

Exploring the “Abject”: Functions of Femininity in Female Performance Art

“YOU ARE A BICH, WE ARE VIRGENS”

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Exploring the "Abject" functions of femininity in female performance art

This essay is an interrogation into females' explicit bodies in performance art, questioning materiality, perception, desire and the forbidden. We will adopt the perspective that the reading of the female body in performance art derives from the way these bodies have been placed within a system of representation throughout history. The female artists in question present the lengths they feel they must take in order to break down the symbolic system within which they are placed.

"Every picture is a picture of the body. Every work of visual art is a representation of the body. To say this is to say that we see bodies, even where there are none, and that the creation of a form is to some degree also the creation of a body."¹

By definition, female body artwork immediately becomes vulnerable in its communication. It proves important to communicate the 'truthful' body, to relieve its status from a "consumer object to be brought and sold, rather than embraced and touched."² We will use psychoanalytic and social approaches to aid our exploration throughout, establishing that encodings are constructed, representations are fantasised and the veiling of the unconscious is encouraged. We will first look at a brief history of how the body has been constructed as a secret, blind and desired object. The evolution of western visual culture has encouraged these constructions, and thus the female body

¹ Sally Banes and Andre Lepecki, *The Senses In Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2007) p127

² Ibid

has become inscribed with dangerous codes and misrepresentations from a dominant patriarchal gaze. We shall then proceed to discuss female performance artists' attempts to absorb the gaze that has penetrated the female body. We will begin with Carolee Schneemann's erotic film *Fuses*. Her work in the '60's was considered radical, as she produced works "from within a culture that has lost and denied its sensory connections to dream, myth, and the female powers."³ Schneemann's work defined an integral moment in Western visual culture, as little feminist exploration had been made in regards to the body. We then move on to Post-Porn Modernist Annie Sprinkle. In her performances *Public Cervix Announcement* and *The Sacred Prostitute*, she employs the postmodern technique of eradicating the voyeuristic gaze by placing herself as a fetishized object in her performances. Annie Sprinkle reveals her explicit body, leaving nothing to the imagination, celebrating her own sexual pleasure in her performance in the hopes of demystifying the incomprehensible illusions surrounding the female body. We will investigate, however, how far these artists' techniques truly go in absorbing the gaze, when the body is still considered as youthful and sexualized.

Moving across the 20th and into the 21st century, we will consider how performance artists refract the patriarchal oppressive gaze by adapting it to their bodies, using it as a terrain for the "inappropriate" and the taboo. Karen Finley and Rocio Boliver reject the passive, clean and appropriate representations of the female body as a reaction against a society that promotes an "idealistic and sanitised view of the body."⁴ We will investigate how pain is central to Finley's *The Constant State of*

³ Schneemann, Carolee. "The Obscene Body/Politic." (Taylor & Francis. College Art Association, Web. 18 Apr. 2016) p31

⁴ Patrick, Campbell, *The Body in Performance* (Switzerland: Harwood Academic, 2000) p14

Desire (1986) and Boliver's *Cierra las Piernas* (2003). It is important to notice the change in representational techniques across time: "body art becomes increasingly frenzied, violent and excessive" as the "mechanics of alienation" overtake the celebratory works of Schneemann and Sprinkle. Boliver and Finley utilise their bodies to provide meaning, refracting misrepresentations of the female body over their literal bodies.

Societies have a tendency to repress the female body through fears surrounding their own morals, that these should become disturbed or altered. It is the radical nature of these performances artists that brings about such a fearful confrontation within society. In the final chapter, we shall explore the influence of censorship on art and the female body; censorship is a way of controlling the gaze, a further suppression of the "inappropriate". The body thus becomes an object of fear, further fetishized and thus disabling the audience's ability to think critically. Can these transgressive presentations of the female body ever connect with the individual, raise awareness about their repressions and oppressors and finally escape the throes of representation? This investigation provides an overview of modern to contemporary performances, so that we may envision the ongoing battle of decoding the female body. This will hopefully allow for a greater insight into the reading of the body at present. Has society managed to shake off the codes that shackle the body, or have misrepresentations merely found a new guise within different manifestations?

ii)

Absorbing the Gaze*the secret, blind and desired body*

"Bullets of projection are aimed into our bodies: trajectories of phallographic apprehension produce our "wounds."⁵ Carolee Schneemann

To aid our understanding of how the body has been constructed throughout history as a secret, blind, fetishized object, we will explore a Freudian analysis to poignant moments of western visual culture. This understanding will aid further analysis of Schneemann and Sprinkles' attempts to close the gaps between the consumer and the consumed, disposing of a fetishized consumption of the female body. As both artists find new techniques to "complicate the model of disembodied vision by producing work which refuses to refuse their bodies as modes of knowing, refusing the body as repetitive "sign of unknowingness."⁶

Power Within the Visual Encounter

To aid our understanding of how the body has been constructed throughout history as a secret, blind, fetishized object, we will explore a Freudian analysis to poignant moments of western visual culture. This understanding will aid further analysis of Schneemann and Sprinkles' attempts to close the gaps between the consumer and the consumed, disposing of a fetishized consumption of the female body. Both artists find new techniques to "complicate the model of disembodied vision by

⁵ Schneemann, "The Obscene Body/Politic." p28

⁶ Campbell, Patrick. The Body in Performance, p35

producing work which refuses to refuse their bodies as modes of knowing, refusing the body as repetitive "sign of unknowingness."⁷ Dominic Johnson believes that "the concept of fetishism is central to the production of meaning in the visual encounter."⁸ Freud's theories of Fetishism provide important first insights pertaining to the the sources of the body's encodings, as well as how these codes have conditioned society's perception of the body. These psychoanalytic theories originate from Freud's concept of castration anxiety, which is centred around lacking, loss and disavowal; If an object/someone is lacking a phallus like their own the subject fears their own castration, and this void is filled by a fetish. For Freud, "fetishism is the process whereby a male viewer of female sexual difference masters the threat of castration... Because the naked female body, when first seen by the little boy seemed to lack a penis, the unconscious desire of the male ...is to disavow this lack by putting a fetish in its place."⁹ Whilst this theory is somewhat reductive, it does illustrate the power inherent in the visual encounter. Within the visual encounter a space is opened up whereby the viewer's imaginations and fantasies emerge, which then become projected onto the object. This encounter becomes particularly threatening for the female body, subjected to such objectifications and misrepresentations throughout history. Thus to challenge fetishisation of the female body, it proves important to challenge the power within the visual encounter.

Within the arts, the visual encounter has encouraged negative habits surrounding readings of the body; it is these habits that the female artists in question

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Dominic Johnson, *Theatre & The Visual* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) P50

⁹ Williams, Linda. *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: U of California, 1989) P41

attempt to absorb and deflect in performance by becoming the authors of their own bodies and desires. Throughout history, the arts have succeeded as a platform encouraging the fetishisation of women. Western art's traditional representations of the female nude become a good example for Freudian analysis. The female nude becomes an object which feeds desire, but has no desire of its own. In Freudian terms, the body of the woman (the object of desire) becomes the substitute for the phallus. This theory, supported by the supposed passivity of the female nude, has created a different kind of "social presence" for men and women.¹⁰ Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey believes that fetishisation stems from "the woman outside the narrative flow of action and event, [flattening] the verisimilitude of the representation of woman and [turning] her into an icon."¹¹ She recognises that women are represented without narrative or truthful action, and absolving these truths concludes with the woman being turned into an icon, a projection of the observer's fantasies. The woman thus becomes a symbolic representation of something other than herself, worshipped and fetishised. This notion, supported throughout the history of Western art, needs to be challenged in order to disrupt the normative "appropriate" vision. Live art becomes a vital platform for this disruption. The unsettling of normative vision leads to the artists in question's works being considered as "politically volatile – threatening, perhaps, to a comprehensibility structured... society, [centered] around the insatiability of commodity exchange."¹² To challenge this 'commodity exchange' in which women may also be objects to be

¹⁰ Ibid, p 39

¹¹ Ibid, p 12

¹² Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body In Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997) P6

packaged and sold, the woman must become the author of her own desires and, in terms of Mulvey's theory, the female object must be rendered literal.

