatisation) the social/collective systems that previously provided support. As Wilson articulates it, despite the fact that "individuals alone cannot control their fates in a global, complex, capitalist society, no matter how well they compete", "neoliberalism insists we achieve it [i.e. control our fate]" (2017, 3). The way that this plays out

at an interpersonal level is particularly cruel in that contemporary, neoliberal “practices of self-care encourage us to internalise, and thereby live by, the very same neoliberal logics of privatization, self-enclosed individualism, and personal responsibility that are causing all these hurts in the first place” (Wilson 2017, 155). In other words, the pressure to compete as self-enclosed individuals dominates every aspect of contemporary life, rendering us oblivious to the fact that we are all vulnerable, social beings whose lives depend on shared “infrastructures (e.g. schools, roads and bridges, communication) that bring us into relation with one another”(Wilson 2017, 4). Moreover, as William Davies puts it in his book *The Happiness Industry*, “[i]t is only in a society that makes generalised, personalised growth the ultimate virtue that a disorder of generalised, personalised collapse will become inevitable” (2015, 177).

It is precisely this context that gives such urgency to my project. Over the course of the neoliberal era (1980s to today) the rates of depression, anxiety and suicide have steadily increased, which has many heralding our contemporary moment as a ‘mental health crisis’.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, as highlighted in the previous chapter, the rise of the internet and the iphone have led to enormous changes in the generations that have been raised with them, affecting in particular their wellbeing (Twenge 2017). Whether or not such claims accurately reflect an increase in mental distress or instead point to the willingness of people to seek help for it is less important than the fact that people are in pain. As the leftist feminist Lynne Segal asserts, “However inflated those figures on depression might be, they tell us that we live in worlds of pain and unbearable sadness. That being so, it is surely possible to see beyond personal suffering to suggest that such prevalence of misery might also have a public dimension and hence a political one” (2017, 49). Many factions of the left, and especially the academic left are accumulating arguments and activist projects centring on this point. For example, the entire discipline of affect theory has developed from and continues to establish the view that bad feelings are

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<sup>3</sup> The acclaimed social study *The Spirit Level* (2009) by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett finds rampant inequality to be the cause of rising societal ailments including depression, anxiety and other illnesses. In 2012 the World Health Organisation named depression a ‘global crisis’ (The WHO website, 10 October 2012). Likewise, the oft-cited 2017 study by The Mental Health Foundation of the UK states: “one in four adults will experience a mental health problem - like a panic attack or depression” in their lifetime, with the rates increasing in young people (Mental Health Foundation website). By contrast, there are studies such as Horwitz and Wakfield’s 2007 book *The Loss of Sadness*, which argues that depression is not on the upsurge, but rather it is the number of people seeking treatment that is steadily growing.

not merely felt by individuals but arise out of situations and can and must become the material for a collective politics. Out of this developed the politically motivated collective of artists, activists, and academics (including Berlant and Cvetkovich) who call themselves Feel Tank Chicago, who deride the relegation of feelings to the private, individual and a-political sphere, making affect and in particular 'bad feelings' central to their critical, socio-political methodology. At their three "Annual International Parades of the Politically Depressed" demonstrations, which they titled "depress-ins", held in Chicago (on 1 May 2003; 1 May 2004; and 4 July 2007) they sported T-shirts and (with a sense of humour) bathrobes printed with the motto: "Depressed? It could be political" (Wikipedia). In tandem, another critical mass of thinkers, evolving out of the legacy of the anti-psychiatry movements of the 1960s, has coalesced in Canada and internationally under the rubric of Mad Studies and/or Mad Pride, similarly aiming to politicise depression and other mental illnesses, taking its lead from disability studies and activism by critiquing the medical model and its labelling and pathologising of "the pains and privations endured by countless people" (LeFrançois et al. 2013, 10). Another voice in this chorus is that of cultural theorist Mark Fisher, who asserts that just as the anti-psychiatry movement of the 60s argued that schizophrenia was a political rather than a natural category, what is needed now is the politicisation of more common disorders. Fisher, who himself tragically succumbed to suicide in 2017, urges us to "reframe the growing problem of stress (and distress) in capitalist societies. Instead of treating it as incumbent on individuals to resolve their own psychological distress, instead, [...] we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill?" (2009, 19).

Opposing all of these critical and perhaps 'utopian' perspectives, however, are "both the psychiatric profession and the world at large" who encourage us "to see our misery as coming from within" (Segal 2017, 39). The psy-disciplines claim that our personal life history or circumstances are responsible for our malaise and encourage us to pursue a hermeneutical investigation to root it out, or a lifestyle change, that commands all our attention and effort, turning us inward and away from contemplating or taking action against any wider socio-political causes. If those prescriptions don't work, they inform us it is our chemistry that's bad and recommend we take a pill. A recent

article in *The New Scientist* (18 November 2017) by Andy Coghlan entitled “How bullying can lead to depression” explains the neurochemical affects of “bullying, body-image issues, social anxiety or extreme shyness”, suggesting a “new avenue for treating depression” is to use an anti-body that would prevent the chemical affects of depression in the brain. This seems an apt and disturbing illustration of the current, mainstream, i.e. neoliberal approach to wellbeing; we fund studies that microscopically examine the blood vessels in the brains of mice, rather than address the social causes for bullying. The aforementioned Davies explains that since the rise of neoliberalism “psychiatry lost the capacity to identify problems in the fabric of society or economy” and instead zeroes in on individual chemical imbalances and genetic codes (Davies 2012, 174).

Taking Davies point further to critique neoliberal truths Wilson, again, asserts that “[i]n working at a molecular level rather than a social or political one, contemporary psychiatric discourses become part of the disimagination machine, stripping us of our capacities for radical critique and getting to the roots of our problems” (Wilson 2017, 156). Wilson borrows the concept of the ‘disimagination machine’ from cultural theorist Henry Giroux who explains that, [it] is both a set of cultural apparatuses extending from schools and mainstream media to the new sites of screen culture, and a public pedagogy that functions primarily to undermine the ability of individuals to think critically, imagine the unimaginable, and engage in thoughtful and critical dialogue: put simply, to become critically informed citizens of the world” (2013, 263; cited in Wilson 2017, 70).

In light of such thinking and the subsequent misdirection of resources, the question emerges; did the self-technologies of the contemporary feminist and queer artists described above unyoke them from specifically neoliberal norms? Can shame attacking and *parrhesia* be effective strategies to counter neoliberalism? Or are they too individualistic and therefore dangerously interchangeable with status quo, neoliberal self-technologies?

Feminist theorist and Foucault critic, Lois McNay responds affirmatively to the latter, claiming that “the experimental process of self-formation that [care of the self] revolves around is uncomfortably close in structure to governance through individualisation, and it is therefore not clear how such an atomized practice can pose any serious challenge to neoliberal social control” (2009, 62).

In keeping with McNay's perspective one could concede that Aguhar's suicide, despite being such an intensely critical act, did little to create wider change, especially outside of the circles that were already sensitive to the problems that plagued her. However, Wilson conversely asserts that neoliberalism operates in keeping with Foucault's definition of 'governmentality', not as a centralised form of power, but instead takes hold as a "soft power", "guid[ing] people's conduct 'at a distance' – through culture" (Wilson 2017, 87). As such, a Foucauldian critique is exactly what is required to undermine its grip, in that he incites us to go beyond "saying things are not right as they are", but rather "pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest" (Wilson 2017, 17; Foucault and Eribon 1981, 21). Wilson goes on to posit that the "vital intellectual work requires not only critique of our social world, but also transformation of ourselves" because it is at the level of the self and technologies of the self that neoliberal values come to dominate our lives (15). I can see no better explanation for why I have stumbled upon a methodology that is capable of challenging neoliberal values/norms in utilising what might be deemed its very own inward-looking practices. In Wilson's critical account of neoliberalism, she describes another "gigantic paradox" at its heart; it is at once "a totalising situation where resistance and transformation seem impossible", whilst at the same time its "power over our lives is incredibly tenuous" (2017, 7-8). In other words, power is everywhere, but so is resistance, which is not to say that all forms of resistance are equally efficacious.

In the case of Aguhar, it strikes me that neoliberal truths, or 'disimagination', were powerfully instrumental in her demise. Although she rallied against the "It Gets Better" campaign and against the world for "being too weak", ultimately she succumbed to a highly individualised course of action. The stories that make up the campaign are a potent example of what Keating calls "status quo stories" that percolate throughout popular culture and "trap us in our current circumstances and conditions; they limit our imaginations because they prevent us from envisioning alternate possibilities" (2012, 170). The passive voice of the campaign is telling – "it gets better" – but who is it that is going to make it better? Sit tight, work on yourself and it will get better, work harder and it will get better. This is the epitome of the status quo message. Even though Aguhar was critical of such messages, her sense of herself as in

some ways the ultimate individual, the outsider, the ugly object for which there is no place, as in so many ways exceptional, meant that she chose a painfully solitary path. The difference between Aguhar and Araniello is that the latter artist, due to her total physical (in)dependence, embraces collective support and engagement and wholly repudiates the misguided perception that she is different or special. Aguhar was problematically bound to a dangerous form of individualism, no doubt because, like myself, she was born, raised and resided in neoliberal America.

### **Self-disclosure in the Digital Age**

Having begun this thesis analysing work from the 1970s, such as Martha Wilson's video piece *Deformation* (1972), and ended by turning to the youtube videos of Araniello, it strikes me that Wilson's work, if produced today, would most likely be made in front of a webcam and disseminated online. In other words, her unburdening to camera is a prelude to the confessional internet vlog now ubiquitous in our media-scape. Her 'making down' video provides an interesting point of comparison to the make-up and hair tutorials that Aguhar regularly consumed, or indeed to the silent videos Aguhar produced after having applied their techniques. In Wilson's *Deformation* and Aguhar's performance-to-webcam videos, both artists speak back to feminine beauty norms and by applying cosmetics in a critical and freeing manner, purposely risk inviting the viewer to perceive their particular features as ugly. They each gleaned some power from that act. As I have demonstrated above, speaking back to power robs norms of their authority and doing that can feel good because it takes nerve or, alternately provides a boost. This is so, even if Wilson refuses to name it 'courage', and despite the fact that greater confidence in all arenas was not what Ashery experienced from having appeared beastly in her work.<sup>4</sup> As a result of all my deliberations above, I now recognise that if such acts don't feel good for an individual, it is a marker of how much more shame attacking work there needs to be done in the world, rather than a sign of

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<sup>4</sup> During our exchange, Wilson stated, "It's not courage. It's not knowing where social boundaries are supposed to lie" (email correspondence with the author, 29 July 2016). Undeniably, Aguhar's death demonstrates that courage is not the right word, on a number of levels, because on the one hand such truth-telling can be foolhardy when your life is at stake, on the other, being called brave can be just another form of discrimination.

personal failure or evidence of the inadequacy or inefficacy of shame attacking as a practice.

What's left to consider further is the difference that context makes, especially since it was digital exposure specifically and not live performance in an art context that prevented Ashery from continuing to physically appear in her work. In our contemporary moment of worldwide, instantaneous dissemination via the internet, self-disclosures have greater visibility, but also, according to numerous cultural theorists, weakened political impact, particularly in the face of neoliberalism.

Mark Aguhar's work can be seen as participating in what cultural critic Aria Dean refers to as "selfie feminism" (Dean 2016). In her 2016 *New Enquiry* article "Closing the Loop", Dean explains that "selfie feminism" refers to the consensus among a range of contemporary feminist and queer of colour artists that "the act of self-imaging is invaluable; nothing less, in fact, than *the primary* feminist tool for resistance" (Dean 2016). Aguhar's work, however, is notably absent from Dean's essay. Dean asserts that the artists being recognised as part of this then burgeoning scene, who were being featured in culture magazines or included in online group exhibitions, were predominantly white, cis-gendered and able-bodied. Dean's article thus points out how this new generation were "taking on the baggage" of second-wave feminism in its universalising tendencies, "failing to note any nuance beyond 'female body', 'female form', 'girls'". Moreover, Dean's ambivalent assessment of the selfie goes beyond questioning its relevance as a political tool for minorities and intersectional subjects, to a total denial of its efficacy within neoliberalism, stating: "on the internet, this subversion is hardly revolutionary. In fact, the algorithm thanks you for your contribution" (2016). In other words, self-disclosure online only serves as capital for the platforms and their advertisers.

Echoing this point is a 2013 *New Enquiry* article by critic Rob Horning which uses Foucault's theories on the Cynics and *parrhesia* to analyse societal critique as it is conducted on social-media outlets, which is highly lucrative for them, effectively perpetuating the exploitation of the powerless masses whilst protecting those with high status. In his conclusion, he argues that in the worst-case scenario online *parrhesia*:

is another species of 'cruel optimism,' to use Lauren Berlant's phrase, in that it offers formal rituals that make the present tolerable or even



pleasurable while altering nothing about a general condition that makes people feel overburdened, depressed, precarious, excluded, humiliated. There is a pale satisfaction in making a limited truth in the moment, even if it has no effect on the distribution of power or the way one is known by society.

Horning's conclusion points simultaneously to the limit and to the purpose of my research. This thesis advocates political activities that may in fact be too personal to make a dent in the all-encompassing neoliberal order, but which are nonetheless useful in providing opportunities to feel better and to join with others to create groups and spaces in which we can survive, if not flourish. One needs to be able to cope and to find pleasure, to turn away from shame, whenever possible because doing so may be necessary to facilitate a kind of activism in which affect is central, instead of subordinate. My hope is that my research provides cause for genuine, rather than just cruel, optimism.

This is also why Dean does not wholly repudiate 'selfie feminism' as critically defunct, but instead keeps writing in order to show how certain contemporary artworks by artists of colour use the selfie in what she sees as worthwhile ways. Significantly for this thesis, Dean comments on how those ways echo the work of pioneering second-wave feminist performance artist Adrian Piper, who took the risk of self-disclosure, of representing herself, as opposed to passively allowing others to define her (Dean 2013).

### **Becoming a Political Subject**

In art theorist Maria Walsh's critical response to my video *The O Show: The Therapeutic Potential of Performance* (2012), she asserts that REBT is "interesting from the viewpoint of an aesthetic whose goal is an art of living", but goes on to criticise "the alignment of REBT with the quick fix solutions of problems that ignores social determination [that] makes it politically suspect" (2017). She goes on to argue that the REBT ethos within my video is "align[ed] with consumerist capitalist society without acknowledging any ideological rationale" (2017). Within the episode of *The O Show* that Walsh critiques, my past therapist Bernadette Ainsworth uses her participation as guest as an opportunity to self-market and to sell REBT as the treatment of choice. *The O Show* is an attempt to utilise a mainstream commercial format to valorise the

lives and work of the artists I admire, whose practices of shame attacking I find personal value in, but it also parodies such acts of valorisation and the commercial values that they imply.

