

Spring 2015

For Your Viewing (Dis)Pleasure: Investigating Power, Bodies, and Objectification Through Performance-Based Video Art

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**For Your Viewing (Dis)Pleasure: Investigating Power, Bodies, and
Objectification Through Performance-Based Video Art**

Betsy Johnson

A Senior Honors Project Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Honors Degree Program

Faculty Sponsor:
Rachel Simmons

Rollins College
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Introduction

Over the course of the past year, I have been developing a body of studio work, consisting of two videos. The present thesis paper, which discusses my process and the theoretical underpinnings of *I Touch Myself (Raw)* and *ICERACK* expands upon my early interest in the concept of the body as a site where power dynamics are constructed, deconstructed, and play out. Sociologist Erving Goffman's 1963 book, *Stigma*; political philosopher and sociologist Flavia Monceri's 2012 essay, "Beyond the Rules: Transgressive Bodies and Political Power"; and prominent social theorist Michel Foucault's 1975 book, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, formed the foundation for my thinking on the subject of the body and how power is exercised through, between, across, and/or on bodies. The violence against women that I almost constantly perceive in everyday life—directed toward other women and/or myself—has led me to focus specifically on power dynamics in relation to "female" and/or women's bodies. Using my relationship with my own body as a queer, gender non-conforming woman as a lens, this work investigates the role of objectification in the sociopolitical and cultural structures that forcibly position women's bodies as sites of control under "white supremacist, capitalist [hetero]patriarchy."¹

Here, it is important to acknowledge and define my use of the term "woman" in my thinking and writing about this particular body of work as denoting those who identify as women and/or those who were assigned female at birth. While it is

¹ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 146.

essentializing and, in most cases, problematic to define “woman” in such a way that includes those who do not identify as women (e.g. those whom others *read* as women or as possessing a “female” body, etc.), it is important for my working definition to include those individuals, because the work explores how various forces generate, enforce, change, and destroy what it means to have and/or exist in relation to the dominant construction of the “female” body under heteronormative patriarchy.²

Monceri, in a paper titled “Sadomasochism: Deconstructing Sexual Identity through Power,” defines power as “an ‘asymmetrical relation’ emerging from the interaction – at the most basic level – between two human individuals,” specifying that she subscribes to Michel Foucault’s understanding that “power itself is to be understood as a ‘social institution’, in the sense that it is a pattern of order aiming at reducing the complexity of the concrete interactions by selecting the most widely diffused world of descriptions.”³ This concise definition of power points back to Goffman, who describes in greater detail the “pattern of order” that ultimately dictates how power is distributed in any given environment:

Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories...The routines of social intercourse in established settings allow us to deal with anticipated others without special attention or thought. When a stranger comes into our presence, then, first appearances are

² I have included in this thesis an “Acknowledgements” section that further addresses this and other potential limitations due to this project’s particular scope.

³ “Sadomasochism: Deconstructing Sexual Identity through Power,” In *Persons and Sexuality: Interdisciplinary Reflections* ed. Allison Moore and Carlo Zuccarini, Oxford: Inter-disciplinary Press, 2009: 128.

likely to enable us to anticipate his..."social identity"...We lean on these anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands.⁴

My conceptualization of the body as a site where power relations form, evolve, and disintegrate is informed by Goffman's remarks, which implicate the body as the source of the "righteously presented demands" that he describe, as well as my understanding of society's leading role in "develop[ing] various mechanisms to control the human body and the language associated with it."⁵

Straddling the gap between my personal experiences and the critical theory that I have assembled into a worldview, my work contains different pools of meaning and content that seep into and through one another to form an intricate system of signs and potential interpretations. By discussing my process of thinking/making—a circular process in which thinking generates making which generates thinking, and so on—in building this body of work, I hope to unpack some of the work's meanings and to contextualize the work both within contemporary art and within critical theory—namely feminist theory. A brief outline of the foundational concepts and theoretical frameworks guiding my practice and thought will prime a later discussion of my process and the evolution of my ideas leading up to the finished body of work.

⁴ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 2.