Subject to look

In regards to the artists in question, performance becomes a moment of conscious free will, an exposition of and detachment from constructed visual encounters in the arts. We have been taught to look in a certain way since the 'theatron' of ancient Greece; "a man-made cave clearly marked "look but don't touch."¹³ We have seen how the visual encounter has contributed to repressive codes concerning the female body, read as an object to be consumed and rendered blind. Although the roots of these constructions are particularly hard to pin down, one can see the long-lasting affects of psychoanalytic representations of sexuality, where the female body has become a collection of symbols and fantasies. Society's view promoting an "idealistic and sanitized view of the body as completed, closed, contained"¹⁴ has seeped into the representation of the female body in visual cultures, thus conditioning society's ways of reading it. The visual encounter begins to be challenged in the emergence of Live Art, an acknowledged space "where borders are disrupted and rules are broken, where new possibilities are imagined and new discourses are formed."¹⁵

¹³ Campbell, Patrick. *The Body in Performance*, P26

¹⁴ Campbell, Patrick. *The Body in Performance*, P14

¹⁵ Manuel Vason, Lois Keidan, and Ron Athey. *Exposures* (London: Black Dog, 2002) P2

The concept of fetishism thus far has centred around patriarchal fears and anxieties. These are kept at bay when envisioning passive objects onto which their own desires and fantasies may be projected, thus creating fetishes. We will begin to analyse Schneemann and Sprinkles work in terms of authorship, no longer being objects of desire (fetishes) but subjects of their own desire. *Fuses* is a montage of sexual intercourse between Schneemann and her lover James Tenney, in which the audience becomes a visible spectator by their witnessing of the lovers' mutual pleasuring. These images are played alongside shots of waves, a lady running on the beach and close-ups of their cat (who becomes a third observer to the action). Schneemann's editing plays with speed and movement; an image of Schneemann with her mouth around her lover's penis is played next to the pulsing of light through the window pane, giving the silent film a rhythm comparable to the motions of sex. "Schneemann's editing in *Fuses* is slippery and messy...[it] creates an insistent visual tactility and perceptual disorientation that mimics and reproduces the sensuous encounter which *Fuses* documents, allowing the medium to become both apparent and, even more strikingly, participant."¹⁶ The action being placed alongside other film material reminds the viewer that they are watching a film created for observers, yet controlled by the artist; the audience is participating in her sexual fantasies and not their own. Female artists taking authorship over their own desires began to remove the female body's representations as "obliging prop[s] for men's fantasies."¹⁷

Schneemann embraced a relationship based on mutual desire, whilst post-porn star-come-performance-artist Annie Sprinkle found new techniques in "reclaiming the

¹⁶ Schneider, *The Explicit Body*, p70

¹⁷ Gray, Watson, *Art and Sex*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008) P18

erotic"¹⁸; for Sprinkle, reclamation is about exhibiting "her satisfaction, but most explicitly her self-satisfaction."¹⁹ In Sprinkle's performance *The Legend of the Ancient Prostitute*, she transforms into Anya, her stage persona, as she performs a masturbation ritual. She turns the theatre into a reconstruction of an ancient temple in the hopes of recreating the kind of space where prostitutes used to perform. These temples were believed to be "the best time to connect with the Divine, to experience visions, and create miracles [...] when you were in a state of sexual ecstasy."²⁰ Sprinkle suggests that this performance is one of her most important, as it marks the transition of her objectified pornographic-body to her performance-body. Sprinkle is now the author of her own desire as she encourages her audience to feed into her sexual energy. Her audience are asked to indulge in her orgasm: as she presses a vibrator onto her "trustworthy clitoris" the audience are asked to shake the rattles they have been given; "the sound builds to a peak as Anya reaches ecstasy."²¹ It is clear that Sprinkle's performances are depictions of culturally taboo images. She exposes the blatantly sexual body, embodying presentations normally recognised in the realms of pornography. However, Sprinkle enables a platform for women in which they have control over their own desires, as she does upon her own. In Sprinkles' post-porn, postmodernist performance, she foregrounds "de-natural[isation]...; [pointing] out that those entities that we

¹⁸ Campbell, *The Body in Performance*, P61

¹⁹ Watson, *Art and Sex*, p18

²⁰ "THE TEMPLE OF THE NEO-SACRED PROSTITUTE", *Anniesprinkle.org*, 2016 <<https://anniesprinkle.org/ppm-bobsart/temple.html>> [accessed 25 April 2016].

²¹ *Ibid*

unthinkingly experience as 'natural'... are in fact 'cultural.'"²² This suggests that she wants to expose female sexuality as something that unifies our culture, and should begin with ownership. Sprinkle's performance persona "loves women and puts her focus on liberating their sexual energies."²³

Visibility Politics

This analysis of the gaze is grounded in the notion that men and women have very different privileges. Ann Kaplan, in her book *Women and Film*, describes the privilege inherent in men's gazes as such: "[...] the mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism... are male operations...because his desire carries power/action where womens' usually [do] not."²⁴ Following this, the male gaze needs to be overturned in order to deconstruct misrepresentations of women. Schneider writes that in the "patriarchal imagination, there is nothing more literal and threatening to the prerogatives of the Symbolic Order than the sight (seeing back) of the female genitalia, the vanishing point as a seeing eye."²⁵ Women as the subject of blindness is a position audiences have been accustomed to in the visual arts, a founding notion of the patriarchal imagination. When Schneemann's *Fuses* was published in 1967, the truthful exposure of bodies and mutual acknowledgment of pleasure was a rarity in film, and

²² Angelika Czekay, 'Distance and Empathy: Constructing the Spectator of Annie Sprinkle's Post-POST PORN MODERNIST', (Kansas), (Spring 1993), <https://journals.ku.edu/index.php/jdte/article/view/1876/1839> [accessed 21/4/2016] pp177-190 (p178)

²³ Ibid, p181

²⁴ Kaplan, E. Ann. *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*. (New York: Methuen, 1983) P29

²⁵ Schneider, *The Explicit Body*, p82

audiences were threatened by the explicit nature of the footage. The acknowledgement of the spectator is the perceived moment of danger, as it is in this moment that the seer is rendered visible; they are "rendered blind [...], feminised, which is to say, castrated."²⁶ Scheemann's art is not about creating anxiety but creating a reciprocity in the visual encounter; "mutual recognition between seer and seen, who become seer and seer, subject and subject, object and object, in the scene of viewing."²⁷ It is important to acknowledge that the rendering literal is not purely to castrate or enhance anxiety in the viewer, but to aid a critical communication; to enable a space in which spectators can question their notions of anxiety, to be critical as to why they feel what they are seeing is different and unnatural. "Schneemann's work rests not simply in her provocation of the unnatural, but in her exploration of cultural distinctions between natural and unnatural."²⁸ Her work makes audiences critical of the banality of what is considered shocking, thus making prevalent underlying issues on sexuality. Furthering this provocation hopefully allows audiences to perceive the absurdity in what they consider to be 'natural', and make light of the façades they base their own pleasures upon. In Fuses the passive, pleasure-less constructions of the female are eradicated, as the gaze is acknowledged as witnessing a mutual sexual experience. This is a huge development from the pornographic gaze, as the sexual body was embraced, "forced from the control of the right-wingers and misogynists."²⁹