Subsequently, for *The O Show: Killer Conversations* (2017) I address my own shyness and the phenomenon of social anxiety and in the closing discussion with Windy Dryden I remark that the therapeutic techniques required to overcome shyness are one and the same with what is required to “speak truth to power”. In this way, I hint at the broader socio-political ramifications of the episode and my work more generally. Moreover, it is because of the research I have carried out for this thesis, that I was able to recognise exactly how much my own shyness is a manifestation of the generalised shame that women and other minorities feel, i.e. ‘toxic shame’.<sup>5</sup> I have tended to utilise humour and the lighter affects in my feminist artwork, in part because, as I say in the opening monologue to *Killer Conversations*, there is a voice in my head that tells me “I have nothing of any value to say”. Taking myself seriously as a joke has been an important step toward actually taking my self and my political views seriously. Becoming a chat show host has enabled me to have a voice. More recently I have used that voice in increasingly political ways, particularly in the episodes filmed after *Killer Conversations*. In other words, this research project has led me to fine tune a more politically driven purpose.<sup>6</sup> In caring for myself I have developed a greater capacity to speak truth to power.

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<sup>5</sup> I had previously assumed, following a psychoanalytic logic, that my shyness was in part down to the fact that I had always taken my mother’s behaviour as a model for my own. Now it strikes me that the only people in my immediate family who are shy are my mother and I, i.e. the two women; my two older brothers, despite having the same mother/model did not follow her lead.

<sup>6</sup> For example, I invited Temi Wilkey to perform a piece, which is a very dark, political critique of racism, and racially motivated hate crime in *The O Show: Female Masculinity* (2017). I also addressed the 2018 activist campaigns addressing violence against women (i.e. #metoo and Time’s Up) albeit with a comedic touch for *The O Show: Time’s Up, Penis Down: Masculinity, Sexuality and #MeToo* (2018). Finally, producing *The O Show: Business or Pleasure?* (2018) coincided with the drafting of this conclusion and actively questions neoliberal values around the couplet success and money and how they impact the value we give to our labour and hence our self-rating. The forthcoming episode *The O Show: Without Sacrificing Her Femininity* (2018) is also highly political and will feature cultural producer and outspoken intersectional activist Chardine Taylor-Stone and Marissa Begonia, the founder of The Voice of Domestic Workers, among other guests. See my portfolio of practice for documentation of these events.

## From the Self to the Collective and the Political and Back

My experience parallels that of other Foucauldian feminists before me, namely Ladelle McWhorter who describes her entry into political activism as being the result of her caring for her self and carrying out what I would define as shame attacking. In her Foucauldian feminist academic book/memoir she explains that “working with others to change the law” entailed “having to change myself into someone who could demand and effect change in the law” (1999, 219). McWhorter goes on to describe in detail the physical and affective experience of the moment of confrontation, that is, the first time she attended Lobby Day at the General Assembly in Virginia, she “dreaded calling on [her] representatives”, for fear of “their wordless condemnation” since “it was the first time [she]’d ever looked a straight person in the face and asserted that people like [her] deserve civil rights and police protection” (1999, 220). She goes on to admit that she had extreme doubts about the efficacy of such an act, knowing full well that her request would go unconsidered by “a group of people who are notoriously anti-queer”, i.e. those in power in the American South, but that nevertheless, she states: “I had to be there in order to care for my self. The act, the exercise, the practice of behaving as *if* I, a queer person, am a full and equal citizen of this state and this country is the only way I will ever feel that I am a full citizen of this state and this country” (1999, 220: emphasis added). In this way, McWhorter highlights the individual working on the self (the acting as *if*), which informs political acts, even collective ones directed at changes in the law.

The case studies within this thesis, mirror McWhorter’s and my own experience, by using personally transformative acts to counter the social control that both internalised shame and public humiliation exert over individuals. In this way they arrest conformity and help to create safe spaces where freedom can be practiced. This is how care of the self becomes political and indeed may already be inherently political. In fact, to emphasise the individuality or individualism of my case studies is to misrepresent them; none of the artists addressed above produced their work in a vacuum. Wilson is indebted to and bolstered by Lucy Lippard who named her a ‘feminist artist’ and Lippard was responding to and in turn was buttressed by the then burgeoning women’s

movement. Perhaps more importantly, Wilson then went on to found her own space, which helped support and bring to fruition the careers of many performance artists including politically motivated, shame attackers Karen Finlay and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Underscoring Franklin Furnace's mission statement "to make the world a safe place for avant-garde art", and the interconnectedness of the world of performance art, is the fact that Cassils not only did an internship at Franklin Furnace between their bachelors and masters degrees but also received funding from the organisation in 2009. Cassils themselves has turned to more collective forms of display, for example, when engaging a mass of queer and trans-identified peers to push their 1300-pound sculpture through the streets of Omaha, Nebraska for a collective performance in 2017 called *Monument Push* (Bemis Center website 2017). Additionally, Ashery's oeuvre is comprised of as many socially engaged, community-oriented, collaborative projects as it is of solo works. Even in the case of Aguhar, whose individualism elicits the most alarm, the Chicago charitable organisation Chances Dances has created a Mark Aguhar Memorial Grant to support artwork by "feminine spectrum (such as woman-identified and trans-feminine) queer artists of color" and in this way her work continues to make queer art more visible and queer lives more liveable, despite her own untimely death (Chances Dances website 2012).

As these examples demonstrate, feminist and queer artists who engage in anti-shame activities have a tendency to do so within specific contexts in which there is a greater openness to questioning societal norms and the recognition that doing so has aims beyond the personal. Whilst there are no truly safe places, free from all triggers and risks, feminist and queer shame attackers take part in and create spaces in which such acts and their actors feel at home, even if this entails, as it does for Ashery "feel[ing] belonging through the experience of not belonging" (Mock: 34). Such spaces include Franklin Furnace, the Live Art Development Agency, The Royal Vauxhall Tavern, academic conferences, a room in a Children's Centre where a socially engaged project is taking place, *The O Show* and certain online portals, among others. Such arenas provide the opportunity to feel "commonality in uncommonness", as José Esteban Muñoz has articulated it.<sup>7</sup> These spaces make room for

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<sup>7</sup> Muñoz used this phrase during an extemporaneous lecture on post-punk practices at the Performance Studies (PSI) in Leeds on 30 June 2012.

individuals but ultimately aspire to carry out collective work. Individual work on the self is still needed because there is no perfect norm-free place, just as there are no static individuals without limitations or fallibility. However, the fact that such 'safer' arenas exist and continue to be sought out and created enables shame attacking to transcend its purpose as *merely* an individual/therapeutic practice. Furthermore, many individuals, particularly vulnerable ones, are not able to take the more public risks that political activism so often requires, but must start by caring for themselves. As the radical feminist poet Audre Lorde states, and Aguhar cites: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (1988, 131).

In feminist Foucauldian Sawicki's response to McNay's criticisms of Foucault's notion of care of the self, she provocatively asks: "Is ethical work on the self only justifiable insofar as it represents a political challenge to neoliberal social control?"(83). This is similar to affect theorist Lauren Berlant's incitement: "Can absorption in affective and emotional transactions that take place at home, on the street, and between intimates and strangers be deemed irrelevant to civil society unless they are somehow addressed to institutions?" (2008, 8). My answer to both, as phrased by Heyes, is that the conception of politics is too often "a game of size from which the individual is strangely absent" (2007, v). This thesis highlights that although it is true that it takes two to tango and it may also be true that it takes a movement to change laws and policies, one need not succumb to pessimistic resignation or depression; there are lots of things that you can do alone, both within and against neoliberalism!<sup>8</sup> In fact, it is not possible to partake in public life ethically, in coupledness or group action without willing individuals, acting of their own accord and caring for themselves.

Furthermore, my response to McNay's criticism of Foucault resides in the obstinate and perhaps optimistic belief that critical forms of self-care can and should entail, in the words of Sawicki, "divorc[ing] the appeal to freedom in the idea of the self as enterprise from its connections with neoliberal forms of normalisation" (2012, 84). In other words, critical practices of the self such as shame attacking *parrhesia* can be an avenue to critique the market as *the* site of veridiction. It is particularly vital when such acts reveal the labour, false starts and failures that necessarily accompany attempts to be productive, successful

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<sup>8</sup> I feel it is necessary to clarify that I mean 'alone' in the sense of relating to oneself, as opposed to acting in complete and total isolation, which is not practicable most of the time.

or happy; or call out the ease with which we judge one another's worth in terms of the normative values of the market; or actively contest the assumed connections between wealth and success, or wealth and human value.

As theorist Andrew Dilts argues, "if there is critique of neoliberalism in Foucault's final work, it begins by taking the neoliberal account of subjectivity seriously" (2011, 145). Neoliberal subjectivity is "radically empty"; neoliberal subjects are, "in the language of capital, bundles of abilities, attributes or qualities connected to a body", which one then attempts to appreciate through training and self-care, as a form of investment in one's own human capital. This description brings to my mind Dryden's recommendation that we "celebrate [our] unique constellation of traits" and Ellis's contention that it is impossible to ascertain the ultimate value of the self because we're all far too complex, fallible and always changing (Dryden 1994, 31). But saying it is impossible to provide an ultimate rating is actually wholly different from asserting that the subject is *empty*. Our self-ratings may be radically empty, or rather contingent, but our selves are full, made up as they are, of a "constellation" of qualities. Dilts goes on to assert that "the question of the current neoliberal order and the possibility of resisting it, must start with a genealogical account of how that order establishes truth, and one which can therefore question the value of that truth" (146). So as an addendum to Ellis view that as rational and fallible beings we ultimately have no way of discerning a truthful global rating and therefore we must accept if not value ourselves unconditionally, we must *also* rationally dispute judgments imposed by our very specific neoliberal context that attempt to pin our value to the fluctuations of the market, which supposedly has the final say in the face of our ignorance. But if we utilise our rational minds and accept if not value ourselves, in all our individuality and alterity, as Ellis, Foucault and the ancient Cynics advocate, then we "change the currency".

However, as I point out at the start of *The O Show: Business or Pleasure?*, the practice of unconditional self-acceptance may help us to avoid self-evaluations based on the market, but it may not prevent us from judging what we do, that is, our work according to capitalist values. Moreover, in this neoliberal moment, we are increasingly defined by what we do for work *and* our 'private lives' are impinged upon by market logic. This is not only because we conduct/report on our leisure activities online, but also, as affect theorist Winant explains, "[d]esire for the kinds of stability and comfort neoliberalism has

dissolved is precisely what makes the neoliberal advance possible” (Winant 2015, 124). In other words, if you heed the warnings and obey neoliberalism’s “simultaneous imperatives – to both actualize and minimize one’s selfhood” you then necessarily, often unwittingly, go along with neoliberalism because we all want and strive toward being comfortable (Winant 2015, 117). In this sense, McNay’s argument about the “atomization” of resistance again holds sway and has me questioning whether the art/life practices analysed above do *enough* to distinguish these artists from *homo economicus*?

Performance artists (like academics and undoubtedly many other professionals), although engaging in critical and defiant acts, including non-normative self-technologies to care for their selves, all too often appear to be interchangeable with ideal neoliberal subjects; they do what they love, are as prolific as they can be and in that process to some extent flourish, or they self-appreciate, and in many cases reap the rewards of success and financial stability as Cassils, Ashery and Wilson (if only in later life) have done.<sup>9</sup> Even Aguhar’s procrastination, i.e. days spent watching youtube videos and self-grooming, can be critiqued as evidencing her as the ultimate ‘prosumer’ or “self-producing consumer of digitised ‘information’” – her blog potentially capitalising on her leisure pursuits (Herbechter 2012, 343). If you attack shame, whilst maintaining the caveats that Ellis prescribes, that is, without jeopardising your employability or relationships, then this might be construed as “[d]o[ing] what you love and keep[ing] your head down”, which only fuels neoliberalism (Winant, 117).

Winant, who goes on to articulate the conundrums, defeatism and demoralisation within the political left states, “we are too straight – too bound to failing norms – to attack the forces disfiguring our lives” (124). However, in his article “We Found Love in a Hopeless Place” (2015) he advocates for a kind of ‘self-help’ for members of the left and one that sounds akin to the desubjectifying acts of shame attacking self-care that I advocate in this thesis. He asserts that we must “invent new selves in the crucible of shared struggle” and that “there is no way to win any justice without generating tremendous amounts of discomfort, for ourselves first of all” (128). He describes a kind of

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<sup>9</sup> When I use the term ‘success’ here, I mean that they each have produced substantial bodies of work for which they have garnered critical attention, gallery representation and/or other forms of institutional support as well as a substantial audience.

interpersonal risk-taking that needs to take place to engage with people who disagree with you, to endure multiple rounds of rejection, and get out of the rut of feeling bad, stuck and comfortable with our failing lot. It sounds a lot like shame attacking although he's not talking about getting a date, he's talking about being a trade unionist. And much like *parrhesia*, "[s]uch a political practice ought to terrify its participants as they embark on it, and discomfit those with whom they seek to engage" (Winant 2017, 127). Speaking to the risk and uncertainty of political action for the left, he writes: "The question ahead is not just where we will arrive, but, more frighteningly still, who will we be when we get there. Perhaps if we are lucky and brave, it will be a surprise" (Winant 2017, 128). Again, his words echo Foucault's descriptions of to the unknown futurity and indeterminate possibility that befalls the *parrhesiastes*.