⁵ Annamma Joy and Alladi Venkatesh, "Postmodernism, Feminism and the Body: The Visible and the Invisible in Consumer Research," *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 11 (1994): 340.

Concepts

Central to my work are the concepts of the male gaze, the sexual objectification of women, agency, and the pleasure of looking as discussed in feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's classic essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."⁶ Mulvey's essay, which uses psychoanalysis as a lens to deconstruct cinema as a system, exposes the structures guiding how we see (i.e. understand visual representations of) women and men. In this work, I have layered Judith Butler's conception of gender performativity, and the related concept of heteronormativity—the ideas that gender is a social construction and that both gender and sexuality are performed rather than innate—on top of Mulvey's consideration of the male gaze, in order to analyze my own position as a queer woman within patriarchal society and visual culture. Combining Mulvey, Butler, and several other theorists' ideas, my work aims to subvert or momentarily disrupt the male gaze in order to call attention to the complex and often veiled structures that govern bodies and relations between bodies.⁷

Here, I will provide some working definitions of the terms and theories listed above as I have come to understand them through my research, beginning with the male gaze, a concept closely tied to objectification. Despite its shortcomings as an outdated, Second Wave feminist text, Silvia Federici's 1975 essay, "On Sexuality as

⁶ John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) supplements my understanding of Mulvey, their ideas overlapping at several junctures.

⁷ Further discussion of these "other" theories will follow in the "Execution" section, as they are more easily explained in relation to specifics of the work itself.

Work,” provides an access point into theory around the male gaze and objectification through a description of one of its symptoms or effects:

Whether we are skinny or plump, long or short nosed, tall or small, we all hate our body. We hate it because we are accustomed to look at it from the outside, with the eyes of the men we meet, and with the bodies-market in mind. We hate it because we are used to think[ing] of it as something to sell, something that has become almost independent of us and that is always on a counter.⁸

The male gaze describes the seeing of women’s bodies as sexual objects. Art critic John Berger expounds upon the gaze, a phenomenon that is built into the traditional Western visual tradition:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object.⁹

In describing how the male gaze functions in both men and women (i.e. shaping all people’s perceptions of and relationships to women’s bodies), Federici and Berger allude to the concept of sexual objectification. Objectification refers to the often unconscious mechanism embedded in the male gaze that strips agency, or subjecthood (i.e. the power to act or exist autonomously), from women, reducing them to the pleasure that a heterosexual man, or any looker for that matter, might attain from using their bodies in some way. In the dynamic between the objectifying

⁸ Contemporary feminist theory (i.e. Third/Fourth Wave) gives us the tools and language to recognize Federici’s essay as problematic for its blatant heterosexism and erasure of queer and trans lives. Silvia Federici, “On Sexuality as Work,” *The Commoner* 15 (2012): 93, <http://www.commoner.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/05-federici.pdf>.

⁹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 47.

(subject) and the objectified (object), the subject is defined by his agency, his power and freedom to act *upon* the object. The objectification process is a subject-forming one, that is, one through which (male) agency is generated. The act of drawing, or mark-making, demonstrates how the subject is formed in opposition to its object: the subjective “I” is recognized by the mark-maker when he activates a pencil and leaves a mark. Simultaneously reaffirming the pencil’s objectness, the act of mark-making affirms the subject’s (mark-maker) role as activator of the object. The mark-maker understands his subjectivity as the inverse of the pencil’s objectness.¹⁰ Yves Klein’s parodic “anthropometries” performances of the early 1960s, in which Klein directed nude, female models covered in paint to roll across canvas to make paintings, provide the ultimate representation of the subject-forming facet of objectification. Feminist art historian and critic Amelia Jones remarks:

Klein’s ostentatiously offensive objectifications of the female body in the anthropometries reiterate even as they parody the closed systems by which modernist art production and reception, under a façade of neutrality, continue to compose rigid and exclusionary structures of artistic meaning and value: while the male artist plays with his authority, the female is still body – fetishized phallic substitute.¹¹

The male gaze and its function, objectification, not only reduce the objectified (woman) to the role of the passive object, whose purpose is to please men, but also reaffirms and forms the viewer’s role as active agent and consumer.