²⁶ Ibid, p81

²⁷ Ibid, 86

²⁸ Ibid, p50

²⁹ Campbell, *The Body in Performance*, p61

Annie Sprinkle understood the oppressive nature of the phallogentric gaze through her experience in the sex industry; her performance art became a space in which to finally claim authority over the objectifying gaze. Sprinkle encourages the gaze in her performance *Public Cervix Announcement*³⁰. It is interesting to acknowledge Angelika Czekay's performance review, as she states "Sprinkle's piece relies on the fetishisation of the female body in Western culture."³¹ This point could be argued as Sprinkle exerts her sexual pleasure, and her sexualized post-porn body as a recognizable image of desire. Sprinkle in this sense relies on the power play to proceed, and thus a fetishized object. However, alongside her pornographic aesthetic, Sprinkle closes physical proximity as she invites her audience to come and look at her cervix: "Now, please, be my guest. I invite you to take a long look at my cervix."³² Sprinkle lies on her back with her legs spread apart, inviting the audience to "shine flashlights through the speculum she has inserted into her vagina" whilst carrying out interviews with them, thus building a relationship of honesty.³³ It is Sprinkle's narrative that exposes her spectators, as she asks questions the spectator is acknowledged and willingly absorbed into the action. By rendering her body literal, representations of the "mysterious, self-recessive and dangerous" body begin to deconstruct themselves, and "mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism" are challenged. Sprinkle, like Schneemann, desires to relieve the power within the phallogentric gaze, and expose existing ignorance. This ignorance

³⁰ See Appendix A

³¹ Angelika Czekay, 'Distance and Empathy' p.179

³² "A Public Cervix Announcement | ANNIESPRINKLE.ORG(ASM)", Anniesprinkle.org, 2016 <<http://anniesprinkle.org/a-public-cervix-announcement/>> [accessed 25 April 2016].

³³ Schneider, *The Explicit Body*, p53

was a symptom of the gap between the viewer and the viewed. This becomes closed as Sprinkle opens herself for scrutiny.

The patriarchal gaze still proves stubborn to shift. Many critics have suggested that these autoerotic performances still exist primarily to excite male spectators, even going so far as asking, "how can desire itself satisfy desire?"³⁴ These responses depict the problems these artists are trying to highlight and expose in their works. Although by employing their own overt sexuality to reverse the patriarchal gaze, these performances still re-instate problems that have been engrained throughout history.

Reaching this natural state was problematic for women artists who were constantly faced with the meanings inscribed on their bodies. It became evident to performers that they could not ignore either the context they were working in or the ideological representation of the body.³⁵

In bringing their bodies to the public realm, rendered real and not for consumption, there still remained the problem of the spectatorial perspective. The body marked as female will continue to be vulnerable to the gendered gaze, especially if the way the body is presented is closer to the conventional stereotypes that were objectified in the first place. It has been clear that these artists have begun to deconstruct their misrepresentations and thus eliminating their fetish markings from perspective. Schneemann and Sprinkle deny their disembodied bodies, removing the representation that they are passive nudes and celebrating their identities as women capable of satisfying their own desire. The question as to whether this fully eliminates the

³⁴ Ibid, p105

³⁵ Campbell, *The Body in Performance*, p43

projected desire of the observer still relies on perspective. Perhaps female performance artists need to infer a larger critical distance between what is being shown and the critical tropes they want to infer, to further remove themselves from the stereotypes that mark them female. Although these performances prove empowering, Schneemann and Sprinkle are still confronted with difficulties to remove their bodies from the "patriarchal delimitation of women to the realm of sex"³⁶ and thus unable to fully remove the meanings that still are "inscribed on their bodies."³⁷

³⁶ Schneider, *The Explicit Body*, p105

³⁷ Campbell, *The Body in Performance*, p12

ii)

Refracting the Gaze*the passive, clean and sterile body*

This chapter will advance upon Schneider's belief that it is not merely enough for the object's gaze to be rendered visible; there is more that is hidden, and must be exposed. "The gaze returned from the position of an "object" must be a gaze not simply from the object fetishized but from that secret-ed by the object – the gaze of the object's secret that [this] object is not what it [appears] to be."³⁸ Schneider suggests it is not enough for performance artists to have authorship over their own bodies, and they must further expose what has been secret-ed and repressed. Rocio Boliver and Karen Finley find other manners of embodiment in order to expose, confront, and challenge misrepresentations as well as to produce critical analysis. We will first examine Karen Finley's performance, *The Constant State of Desire*, overviewing how Finley uses her previously fetishized body as a textual terrain to reverse the phallogentric prejudices corrupting the Western gaze. Finley deconstructs these misrepresentations and re-plays them ferociously across her body. It is interesting to see Mexican born artist Rocio

³⁸ Schneider, Rebecca. *The Explicit Body in Performance*, p100

Boliver, has similar techniques, in her performance *Cierras las Piernas* (Shut Your Legs), we witness how patriarchal terrors are physically enacted across her body. Boliver's body becomes a terrain in which to modify and violently confront societal ideologies continually oppressing the female body. We see how the gaze can be changed by these bodily events, denying the voyeuristic gaze with the hopes of a more critical one. "Body events disturb assumptions of a natural and transparent viewing position, and seek to uncover its political and ideological investments – they corrupt the pure gaze by activating the implicated gaze."³⁹ Advancing from the embodiment of the self as seen in Sprinkle's and Schneeman's empowering performances, we may discover how the secret-ed can be exposed and re-played across the embodied body. Will these performance techniques ensure that "cultural ruses of dis-embodiment" are lost "by foregrounding the literal embodiment of the tactile body?"⁴⁰ In this respect, we will hopefully discover if these body events help the body to shake off misrepresentations marking them as female.

Threatening normative ways of thinking

Finley and Boliver use 'the real' to disturb and further make explicit the absurdity of constructs that continue to oppress the female body; "It is that which threatens the scope of the possible, the thinkable, the tolerable...It is that which allows for the production of meaning, and as such comes to stand as that which perpetually threatens meaning."⁴¹ Harradine suggests by further disturbing the pleasure in viewing,

³⁹ Jim Drobnick, "Body Events And Implicated Gazes", *Performance Research*, 13 (2008), 64-74 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528160902875648>>.

⁴⁰ Schneider, Rebecca. *The Explicit Body in Performance*, p100

⁴¹ Campbell, *The Body in Performance*, P73

the audiences' misrepresentations of the female body have a greater chance of being challenged, thus audiences are more likely to think critically about what they are seeing. We will investigate how Finley performs pain across her "literal and often blatantly sexual body"⁴² and the effects of Boliver's performances' need to "dive headlong into the forbidden, perverse, censored."⁴³ Performing the taboo and the perverse over the female body, which is normally rendered an object for desire, will potentially bring an uneasiness to the viewer that is needed in order to change the pre-conceived passive and sterile body. This uneasiness is rendered important by Harradine, who believes in an "uneasiness experienced at witnessing and being drawn into a viewing relationship (that some may seem perverse, immoral or illegal)...there is a sure sign that socially approved viewing patterns are being unsettled."⁴⁴

Re-living to Refract

We will see how these artists use performance as an abreaction, an expression of what has repressed them, by re-living and re-playing these tenets across their bodies. Julia Kristeva, in Powers of Horror, outlines how the abject may be used to disrupt the ordered symbolic realm:

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasm in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and