REBT hinges upon the notion of personal responsibility; the rational self can distinguish between that which one can change and that which one cannot and between healthy and helpful emotional responses and unhealthy and unhelpful ones. The notion of responsibility is therefore integral to therapeutic treatment in that if one's own thinking is ultimately responsible for one's feelings and mental state, then one is therefore able to change the way one feels, reacts and responds to external stimuli and circumstances. An REBT therapist will point out any use of passive voice in a client's descriptions and correct them: the 'activating event' did not *make you feel bad, you upset or disturbed yourself*, due to your own irrational thinking and beliefs. For an REBT therapist, *it* doesn't get better, or worse for that matter.<sup>10</sup> This is in direct contrast to the way in which affect theorists make the shift from *I* to *this*; "*this* makes me feel terrible" verses "*I* feel terrible". Affect as described/used within affect theory is provided by the context, the social atmosphere, it is felt and shared, not owned. This move is politicising, if I am not responsible as an individual as the feeler of the feeling, if I do not own the bad feeling and it belongs to the situation and context I am in, then I look outward to the social causes of those bad feelings and hence become politicised. Affect theorists tell us to "inspect sad affects for what they tell us about power relations" (Winant 2015, 120). But to me, being alerted

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<sup>10</sup> To clarify, an REBT therapist will only encourage the client to address unhealthily negative feelings that are the result of irrational beliefs. Injustice, strife, failure, pain and loss, be they personal or socio-political in nature, cause negative feelings and that is totally acceptable, expected even, but they lead you to action, not the passivity or violence to which unhealthy emotions can and often do lead.



by REBT to question and challenge the passive voice of such phrasing, this new construction speaks to the passivity I feel in relation to wider socio-political forces, it encourages, quite contradictorily my own sense of hopeless defeat; I've acquiesced before I can even begin to look for the root of the problem, regardless of whether my gaze is likely to turn inward or outward. If this is part of the crisis of the left that Winant articulates, then we on the left can all benefit from taking some personal responsibility, from re-shifting back to the / feel terrible. So that I can then ask, what can / do about it? The answer will hopefully be to engage in acts of shame attacking in defiance of neoliberal norms, to unburden myself of the pressures to be a self-enclosed individual, and in that way turn outward again to engage with others.

There are so many opportunities to experience shame within the context of neoliberalism. But we have to use shame for our own benefit, we have to listen to shame because it puts us in touch with the norms that all too often divide and conquer us. We have to attack shame so that we can explore with curiosity and get to the root of things. "Without going to the root, we find ourselves thrashing around the surface of neoliberalism's tumultuous seas, unable to imagine, much less build, alternative worlds" (Wilson 2017, 71). That we can defy shame so as to have the curiosity to get at the root of things is my educated hope. "With educated hope, our sense of who we are and what might be possible shifts in profound ways. This is when those new worlds we are longing for open up" (Wilson 2017, 16).

In this world where we are taught that we need (to be) a superhero, an individual heroine, what we really need to do is admit that we need people; we need collectives and shared struggles. We need to not hold onto the identity characteristics that divide us. I therefore advocate shame attacking as an ethical practice that, although it does not always have institutional-level political outcomes, can fuel activism to redress wider structural imbalances, and even when it does not, if it is carried out in a life-affirming manner, provides ways for individuals and groups to live differently and to cope. As problematic as focusing on the individual over the socio-political can be, we still need the therapy.

## How REBT Can Benefit From Foucault

However, many cultural critics share Walsh's scepticism and are wary of REBT and its more widespread, sister therapy Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, in part because of its popularity with and advocacy by the medical and health industries, increasingly linked as they are with neoliberalism. It is my contention that it is precisely for this reason that Foucault's theorisations on the Cynics and his notion of critique more generally are necessary to supplement Ellis' therapeutic practices when it comes to applying them as a feminist/political practice. This thesis is testimony to the fact that Foucault's ideas are in fact useful for distinguishing self-disclosures that are ultimately disciplinary and conformist from those which are critical and freeing. Many of the anti-shame exercises prescribed by Ellis and his followers are meaningless politically. The classic examples of taking a banana for a walk or Ellis himself asking 100 women out on dates are perfect illustrations of this fact. It is only when anti-shame practices are employed by individuals and groups who wish to challenge sexist, racist, classist, ageist, ableist, capitalist and hetero/normative societal conventions that the practice becomes politicised. To this end, Foucault's theorisations on *parrhesia* aid Ellis in adding criticality into the equation. Simultaneously, Ellis' views shine more light on the therapeutic within Foucault's *parrhesia*, re-emphasising it as a practice of self-care, especially when it is done in a life-affirming manner.

When a client approaches a therapist with their concerns, with feelings of shame or depression due to a negative self-concept, the goal is to achieve wellbeing and an improved self-concept. In the psychotherapeutic context there are clear guidelines about what ways of living/behaving are healthy and unhealthy. If those same clients were to take a philosophical approach to their problems by consulting the work of Foucault, or a Cynic perhaps, or a feminist or queer performance artist for that matter, those interlocutors would enable them to question *why* certain behaviours and goals are judged to be healthy or unhealthy and what the underlying prejudices and power dynamics that inform such judgments are. This process can be very much akin to the rational disputation that occurs within the practice of REBT, or it can depart from it, pushing against the caveats that the therapist would hold in place to protect the client and those they are in contact with from immediate harm. In my view, such

warnings might not operate simply to dampen their radicalism or political efficacy, but by contrast, serve as an acknowledgement that relations of power are never ending and constantly fluctuating; what feels empowering in one moment will only floor you the next, or alternatively, put you in a position of power that you might abuse. In all cases, the individual would be advised to weigh up potential positive and negative outcomes (in the case of REBT, rationally, or following the Cynics, without knowing what they will be in advance) and try to decide how to act, ethically. Freedom should be practiced ethically because “freedom is the ontological condition of ethics” (Foucault [1984a] 1997, 284). Whilst REBT therapists and their clients are encumbered by normative standards (and rationality), by contrast Foucault and his Cynics push against and beyond normativity, always wary of its limitations as well as the possibility of reinforcing new norms. Hence Foucault’s ethics assist Ellis’ shame attacking to become critical and potentially political, to go beyond the guidelines when necessary, if not for the individual, then for humanity (living a new life to usher in a new world).

Whilst the optimist in me would like to argue that Ellis’ unconditional self-acceptance and shame attacking are inherently anti-totalitarian, I cannot ignore the fact that both practices can become highly problematic if carried out unethically. Whilst Ellis and his followers advise clients to use the tools and techniques of REBT without hurting themselves or others, there is nothing to prevent shameless behaviour from causing pain or being immoral of its own accord. Just as Aguhar’s case demonstrates that Cynic principles can be both outwardly cruel and self-sacrificing at the same time, other examples might show that without certain principles in place, shamelessness and self-acceptance flatten into egotism, or rather self-aggrandisement, leading to the abuse of power and reinforcing the status quo.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, for Ellis and his followers, flexibility (and ethics) supersede unconditional acceptance insofar as it is not recommended that *everyone* practice it, as that would be rigid!<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The behaviour of Donald Trump is a formidable illustration of this. But, as Dryden commented to me in an email, Trump’s “problem is not a lack of shame, but thinking he is always right” (email to the author, 29 April 2018). Sadly, someone who thinks he is always right is not likely to seek out therapy or personal transformation, despite very much needing it.

<sup>12</sup> In answer to my question “should *everyone* unconditionally accept themselves”, Dryden answered “no, since that would be rigid” (email to the author, 29 April 2018). Furthermore, I would argue that even if you could equate Trump’s behaviour with an anti-shame exercise, the comparison to *parrhesia* fails because of the lack of genuine risk (there is no conflict that he cannot simply buy his way out of, it seems, nor do his actions significantly alter or open up his

While a methodology can be gleaned from these pages to assist in the practice of politically motivated, ethical shame attacking/truth telling aimed at freedom, there is no simple blueprint that every individual can follow, as that would be counter to Foucauldian notions of power/liberation, as well as to Ellis' championing of flexibility. For those of us who feel the wounds of shame, who are exposed to oppressive norms when we feel its familiar burn, shame attacking with caveats is a much-needed salve. The ideal, perhaps utopian formulation would combine the risky criticality of *parrhesia* with the cautionary ethics of therapeutic shame attacking, enabling it to be sustainable, because we will need it to be.

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self/identity to contestation in any way). Trump acts out of hubris (that itself can and should be pathologised), in an attention seeking, re-affirmation of his sense of entitlement. His example prompts me to return to Bartky's insights referred to in the introduction of this thesis regarding the supposedly neutral subject of moral psychology. If 'true' shame (and guilt) within moral psychology serves to align an individual with their genuine principles, Trump's lack of shame demonstrates that his actions are in keeping with his utter lack of a moral or ethical compass, again differentiating his actions from someone who practices *parrhesia*. For Trump, there is no internal interference or conflict because he holds no commitment to truth, only to that which serves him. So whilst, for women and other minorities shame functions as an internalised instrument of oppression, for Trump his total confidence and imperviousness to self-doubt serves only to perpetuate the overstepping of ethical boundaries and the abuse of authority.

## Appendix A: Transcription of Interview with Martha Wilson

3 March 2016

Oriana Fox: To explain my research is about the impact of being a feminist performance artist on the artist themselves, the personal ramifications of doing it. So I'm curious, do you think your early works on appearance affected the way you then presented yourself in your every day life?

Martha Wilson: I want to back up and approach the term feminist first, before I go into the experience of my work because I didn't use that term, did not use, did not understand the term until Lucy Lippard came to Nova Scotia and said "oh you're a feminist performance artist" and gave me some terms to use to describe what I was doing. So I was happy to hear it, that I was a feminist, but the experience of creating the work was socially based, you know, you're born a woman in our society and you're born second-rate somehow and you have to function in relation to the world as a person who is born second rate. So the work was coming out of the absurd condition of being a woman and also the relationship that I had personally to conceptual art and having been a lit major and reading volumes and volumes of books and then discovering that the visual art world was making art out of words. I thought, "Oh my god, this is incredible" so all of those three factors kind of melded together and...

Tell me the thrust of your question, did the internal, the process of creating the work change the way I presented my self to the world, is that the question?

OF: Yes.

MW: I would say yes, in a very profound way because of another event that happened at the Nova Scotia College of Art, which was that Vito Acconci came to town for a residency, I think for several months, he was an artist in residence and I was faculty, so I was allowed to audit whatever was going on in the school. So he looked at what I was doing and talked to me and he said I should read Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. It's about how we are all performing all the time to various audiences, to audiences of the self, the other, history, for the audience of crankiness. We're always on the boards

somehow. So the idea that I could manipulate appearance and behaviour as an art medium arose in the course of these discussions at NSCAD.

OF: I was thinking about your seminal piece *I make up*, you put on your make-up to look your best by societal standards and to look your worst. So I'm wondering if there was a third way to approach your appearance? Did you think at all about that?

MW: It was important to be brutally honest, I felt I shouldn't be knocking the corners off of the idea. I should do the idea all the way and look as ugly as I possibly could. I think that being brutally honest comes from child abuse and sexual abuse and not therefore knowing where the regular lines of social behaviour are supposed to fall. I think child molesters should be shot, but on the other hand it gave me the feeling or the commitment that being brutally honest was my job on the planet, from the guts, that's all I can do so it turned out to be a good thing and in my book...

OF: You turned it into a good thing.

MW: I thanked my father. As you just said, I made it into something that worked for me.

OF: When I look at you, your look is very unique. I think that's what I mean by the third way. How long have you had that look?

MW: I think that's a valid point. When I was a younger person, I think I wanted to fit in and disappear and not be outrageous and then I heard my mother talking to my hockey coach and she used the word pleasant. I think she said "Martha is a very pleasant person" and I reared up and said, "pleasant, fuck no!" Thank god I overheard her too. I didn't know yet what I wanted to do, but around that time I heard Yoko Ono's singing – one of those cries – so I got the idea that art was a path to explore what was outside of regular social life. I still didn't want to call myself an artist. I started doing the work but I was nervous about committing. They didn't make any money. I told my father, I was already an English lit major, which was bad enough. I told my father I wanted to go to

art school and he said “no, you’ll never make a living doing that!” So I had to stay in graduate school in English Lit and really was fortunate that the Nova Scotia School of Art was across the street and my boyfriend was going to NSCAD (Nova Scotia School of Art and Design) and so I was going there and hanging out with Vito Acconci. Then my PhD thesis was not accepted by my advisors, so the door opened and I walked across the street and got a job.

OF: Your piece *Appearance as Value* is all about calling yourself an artist but making it into a mockery.

MW: How nervous I was about it...

OF: I find it very hard to understand that piece. I watched it several times and I wanted to ask you what it is about for you?

MW: It is about looking like how you want to feel even if you don’t feel that way, in an effort...

OF: Like ‘faking it till you make it’?

MW: Exactly, faking it till you make it and manipulating your internal landscape of feelings so that you can call yourself an artist with confidence or move in the world in a confident way. In 1973 Jacki Apple and I did a piece...

OF: I was just about to bring her up.

MW: Oh good, I met her and we did this performance at the Plaza Hotel in New York and all I remember is I just felt like my neck was going to break. I was so anxious. I didn’t want to look around and see. I didn’t know how to convey that I actually didn’t belong there. I didn’t feel like I actually belonged there. Jacki was relaxed... So I just had to pretend that I was relaxed. Fake it until you make it, that’s a very good phrase.

OF: I wanted to bring her up because you were talking about wanting to be invisible and when you met her your reaction to her was “Oh I didn’t know a feminist or an artist could look like that!”

MW: She had heels! She wore makeup.

OF: Did meeting her have an effect on your appearance or was it that comment about being pleasant?

MW: The being pleasant comment happened in high school and I didn’t know what to do with it. Went to college, got to grad school, still didn’t know what to do with it, but already started to create art works out of words... So, ok, I’ll tell you the backstory of why I look non-conformist. So I did this early work and then moved to NY, Jacki and I go to OK Harris gallery, where the director Ivan Karp – we made an appointment, we showed him our work. He says “Why are you showing me this!? This work is terrible! I would never show this work!” He started yelling and it was so traumatic to me. This was like year one and Jacki is taking me around and introducing me to the art world. But this was so horrible, I just took all my stuff that I did in Halifax and I hid it under my bed and started Franklin Furnace and started doing political satire and formed a band. I was working in the art world, I just wasn’t making any physical stuff. Then a couple of works had been shown at Guild Hall Museum ‘personal is political’ was the name of the show and Mitchell Albus saw it and said “do you have more stuff under your bed?” I said, “actually I do” and I put it on top of the bed and he said “I wanna show this, this, this and this”. Basically, everything, so he showed my work in 2008 from 1971-74, from those early years in Halifax. Then I asked him if I could have another show one of these days, and he said, ‘absolutely no problem.’ But then he got a new space and a new partner and when I asked him for dates [*breathes in deeply and pulls back*] he went like that. So I contacted my friends Joan Semmel, Judy Bernstein and I asked, can I show my work to somebody else? They said absolutely, you don’t have a written contract there’s nothing to prevent you from reaching out to other dealers. So Wendy Olsoff at P.O.W. Gallery had bought *I make up the image of my perfection/ I make up the image of my deformity* and invited me to join P.O.W. and said, ‘I don’t know why I didn’t ask you before’. So nice. I had a show in 2011 and one



of the pieces in that show was called *Growing Old* for which in 2008/9 I just let my hair grow. I became a redhead in 1978 because we were all in Amsterdam hennaing our hair together and then I decided I liked being a redhead instead of a blonde because redheads are volatile, alcoholic, anything but dumb and placid.