¹⁰ Berger, 45-46.

¹¹ Amelia Jones, “Dis/playing the Phallus: Male Artists Perform Their Masculinities,” *Art History* 17, no. 4 (1994): 564.

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey defines the Freudian term “scopophilia,” the pleasure of looking, in order to introduce her own term, “fetishistic scopophilia,” which describes how the looker overcomes his castration anxiety in looking at the female figure by turning the figure herself into a fetish object.¹² Mulvey uses the concept of scopophilia, which traditionally refers to the pleasure of *secret* looking associated with voyeurism, because her argument concerns cinema, which involves the apparatus of the darkened theatre.¹³ Regarding, however, my appropriation of the terminology of the pleasure of looking, I am not concerned with the voyeuristic function of the concept, and I use the term to refer to a more general pleasure of looking.

Now that I have unpacked the basic terms and concepts around Mulvey and the male gaze, I will summarize Judith Butler’s conceptions of sex and gender as socially constructed, performed, and enforced, beginning with the concept of gender performativity.

Butler’s conception of gender performativity—that gender is not innate, but rather performed—is based on Simone de Beauvoir’s famous observation that, “one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman.”¹⁴ Butler describes gender as “an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*...through time.”¹⁵ In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler extends the concept of gender as socially constructed (i.e. performed) to sex. By pointing to the constructedness of sex and gender, Butler’s ideas also

¹² Mulvey, 12-13.

¹³ Ibid, 9.

¹⁴ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519.

¹⁵ Ibid, 519-520.

undermine the patriarchal myth of heterosexuality as biologically “natural.” Heteronormativity, then, describes the structure of “cultural, legal, and institutional practices that maintain normative assumptions that there are two and only two genders, that gender reflects biological sex, and that only sexual attraction between these ‘opposite’ genders is natural or acceptable.”¹⁶

Compulsory heterosexuality, a facet of heteronormativity, describes “the covert socializations and the overt forces which have channeled women into marriage and heterosexual romance.”¹⁷ The various discriminations engendered by sexism (e.g. unequal wages, the idea that women are *naturally* prey to men) act together to enforce heterosexuality, particularly for women.¹⁸

Execution

I. Opening Remarks

I began building this body of work with a handful of concepts and ideas in mind, some of which were directly linked to one another, others which were more tangentially related, but all of which related back to the concept of women’s bodies as sites where power dynamics are constructed, deconstructed, and play out. With such a large mass of potential directions to take the work in, conceptually, I found

¹⁶ Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook, “Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity: ‘Gender Normals,’ Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality,” *Gender & Society* 23, no. 4 (2009): 441.

¹⁷ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Experience,” *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 636-637.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 641-642.

myself spending a considerable amount of time and energy attempting to find a way to link all the various ideas that I had explored in earlier work, psychoanalytic and feminist theories that I had read, and other observations taken from my everyday life, as though all of the thoughts jumbling around in my head were pieces of the same puzzle. I could perceive that the pieces could fit together in any number of interesting and novel ways, I just needed to find the right form that avoided cliché and was successful in communicating the complexity of my ideas. I also needed to determine exactly what those ideas were. Through a continuous process of generating, testing, and analyzing new ideas and forms, I have honed in on a more concise and cohesive set of ideas that has gained a sense of nuance that my early thinking and forms lacked. Having already enumerated upon the theoretical tenets upon which my work is based, I may now describe the process by which I have arrived at my finished forms, as I further contextualize my work in terms of both theory and contemporary art.

II. On Porn and Collage

With the key concepts of objectification, women's bodies, and power in mind, I began with the intentions to subvert the male gaze and to pose questions about agency by appropriating and manipulating images of women. At this early stage in my research and practice I was especially interested in how publically available, sexualized images of women (i.e. advertisements, narrative media, porn, fashion) contribute to and shape our societal conception of Woman. As Mulvey

demonstrates, the male gaze is embedded not only into how images of women are constructed but also into the process by which we, as consumers, consume and relate to images of women.¹⁹ From my reading of Mulvey, I extrapolated that within patriarchal visual culture, women's bodies often (perhaps always) function as vehicles for male agency, especially where sex is involved.