⁴² Schneider, The Explicit Body, P114

⁴³ Schechner, Performed Imaginaries, P150

⁴⁴ Campbell, The Body in Performance, P73

hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it.⁴⁵

Kristeva describes the abject as a liminal period, first present when the child is separated from the Mother and is pushed into a symbolic existence. This moment is likened to the moment that the skin of the milk brushes the lips. This grotesque, although harmless, happening misleads the laws of milk drinking and conjures up feelings of revolt. Finley and Boliver use performance to embody this liminal period, the moment when the "unthinkable" plays out across the terrains of their bodies, demonstrating how this disturbs the laws that construct these bodies. Boliver challenges the margins of her body, exposing her orifices and pushes her body's boundaries through brutality and pain. She uses the performance space to express and re-live the conflicts that oppress women in her society whilst displaying her "irreducible physicality."⁴⁶ In Finley's performance, "the paradox of disembodiment is played out."⁴⁷ Across her overtly literal body she re-plays the disembodied voices that constitute woman's history. We will firstly investigate Finley's *The Constant State of Desire*, a collection of monologues dealing with perverse and tabooed topics through various personas. These personas "that pass across her may be mangled, multiple and even manic...the rush of identities across Finley's bodily stage is never apologetic."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Julia Kristeva and Leon S Roudiez, *Powers Of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) P2/3

⁴⁶ Schechner, *Performed Imaginaries*, P151

⁴⁷ Schneider, *The Explicit Body*, P100

⁴⁸ *Ibid*

Finley intertwines her natural persona with her monologues; Finley as herself begins by recalling how the critics have described her as scatological. "Scatological," she states in her amused Chicago accent, "I thought they meant I was a scat singer."⁴⁹ Her humour and ease is immediately transmitted to the audience. This ease is suddenly juxtaposed with another persona; it is as if she has fallen into a trance-like state as socio-cultural terrors play out across her body. Finley embodies this state in performance through her desire to become a medium for society's repressions. She will prepare her body and her mind for days prior, stating: "so that things come in and out of me, I'm almost like a vehicle."⁵⁰ Her body becomes a terrain for abject terrors to manifest themselves: stories of incest, rape, and abuse play out and pass across her frame. This enables her to fully experience the content of her work, reliving the terrors as if they were her own. As her body shakes and convulses, repressions are pushed into existence with no order to hold them back. Schneider writes that Finley's body becomes "a terrain, landscape, a stage across which patriarchal fantasies of domination are carried out – [which] serves to make evident the artist's rage, a rage which through her politic of literality, talks back to the social dreamscapes which rack her frame."⁵¹ Her body presents literally the idea of the liminal period which defines the abject: she becomes the uncanny, nauseating moment when the skin of the milk touches the lip. By making herself into a medium, she suggests the desire to share this feeling of rage and disgust with her audience in order to relieve their repressions and aid them to pass through them alongside her.

⁴⁹ The Constant State Of Desire (Chicago: Karen Finley, 1989).

⁵⁰ Richard Schechner and Karen Finley, "Karen Finley: A Constant State Of Becoming: An Interview", TDR (1988-), 32 (1988), 152 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1145876>>.

⁵¹ Schneider, *The Explicit Body*, P114

Finley disturbs in content and well in form. She unequivocally releases "unthinkable" topics that are usually encouraged to remain under the surface. By making literal Freud's theories defining the symbolic order, she uncovers both their absurdity and destructive repercussions. By the end of ACT 3 in her performance monologues, Finley has covered her body in glitter, raw egg and garlands. She then slips on a black lacy nightdress, becoming an object of desire for her audience, performing her next monologue (First Sexual Experience). While Schneemann and Sprinkle denied the phallogentric gaze by absorbing male constructions of desire and castration anxiety, Finley literalises these constructions. As this theory relies on woman's "lack" of a penis and thus becoming an object for the man's projection, she takes on the symbolic masculine persona, unpicking Freud's theory and presenting it to reveal its violence. She describes her first sexual encounter as the moment she was as birthed. The baby becomes the erect penis emerging out of her mother's vagina: "At the time of my birth I had an erection. I'm fucking my own mama at my birth." The symbol of a man's projection of their own phallus (desire) onto women is shown in the literal depiction of a "Mama" with a baby – "I love to find a hot, young mama with a young, bald baby."⁵² This story is extremely graphic from the offset, demonstrating Finley's embodied rage at how Freud's theory has seeped into society's history of looking. Literal depiction becomes a perverse, brutal expression of incest and terror, prevailing the danger of internalising such representations. The horrors of females throughout history are played throughout this monologue.

⁵² Karen Finley, *A Different Kind Of Intimacy* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000) P147

I just take that mama and push her against that washer. And I take her baby, a bald-headed baby, and put Downy fabric softener on baby's head. Then I strap that baby around my waist till it's a baby dildo. Then I take that baby, that dildo, and fuck its own mama...

Then I mount my own mama in the ass. That's right. I fuck my own mama in the ass... I cum real quick. Cuz I'm a quick working man. Work real fast. After I cum, I come outta my mama. She don't look at me. Just suckin' her Pall Mall. So I go down on my mama and suck my own cum outta my own mama's ass, outta her butthole. Her coconut Hershey juice. Suck it out. Suck it. Pucker. Pucker.⁵³

Finley utilises the stereotypical masculine language often found in pornography. As she literalises the symbols that constitute Freud's castration anxiety, her grotesque language challenges both the objectification of women and the constructs that confine their perceived "appropriate" behaviour. She replays the way the female body has been inscribed by breaking down these inscriptions, exposing its literal parallels. These bring brutal and absurd reasoning behind the markings of the female body, thus satirising the validity of the patriarchal gaze. The content of Finley's work and the way she provokes a reaction brings forth a more socially engaged way of thinking; as she breaks down symbols she begins to break down the constructs that "rack her frame."⁵⁴ By re-fashioning the patriarchal ideologies with such rage, it offends normal patterns of behavior. The "gagging sensation" refracts the patriarchal gaze. Finley brings forth the unthinkable for her audience, releasing "inappropriate" language. While this behaviour is unpleasant, it is not harmful, and reveals the need to feel and discuss these repressions in order to develop. To return to Harradine, threatening the constructs of

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Schneider, *The Explicit Body*, p114

what is deemed socially acceptable questions why these things are not suitable, breaking down rigid societal constructs.

The Abject as a force of Abreaction

Julia Kristeva believes in the importance of using the abject to threaten notions of the woman being discrete, sterile and passive. She states that "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order."⁵⁵ Boliver brings the abject to her body as she presents her pain and suffering through the modification and even mutilation of her body in performance. Through email correspondence with me,⁵⁶ Boliver responds to questions on pain: "When people look blood or body pain they understand immediately that something is wrong, but not the same with the traumas."⁵⁷ She brings the abject to the surface for her audience, the defilement that people fear to see and recognise as abnormal. She explores psychological traumas that society is encouraged not to show. In her abject performance, she unveils societal traumas as well as her own through the use of pain, testing the confines of female "appropriate" behaviour through her "irreducible physicality."⁵⁸

In Boliver's performance *Cierra Las Piernas* (Close your Legs), Boliver begins dressed in a nun's habit and positions herself on a raised, slanted bed as if going for surgery. To enable maximum exposure, a cameraman films the action that is connected

⁵⁵ Julia Kristeva and Leon S Roudiez, *Powers Of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)