OF: Anything but pleasant.

MW: So I became a redhead in 1978 and then in 2008, half of my life later, I started letting it grow all the way out grey and took a picture every six weeks for, I think it was a 1 year process. So now I have grey hair and I'm walking down 5<sup>th</sup> avenue in Brooklyn and people are bumping into me like I don't exist, like I'm invisible. A woman of a certain age is invisible and not powerful, not interesting, not anything. You know, you become invisible. So I had to do a piece called *Invisible* and then riffing on the Cruella De Vil hairdo, half black and half white, I made myself half red and half grey. The photographer said, "oh are you gonna keep it like that?" And I thought "uh, I'm gonna keep it like that, yeah I think I'll keep it like that". A lot of comments, pretty much every day, young black people, old white people, young transgender, everybody feels it's ok to say something. Definitely they like it. "Like your hair", is usually the comment I get. So I've been keeping it like this. I'm not invisible but I'm admitting my age, you know what I mean.

OF: I think that is kind of the third way that I was trying to...

MW: It's the third way.

OF: But it wasn't because of early work, it was because of the recent stuff.

MW: You know, I think my early work and the work I did in 2011 and the work I just did in 2015, it's all one big blob, I really don't see it as a separate body of work that's going off in a different direction. I think it's all kind of the same.

OF: It's definitely a continuum.

MW: It's a continuum. That's a good word. But I thought of a piece for my next show, which I have not done and I may not do, but I'll tell you about it anyway. Back in the 70s I was living in Tribeca and David Salle was living one block away. David Salle became successful and the first thing he did was pin his ears back, get a nose job and he got his jaw fixed. This impressed me greatly that he was so insecure that he had to go and get plastic surgery. So now I'm thinking of a piece which is to take a portrait of me on the left-hand side as I am in the present or whenever it is when I take the portrait and that side will be called 'Martha Wilson', that's who I am, and then get the work done and take another portrait on the right side, and call it 'David Salle'. But I may not do it, because it means violating my own principles, of not, but we'll see how it turns out.

OF: That would be hilarious.

MW: My boyfriend feels it would be, he would be justified in art world retribution of some kind, but I can't really worry about that, or think about that. It doesn't really bother me. There is a possibility of scandal, but why would that be terrible? All publicity is good publicity. He's more anxious than I am about the whole idea.

OF: My friend's have to reign me in sometimes. I don't think you should name that gallery dealer in that blog post. Don't do that, it might be career suicide.

MW: Now that we have facebook, we can really get into trouble.

OF: I'm relating what artists do to this idea of shame attacking which is actually a technique from rational emotive behaviour therapy developed from the Stoics and Foucault also writes about the Stoics...

MW: Oh, really? I did not know that.

OF: Foucault talks about a kind of truth-telling or free-spokenness that challenges norms by telling the truth basically. So it kinds of relates to what you were saying about being brutally honest. Foucault talks about it in one sense and Albert Ellis, the founder of REBT, talks about it as therapeutic.

MW: Can you tell me how it works?

OF: The classic example is that Albert Ellis was worried about being rejected by women, so he gave himself the shame attacking exercise of getting rejections from 100 women who he asked out on dates. He didn't rate himself based on all the women rejecting him.

MW: So he established a problem, he went out and did the action. But then his analysis didn't seem to be related to what was really going on in the world.

OF: *[laughs]*

MW: Right? I mean, he was being rejected.

OF: Yeah, that's true. He was saying... Albert Ellis doesn't believe in self-confidence, he believes in unconditional self acceptance. So because we're all fallible human beings, we don't have total control over ourselves, so we can't always appear perfectly. He believes that our problems are caused by striving for perfectionism and then failing and we negatively self-rate.

MW: And then judging yourself as a result.

OF: Yes, so shame attacking is an opportunity to practice your unconditional self-acceptance.

MW: I like it, as a strategy, I think it's good.

OF: I think you are doing that, maybe not using those terms?

MW: Maybe not in the same kind of spread sheet way, going down the list, but still, I think establishing a problem and then trying to solve it is the essence of what I, I mean I'm not alone, I think that's what performance artists are doing in their work. They are establishing a conundrum and then going into it and finding out what's in there.

OF: Yeah. So you say yourself in *deformation* I'm making myself realise I don't look this bad all the time. You face the reality of letting the world see you in a way that you feel ashamed of, so you are attacking the shame of not living up to society's beauty norms. You say in the video 'at least I don't look this bad all of the time'. In your recent works, like *Before/After* it's very much the makeover paradigm but flipped – well it's not flipped, it's just the reality, there's no makeup involved in that one. So there isn't a constructed thing that's happening, but it's a presentation of the self that takes confidence to do.

MW: Yes, I thought nobody is going to buy this, but somebody bought that work. I don't know who it is. I think it wasn't on this continent, I think it was somewhere else.

OF: Maybe Austria? They love feminist art.

MW: Ugly feminist art.

OF: Did it give you confidence?

MW: There's another work in the most recent show called *Makeover* and there's a picture of me in real life turning into Catherine De Nuve in 1974. So that's ironic in the opposite direction. You know in 1974 she was the most beautiful creature on the planet and every girl wanted to look like her. Ha ha. We debated for a long time whether I should use the actual ad....we thought we could be sued. We took out the Chanel bottle and the logo. I thought to hell with it, if I get sued. I wanted that image in the Harper's Bazaar that we wanted to be. That was imperative.

OF: I'm wondering, if I attribute confidence to your work, is that accurate?

MW: Uh, yes. I think you can gain confidence or courage, yeah courage perhaps by confronting your worst fears and not hiding from it, the only way to get past things, is to look at it.

OF: Yeah but looking at it yourself is very different from putting it in a public forum, like the internet or in a gallery like you or anywhere, published in books.

MW: People come up to me all the time and say “I admire your work” and I think what they’re saying is “you have a lot of nerve putting those up, those out there” but they admire it.

OF: It takes guts.

MW: It’s brave. So she still may not do it, but you can tell her from me to put your worst fears out there is, can work out to be freeing and liberating.

OF: So you are going with that, you haven’t edited out something because, no, you just couldn’t bear it in public?

MW: No. I showed my ass in the panda piece. [laughs]

OF: No shame. Oh yeah, there was one other thing which is, I know you talked about starting in isolation and someone discovering you and then I think with Disband was like a collective things. Did you participate in consciousness-raising sessions?

MW: Oh yeah, it was like a big sea of feminist practice and feminist support. Judy Siegel took me under her wing and took me to NOW, National Organisation of Women and I didn’t like that so much so I went to the artier groups. I stuck with the arty ones. It wasn’t what I expected it to be. At NSCAD women were in competition to get the prize of making it in the art world, they were undermining and trying to hurt each other. In NY, I expected the women to take me apart like a piece of meat, but it was the total opposite. It was all about support and about coming to terms with feelings.

OF: Did Disband come out of that sentiment?

MW: Yes, in a way it did. I was sick of only hearing myself, I wanted to hear other people. Collaboration is a way to get to know them very very well and you

can understand there's a different approach to solve any problem you may have.

OF: I think that's everything. Thank you so much.

## Appendix B: Transcription of Interview with Oreet Ashery

21 July 2016

Oriana Fox: In my research I'm writing about feminist and queer performance artists and how they reveal their bodies. It's interesting to think about your work because it's something you stopped doing, although you say, paradoxically, that doing stuff without yourself in it can be more revealing.

Oreet Ashery: Yeah, there's no way out. No really there isn't. It's a different kind of revealing.

OF: Yeah, so that's what I wanted to talk to you about.

OA: It's kind of a harder kind of revealing actually.

OF: Harder really, how?

OA: Yeah, I think using our own bodies, there's a safety net in it, because I think, in terms of the reading of the work, people read it more favourably because it's kind of you and everything, all the human imperfection that you bring with it, and all the kind of, and people kind of associate it with your own autobiography. So the remit is smaller, in a sense it's kind of unique to you as an artist because literally it's you, it's your body. So I think you're in a better position, so I think in a sense in terms of reception. I mean it quite seriously, I don't think in terms of whether people like it or in terms of whether you're doing quite well or something, but just in terms of your own feelings about it, my own feelings about it. I feel like if you think of art and the viewer as a kind of a relationship, I feel like it's an easier relationship for me, in a sense. I didn't know that when I stopped performing, I didn't know that. I just felt like I had to hide my body and I thought it would be easier. Now after doing it since 2011, I feel like because it's a broader net when it's not your own body, so I think the relation with the viewer is a lot more complex and yeah, there's a big, big sense of exposure that I didn't anticipate at all. Because in a sense when you perform, your body does a lot of that work for you.

OF: So you're expecting it.

OA: Yeah, you're expecting it and even just literally just being somewhere, not doing anything and people watching you, that kind of exposure is already embedded whilst if you write you're literally laying down all your narrative in a way that is outside or beyond the border and it is a lot more revealing. As a narrative things are a lot more complex in terms of exposure, not to say that this work is better than another but in a sense of how much you give yourself out or away or disclosure, sharing. Definitely I realize that it's totally the other way around. There's no hiding.

OF: Can you give me an example?

OA: Yeah, for example *Party for freedom* (2013) which was the first major work where it was not me performing. I think that gave people a sense of my inner landscape in a way that I couldn't have portrayed if it was just me performing, so having a number of other performers and having quite a complex structure of the project, outside the solo performance format, actually yeah did expose, I felt a lot more of my inner psyche, a lot more of my relationship to politics, slippages and my relationship to aesthetics. My vision I think was a lot more on the table than if I was just performing. So yeah, in that sense. I think now with my most recent work I've made, *Revisiting Genesis* (2016) it's quite interesting because it's a little bit semi-autobiographical, aspects of it are really to do with my life, but nobody realizes that. People don't.

OF: That whole thing with Leicester. I knew it was, but maybe that's because I've been reading all the interviews with you.

OA: Leicester was one of the most personal episodes to me. So in that sense for me I felt like I reappeared again quite compulsory and recently I just turned 50 and I'm constantly looking back into my past work rather than future work and I constantly need to make sense of it. So that's quite interesting. But even in that work where I'm not in it physically and nobody ever needs to know that about me and a lot of people that don't know me, never know that. Even though



there's some kind of a price in terms of my own sense of exposure that is getting for me heavier and heavier.

OF: Well, yeah it's in the narrative. You can see through her; she's invisible. Right?

OA: [*Laughs*] That's true. Yeah, that is true. Exactly, so there it is. It's that kind of dichotomy where it's on the internet so everybody can watch it, so it's very exposed.

OF: Is it going to stay on there? Because the way it appeared on certain dates over weeks, I thought, oh no is it going to disappear. If I don't watch it now, will I miss it? What if they all disappear? That's funny because I had this anxiety about them disappearing. [*Laughs*]

OA: That's a good anxiety. I don't know. It's now going into exhibition format and screening as film so in a sense I can take it off line. And knowing my state of mind, I probably will because my whole inner.

OF: Also, if you have it online, some people won't go out to see it, people will walk out of screenings and say I'll watch it later online.

OA: Yeah, I don't know what's this strong, I've been reading a lot about women artists like Lee Lozano and Angeles Martin about withdrawal. Worryingly I'm finding myself completely drawn to that figure of withdrawal.

OF: It's really in at Goldsmiths right now.

OA: I was into it before.

OF: I'm sure you were. [*Laughs*]

OA: I was so into it and now everybody's into it. By the time the work came out everybody's withdrawing because it's apolitical as an act. For me everything comes from political motivation. For me, solo performances were all about

gender identity. *Party for freedom* was about rage and the far right, political rage and disillusion. After the dissolution, came withdrawal. So I kind of felt like withdrawing or wanting to withdraw and now it's so in and now everybody's withdrawing and it's not so much fun anymore and you realise how kind of as an act how apolitical it is. So I've started to have my own critique of it, as usual, which will probably cause me to want to withdraw even more. So that's where I'm at with it. But it's not just in Goldsmiths, it's everywhere. I think it's a very political moment in that sense. But it's also in the trends in the art world and in the theory in the art world. First was accelerationism and now there's withdrawal.

OF: To go back to the early work, I'm surprised you say that it's less revealing because I read that in order to get through some of the Marcus Fisher work you had to drink. It sounded like it was really psychologically taxing. That seems more immediate or more extreme.

OA: I sound like I'm moaning, but it is all difficult. So that was difficult in another way. I think Marcus Fisher and also *Hairoism* (2009/11) are difficult in retrospect as well. They were difficult in the moment because of the kind of, in *Hairoism* just simply from having to sit down for so long, for six hours, I put my back out quite seriously, I was having people touching me and hair and glue are not particularly nice substances. Then watching those very toxic videos of those men, it wasn't nice. Marcus Fisher was taxing in other ways – just that feeling of working against a whole cultural heritage, and everything is always on the border. What was harder in retrospective and me contacting the whole sort of contacting the whole world and saying "Take it off! Take it off the internet" was a) in retrospect looking online, looking at the work and feeling that the work had gone out of my control, that is, I can't control the images anymore and I can't control where the work is. And secondly, that sense of self-disgust from the work, just looking at my body and just kind of feeling, just having a real feeling about just the actual very kind of abject, feeling that it's a really abject body and really struggling with that. Then just something unexplained as well that made me want to like totally – not conscious feeling that I can articulate but a massive drive, which I think is to do with the feeling of overexposure of just wanting to pull the work out completely and then realising obviously, it's not possible at all.

It's not possible to trace all the roots of your work and to get them offline and not even desirable. Also being so unforgiving about your own history and your own performance and the value of it, so quite difficult feelings to deal with in that way. Also, that's something I have to deal with ongoing, is the self-hatred toward my work. I never like my work, but when it's my body it's a bit harder. So it's not an easy relationship.

OF: You never like your work? Really?

OA: No, I really don't. I really struggle. I mean I like it at some point and then I totally stop liking it and then I never can like it and then maybe...

OF: So with each time, are you trying to make something that you like?

OA: I think that's my main motivation, that's why I have fierce motivation, it's to make something that I like and then apart from political motivations, but to make something that I can live with. But quite disturbingly what I think I will like, is exactly what I'm not. So it is kind of mainstream, very formal, apolitical work and it's really just not me.

OF: That's so funny.

OA: That's the pattern really. Maybe I need to go to art therapy. I don't know, I don't know if other artists have that. But that's the thing; it amazes me when people like their work. I'd love to have that feeling. I don't know what that feels like. It must be an amazing feeling. I just never had that feeling. And I love art, I love other people's work, it's not like, so there are a lot of disparities there. *[Both laugh]* Sorry, this is like a therapy session, I'm sure it's not what you signed up for in your PhD.