My experimentation with forms began with pornographic images taken from men's magazines. In an earlier installation (*Not Yet a Woman*, 2014) that dealt with what I have termed the "casual infantilization of women," I juxtaposed pornographic images taken from a copy of *Penthouse* magazine with paper doll clothes and stickers marketed to little girls.²⁰ The conceptual overlap between the earlier work and the new work led me to continue working with appropriated images from men's magazines. I decided to appropriate porn images for this body of work about objectification, women's bodies, and the power structures that govern them because porn is the logical conclusion of objectification and the male gaze when their more sublimated forms (e.g. cinema, as Mulvey discusses) are taken to their extremes. Heterosexual porn, because it so literally represents objectification and the male gaze—women's physical bodies are mechanically reproduced as objects (images) to be used by men to achieve sexual pleasure—seemed to be the appropriate vehicle for undermining the specific aspects of patriarchy with which I was concerned.

¹⁹ Mulvey is concerned with women as they are depicted in film, but her observations apply to all commercial representations of women. Mulvey, 6.

²⁰ The "casual infantilization of women" refers to the mechanisms throughout our culture (e.g. language, pop culture) that subtly perpetuate our conception of women as juvenile entities (i.e. agency-lacking objects) that need protecting, disciplining, and controlling.

Female porn actors/models in mainstream, heterosexual porn are often posed and photographed in such a way that invites the (male) viewer to imagine himself as penetrating her (real body). This point-of-view convention signifies the breakdown between image and reality that seems to characterize images of women that interested me most in working with porn. Furthermore, porn, especially that produced in the hyperreal style—evenly and brightly lit, close-up, high definition—that populates men magazines such as *Maxim*, *Playboy*, and *Penthouse* requires the viewer to thrust himself into a fantasy in which he can interact with the physical body of the woman depicted. The male gaze simultaneously relies on and facilitates the collapse of the barrier between image and reality. The intense desire to touch the physical bodies of women in porn (and all public media of women produced through the male gaze) further demonstrates the collapse.

The intense desire to touch—itsself a function of the breakdown between image and reality engendered by the male gaze and objectification—begets a sense of *entitlement* to touch. The very act of consuming (i.e. viewing as a means to achieve sexual pleasure and/or entering the fantasy space that the producers intend, in which the viewer takes the penetrating or otherwise “male” role) the type of point-of-view, heterosexual porn discussed above requires that the viewer feel, however subconsciously, entitled to the bodies of the women depicted. This entitlement to imaged women’s physical bodies is perhaps more overt when we consider relations between men and women in public spaces: the same entitlement is the driver behind

the success of strip clubs and underlies men's aggressive "flirting" behavior in bars and clubs as well as street harassment.

The pleasure of looking, as discussed above, informed my thinking about the breakdown between image and reality within images of women that is most perceptible in mainstream porn. The centrality of touch and materiality in my thinking about objectification led to my early decisions regarding medium. My decision to work with porn (i.e. images appropriated from men's magazines) accompanied my decision to return to collage, which I had used in the *Untitled* series. My past success with collage in as a strategy to deal with very similar concepts initially made it attractive as a mode of working for this body of work. I was most attracted to collage, however, for its emphasis on images as objects and the violence and fragmentation inherent in its process.

My first indicator that collage did not hold the potential that I had expected it to (for this particular body of work) related to my decision to switch from images cut out from physical copies of men's magazines to images taken from online sources. After setting out to acquire men's magazines, I quickly realized that the format is archaic and no longer reflects how most people access pornography. Without any particular reason to reference outmoded forms of porn, I began to compile and print images from Google image searches to collage, which allowed me to find images that matched a certain set of criteria somewhat efficiently.²¹ Beginning with no conceptual

²¹ I was looking for explicit, large, high definition images following the point-of-view convention discussed earlier. I was also looking for images of woman on woman heterosexual porn, in which models seemed to be performing lesbianism for the male viewer (i.e. disinterestedly engaging with each other and/or looking coyly at the camera).

reason to gather images using Google, I eventually became uncomfortable about introducing content about the Internet into the collages, because I wanted the emphasis of the work to be on the action performed to the appropriated images.