⁵⁶ See Appendix B

⁵⁷ See Appendix C

⁵⁸ Schechner, *Performed Imaginaries*, p151

to a live feed on a monitor providing a "close-up of Boliver's vulva and vagina."⁵⁹ Then, with great effort, she inserts a needle and thread through her left labium, creating a large hole. This painful process is repeated on her right labium. After this process, she takes out a Jesus action figure, dressed in a white robe and a crown of thorns, proceeds to place a condom over his head, and covers him with lubricant, so that he is ready to be inserted into her vagina.⁶⁰ When Boliver is sure that the action figure is fully inserted into her vagina,⁶¹ she proceeds to take the two threads that have been tied to her labium and sew her vagina tightly shut, with Jesus enclosed within. When this is done, she carefully transitions from her nun persona: she changes into a bra, which sits below her breasts, stockings, red heels and a garter belt. She moves and dresses delicately so not to expel Jesus. The zipping up of her stockings concludes the transformation, and thus zipping her legs shut (Cierra las Piernas). Schechner describes the reaction amongst the audience as a mixture of "shock, sympathy, and disgust."⁶² Boliver complicates the boundaries of what is perceived as proper interaction with the female body. Through the incisions she brings the abject to the surface of her body. The abject is what society believes needs to be cast aside in order to go on living. This is revealed to be untrue: Boliver lives but suffers. She proves the Symbolic construction of the female body is false; "corps proper (clean and proper)"⁶³ representations can be abandoned, as traumas take form through her pained abject body. Harradine suggests "by literally admitting these "unspeakable" aspects of embodiment the whole binary system of

⁵⁹ Ibid, p150

⁶⁰ See Appendix D

⁶¹ See Appendix E

⁶² Schechner, *Performed Imaginaries*, p150

⁶³ Campbell, Patrick. *The Body in Performance*, p15

inner/outer, central/, marginal, on which subjectivity is founded, collapses."⁶⁴ Boliver interrogates the borders of her body, thus demonstrating the fragility of the confines of female identity. Demonstrating the female body outside of a sterile, private space proves to be of extreme importance for an audience to realise that something is wrong; as she uses the abject to play out traumas, the audience are able to evaluate their own. We see that Boliver's performance proves that female's identities will not die in the uncovering of true representations of the body, but will reconstruct themselves.

Schechner's performance review describes his encounter with Boliver backstage after *Cierra las Piernas* at New York University. He describes the afterbirth of Jesus's insertion: "Boliver and the assistant take Jesus out amidst plenty of blood... Is she giving birth or getting rid of what has raped her (culturally speaking), or both? Is this the afterbirth of a performance? Is the blood also a kind of menstruation?"⁶⁵ Although Boliver's blood does not expel until after the performance, her performative action plays with the potential for this fluid to seep through the wounds that she has made. The title of the performance, *Close Your Legs*, suggests restriction and confinement, the result of the pressures of being a celibate, discrete woman in society. Schechner's question: "Is she giving birth or getting rid of what has raped her?" Suggests that this idea of expelling what has forcefully been inserted into her body inform both conclusions, as she enacts a brutal "Virgin-Whore dyad"⁶⁶; she transforms herself from nun to "whore". The transition between personas shows the absurdity of perceived identity, especially

⁶⁴ Ibid, p15

⁶⁵ Schechner, *Performed Imaginaries*, p151

⁶⁶ Ibid, p150

for women who are categorised as either "virgin" or "whore". It could be suggested that Boliver, like Finley, enacts female mimesis. By partnering these two misrepresentations (virgin/whore) and finding the literal place where the two stereotypes meet, she challenges the constructs of those stereotypes. Boliver finds the literal connection between the two in the form of a Jesus dildo, which she forcefully contains within her vagina, her labium acting as the confining constructs. She interrogates the identity of her own self, utilizing the abject to deny the notion of a fixed identity, whilst playing out over her physical body the stereotypes of nun and "whore". Although both Boliver and Finley enact radically different performance languages, they both reenact disembodied bodies serving the oppressive history of women.

Both artists threaten the patriarchal gaze in the hopes of enabling a critical gaze; the spectator questions the abnormality of their performance as well as their own disgust towards it. Both use their bodies as terrains where the terrors of misrepresentation meet reality. This releases the body from existing as merely a sexual, desired, sterile object. The silent nude becomes the abject medium to challenge the constructs of identity. The spectator's reaction, however, must be investigated further; if it is not a sexual reaction, are they only capable of feeling disgust? Within these artists' threats to the Symbolic order, how can they ensure that their intended meaning is received by a critical gaze?

iii)

Controlling the Gaze

the controlled, discrete and oppressed body

"This Women Performs Acts of Gross Lewdness. Not in Soho, But at a Top Arts Centre. You guessed it – Your Taxes Are Paying her."⁶⁷ John Torode, The Daily Mail

The re-assertion of female identity has proved essential for the female performance artists in question, using performance as a field to express, confront, and break down symbols constructed by an ordered society. We shall see how these performances, regarded as abject and perverse, are considered by psychoanalytic theorist Kristeva as a "disruption within the order-loving symbolic realm,"⁶⁸ and how a

⁶⁷ Campbell, Patrick. *The Body in Performance*, p53

⁶⁸ Lynn Beavis, *Performance Art, Censorship And Psychoanalysis: Theorizing The Outrageous Acts Of Karen Finley*, 1st edn (Canada: Research Gate, 2016), pp. 1-144 <<http://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/2112/1/MQ78010.pdf>> [accessed 25 April 2016]. p12

disruption of this symbolic order is essential for society's progression. The Law suggests that these disruptions are permissible, with no technical systems infringing the expression of speech. In the United States, The First Amendment Act disallows Congress to abridge freedom of speech, and the 1968 Theatres Act brings about the abolition of censorship within the UK. However, patriarchal definitions of what is deemed appropriate in society have still managed to take control over the production of female body art. We will firstly investigate the importance of art performance for helping the development of society, and how this progression is met with fear of those within "the order-loving symbolic realm."⁶⁹ We will then discuss Finley's work in regards to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) controversies in the 1980's and 90's. The NEA controversies will be used as a starting point for a psychoanalytic investigation into the nature of censorship, shedding light on its function in society as a veil masking the 'unacceptable.' In the exploration of Finley's work we will witness its paradoxical nature; as she is sanctioned through economic power, her work is censored, and thus her female body further repressed and disregarded. We will witness the dangerous power of an authoritarian view on society, as fear spreads to the people, and readings of the body become more confused. Rocio Boliver confronts the subject of social censorship within her performance; we will see how far the exposure of what is "forbidden, perverse and censored" enables the spectator to think critically about what happens in society, or adversely, to react against it. It becomes vital for these performance artists to find a voice through the censored, and to transgress the margins as a viable source of provocation, in order for the continued evolving of conversation surrounding sexuality.

⁶⁹ Beavis, Performance Art, Censorship And Psychoanalysis p12

Artists are significant symbolic deviants in our society, their work calling out negative responses from large numbers of people... Deviance signals that something is awry, and can contribute to society's flexibility and growth. But if society mobilizes its defences to stave off challenges to the status quo, deviance may also unwittingly lead to rigidity. Deviance therefore has a dual character. It is transgressive yet positive...⁷⁰

The NEA is an agency providing grants for organisations and individual artists. Although Sprinkle was never funded by the NEA, she was supported by agencies who did. Finley, however, was labelled as one of the 'NEA 4', a group of artists who were proposed grants which were then retracted. It was Finley's performance, *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1989-90) that was singled out for its alleged obscenity. The performance consists of her layering substances onto her body: egg, chocolate, bananas. As she layers the food, she also layers words about abuse and harassment. Her body became a political tool, and it was these that the authorities feared. The NEA were pressured by Congress and 'New Right' ideology to alter their promotion for the type of art that was considered "obscene female sexuality."⁷¹ What they really feared, however, was the confrontation of the themes of rape, incest, and violence being explored through the female body.