OF: Well, part of it is, I think I sent you that excerpt, which was all about, I was proposing that when you act against, or you defy societal norms, that there could be something therapeutic in that, I'm hoping, because it relates to this theory of the therapeutic by Albert Ellis. Ellis prescribes this technique called shame attacking that entails acting against your self-inhibiting irrational beliefs,

or in ways that might be perceived as shameful or negative, so that you learn to live with the discomfort and gain confidence.

OA: That's interesting. For me it's very idealised.

OF: Yes, and then you came along and [laughs] said "take those pictures off the internet!" I was like, oh shit, my theory just went down the tube.

OA: Again, it's quite weird because I work my whole life with minorities, so I know what it's like to be outside the mainstream and I know how empowering it is to work with art, with people who feel marginalised. So I know the theory, but again I admire people who stand up and make work that is difficult, but I feel personally for me, there is a very strong, I think we all have a very embedded instinct to fit in and at some point you realise that you don't and then you either go to therapy, you kill yourself or you make art. Or you kind of modify yourself to fit in, which is really sad. Maybe a lot of people do that in the end, desperately trying to fit in. So I think for me, it's always that kind of conflict and battle between an in-built desire to fit in and maybe also being born in Israel because you really culturally encouraged to fit in because of the army and the sense of threat all around, because of all the propaganda machine is all about you're part of a collective. Probably true of some other Asian countries and places, but that sense of being part of a collective, for my generation I think is profound. It's very strong, so if you're different, you really feel it. You really feel different in a sense that here I never felt when I came here when I was 19. I think again there's like an in-built thing in English culture about being eccentric or being an outsider, there's a different thing going on with that. I always have that unresolved and primal sense of doing this work despite myself. Maybe the voice of my parents or the country or patriarchy are like "I need to fit in" and I don't believe that people don't have that voice, I mean, the must. It has to be there. There's no way that we can condition ourselves to a place where our minority status sits so well with us that we're ok with it. I don't think it's ever really quite like that. People's journeys are different, but on the whole I would be really surprised if people didn't have those kind of... It's a bit of both, making work that is difficult, I think it does make you stronger and it is healing in a sense for part of you, but for part of you it's always just an evidence that you are different and that

evidence is staring at you from every page of the internet and you're like "fucking hell, I just want to fit in, I just want to be like an office worker with a suit, you know". And then when it comes to internet dating, that's a whole other discussion. Somebody should do a PhD about that, about artist's work and dating. How does that work? I think that's a whole other thing.

OF: That's interesting. I thought it was really interesting about how for your project *Staying* (2010), that the texts were used in groundbreaking ways in court cases.

OA: That was an amazing project. That was actually one of the projects that I live quite peacefully with, yeah. That was a very good project. That was the case. That's my whole interest in fiction and reality.

OF: What's interesting about it is that we always talk about the personal informing the work, but it's one of those instances where the work went back and informed a real life, it had an impact on real life in an unforeseen way.

OA: I mean, it started with me realising that people who come as asylum seekers for grounds of sexual orientation have to write a 20-page document to explain their sexual orientation, justify it, as in really having to prove that there is no alternative for them, and really having to show that their life is in danger as a result. Then when I thought what would that be? Obviously, as an artist that works with identity, immediately you kind of think, what does that mean to write, to narrate your life in that kind of way that is meant to be legal and true? Again, I don't think it's, it's absolutely not possible to have a level of accuracy and memory, our subjective experiences are just, and I mean that's part of the problem. The other part of the problem is that some people are not able to act out on their desires, there's a lot of shame and guilt around that, so how do you prove something that hasn't happened? There's no witnesses, no manifestations, it's like in your head. I mean how do you prove that? And then also the details, let's say you had sexual experiences and to write that is also very exposing and humiliating. So all of that made me feel like there's a real issue with that demand. Also, it's always one-to-one, it's like you and an officer, so that's why I thought it will never be one participant and me, it would always

be in a group. The texts we will write will be subjective. We worked with subjectivity, but really you can only write what these women wrote out of real experiences. You can't make that stuff up. So in a sense it is more real than evidence. I think it's more real and that's what they realised actually in court cases, especially the poetry, because the poetry is erotic. We did a workshop on erotic poetry. When you read that you think, no you couldn't just come up with that stuff unless you really felt it and that in a way really helped. And then we worked with alter egos and these alter egos were really amazing siphons for them. The alter egos they created were so interesting, really really interesting – kind of intersubjective structures of thinking about their situation and how that allowed them to then be more open about what happened, yeah really open up and I think their stories are so telling in terms of those experiences. Yeah, it's been amazing that the material has been used in cases and then in a totally different way. It's a bit of a jump, but last year I worked with the Tate, asylum seekers and people with mental health issues. It was quite a varied group and we filmed some of the process. Then I got a letter from one of the participants who is in Mind charity and they asked her to stop coming to that particular, it's like a creative service that Mind provide and she was taking part in that, so it's like a welfare service. They asked her not to come because of her behavior which is kind of interesting considering its Mind charity's thing and then we sent the documentation of the process for the performance as evidence to them, because it became a legal battle, as evidence of her behavior and she was an amazing participant under a lot of stress and you can see all that totally unfolding in the project and you can see her role in it. It was a massive piece of evidence in her favour. So it's interesting how, especially with asylum seekers and immigrants, what is considered evidence. You really need, from my experience, really needs to be re-looked at in terms of subjectivity from my experience, because I think those stories are valid evidence and sometimes even more than trying to recall dates and times and sometimes you can't remember that. You can't hold that, but your experience you can. I came into it quite cynically, kind of thinking that anybody can make up being lesbian or gay, you just make it up, but when you actually get involved you realise, when you get the details, it's like good literature, it comes from somewhere, you literally can't make it up. That was that part of it. It's really interesting.

OF: It's interesting too because it's like something that you did as a young person, that you didn't know was performance, it's like a strategy, like interventions and wondering that you did, dressed up in different ways and going out in public and you didn't know that was performance art. Now in a way you're giving the tools that you developed in your life, you used them to make your own work and then you're, is it kind of like you help other people to then use those tools?

OA: That's a very nice way of looking at it. It's that life-art thing, yeah. Life as art and art as life. Yeah, it helped me, those actions that I did, that I didn't call art, it helped me to do them at the time, like spontaneous interventions, but then the permission to call that art, is also very helpful because I think our perception of what practice is can be limited. To allow yourself the permission to say, well that is an art practice, a life-art practice, that is a tool that you can definitely pass on and share in teaching and workshops and generally.

OF: When did you start doing workshops and teaching and things like that?

OA: Really really early on, I mean I started, I was always as a teenager I was part of workshop set ups, obviously not running them, but I was part of them. As I said, Israel is a very group activity orientated society, so I was always in, a lot of teenagers are, a nature group, going for walks, drama groups, not so much like here in the West in terms of you know the parents drive their children to this class and that afterschool, at that time it was not this middle class self-improvement. It was more literally a group of you going and cleaning this river, getting rid of rubbish, all very for the best of the bigger plan of all.

OF: That just made me think of Hebrew school.

OA: Yeah, it's always in the service of something, so that sense was installed in me and that experience. I did do funny things. I did do witchy things and group hypnosis and things that I guess would be valid performance works now. Yeah, experimental kind of unethical group activities of all sorts, also sexual also at a very young age, like ten/eleven. I did all that and then I was always playing the boys which was quite nice. I did all that and then when I came here, in Leicester

I started making costumes, it wasn't in a workshop, I made costumes for dancers in a workshop, but really I started I guess in the mid 90s. So I moved from Sheffield to London after my BA and I started to run a black and white dark room just here in Roseberry Avenue, voluntary. I ran the dark room on a voluntary basis and completely made up, like no methodology, just and then I ran a lot of stuff, I ran a whole project for homeless women, basically just photographic, just giving them cameras. I ran a whole project with children of immigrants.

OF: So in a way the socially engaged stuff precedes the...

OA: Precedes that but without any, there wasn't a framework like there is now. Nobody told me this is "community art", this is "intervention", this is "socially engaged", I literally just did it. Actually every year I'm nominated for the Paul Armory and I never get it, but this year actually I've applied this time to really have a sense of how my practice then, how does it fit with the community art movement in England. There was a strong community art movement in England in the 80s and 90s and I wasn't part of it because I just did what I did and I'd like to know more about that and how I can fit myself. Again it's that fitting in, I think that I fit in that context, I feel better about it in a sense. Again it's all pre-digital, it was all completely, I don't know where I got it from? I literally worked with minority groups and give them cameras. That's how it started and I've never stopped doing workshops, outside of teaching. Now in recent years I guess teaching totally replaced my other project in a sense. I teach in a kind of higher education way and I miss the workshop format.



## Appendix C: Transcription of Interview with Cassils

25 November 2016

Oriana Fox(OF): Has your work impacted your life in ways that you didn't predict in advance?

Cassils (C): I don't know, that's a good question. I've always made work my entire life, so I've never not made work. So if something has impacted it, it seems like a natural progression to me. It doesn't seem like that's an odd turn, it's always a surprise so I'm not surprised when I'm surprised. Because that's basically the way I live my life, it's through this process of making and its more if I've chosen not to make work or there are times when I haven't been able to make work, that affects me much more and in a negative sense, I'd say. I guess there are examples of certain works that are more, I could be more specific, I guess certain things, because for the most part, I work as a personal trainer and have done for 18 years. So although a lot of the works are physically really aggressive, I am very kind of conscientious and I really mitigate all the sort of protocols involved in achieving that end. So it's not like I'm just recklessly going and you know bashing 2000 lbs of clay or something like that, there's a real kind of working up to that moment. But I'd say that the only time that I was really surprised about a kind of reaction to that would have been, I guess when I decided to take steroids for the *Cuts* (2011-3) project for six weeks out of the six months and I'm someone who has always worked with what I had and I've not really taken a lot of pharmaceuticals into my body or drugs, whatever, the odd joint, but I'm not like a heavy drug user, I never have been and I'm very sensitive because I'm quite clean as a machine and so that really wreaked havoc on my endocrine system and it took me a good year and a half to recover and I guess I hadn't anticipated that, you know. So in terms of an actual surprise – that was not a great experience. But it was a learning experience.

OF: In your blog post on the *Huffington Post* and you mentioned it in the lecture at Goldsmiths, I think, and I got the impression it was a series, or was it just one?

C: It was just the one.

OF: You mention the dysphoria spreading to other areas of your life, can you say more about that?

C: I think it's more than just these particular moments, it's also, there are teaching moments from the work. Also, I think artists make work as a way of dealing with the world, you know. So that's kind of the way you manage to make sense of it is to move it through you. So in terms of a dysphoric affect, in terms of the steroid, it was as if the inner compass and the connections I had within my own body, which is something that I know quite well, I've been, I'm not an athlete per se, but I've had an athletic relationship to my body and there were times when I was training as a professional athlete so I have a strong knowledge base as to where the limitation is and so when you take a steroid for example, there is a physiological reaction to the chemical compound and that feels very different from how your body normally feels. So for example a lift that it would usually take me a couple of months to work up to, work up to safely, maybe a month, maybe three weeks, it would take three days on steroids. Literally, within three days, your body can move that weight and that was very disconcerting. Mostly because understanding the anatomy and the way things work, yes the superficial muscles can take that and the steroid is literally building the superficial muscles, but not the underlining bones and strengthening the tendons, so although you are capable of moving that, you are also ripe for injury because you can't feel the limitation, because the compass is off. So that was the dysphoria I was experiencing, just literally growing new flesh, I didn't know how to manage, you know what I mean. I didn't know how to drive it or control it. I didn't know where it ended and where I started. So that was very strange. I think if I had stayed on steroids for many years, as many people do, I think I would have figured it out, but [interruption]

I don't know if that's what you wanted, if you wanted something more emotional.

OF: That's quite physical, so I was wondering if there were more psychological repercussions affecting other parts of your life. You said there were social incidents in the street, things like that?

C: Yeah, I think, basically passing more, not just looking trans, but passing as was interesting and certain times there were moments where you would pass and have that success at passing and there were other moments where you were being clocked and there was clearly a disruption between what the immediate read was and then there was anatomy that was viewable that disrupted that person's initial interpretation of what you were. So there was this kind of figuring out that was happening in a really public way and at first I was uncomfortable as it is. I guess I'm used to being clocked as a really angry lesbian or something like that. So I'm used to that, but it was interesting then being policed in this way. This was only in 2011 and I'm sure that this would be the case to some extent, but I do feel with more visibility that is occurring, maybe just in this enclave that I live in that is Silverlake, Los Angeles, there are people that are more open to this kind of thing. Perhaps now it would be different. Certainly if you dropped me out west in the middle of nowhere, perhaps not. So it was mostly things like that and it was just the effect of taking something foreign into your body that was messing with your endocrine system, there was an increase in testosterone, a flat lining of oestrogen. So those things affect your body chemically and they affect the way that you feel and they affect the way that you interact with people. I think I had more of an understanding around, because I choose not to transition through the use of testosterone and surgical methods because I've been sick before and I really know that doctors are really just like any other person, and it's really just their best guess and there's been no long term studies on the affects on the body. We're in a microwave mentality as a society, well I want to be this and I'm going to do this and I don't really care. That's fine, I'm not judging anybody else, but for my own personal, knowing what I know about the body, I guess I think a little more critically. What does it mean for everybody to be taking the exact same hormone into their body, it's made from horse urine in a factory. What does it mean and how is that going to interact with us long term? There's not something wrong with that, we do all sorts of crazy shit, but I guess the one thing that also surprised me would also be that in having a surge of testosterone on account of having the steroid and it wasn't like that 'roid rage' thing, it was subtle, but it was enough for me to shift and it was also probably as a result of the increased strength and size and just more physical competence, if someone just came at me, or started being aggressive with me, I felt like I was

matching their aggression more. I'm not an aggressive person. I felt like I didn't have to do that thing that you have to do as a woman where you're small, where you have to kind of acquiesce and just get out of it and you're not even conscious of half the time when one is doing that.

OF: I find that for me it's the opposite, because I assume men won't hit a woman, I don't acquiesce. My ex-boyfriend used to get mad at me because he was worried he'd get beat up because of me, instead of me.

C: Of course that's true too. I don't think I occupy in the world that way, per se but I do think that when there is an aggressive relationship and you feel like someone is kind of, for example, trying to start a physical fight with you. I had a moment in a car and I guy was like "fuck you" and I was like "fuck you" – we were in a traffic jam and he was like "you wanna get out of the car?" and I was like "yeah". And normally I would be like "no". I was ready to and felt confident that I could have kicked his ass because of my strength at that moment.