In one of my first experiments with collage, I cut several laser jet images printed onto ordinary copier paper into several pieces and pasted them to an unfinished piece of medium-density fibreboard (MDF). I allowed much of the MDF to show through in order to emphasize the object's objectness, and I coated the piece with glossy clear coat to refer to the glossy pages of magazines. I also experimented with scattering pubic hair across the surface of the piece. By fragmenting the images and collaging them with pubic hair, I hoped to disrupt the male gaze by stripping the images of their original purpose and repulsing the viewer, as well as signify how objectification strips women of their agency. I intended to further refer to objectification.²²

Conceptualizing the acts of rubbing and scratching as the potentially destructive extremes of touching (which, itself, is an extension of looking), I began looking for ways to represent obsessive touching through collage.²³ I found inspiration in Amie Dicke's physically sanded down, cut, and pierced images appropriated from fashion magazines.²⁴ Though the content of Dicke's collage work

²² Evoking a response of disgust in the viewer represents one strategy that I have developed as a way to subvert the gaze. By drawing the viewer in (i.e. activating the gaze) only to repulse them, I hope to push viewers to question their own subjectivities by recognizing and analyzing their (hopefully) strong emotional responses.

²³ In this vein, an early idea that never came to fruition because of perceived logistical difficulties was to produce scratch-n-sniff porn stickers.

²⁴ Thijs van Velzen, "Amie Dicke," *Freunde von Freunden*, April 5, 2012, <http://www.freundeVonFreunden.com/interviews/amie-dicke/>.

revolves around the fashion industry, with which my work is not explicitly concerned, the affect resulting from her violent treatment (e.g. cutting, piercing with hundreds of pins) of magazine ads very closely resembles that which I wanted to evoke with my collage work. I wanted to find my own collage technique and/or process that would call attention to the obsessive drive, omnipresent in patriarchal culture, to objectify and consume women's bodies.

I experimented with acetone transfers, which involve the rubbing of an image onto another surface using a cloth soaked in acetone. I found that—by scratching the surface of the board onto which I would then transfer an image—the original printed image picked up the scratches, leaving the imaged woman's body covered in wounds. My attempts to control precisely where the image picked up scratches failed. The transfer process only sometimes altered the paper images the way I intended. Seeing no way to resolve the aesthetic questions raised by the transfers, which were rather boring in and of themselves, and unhappy with the two-dimensional quality of the collage work I had been doing, I decided to approach collage one last time before abandoning it altogether.

I began creating and photographing sculptural collages, piles of crumpled up inkjet printouts of images taken from porn and fashion magazines. This final attempt at collage was more successful than the others, as the resulting photographs felt relatively fresh, interesting, and aesthetically resolved.



Betsy Johnson, *Sculptural Collage*, 2014

The elegance and beauty of the photographs, which depict a jumble of disfigured appendages and patches of smooth skin, represented to me, yes, a reclamation of images whose original purpose was perhaps problematic; however, I could not overlook the philosophical implications of using my agency as an art-maker to further commodify other women's bodies. Though I had intended to fragment and otherwise visibly alter certain types of images in order to abstract them to a point at which they would lose their intended meanings or uses as commodities, the final product simply represented a different form of commodifying violence against women, because the photographs' beauty overshadowed the subtlety of their grotesqueness.

There are often doubts as to whether the work of artists such as Richard Prince—who has been appropriating and re-presenting hypersexualized, commercial

images of women for several years—successfully provides critical commentary on the sexual objectification of women or simply contributes to the long heritage within art history of exploiting the female body.²⁵ In the same vein, I doubted the subversive potential of enacting violence on and re-presenting women as objects to be consumed. Even Dicke’s method of meticulously cutting out the fetishized flesh of female fashion models can be critiqued as functioning counterproductively, her work reaffirming, by omission, the allure seemingly locked in the flesh of imaged women.²⁶ In “Beyond Fragmentation: Collage as Feminist Strategy in the Arts,” Gwen Raaberg discusses Fredric Jameson’s observation that “the text [i.e. any cultural text produced in postmodernity] is symptomatic and merely reproduces postmodern culture.”²⁷ When modified to read, “the text is symptomatic and merely reproduces *patriarchal* culture,” Raaberg’s statement reflects precisely the reason why I resolved to switch modes of working entirely.