⁷⁰ Steven C Dubin, *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions* (London: Routledge, 1992). P2

⁷¹ Beavis, *Performance Art, Censorship And Psychoanalysis*, p2

Authorities feared that indecent exposure would get into the heads of weak individuals, and believed the breaking down of these constructed boundaries would lead to society's deterioration. Lynn Beavis in *Performance Art, Censorship and Psychoanalysis*, takes a psychoanalysis approach to the NEA controversies and suggests:

the New Right's insistence on the loss of decency in this work, in fact, may be viewed as a mask (fetish) for their perhaps unconscious realisation that the real loss would be their own position of authority – in this light, a form of cultural anxiety.⁷²

This suggests that the indecent nature of Finley's work was censored in the fear of the castration of the 'New Right's own power in society. In order to regain political control and to reassert their values of morality they had to find "remedies (that) could not be found in the law,"⁷³ and turned to economic punishment. Senator Jesse Helms proposed "a \$45,000 cut to the NEA and a five year ban on funding SECCA and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia (ICA)."⁷⁴ The cutting of these artists' grants becomes a symbol of the need for society to be "protected", suggesting that their art is dangerous. It alters how people perceive and read their work, and thus how they read the female body. This has paradoxical outcomes to the intended meaning of the artists at work, with their aims to "demystify the body."⁷⁵ Somehow the "Law of the

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Ibid, p52

⁷⁴ Dubin, *Arresting Images*, p100

⁷⁵ Patrick, *The Body in Performance*, p63

Father"⁷⁶ brings further fear and prejudice to markings of the body. Diverting from 'normal' representations and roles that mark female bodies seemingly elicits further misrepresentations and reinforces cultural stereotypes.

One could argue that the biggest effect of economic sanctioning was not the cutting of funds but its effect on society at large. In the months following the NEA controversies "numerous other incidents took place, and a climate of cultural vigilantism developed." The fear of the government turned into the fear of society, as the repressive environment influenced other art agencies' "standards of decency", and most importantly those of society itself. Finley's act of smearing chocolate onto her semi-nude body serves to open a dialogue to the treatment of the female body; her body as "material fact"⁷⁷ becomes a disgraceful scene of indecency. The hopes of stirring people to critically question their lives is threatened when individuals do not think independently, but are influenced by a dominating view. The authority's fear seeps into the masses, and the artist's voice, represents the marginalised, becomes particularly hard to convey. As Walter Benjamin suggests, "the greater the number of people that are packed into a tiny space, the more repulsive and offensive becomes the brutal indifference, the unfeeling concentration of each person on his private affairs".⁷⁸ This suggests and supports findings thus far, that morality is determined by the consciousness of the pack. Individuals are led by groups, which engenders a collective conscientiousness and makes it difficult for individuals to consider why they are

⁷⁶ Ibid, p55

⁷⁷ Richard, and Karen, A Constant State of Becoming: An Interview, p153

⁷⁸ Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt and Harry Zohn, Illuminations (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968) p168/9

shocked or disgusted. A vicious circle is slowly becoming apparent; as Schneeman states, "we who are addressing the taboos become the taboo. The suppressors are confused."⁷⁹

We will now further explore the oppressive nature of a majority view, and how the pressure to behave in "appropriate" manner might constitute in itself part of the mechanism of repression. Social censorship could be seen as one of society's biggest corruptions. The oppressive values taught by dominant ideologies could be on religious or political grounds, however are usually determined by a view that constitutes itself as the "right" or "appropriate" way. "In psychoanalytic terms, censorship is the process by which the unthinkable is blocked from entering consciousness, and which inhibits impulses and actions that are socially unacceptable."⁸⁰ In cultural practice, psychoanalytic theory of censorship is replicated, as socially inappropriate behaviour is disregarded as it conflicts with official ideals within society. We have previously discussed the margins from which these female performance artists emerge, vocalising the "unthinkable" and the "inappropriate" in the form of their own pleasures and sufferings. It is these acts that are encouraged not to enter consciousness, as acts "which refuse or transcend pre-established expectations represent a threat in that they draw attention to the uncanny, the difference which must remain masked."⁸¹ The threat lies behind the uncanny (*unheimlich*), which Freud suggests should remain masked and concealed, for whoever draws attention to the uncanny cannot become a productive

⁷⁹ Carolee Schneeman, "The Obscene Body/Politic", *Art Journal*, 50 (1991), 28 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/7777320>>. p35

⁸⁰ Beavis, Lynn. "Performance Art, Censorship and Psychoanalysis" p46

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p14

member of society. It is the constant masking of the uncanny that has conditioned behaviour within society. Throughout childhood, women are sanctioned through the experience of the female body; one is made to feel embarrassed in the accidental exposures/discoveries of the naked body, sanctioned for pleasure and shunned for its development. The threat lies within performance art as it exposes bodily truths that are usually masked. It is this transgressive body that criticises "the patriarchal order that maintains such systems of privilege."⁸² These artists stand out as individuals, as they act against the need to be a "productive member of society."⁸³

What better than to dive headlong into the forbidden, perverse, censored... How far can you go when you're offered a space of freedom, how much are you prepared to go out on a limb. (Rocio Boliver)

With Boliver, there is no fear of self-censorship as she thrives in pushing her body to confront her own as well as other women's' repressions; "If it wasn't sex that [being] censored she would investigate something else that was."⁸⁴ Rocio comes from a liberal perspective in regards to Mexican culture: bought up by her father, a muralist, and a Spanish mother, Boliver regarded her upbringing as 'cosmopolitan'. She encountered social censorship from her peers, as what she considered to be "appropriate" was noticeably different from the other girls in her Catholic school led by

⁸² Ibid, p64/5

⁸³ Ibid, p23

⁸⁴ "Rocio Boliver | Wtnstnf", Wtnstnf.wordpress.com, 2014 <<https://wtnstnf.wordpress.com/category/rocio-boliver/>> [accessed 25 April 2016].

Nuns. She states: "from THE WOMEN became the first terrible castration."⁸⁵ She was sanctioned for her sexual freedom, and remembers that she was made to feel guilty for masturbating "too much." This act was met with abuse from her female peers, who reiterated "YOU ARE BICH, WE ARE VIRGENS."⁸⁶ The women (society) defined themselves as "virgins" and her as a "bitch," vocalising the way they had been conditioned to perceive female sexuality. But what kind of repressions were the nuns hiding? Boliver also comments on the name of her performance piece, *Cierra las piernas* (Close your legs), acknowledging the social rules women have to abide to. In this title, she questions why this is, and how this affects one's perception of their body. "Close your legs, why? Because if you, as a woman, open your legs it means that you have something terrible dirty in the middle of your legs."⁸⁷ Rocio performs society's repressive sanctioning as she brutally zips and sews her legs and vagina together. Through this action she is mimicking her repression and ironically suggesting that now, her body can sublime both female misrepresentations.