Generally I'm a pacifistic person, I'm not like that all that. All that might have been the stress of the project. It was extremely rigorous; there was absolutely no freedom in it at all. This was I guess another surprise actually because initially I thought conceptually rather than waste, I'm going to build, but in fact, I became a slave to this routine and a slave eating very particular foods at very particular intervals and doing very particular kinds of regimented movement. At the same time having to balance that with my workload so I could keep my finances in balance. So it was a very intense, super physically intense and super demanding. There was not really any kind of off switch, so that could have also been why I felt levels of dysphoria and levels of anger or changes in my character because when you're taking on something like that, especially something that's durational, you're really asking a lot from yourself and often there is a bit of a discrepancy between the concept and the act of following through with that concept. It's one thing to think about lighting yourself on fire and it's another when you're doused in gasoline and you have someone with a lit stick coming at you. You're just, I'm gonna stay still now. That's very different from how you imagine it. I never even think of that aspect, I think about what it means and what I want it to look like and what I want it to do.

OF: Did you do any psychological preparation for that?

C: No.

OF: I thought for sure you would have had to, to do some sort of meditation to hold your breath and not freak out.

C: When I do works I go into, it's the kind of same space when I'm doing something physically challenging, it centres me. It's through those works of performance or when you're learning a skill, when you're just in something that's so incredibly all encompassing that you have no ability to shift your thought to anything else. You're just completely committed to it and that provides a sort of focus and calm. So I guess I call upon that in those moments. So you commit to it and of course you've done the work to make sure that it's not reckless. Although I suppose out of all of the works that I've done that feels the most reckless because you can't train for fire. Yeah, you can train to keep your mind calm, but you can't train for the fire not to burn through a hole in the fabric. There's that real risk involved in doing an act that is inherently dangerous, where the risk is just higher. So the level of damage is something you can't mitigate. I mean you can do your best, but then at a certain point, it's a wild freeform force of nature.

OF: You must be really good with time management?

C: You know how it is. I'm not American, but I live here. You have to be good at time management if you want to be an artist and also have a roof over your head. So you have to divide, you work a day job, which also takes effort and time. You have to be incredibly disciplined. So I've applied that regiment to the rest of my life. I have a fucking colour coded iCal and I have to carve out time for creative process, I carve out time to make income and to train myself and time to make work. So it's something that I've learned along the way and I feel like the more regimented I become in that regard, I can make more work. Once you start to make more work and it gets stronger and you have more opportunities and then that shift can kind of happen. I really do feel like for myself it's been something that I've had to become more regimented about.

That probably comes from my experience of working with people's bodies and seeing incremental change through systematic stimulus and you just apply that principle to other areas of your life and for me that works.

OF: Yeah, that's very self-helpy, but I see what you're saying.

C: It is not self-helpy, it's physical response. If you don't make time to do your shit, then shit's not gonna get done. You break things down. Like, if you come to me as a trainer and say, 'I wanna do an upside down pull up', I start you on certain exercises and slowly, systematically build your way up to it. It's an incremental process you have to go through and it's the same thing for building one's career and making art – which are two different things – using your brain, all of these things building relationships, all of these things have a natural progression and you have to put in the time. Maybe it is quite American but I don't think it is self-helpy.

OF: I was wondering if your art work affected your day job? Or maybe it's your political ethos?

C: I think everything you do, you do a lot of. If I worked at burger king that would affect my art. I'd probably make a burger differently from other people and I think there's this inherent back and forth and once again, it's like how much time you put into things. I think initially when I was having to work more as a trainer I had a different style. On a formal level, I was a painter and I was really into anatomy and so I have a strong, solid understanding of the insertion of muscles and when I look at a body I see it as a drawing in motion and I look at the way these things fit together, where insertion points are and it's not from an anatomical perspective, but in terms of what that looks like and how I could render that. There's that aspect and there's also a creative aspect to thinking about how people, or different ways of teaching based on how people respond, finding different ways of getting into people's body...If I'm doing a site specific piece I would think about how I can make this work stronger and more particular – I think about that in terms how I'm going to help a person and be the most effective. That's certainly something I carry through in dealing with people.

OF: Does anyone come to you and want to achieve a normative ideal?

C: Now I'm in a point in my career where I can kind of choose, so I only choose cool people to work with. People who come to me are usually looking to work hard, not necessarily as athletes, but from a rehabilitation perspective. People who want to follow through and work hard are the kind of people who come to me. They can just tell. There's this lazy dude in my gym who has a huge roster and he just chats and you can just tell. That's not the person I am and that's not the work that I do and so like attracts like to a certain extent. So yeah, I think if I do have someone because of course I live in LA and so when you end up with clients who are cool, but end up in front of camera and specifically women who start to kind whip themselves in a way about not maintaining certain normative ideals, it is about reminding them they are living in a society that is asking that of themselves and then asking them is that really the response that you want to be responding to. Just reminding them to take step back from this and I try to turn it around from people wanting results to people feeling strength or people feeling an empowerment in their body and feeling in a sense, not necessarily control but empowerment. That's self-helpy, but it's true.

I do have that for sure. I try to turn it around for the most part. I have a lot, not a lot, but I've been beginning to get quite a few trans clients and now that we have shows like "Transparent", I've been training people from "Transparent", like super young transwomen who are wrestling with how they really want to look and if they wanna full on do hormones. And it's like look do you have to fit in with NY fashion size 2, that's not the body you've been given, that's not who you are. You have to kind of make peace with who it is that you are and what you're trying to get out of this. So there's a lot of conversations like that that I have with people, if I have to.

OF: Did the work for *Cuts* change the way you worked out and what you were trying to achieve with your body after that. You had to do all that work to maintain that look for a transient moment. Did it make you think about how you work to maintain how you are as you are?

C: Well, I really think about this concept of periodisation, so it's this notion that I never really do the same thing forever and ever, because a) it's boring and b) it's not good for you, so I'm constantly finding new things to become interested in and this is in terms of art and in terms of physicality and all sorts of aspects. For example, there was the *Cuts* project and then I went into the *Becoming an image* project, which required a completely different kind of training protocol. We're talking a lot about sports today which is weird because I don't really care about sports that much, I care much more about the work, but maybe you're just catching me because I just came off work, but there's different seasons and in different seasons you play soccer and then there's track and field and this is meant to accommodate the fact that you use your body in different capacities because otherwise you overtrain. So yes, I got a new skillset in doing the *Cuts* project; I learned about extreme bodybuilding because I was working with Charles Glass, who is a master of that. I learned also that it's not a holistic process. You have to check out on certain aspects, because you're there to build the surface of the body, versus the internal structure of the body. There's a divorce. Just learning a skillset to develop flesh as formal material, which is really what the project is about on some level, and the sort of, that's really not how I work as an individual and someone who works with people's bodies; I'm really mindful and holistic really. I had to learn to be unholistic I guess. There are certain times when I will call that in to play but I will not recommend it long term. It certainly superseded certain notions that I had about the possibility, because I thought that I had been training really hard, and I had been, but I think in going through that process I met strength thresholds that were surprising to me. So that's always good. It's nice when you break through.

OF: Some of your work, a lot of it entails a physical experience but the goal is to produce an artwork? So how important is having experience to you?

C: Oh, paramount, they are one and the same. I think in all of the works, the process is very much part of the work and its visible and so I think they're one and the same. I'm interested of course in thinking about ways of extending the idea beyond the ephemeral moment, but I don't think that that means I'm more interested in stable art objects or the act of making.



OF: How do you draw the line between revealing things in order to counter invisibility and protecting the privacy you value.

C: Inherently a lot of my work is quite vulnerable so it's less of a thought out strategic thing. I don't think you need to hear the biography of my childhood or something like that, it's more about being vulnerable in the moment with people and through the image and I think one way of accomplishing that for example in the most recent piece at the National Theatre, being in your underwear and making eye contact with the audience as they walk into the space.

OF: When I see images you make, I see something perfect. That's maybe just me that I don't see the vulnerable aspect.

C: Lighting yourself on your fire is a pretty vulnerable act.

OF: I think so too, but there's a bravado in it as well.

C: I think the new piece I'm working on now (in Finland and here) called *The Powers That Be* is super vulnerable in many ways. For me doing *Tiresias* (2010-3) felt incredibly vulnerable piece because as someone who's a transperson who doesn't have a body that lines up with that narrative, to expose your body in that regard feels incredibly vulnerable. So maybe you see me as a superhero, but I feel in that moment that there's a discrepancy, and this is something that happens everyday, there's a discrepancy between how I feel and how I'm read. So to disclose that to a certain extent with just the act of revealing, to me that's an act of vulnerability.

OF: Maybe because of your vulnerability I see you as incredibly courageous and superhero-like.

C: It's good feedback for me to think about, I appreciate that.

## Appendix D: Transcription of Interviews with Katherine Araniello

2 May 2017

Oriana Fox (OF): In your work you often use personas – we have that in common as artists, but if you were to be a guest on *The O Show*, I would want you to be yourself. Is it a persona you present in your recent youtube vlogs?

Katherine Araniello (KA): I prefer to answer questions as a persona because I feel that once I start explaining it, I become a bit preachy. I come across as someone who is really hot on disability politics and I actually don't think I am. When you worked for me I was homing in on assisted suicide. It was a new thing to me, but I have to be honest, I'm bored with it. I'm more into boredom, awkwardness. So for example the video blogs you mentioned and I noticed how other people do them. One is they're real and they want people to buy them or to engage and follow them. I watched blogs by this disabled guy who wants to be inspirational. So I wanted to reverse it and do the dreariest, dullest thing. It's a deadpan performance to camera. It doesn't even mention disability. It's more exciting to watch paint dry than to watch my blog. I really like doing it because it suits; I wanted to be flat and not animated at all.

What did you want me to talk about?

OF: I wanted you to talk about how you dress and what you wear?

KA: It's just my style.

OF: You have style but I don't have any style.

KA: You do, you choose to dress like that. I've always been consciously opposed to the gendering of clothing by the fashion industry. It's about noncompliance. I prefer men's perfume to women's perfume. It's nothing to do with me, it's in my consciousness; I will not be dictated to about how I should dress or do my hair. At the age of 51, my hair is probably inappropriate for someone my age. I wear men's shirts actually because of my scoliosis, because male shirts are bigger. But I do prefer those styles. I am not going out and

asking people to look at me in a certain way. I'm used to people staring at me, but I used to be very self-conscious. I feel it, but it doesn't touch or destabilise me. Also, I think there's a hypocrisy going on, if I am playing the victim, but I don't look like a victim and that's a bit of a headfuck. I like rearranging everything so that there's never any clear definitive conclusion.

OF: I used you as a footnote in the first chapter of my thesis which focuses mostly on the work of Martha Wilson. I said that you call attention to your appearance because people are going to stare anyway.

KA: You see when I was on holiday, people did say to me... The assumption is that if you look outrageous or different, like for example my hair, that it's something you're doing purposefully, that you're trying to say something, but what if you're not? Where does it sit?

OF: Are you doing it out of habit now?

KA: Not out of habit. I'm doing it because it's part of my identity. It's how it is. If I said to you, what would you say about that?

OF: I think for me it's wanting to be invisible and not draw attention to myself.

KA: I think that I am invisible irrespective, whether my hair is like this or not. I'm not doing it to get public attention. I really am not. Years ago when I was in my 20s, there was a documentary being made about disability and fashion and they asked me to be in it and I was surprised, what are they talking about? I don't even think about fashion. I guess I'm against it because I won't conform to how society expects us to look. So yeah as a disabled person I'm expected to look a bit dowdy. It is a style and an identity, but I am comfortable with the way I look. That's a bit boring.

OF: That's not boring. I think there are very few women who feel comfortable with how they look.

KA: I gave up on that years ago. If I start worrying about that, I'd think my nose is a bit big, because of my scoliosis, my teeth don't meet. What's the point? Maybe I think I do use all those things to my advantage. I home in on playing the victim. I am conscious of how society sees someone like me. They would see someone with severe mental health problems and they would probably prefer to be that than to be me. I don't have a conscious statement, it's just what I like. Have you seen ORLAN's hair?

OF: Yes, I wanted to interview her.

KA: Have you seen Rocio Boliver? Maybe what it is that maybe we are not giving a shit about society's expectations and you have to be strong in your personality to do that. I know Rocio doesn't and she's amazing and it's women like that who I find inspirational. It's just a strong identity I think. I'm not concerned about being looked at because of my hair. If someone compliments me I like that. Some people find getting compliments awkward.

OF: What you're saying fits in with my theories well. It takes a certain amount of confidence to challenge conventions. According to the inventor of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy, shame attacking or acting in ways that might be considered shameful creates confidence, even when you're not inclined to do it. He says we should hang out with shameless people.

KA: That's really interesting.

OF: But I'm comparing Ellis' therapeutic tactic with Foucault's notion of *parrhesia* or free –spokenness. For Foucault there is a big risk in telling the truth. On *The O Show* on shyness that you saw, Brian Lobel gives a good example of that, of a situations where it's too risky to be outspoken – he had to change his show to being about his 'friend' rather than his boyfriend when he performed it in Nigeria.

KA: I would never do that. That makes me question about my work and how I wouldn't be suited for working outside of an art context. It isn't mainstream and I'm aware of that. In my piece, *The Araniello Show* (2017/18), which I've

developed at Rich Mix and will be performing at The Yard, I question my work the whole time. I don't make things and think 'oh that's amazing'. I asked one of my assistants "What is it about it?" She thinks it's different from what other people are doing, but I haven't tried to make it different. I was going to call it *Miracle of Life*, but that felt too restrictive. It's a combination of video and art sketches. I create a formula, but there's no script and anything can happen. It's all adlibbed. I saw this preacher who has no arms and legs and he's hideous and he made a video full of sentimentality and it says, I really wanted to kill myself. It's a motivational video to make people feel good about themselves. It's hideous, so I thought, I'm going to make my own. I haven't yet made the music video, that's what the crowd funding is for. I made it into a karaoke. I just karaoke it to the audience. I'm flipping things around and making people feel uncomfortable. I shouldn't tell you too much because I want you to come see it. I'm really inspired by facebook. So many people use it as a personal diary. All this stuff I have immediate access to and I make work from it. I turn the dull into something even I find interesting. I was invited to do a talk recently and I put on a persona and I emphasise the struggle, so I play the victim. I play this person who is really lucky to be alive.

OF: Do people believe the character?

KA: It confuses them. Some people get it and some people don't. I think if they want to learn about it they can look me up and read my biog.

OF: You make them work for it.