In my collage work, I had hoped to restore to women the agency lost in the objectification process by bringing to the surface the violence embedded in and resulting from the idea that women exist for male consumption.²⁸ I found, however, that by cutting up, crumpling, rubbing, tearing, and then reassembling the dismembered bodies of imaged women, I seemed only to demonstrate my own

²⁵ Carol Squires and Brian Wallis, "Is Richard Prince a Feminist?," *Art in America*, November 1993.

²⁶ Mary Kelly, “Desiring Images/Imaging Desire,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 73.

²⁷ Gwen Raaberg, “Beyond Fragmentation: Collage as Feminist Strategy in the Arts,” *Mosaic: a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 31, no. 3 (1998).

²⁸ The sexual objectification of women, omnipresent in visual culture, promotes and enforces this patriarchal myth, which I regard as one of the main drivers of the violence against women and femininity that is diffuse in the current sociopolitical structure.

agency as an artist and as a consumer of women's bodies. I later realized that by emphasizing my role as a woman desperately trying to disarm the gaze, I was attempting to absolve myself from any complicity in women's degradation and consumption as objects. I felt compelled to destroy images of conspicuously objectified women in order to clear my conscience, distance myself from the male gaze, and convince viewers and myself that I, a queer woman, am not complicit in women's consumption.²⁹ The resulting forms of my endeavors, however, betrayed my cause. My efforts with appropriated images, which culminated in the sculptural collage photographs, simply reproduced the mechanism by which real women are turned into fetish objects through objectification. These revelations led me to invest more seriously in my video work and to return strictly to using my body to explore the dynamic between representations of women and the distribution of power/agency under patriarchy.

III. Contextualizing Video and Self

When I originally proposed my concept for this body of work, I specified that I intended to work predominantly in video, supplemented by sculptural elements or installation. As I experimented with collage, I was also working on various video projects. One of these was a video of me scratching myself, which eventually developed into *I Touch Myself (Raw)* (2014). Another of my early video projects took

²⁹ It is important to acknowledge, here, that I am not the first to arrive at these conclusions, that many other women artists and thinkers before me have produced work about this. From my reading of Mulvey, I understand that we are all complicit in women's consumption as objects to some degree, because cultural products are produced in such a way that we adopt the male gaze as our own and experience images of women as heterosexual male spectators.

as its subject a *Maxim* magazine cover displayed on an iPhone screen. In that video, which was composed as a continuous point-of-view shot, I repeatedly caressed and zoomed in and out of an image of two female models in bathing suits kissing each other. I intended to make the video interactive, allowing viewers to control the speed and direction of the video—and, by extension, my hands as they interacted with the touchscreen—by physically rotating a scrubbing knob. My resolution to work solely with images of myself eventually steered me away from the video, but the idea's emphasis on control and the experience of time reflects one of my primary reasons for working with video.

In addition to providing the artist with an acute degree of control in terms of what the viewer has access to visually and auditorily, video gives the artist the power over the viewer's experience of time. The viewer retains a certain degree of autonomy (at least temporally speaking) in non-time-based formats, such as traditional sculpture, that video does not always allow because it "announces the presence of another kind of time, one that demands more focused attention."³⁰ In order to engage with video work, viewers must enter the time of the video, recalibrating their experience of real time to sync with the time within the video. Video allows the artist to speed up, slow down, or completely distort the viewer's experience of images. I found the extra facet of control that is embedded in the format particularly attractive considering the vulnerability of using my own body in my work. In making work about power and agency in relation to how women's bodies

³⁰ Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, introduction to *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc., 1990), 20.

are consumed as images, I needed the greatest amount of control over the viewer's experience of my body possible.