I close my legs with a big zipper I saw at my legs, but "the baby jesus" was inside. The neckless of pearls are the tears of both. I finish the performance braking the neckless and throw away the "tears" of them (virgin/bitch) because now they are together. No more time alone and separate.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ See Appendix C

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Ibid

⁸⁸ Ibid

We have established the need for the individual to remain critical to the body's truths and physicalities in the hopes of confronting and releasing repressions. The problem remains of state and social censorship, as it continues to encourage the masking of society's "unacceptable" aspects, fantasy ruling over reality. Here we return to the problems of a disembodied spectator, discussed in Carolee Schneemann's attempts to dissolve the blind spectator in *Fuses*. The space that is produced between the artwork and the artist allows for imaginations and fear to be projected onto the object. Censorship enhances the void for meaning, and an offended society only constitutes a passive spectator and a lazy morality. It is interesting to investigate western society's progression from the NEA controversies, as even now it is still clear we live in a world that struggles to debate. A recent example of this was the removal of the live art piece 'Exhibit B' from the Barbican, Europe's largest multi-arts venue, just two years ago. The piece rallied violent protesters, claiming the performance was an "outrageous act of racism."⁸⁹ This performance encapsulated the sufferings of those of African heritage within their experiences of 'Human Zoos' during the colonial era. Rather than considering that the piece provided insight into a horrific period in history, it was believed, by nature of its exhibition, that the piece propounded the narratives it was attempting to condone, objectifying African slaves. Instead of encouraging debate, the exhibition was removed altogether. Terence Blacker dreams a different world:

⁸⁹ Daisy Wyatt, "Exhibit B 'Human Zoo'", *The Independent*, 2014 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/exhibit-b-human-zoo-show-cancelled-by-the-barbican-following-protest-9753519.html>> [accessed 25 April 2016].

A saner, braver world, [wherein] those who prefer to know the truth, however "challenging" or discomfiting, would be in the majority, and the simplifiers and suppressors would be put in their place. It would seem obvious that anyone who opposed thought and debate should be distrusted.⁹⁰

At present, this is not the world we live in. As the need to appease an ever-growing number of visible, individualized opinions, provocations continue to lead to "moral laziness"⁹¹. We live in a confusing world: On the Guardian website, the top stories adjacent to the article about 'Exhibit B' read, "Mother Holds Down Daughter as Stepfather Rapes Her."⁹² We have been taught to look and to be shocked, but not to look and to think. As such, the female body will continue to be vulnerable, as its misrepresentations will continue to find new manifestations in a society where people are continuously encouraged to be lazy. Feminist photographer Petra Collins reacts against photographs of herself exposing a few pubic hairs being removed from the Internet, and fights back when comments such as "horrible" and "disgusting"⁹³ are made on these pictures. She asks people to dissect their reaction to these images, and poignantly asks them to

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² Kehinde Andrews, "Is Art Installation Exhibit B Racist?", the Guardian, 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/27/is-art-installation-exhibit-b-racist>> [accessed 25 April 2016].

⁹³ "Petra Collins On Censorship And The Female Body | Fashion Magazine | News. Fashion. Beauty. Music. | Oystermag.Com", OYSTER, 2013 <<http://www.oystermag.com/petra-collins-on-censorship-and-the-female-body>> [accessed 25 April 2016].

"think about WHY you felt this way, WHY this image was so shocking, WHY you have no tolerance for it. Hopefully you will come to understand that it might not be you thinking these things but society telling you how to think."⁹⁴

Conclusion

The body becomes shackled as soon as the child leaves its mother, pushed into a conditioned existence. We have explored several female performance artists' attempts to unfold the female body's markings, in the hopes of discovering their 'true' embodiment. It has been made clear that there is huge potential within performance art to help "focus our minds on the matter of what is being seen and heard, and to open the text on possibilities of thought and action."⁹⁵ It may be suggested that the performance space becomes a liminal period where the female body is given a platform to allow the abject to surface, the taboo to find reality, and the repressed to be expressed. This space allows for boundaries to be deconstructed, but the true potential lies within audiences bringing these messages beyond the space of freedom and into a field of social potential.

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ Jennifer, Doyle, *Sex Objects*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) p19

The moment of reception proves to be just as vulnerable as the performances in themselves. Majority views continue to implicate the masses, and potential within performance may become warped by a fixed gaze that may be very difficult to alter. However, performers may still be able to regain some agency through their association with intellectual and artistic movements within the period of their creation, such as Schneeman's work which is bound in second-wave feminist notions of the 60's. Through sexual liberation and celebration, she embraces her sexual body. Sprinkle, emerging in the 80's, places her formerly fetishized body in full view as she regains her own pleasure and attempts to educate the audience on the realities of sex.

It seems that the phallogentric gaze is clearly stuck within its own constructions, as its narcissistic tendencies prove difficult to see through. The female body is still perceived as an object for male desire. It is clear in the works of Finley and Boliver that another side of the constructed gaze is the patriarchal notion of authority, and the act of social censorship which confines the female body to certain roles of "female." Finley and Boliver become a medium expressing how the body is made to repress its own femininity. They are met with the fearful "law of the Father," which reinstates fears inherent within repression, thus further oppressing the body. It is interesting to acknowledge cross-cultural explorations of the body, as Boliver displays how the same source of society's repressions are manifested in different forms.

Even today, it sometimes seems impossible to escape the limits of the male gaze. Receptions of my own performances have been limited to these constricting viewpoints, even when the aim of the performance is to expose them for their absurdity. Within my final performance at Goldsmiths, myself and five other women conducted a movement piece in which we explored the ludicrousness of constructs of femininity: clad in tight sports clothes, we acted out scenes in which we were consciously yet ridiculously over-sexualized, covered in food or cling-film, performing dances with saucepans and clucking like chicks. After the performance, all a male friend could offer for praise was that one of our performers "had a great body" and that his girlfriend should endeavour to look as good in a sports thong one-piece.

As feminist discourses have progressed, women may not be burnt as witches or, at least in our culture, confined to the household. There still exists, however, specific and misrepresented markings of femininity. Stereotypes of "mother", "daughter", "virgin", "whore" and the "passive", "discrete", "clean", "desirable" woman are continually encouraged. It is how women acknowledge and deal with these roles that they may find their own liberation. Although transgressive female bodies are still met with opposition, it is important to acknowledge the danger of self-censorship, as "discursive silence is the most violent and dangerous place to fall into – and which, through uncertainty, frustration, and discomfort, must be resisted by feminists at all costs."⁹⁶ It is important to go back, remove the constructs you are defined by, find that moment of revolt, the moment when the skin of the milk touches your lip, and run.

⁹⁶ Eleanor, Roberts, "Why Bodies? Restock, Rethink, Reflect Three". Are We There yet? (2013)

"women are the wolf of the woman"⁹⁷ Rocio Boliver

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⁹⁷ See Appendix F

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Appendix:

Appendix A – Annie Sprinkle, Public Cervix Announcement



Annie Sprinkle demystifies her cervix by inviting to investigate, with the aid of a speculum and a torch light. <http://anniesprinkle.org/a-public-cervix-announcement/>

Appendix B - Email correspondence between Rocio Boliver and I, the answers to these questions appear elsewhere inside the dissertation. (Sent on 10/04/2016)

Hi Rocio,

So great to hear from you!

I hope these questions make sense.

What are some kinds of sexually repressive ideologies surrounding women's bodies in Mexico?

To what extent do your performances disrupt the repression and misrepresentation of women's bodies?

Your performative actions seem to cause you great amounts of pain--is this pain a way of exploring suffering that you have endured personally or the collective suffering of women in your society?

In Cierras Las Piernas, you found a meeting place between two female archetypes (virgin/whore) --was this with the intent of satirizing these absurd stereotypes of femininity?

Thank you so much for your time,

Kind Regards

Jess

x

To: jess_tier@hotmail.co.uk

From: saberescoger@hotmail.com

sorry for my English.

hello!

I don't know if you have interest because I think there must be a text of Richard Schechner about that performance.

Anway.

There is not Mexico. When I start performance I bealived that my work was radical and the people in Mexico get shock or engray or afraid..., but then I started to travel all over the world and more or less y similar. Why? because this women's body represion is still "working" everywhere. I wad born in Mexico from a mother from Spain and father from Mexico, an artist quite known by his painting murals. So I grow up in a " open mind" and cosmopolite eniroment, but even, was dificult for me because I thought everything was so natural, normal: naked bodies, fuck, flirt..., but from THE WOMEN became the first terrible castration. I could hear: YOU ARE A BICH, WE ARE VIRGENS.