KA: People don't listen if you try to lecture. I believe that if you create humour and people may or may not engage it. It is a challenge and it is in opposition to how I really feel. I looked at some disabled motivational speakers, which is quite hot in America. These people believe that they are special and they believe they are there to motivate and inspire. So I've reversed it and I go to *uninspire* and *not* to motivate and I am not trying to make people laugh. Of course, naturally, how I do it, does create a reaction. Some people get it and some people get confused. Some people got the subversion. I think the stereotypical response is that it gets them going down memory lane and people think about

their aunt with Parkinsons and their grandma in a wheelchair. That's inevitable. Those people are trying to make connections and if they haven't met a disabled person and all they know is the media bullshit, of course they are in disarray. So I want to confuse them even more.

It's so disappointing to see inspiration porn. There's this TED talk by Stella Young and it just puts it into context as to what inspiration porn is. Have you heard of that term? Young is the person who invented it and she died. It means how disabled people are used. She has this really good example when she used to watch Buffy the Vampire Slayer and her parents got a call and they said they wanted to give her an award, not because she'd done anything, but because she was in a wheelchair. From watching that, it gave me the idea. It's a really good tool to make work from. I was doing it anyway, but it gives it a context.

OF: I wanted to ask you about what you said earlier about having got over being self-conscious.

KA: When I was a child I was very conscious of how people used to stare at me and it made me feel very awkward and self-conscious, to the point where I found it hard to interact with other children. So I went to normal schools. When I first went to Goldsmiths, I felt very self-conscious. I was a very different person to how I am now. It's a process. I'm not saying I've always been confident. It's more the last few years that I've got over it. I found it very difficult to communicate with the other students. I think there are still things that make communication difficult, which are mostly access issues. So the question was when did it start to change?

OF: When did you start doing your hair that way and why?

KA: I started doing it years ago. I think my decision was slightly more primitive. Everyone was bleaching their hair and I thought it looked cool, but then it was too cool so I had to change it. So I started dying it red and it took me a while to find the right shade. It started with a conscious desire of wanting to look 'in' as a young person. I just kept it up. I can't imagine my hair being the natural colour it

is. If it was back to its normal colour, I would feel uncomfortable because it wouldn't be vivacious.

OF: It wouldn't be you.

KA: I don't really like it when I see other people with red hair.

OF: You and Martha Wilson would have beef then. But actually now she has half red and half white to purposely show her age.

KA: I don't think that I intend to use my hair as a symbol. I did this workshop with Rocio with menopausal women (45 and up). I applied for it and I got on it. I was slightly thinking, 'god, all these strangers'. The first thing we had to do for the workshop was a 15-minute presentation. So I just gave them a hardcore video presentation where I said nothing. It was really in their faces. That really put me where I wanted to be within the group. So maybe there is some shyness and I think you can use your work and your persona to, just do it...

OF: To break through it?

KA: Yeah.

OF: I wanted to ask you about not being in the mainstream... is performance art really making change?

KA: I think for a disabled person it's more of a challenge. I think being counter to the norm is really popular. For me a lot of my work used to happen in the ghetto and I've managed to break past that, so I do feel I'm taking disability representation to a new audience. Yes, it's an art audience but they won't be so familiar with disability politics. There's a whole slew of live artists who are bringing their perspectives which are different from mine to performance art. So I guess I've found a niche where I can present work that does take it to an extreme. I think for me it would be very, I've chosen to maybe, it's very hard to present work. It's like, for example, I don't really show my brother my work because he just wouldn't get it. It's not because he's stupid, but he just wouldn't

get it. As artists surely we just want to push ourselves and push likeminded people. Why should we be the disciples of the world? Who are we? Ultimately, everybody is invited.

OF: But at the same time, if you don't communicate outside of that bubble, you won't create as much change.

KA: But if you put it on social media you will. Lots of people see it.

OF: No, only your contacts and likeminded people see it. Nobody talks to anyone who doesn't agree with them already.

KA: Not if you make it public. But it's exasperating talking to people who don't agree with you. And it's really stressful. I guess I choose to be around people who are going to elevate the way I think, not suppress me. I already live in a situation in which society oppresses everyone who is different. How would we? Maybe BBC should just allow artists to take over the channel?

OF: The BBC is also problematic in different ways; they have their agenda...

KA: For me personally, in order to survive in a world that is so fucked up, is just to keep pushing myself. I think artists do take their artwork into the public. But you can't make people who are not interested, get into it. How do you do it? With DAG we created fake stalls and at that university we got people to sign a fake petition...

OF: Yeah, interventions.

KA: You were talking about the way I look earlier. Perhaps the way I look does challenge people's perception – the public who don't know who I am or what I do. It doesn't fit into the stereotype of what a disabled person looks and acts like. So I'm doing my bit. Do you know Sherry Rose, the wife of Bob Flanagan? She is also an artist and she was on the workshop with Rocio. You should look into her work.



OF: I will, thanks. Tell me about the DIY workshop that you led.

KA: I was invited by two artists who both came from a dance background. They were running a workshop for women who don't really dance. They were running a project called 'Project O' and they were inviting artists to do dance workshops for one session. So I spent about a week contemplating it. I decided to do it in a performance mode because I don't know anything about dance. To be honest, I don't really know anything about anything. So I created a soundtrack and it was almost sort of, it was an immersive piece. I didn't go there as Katherine Araniello. I took on a completely different persona. I recorded an audio piece. They had to lie on the ground and they had to listen to it. You know "relax", I create this narrative "imagine that you're like a monkey, stuck in a cage". I created a whole template, if you like. Again, it was about subversion and it was actually really fun. So that sparked off the I can't dance DIY that I did. Seems ages ago now, it was only two years ago. I can send you some information. It was really good.

The other one I did called "Playing The Victim" was again about taking people through a process in which they feel and behave like victims and do certain tasks from that perspective. So for example, they had to post messages on facebook that would elicit a certain type of response. It went really well.

9 August 2017

OF: Last time we met we didn't really get a chance to talk about your works on assisted suicide. Your work argues against suicide and is adamant that you have a liveable life that has value and shouldn't be terminated. I know about those pieces from having worked with you in the time period when you made them, but I wanted to ask you for more information rather than rely on my memory/assumptions.

KA: Go ahead and ask me a question then. But before you do can you tell me more about the artist you are writing about alongside my work.

OF: I'm writing about Mark Aguhar who is a femme-identified, gender non-conforming artist who had a blog on tumblr for a couple of years before she committed suicide. She was an art student in Chicago. She did performance, drawings and multi-media work and had a big following. Her work, especially the blog, is very revealing of herself, her body and her opinions. I view her work as a kind of shame attacking, but it's difficult to conclude that her shame attacking functioned therapeutically because of her death.

KA: So she was quite educated from what you are saying and despite all these strong theories that are meant to empower people, she ended up killing herself.

OF: I think she was annoyed when people would say "suicide is selfish" or "it gets better". Aguhar wrote a lot of posts arguing against that logic, saying that it's selfish to ask someone *not* to commit suicide. She wrote a blog listing tactics for staving off suicide like "eat fried food and cheese" and the last one being "because you don't want to".

KA: which is the worst approach, in my opinion.

OF: Why? What would be the best approach?

KA: It's like telling an alcoholic to stop drinking. Once you start to be prescriptive and start telling people what to do, if they have it in their head. Through the process that I've been through of making all that work on assisted suicide, I wasn't actually saying to people 'don't do it', it was actually trying to say, 'isn't this absurd?' I refuse to be prescriptive in my work. I'm not one of these disabled people that are going out there to try and make change. The only change that can occur would be in someone's head. You see people from Aguhar's background or her identity and it's all about how you deal with it in your head, psychologically. It really is.

So going back to my work tackling the whole thing with assisted suicide, it was all about highlighting how ridiculous it was and how absurd it was and this ignorance and disbelief about independence and that it only comes from being able to physically do everything yourself, which of course is bullshit. None of us

are. It's ridiculous, none of us do everything ourselves. I mean, you don't personally recycle everything in your bin, you don't personally break it down into dust or turn it into something that can be reused again. Someone else does that. It's a whole chain and it depends on who you are or your situation in life. So for example, for someone who has mental health difficulties, they would need psychological support. I recently went on holiday on a boat and there was somebody else who was also disabled and he had had a really good job and made lots of money and he was the co-owner of BHS and he became disabled 20 years ago. I heard second-hand through my personal assistant (PA), not from him directly, but he was able to ride around on a scooter and eat without assistance, his comment to my PA was "I don't know how she does it, she's so brave". That was in response to me just being on holiday and eating a meal. Also, other people on the trip were saying to my PAs that they were so inspired by me. All I was doing was ramming food down my face and having a few drinks, I was not doing anything outrageous. Yeah, I have orange hair that sticks up and I need assistance in everything I do, even just getting around the boat. It's not vindictive commentary, but it's extremely, excruciatingly patronising. One of the passengers said to my PA, you have to make sure she's covered up because she's very sunburnt, but not in my earshot.

OF: Right, like you're a child.

KA: This sort of follows me, but I just see it as material. It will come out, not necessarily directly, but it will come out in the work.

OF: I'm worried I'm going to fall into a trap of writing about you that way. I may be at risk of doing that with the other artist. I'm saying that it's brave and takes courage to reveal aspects of your identity that are non-normative.

KA: I don't care what you say about other people. I can get you on the right track. You have said that about your own work giving you confidence. It's not a sin.

OF: Yeah, it's not the same thing as saying "Wow you left the house, congratulations!" "You're so brave"

KA: Exactly. If you're doing something to challenge other people's perceptions or to challenge yourself, that's a whole different narrative. Totally. Also, the artist you were talking about earlier, it's hard for me to understand how someone can allow other people's perceptions of her to penetrate her to the point where she ends her life. That is tragic. What isn't tragic, is me going around a buffet.

OF: It's not as simple as the constant barrage of insults lead to her commit suicide. There were other factors. I think the work was helping her get over the insults and maybe her suicide is a separate issue. With shame attacking as a therapeutic method there are certain precautions you're supposed to be taking to protect yourself and your relationships. But the fact is that for some people they can't live a full life or be themselves if they don't reveal aspects of themselves, like coming out, where they potentially do lose loved ones.

KA: Well in the incident I mentioned to you before you started recording, with the artists who were talking about that other disabled woman's work and I was offended, but I didn't say anything. I wouldn't do that, but I will write about it or make work. Ultimately silence is often where we place ourselves. I didn't say anything in that situation, I just nodded my head. In my defence, it was really loud in the pub and if I had tried to say something, they wouldn't have heard me. I did say something to Lois Keidan and she got it.

To go back to assisted suicide, the last one I did was quite a while ago, I think it was 2009. It was a video vlog in which I presented myself as someone who wanted to commit suicide. So it's very much a parody.

OF: So what prompted you to start making work about assisted suicide?

KA: Well, it was really being quite alarmed as to what was happening in the media and becoming aware that such a thing existed. For decades disabled people have been fighting for equality and to have control over their lives and for the social model, instead of the medical model. So all of a sudden things went topsy turvy and we had disabled people fighting for the right to end their

lives. They were fighting not just for disabled people, but for disabled and terminally ill people. It wasn't for everyone, it was specifically for those two groups, so there was a disparity.

OF: I see, so counter to equality.

KA: The way the media were thirsty to watch someone end their life and it was BBC documented to the point where someone went to dignitas where it is legal to end their life. What was really appalling about it from the very beginning for me was that it was like watching a mirror reflection of someone saying "well, I won't be able to comb my hair anymore and I won't be able to wash my face" and I thought to myself, well I can't do that anyway. Also, the ignorance about people not having a clue or unable to digest the difference between... the public at large do not understand the concept of being independent through assistance. All they see is documentaries where they see community nurses coming in and doing the bare basics. It's no wonder that anyone who becomes disabled and who have a terminal illness would have so much fear that they will want to end their lives prematurely.

OF: Yeah, because there is so much ignorance around how to live independently with a disability...

KA: There's so much ignorance. People don't understand people like me. I need assistance in everything. I saw my consultant last year and he asked me what I was doing for Christmas and I said "I'm cooking dinner". Yes, I do it through assistants, but I am directing them, telling them exactly which pan to use and what seasoning, but invariably when people come over they will doubt that I cooked and will asked who helped me. They believe that it wasn't actually my cooking. Even though that might sound quite basic but it forms the template to most of my work. If society doubts your abilities from the moment you're born, like me, I've never been able-bodied, but my mind is. When I say I'm cooking dinner, it's nobody's business how I'm doing it. But the fact is people can't digest it because they can see that I physically can't move.

OF: To be devil's advocate, the reason why people were advocating for disabled people and terminally ill people to have the right to commit suicide is that they can't necessarily go out and do it themselves and they would be ethically implicating someone else if they were to get help.

KA: There are plenty of ways to do it. I know disabled people who have done it without any help, without the media circus around them.

OF: How have they done it? I can see the argument being that to be equal they need different rights.

KA: The assumption is that disabled people who need assistance in everything would then need help to end their life.

OF: Well now I'm curious. How would they do it?

KA: I knew someone who asked to be dropped off by a lake and he wheeled himself in and drowned. I knew someone else who was just about able to strike a match. So he knocked over flammable liquids and lit the match. I'm not saying it's a dignified way of dying...

OF: Yeah, so maybe that's the argument, that they have a right to a dignified death. Not to say that other forms of suicide are particularly pleasant.

KA: An able-bodied person who can do it themselves isn't necessarily going to seek a 'dignified death'. People throw themselves in front of trains and I could do that. So I'm saying there's this assumption that... the arguments that go for and against are really powerful arguments. I'm not coming from that perspective and I don't really engage in those debates. It is a dangerous thing to happen if it happens. Questions of mortality and life and its value are in the news all the time and I don't want to get involved in those questions all the time. It's not a subject that I'm interested in making work on anymore because I feel I've exhausted it. I don't want to come out as someone who is either for or against it. People are so strong-headed in their beliefs and I wasn't trying to change anyone's beliefs, I just wanted to show the disparity between someone who is

totally dependent and someone who is living independently with the assistance of others.

OF: You are incredibly privileged.

KA: It's difficult to make comparisons because we are all privileged to some extent. I don't come from a lot of money. All the money I have I get from the government. It's all based on how you are medically so you have to change your whole narrative when you meet with consultants in order to get the benefits. There are people in the UK who are as disabled as me who get less than me because they can't make the case for what they need and conversely there are people less disabled than me and they get more help.

OF: So you talked about what started it off, but I feel like for you, it's less about the ethical debate around suicide as much as it is about how people are going to perceive you and people like you on the basis of the fact that that is the predominant form of representation of someone like you.