I was also attracted to video for its fleetingness and immateriality both in terms of objectness itself and in terms of the way each frame of a video is only accessible for a fraction of a second before the next frame replaces it. Video seemed to me less likely to fall into the trap of reproducing mechanisms of the dominant order that I encountered with collage. Denying the viewer the satisfaction of the materiality of a physical object, video has the potential to leave the viewer longing for the object(s) and/or sensation(s) depicted to materialize. Furthermore, my use of video alludes to Mulvey, whose ideas about film and the male gaze have informed my thought about how our culture generates and perpetuates the idea that women's bodies exist for male pleasure, as I have discussed above.

A complex relationship exists between the ephemeral, private performances depicted in my videos; my videos as documentation of my performative acts; and my videos as video works in and of themselves. Though each of these classifications has slightly different ramifications for the interpretation of the work's content, they all share a common emphasis on performance, a pivotal component of the present body of work. My decision to work in a mode firmly linked to performance (art)—though not always explicitly within that tradition (i.e. live performance)—refers to performance art's heritage as a politically engaged practice within the history of

feminist art.³¹ Due to its “active solicitation of spectatorial desire,” body-centered performance art “provides the *possibility* for radical engagements that can transform the way we think about...subjectivity (both the artist’s and our own).”³² For this reason, I chose to use performance to call attention to the subliminal or subconscious mechanisms of the patriarchal order under which my relationships with my own body and the bodies of others have formed and continue to evolve.

Through my practice, I have arrived at a certain compositional formula or structure that I apply to my videos that serves to heighten the sense of performance within them. Early in the development of my video work, I intuitively committed to working in a solitary, performance-driven mode that happens to carry with it certain associations (e.g. early body art performances/videos). Bruce Nauman’s *Flesh to White to Black to Flesh* (1968), Vito Acconci’s *Waterways: 4 Saliva Studies* (1971), Nine Sobell’s *Chicken on Foot* (1974), and Simone Forti’s *Solo No. 1* (1974) are all early examples of simple, unaccompanied performances dealing with the body, whose content is transformed by the presence of the video camera. Similarly, my body is always the subject of my videos: without assistance, I record myself repeatedly performing an action, usually on or to my own body. In *Not Yet a Woman*, for instance, I pull my armpit hair out; in *I Touch Myself [Raw]*, I scratch various

³¹ Later, I will return to this heritage in order to contextualize my work and its content further in terms of specific artists. Jeanie Forte, “Women’s Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no.2 (1988): 217.

³² Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 14.

patches of my skin until they become raw; and in *ICERACK*, I hold a life-sized block of ice shaped like a female torso up to my own, groping the breasts obsessively.³³



Betsy Johnson, still from *Not Yet a Woman*, 2014

The one-to-one, camera-to-body ratio that I use to evoke a sense of performance within my videos has a broad range of possible referents within visual culture, particularly to those that have arisen out of recent technological innovations related to social media. Personal vlogs, webcam sites, and many of the early performance and video artists' works all generally adhere to the formula I have set up above wherein a solitary and often isolated person creates an image of herself. Additionally, as smartphones have developed and surged in popularity, consumers have flocked to the numerous social media applications that encourage and/or impose the use of the one-to-one model of self-image capturing in the form of the "selfie." In fact, the selfie—only further popularized by the integration of a front-facing camera into many contemporary smartphones and mobile tablets—seems to be at the center of the success of the immensely popular mobile apps Instagram, Vine, and Snapchat. Though I do not attempt to reference directly or to appropriate the signs of the selfie or the vast and ever-expanding web of social media networks and

³³ I will discuss and contextualize the significance of repetitively inflicting pain on myself later.

their attendant technologies in the present body of work, it is important to acknowledge the technocultural context of my video work and the composition to which I consistently return.³⁴

Contributing to the theatricality or sense of performance in my videos, I often light my body dramatically within a black non-space, a reference to theatre and the spotlight. The theatrical device of the non-space serves not only to remove any potential distractions from my body and the action I am performing (to it) but also to refer to and emphasize the constructed nature of the performances themselves. I, myself, am not performing an action within my videos; rather, I play the role of “Me Performing an Action.” This distinction is important. It signifies the intentionality with which I impose the male gaze onto myself, which raises the question of why.