I grow up with that dicotomía. I when to a nun school. I felt that I was very very bad. I masturbate very very much. I felt terrible afraid about GOD and hell.

Then I understand the fucking game. So, I use this "hibrid" of woman: THE VIRGEN AS A BITCH AND THE BITCH AS A VIRGEN. I want to sublime both in one. There is not virgen without a bitch and viceversa.

The first time, in this performance, was not easy to take the courage to put "the baby jesus" inside of mu vagina. In all of my performance I work the moust terrorifics goust in my mind. Cierra las piernas, mean Close your legs. Why? because if you, as a woman, open yor legs means that you have something terrible dirty in the.midle of your legs. Since we are kids the adults tell us "close your legs", shouting!

So, yes I wanted to make a unic entity with those aparentely oposit entities than can not be possible to be together.

I use pain moust of the time in my art work for make accesible for the audience, the pain of the soul, mind, spirit..., not only mine but everybody.

When people look blood or body pain they undestand inmediatly that something is wrong, but not the same with the traumas.

A whore is sublime like as a virgen and the virgen can't sublime itself if she is not a whore. They absolutely can't not exist separate.

Yes, I close my legs with a big zipper I saw at my legs, but "the baby jesus" was inside. The neckless of perls are the tears of both. I finish the performance braking the neckles and throw away the "tears" of them (virgen/bitch) because now they are together. No more time alone and separate.

xoxoxox

Rocio

--- Mensaje Original ---

Appendix D - Rocio Boliver, lubricating Jesus action figure



Rocio Boliver, Cierra las Piernas (Close your legs), 2003, Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics NYU (New York University), 2003

Appendix E - Rocio Boliver, inserting Jesus action figure



Rocio Boliver, Cierra las Piernas (Close your legs), 2003, Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics NYU (New York University), 2003

Appendix F- Permission to use email correspondence with Rocio Boliver

To: jess_tier@hotmail.co.uk
saberescoger@hotmail.com

Thank you, Jess

It was my pleasure, and I understand much more of that performance, hahaha.

You can use my e mail as you want. If you get money from it, save 50 % for me!!!

Do not forget to send me your dissertation when be ready. If I get money from it, I will save you the 50%!

I hope to meet you soon and of course I will ask you to give me a hand, deal??

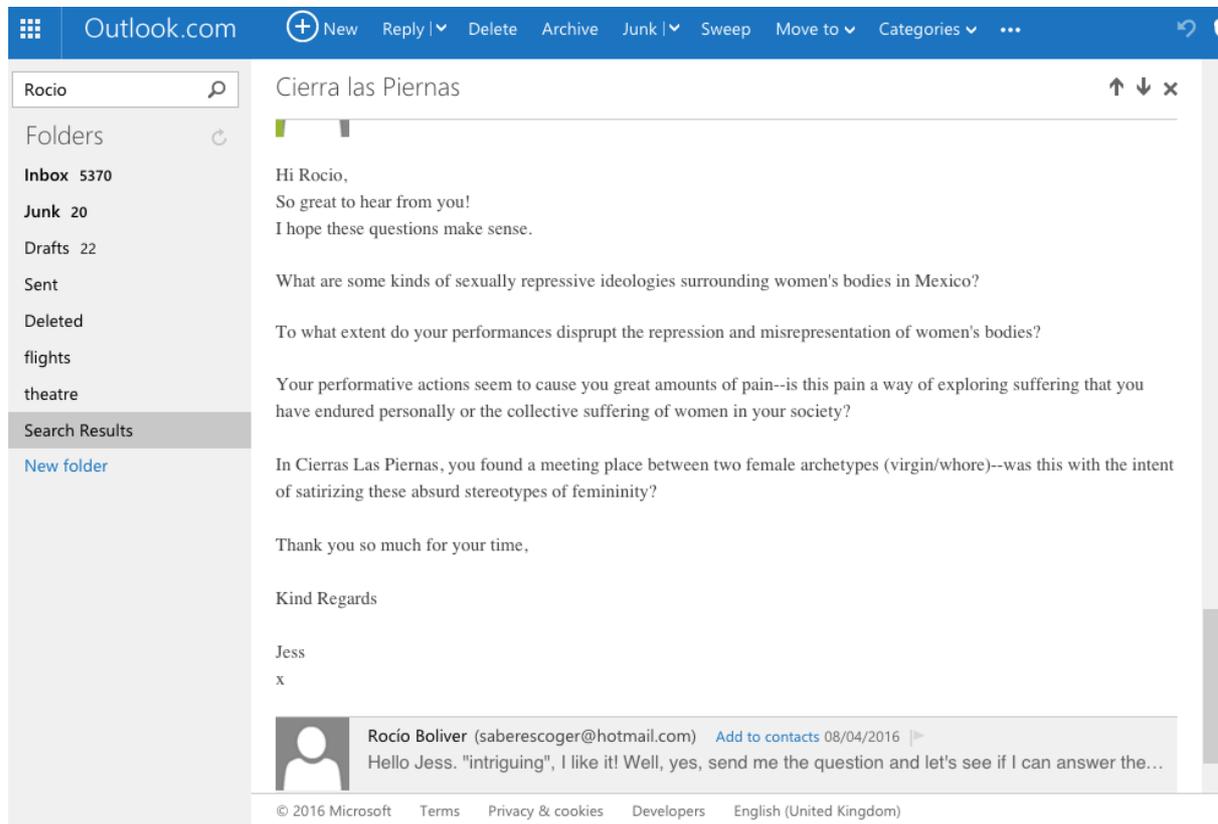
"women are the wolf of the woman". Rocio Boliver

All the Best

Rocio

www.rocioboliver.com

Screenshot of Appendix B -



Screenshot of Appendix C

Screenshot of Appendix D –

The screenshot shows the Outlook.com interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'Outlook.com' and various actions like 'New', 'Reply', 'Delete', 'Archive', 'Junk', 'Sweep', 'Move to', and 'Categories'. On the left, a sidebar lists folders: 'Inbox 5370', 'Junk 20', 'Drafts 22', 'Sent', 'Deleted', 'flights', 'theatre', 'Search Results', and 'New folder'. The main area displays an email thread titled 'Cierra las Piernas'. The first email is from Rocio Boliver (saberescoger@hotmail.com) dated 14/04/2016, addressed to Jess Tier (jess_tier@hotmail.co.uk). The text of the email reads: 'Thank you, Jess. It was my pleasure, and I understand much more of that performance, hahaha. You can use my e mail as you want. If you get money from it, save 50 % for me!!! Do not forget to send me your dissertation when be ready. If I get money from it, I will save you the 50%! I hope to meet you soon and of course I will ask you to give me a hand, deal?? "women are the wolf of the woman". Rocio Boliver'. Below this is a link to 'www.rocioboliver.com'. The second email is from Jess Tier dated 13/04/2016, replying: 'Hi Rocio THANK YOU SO MUCH for that amazing email!! I absolutely loved it, and would love to ...'. The third email is from Rocio Boliver dated 12/04/2016, showing a snippet: '-----Mensaje original----- Desde: "Rocio Boliver" <saberescoger@hotmail.com> Enviado: 11 de a...'. The footer of the email interface includes '© 2016 Microsoft', 'Terms', 'Privacy & cookies', 'Developers', and 'English (United Kingdom)'. At the bottom, a taskbar shows three open documents: 'jess disso updated.doc', 'Parts of a Good Essa....doc', and 'Undergraduate Handb....pdf'.