KA: That's quite good, but I wouldn't say 'someone like me', but I would say anyone that sits outside of the norm.

OF: That that is not a life worth living.

KA: That anyone who needs assistance in eating or moving or... It's the viewpoint, which unfortunately is a generic viewpoint that affects all of us individually. So the ethical questions around it will just go on forever. I feel I'm useless at arguments.

OF: It's not about coming out for or against suicide. It's not preachy.

KA: It's crushing equality. It's literally bashing it to pieces. It has a real detrimental effect on our society.

OF: Right. It's a sort of eugenics argument. That life's not worth living, why should we support that life?

KA: And it's also denial. It's denying the fact that a high percentage, now everybody is living till they're older and everyone will need help.

OF: And older people often deny that they need help.

KA: My parents are a perfect example of that. My father would rather have a life-risking operation on his hip than use a scooter. I'm their daughter, but I have no affect on their attitudes. That's my argument. I'm against this perspective that anything that isn't coinciding with the norm is awful. That construct is so narrow and everyone is in such denial, because it's so confining that no one fits within it.

OF: So you were responding to the stories in the news, but can you say more about the strategies you were using to respond to them?

KA: I was often using myself as the victim, like the video vlog was the first thing I did and I was bombarded with comments from religious people trying to convince me not to end my life. No one understood it as parody, apart from some friends and a couple of academics. It was amazing the number of people who were trying to stop me. They were understanding how I felt and being really condescending. They were empathetic. Many years later I did a piece with Aaron Williamson at Birkbeck where we did a fake protest against the budget airlines for refusing to let me on the plane to go to Zurich to end my life. So students lined up to sign the petition and none of the students challenged the concept. Not one student asked me if I really wanted to end my life. One student even offered to put it on facebook. I had fun doing it, but what does that say about society that I can put on a live art piece like that and get that response. I could do that and feel really down about it and seriously consider suicide. But I don't get down about it. I just want to make more work.

OF: My favourite one was the suicide haircut one where you're improvising with your PA. When you pressed record, what were you hoping was going to happen?



KA: I was literally sitting in front of the webcam and Marja was there to do my haircut, which is quite a boring process so I started recording and saying what was in my head and Marja just got into it without any coaching. It just came about. She was familiar with the ideas behind the work.

OF: I think that there's a similarity between that and the playing the victim work you do now. It's related.

KA: The recent work with the Araniello Show and playing the victim is a host of different sketches with me playing the victim in many different guises. There is very little speaking. It comes out of my experience as a disabled person. The audience has no idea about what they are about to see because I don't give a lot of information about it. It's quick and keeps their attention. I think it's really dynamic.

OF: I also wanted to ask you about the crowd-funding website project. It's playing on people's perception of you that you don't agree with, which is the same with the assisted suicide project. I know you're looking at me and thinking "I might as well kill myself", so I'm going to play up to that expectation. I'm going to make fun of you for thinking that. This crowd funding campaign is taking it a step further – I'm going to take your money. I'm going to capitalise on your pity. It's similarly darkly humorous.

KA: That wasn't how I construed it, but I think that's a really good way of putting it. It's really interesting to hear that because that didn't enter my head. I like that way of thinking. I genuinely was just alarmed. I thought it's time to turn things around even more and really become a victim. I'm aware that a lot of art by disabled people is about embracing it, triumphing it and making it into a success.

OF: like inspiration porn...

KA: I was already doing stuff around inspiration porn anyway, but then it became a term that people started using. So for example Unlimited is an arts council funding scheme that supports work that isn't really provocative but will

just sit well in a gallery. So for me the crowd-funding thing was more personal. I can't stand seeing these videos on youtube depicting people with my disability as inspiring or trying to get money to find a cure. Funding for disabled artists is going for projects where they depict disabled people on a pedestal or educate people about the nature of certain conditions. I'm not interested in doing that. It's backwards. It's not helpful. So for me I wanted an awareness of how people really see you. Lots of disabled people are doing crowd funding. One person I know is trying to get a private prosthetic leg for her sister. Everybody's doing it. The template is pity. It's not about seeing them as equal or as a strong individual but as somebody that needs your help. As an artist I knew some people would see through the way I was drawing on pity when I set up my crowd-funding website. But I think the majority of people funding it are actually from the art world. I want to genuinely make a professionally shot video that will simulate a music video that is genuine in its content. I want to put that out in the world and see how people react.

OF: Your goal was to make how much money?

KA: I put £4k, but I have other money I have accumulated for it. I want to work with certain people.

OF: How are you going to get it distributed?

KA: That's the thing. That's a real challenge. Do I really want to be invited to go onto one of those morning shows? I don't know if I'm brave enough to take it to that extent where I'll say this is how I feel.

OF: The song that you've written, is it how you feel?

KA: No, it's a joke. It's really dire and it's really shit.

OF: So it is a joke.

KA: It's a parody of what already exists. There are these disabled inspirational preachers in America and there is this one in particular and he did a music

video. So I decided I want to do one myself and be this inspirational character. It will be totally the stereotype. So you might ask why do that? I am hoping people will go to my website and see that I'm an artist and see the joke. I know a lot of people who know me were writing to me and asking me, is this for real? I thought, great, it's working. I'm just playing into the narrative of the way people see disabled people. I want to create disturbance, disruption.

OF: On the crowd funding website, you have your parents on there. Did you prompt them about what to say? It's really cheesy.

KA: Oh yeah. I told them to see me in a particular way. I literally told them in a few minutes that they should act as if they see me as an inspiration or as someone who is so able. So it's like a documentary type thing.

OF: Yeah, that's exactly what it is.

KA: I think the thing about the crowd funding and the music video is that the crazy thing is that this exists in the real world and this has to come across as real. People will engage in it more and research it. I was invited to a university to talk about my work and I showed them my actual work but I played the victim. I bored the hell out of them with all the details of my complaints. So it's the opposite of that inspirational way of speaking, which I think is lame, literally. For me it was pushing my own boundaries further. You don't get that in disability art. Everyone's trying to be educational or say nice things. It still creates an inequality.

OF: You use yourself in a lot of your work and you do a lot of vlogging but there's always a particular tactic you're taking. You're never just presenting yourself in an earnest way. Does that appeal to you at all?

KA: Not at all.

OF: Why not?

KA: For me it's far more appealing to present myself as a persona. I present my own discourse. I've picked up a few things from being alive but I don't learn from what's out there. For me it's about reinventing. You see a lot of disabled vloggers out there who see themselves as the spokespeople for disability or as a positive role model. It's so shit that I feel compelled to go out there and alter things so people don't know how to read it. The work can be complicated. Vlogging originally came from youtube and getting yourself out there. Maybe it's all getting lost. Do you know Benjamin the director from LUX? They offer free advice sessions. I went to talk to him and he was asking me about the original source of vlogging. I hadn't thought about the fact that I'm putting it back to its roots. People are often selling themselves. I think by being in it changes people's perspectives. So I go against a mainstream stereotype. I just can't help myself it's just a natural thing to do, reacting against the way in which we read difference and disability.

OF: Have you ever see a representation of disability that you actually thought was good?

KA: Yes, Aaron Williamson.

OF: Or can it be represented as a non-issue? Like colour-blind casting? Can there be disability-blind casting?

KA: That's the question. I know someone who has restricted growth and she was cast in something at the national theatre and it wasn't anything to do with disability and they integrated her really well. There was another piece at the National Theatre like that with three main characters and there was one disabled character and they integrated it into the whole piece and it was really well done.

OF: So there you go, there are some. But you don't want to do anything like that?

KA: Well, that's mainstream. I want to have total control, not read a part. If I collaborate I will step down and listen to other's ideas and it might not be a

disability agenda and I'm ok with that, but with my own work I have such an acute awareness and without having to explain it, it's just there. It's like you being from NY, you might not expose it, but it's just there.

OF: I have one last question about the crowd funding thing. Do you think the people who have given money see you as a charity case or that they are funding a parodic art piece?

KA: I'm beyond caring. I want to make the work and it's important that I do it because I want it to critique how people see disability. I want people to see it and feel uncomfortable and be sickened by it. I could be, if I was scrutinised, you're completely undermining other disabled people's lives, I would argue against that.

OF: You would say they're undermining you.

KA: Exactly. I think people are more likely to talk about things if they can't understand it. Like the artist who has committed suicide, it intrigues you to write about it.

OF: Maybe the premise is you want to follow the crowd funding to fruition by making the video and distributing it. But how do you access the responses?

KA: I model the idea on this thing called 'the modest proposal'. It's this thing that happened during a time of famine in Ireland and a very articulate person proposed to the government that they should eat the fat children. It was so absurd but so well written that people believed it, but it was written to be absurd. So that's how I position the music video and the crowd funding. In order for it to really have an impact, it has to look like it's come from a genuine place. To me it's so obviously fake, but to other people who are so indoctrinated, they believe it's true.

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OF: Why wouldn't you do a performance revealing in a truthful way your life and how you live? Why do you always instead choose parody or use a mixture of truth and lies?

KA: The reason why I wouldn't do it is, I'd find it utterly boring reiterating what already exists, i.e. the medical model of disability, what it does and how it affects my life. I actually find that perspective really uninteresting. The market is flooded with material like that, there's no point. It really sincerely doesn't interest me. I think also it makes the work become quite clichéd. I don't think it's a particularly current way of doing things. If I was a documentary filmmaker I might do that and it might be very informative, but that isn't what I do.

OF: And what about your inclusion of true facts from your life, for example in the suicide video you list stuff like your MA and your Chihuahua...

KA: I like the work being ambiguous. I think people are so indoctrinated about disability that I can throw anything in.

OF: There seems to be a conscious decision about where you draw the line with your truth-telling.

KA: I think I sprinkle crumbs and it is there, but it's done in such a blasé way. The work isn't denying or hiding disability in any sense, it's there, but its part of the process and part of the aesthetic to use it in the way that I do. Ultimately, the work that I make, there is so much stuff around disability and the way the world views difference, where does one stop and where does one stop? I think that I'd like to make reference points that aren't necessarily explainable. People will see it and not necessarily even be sure what I'm going on about unless they look into my work and go onto my website.

OF: Aren't you making the work for the people who do get the joke?

KA: No, not necessarily, I'm making it for anybody who actually wants to engage with it and look at it. It's like branding; you know that if you see a certain symbol you know exactly what you're looking at and what it's about. Whereas with something like disability, or just making references without contextualising them, which functions like a brand, people think they know what they are going to get, but the person watching is thrown into confusion. I don't want things to be straightforward and palatable. The idea is to relate to the work outside of the expected and the expected is to see disabled people and terminally ill people in a very clinical way. I like to play with all those expectations. There's so many disabled artists out there like Martin O'Brien who make work about disability but they don't do it the way I do it. It's not using parody or satire.

OF: Those artists, do they put themselves on display and invoke responses of pity and sympathy?

KA: Not necessarily. For example O'Brien uses his live art practice in a conventional ways, he gets naked and his pisses, you know what you would expect of the genre. He's also into telling stories. His work is a little bit comical, but very much the aesthetics of the live art scene. He has teamed up with Wellcome Trust to make work about Cystic Fibrosis and he has teamed up with Sheree Rose (the wife of the late Bob Flanagan). Those things are in the mix when he does his work. Bob Flanagan's work was very powerful for me. I think the difference here is, I'm not trying to say to anyone, my life is shit because I have SMA. I'm taking the way society presents disability and presenting it some other way. It fits into the art scene, talking about something always medicalised. I'm taking the medical aspect away and elevating and playing with it.

OF: I have another question about the 'gofundme' webpage. Is Laura Dee Milnes a real person or a persona?

KA: She is a real person, who is my assistant, but I wrote the letter.

OF: Yeah, so that's a perfect example of this mixture of truth and fiction. You mention certain facts, the ventilator, the soft food, etc.

KA: Also, there's that level of ambiguity about that because no one really knows if it's true.

OF: If you were to do that kind of art that you don't like, would that be revealing too much?

KA: First of all, I have to say, to put that online was really hard for me. It wasn't easy. It was really challenging. It was probably the most difficult thing that I have done because it is absolutely everything I feel sickened by in the way disability is represented.

OF: Yeah, it's you're portraying yourself in a way that you think is despicable.

KA: Yeah, it's disgusting and grotesque and again it took a few weeks, it was a process. I couldn't just do it. What was really shocking is that it was so authentic that some disabled people that have been political all their lives, were actually sending me private messages asking, "Is this for real?" So I achieved my goal.

OF: Is fooling people your goal?

KA: No, it's following the model of the modest proposal. It's all down to that. I wanted to make it so real that people are not sure how to take it. Is it real? Is it not real? Is it a joke? If you play it that way, people take it seriously. It gives a depth to the work for some, for some it will totally wash over their heads. It's not that it's just funny, like a one-liner, it's deeper than that. I think as artists it's important that we take our position seriously. As much fun as I have making my work, I am pushing boundaries as far as possible. So the term pity porn that you can take really far. There is so much stuff on disability that is so degrading, that I want my work to have a very different reading.

OF: One last question about *The Dinner Party* (2011), what was your intention in getting the butler sloshed? Do you get visibly drunk as well?

KA: I was following the format of the film, the original *Dinner For One* (1963).



OF: I thought maybe your intention was to disable him?

KA: No, that wasn't the intention at all. Well, when I work with other artists I often allow them to bring to the work what they want to bring to it. For example, Ernst Fisher, who Marcia Farquhar recommended, really took it to another level in that he brought his way of working into the piece. In the original the drunkenness is acted, but with Ernst, unbeknown to me, he would not eat that day or even the day before so the tiniest bit of alcohol would affect him. I don't really like theatre in the sense of faking things. So his drunkenness is real. I created a formula in which the other artists can contribute. It means that anything can go wrong. I was interested in creating a structure that was open for the other artists to play with. Ernst took this to a level in accordance to his own way of working. He was really hard-core. It was about taking people outside of their comfort zone. It wasn't about me trying to control anybody.

OF: I wasn't thinking of it being about control, but about the potential of everyone to be incapacitated.

KA: I think chaos and disorder, I like those things. I like the idea of everything becoming off-track and nothing being quite as it should be. It's about breaking down conformist way of doing things. For example with the second version, the sign interpreter was encouraged to join in the drinking. There are normally so many restrictions so I removed all of that. I wanted it to be accessible, but in a less traditional way.

OF: That reminds me of the *Vital Statistics* (2009) piece you did at the Tate which was also about chaos and disorder and absurdity and I can see how that fits with your work.

## Appendix E: Consent Forms

[redacted]









## Sample *O Show* Guest Consent Form

[redacted]

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