I intend the signs of theatricality and/or performance in my video work to refer not only to Butler and gender performance explicitly, but also to Mulvey and the conception of “to-be-looked-at-ness”: “in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.”³⁵ By setting the camera up to record myself and by directing all of my actions toward the camera lens, I project the role of Woman (i.e. woman who, through her socially-determined sexual desirability, has realized her ultimate purpose as an object for male consumption) onto my own body. In this way, I summon or simulate the quality of “to-be-looked-at-ness” that has for the most part eluded me in my personal life as

³⁴ Julie Russo Levin, “Show Me Yours: Cyber-Exhibitionism from Perversion to Politics,” *Camera Obscura* 73, no. 1 (2010).

³⁵ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 11.

a result of how I perform womanhood. The camera lens acting as the gaze's surrogate, I force the male gaze to fixate on my queer body in an attempt to frustrate and subvert it.

The sense of deficiency that drives my interest in subverting and disrupting the male gaze relates back to Butler and the concepts of gender performance and compulsory heterosexuality. I found the precise language to describe my feelings of what I could broadly perceive as internalized misogyny and heterosexism only as a result of examining them through a hybrid heteronormativity/objectification lens. Goffman observes that the stigmatized individual often internalizes society's dominant ideologies:

The stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that [the non-stigmatized] do...His deepest feelings about what he is may be his sense of being a "normal person," a human being like anyone else...Yet he may perceive, usually quite correctly, that whatever others profess, they do not really "accept" him on "equal grounds." Further, the standards he has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be. Shame becomes a central possibility.³⁶

Taken with Goffman's remarks about the stigmatized in general, Berger's commentary on how women are taught to objectify themselves exactly describes my sense of failure as a woman, having internalized the oppressive, patriarchal ideology that Woman's sole "purpose" is to be sexually appealing, and, therefore, useful to men:

³⁶ Goffman, 7.

A woman must constantly watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself...From her earliest childhood, she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually...because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life.³⁷

I do not present and/or enact my womanhood in many of the normative ways (e.g. heterosexuality, makeup, “women’s” clothing, long hair, jewelry); therefore, my sexuality and gender presentation erase me as a site of potential pleasure for men, effectively barring me from attaining that which the dominant ideology requires that I value most. Despite my queerness, however, my identity and presentation as a woman guarantees that, under patriarchy, I will always have to fight the constant compulsion to “survey myself” and, in turn, judge my inherent value in terms of men’s opinions of me.³⁸ Under this system, the fact that I have never been sexually desired and/or pursued by a man becomes the ultimate failure and signifier of my irrelevance and uselessness in patriarchal society. Heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality—which pathologize any behavior or expression that does not reinforce its proclaimed status as natural and proper—banish me to the non-space between fully-human Man and successfully-performed and, therefore, useful Woman.³⁹ The Lacanian notion that “to be is to be perceived” replicates the situation of women under contemporary patriarchy, in which “to be is to be perceived [as man’s sexual object].”⁴⁰

³⁷ Berger, 46.

³⁸ Berger, 46.

³⁹ bell hooks, 125.

⁴⁰ Ursula Frohne, "Screen Tests': Media Narcissism, Theatricality, and the Internalized Observer," in *CTRL [Space]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother* ed. Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula

In both *I Touch Myself (Raw)* and *ICERACK*, I attempt to subvert the male gaze in order to a) alleviate the anxiety that I feel knowing that I do not achieve Woman (i.e. normative womanhood status) and b) to reveal the power imbalances around bodies and gender that forcefully invalidate and pathologize bodies that transgress. I attempt to achieve this by means of self-objectification and obsessive, anxiety-producing imagery of my body that takes the form of self-harm and pain/pleasure hybrids. These methods are, in part, founded on Mulvey's idea that the starting place of completely disassembling the male gaze is located in the act of analyzing the pleasure that we derive from looking (at the female body).⁴¹ In this work, I attempt to enact Mulvey's formula by projecting the image of Woman as sex object onto my body, then creating anxiety in viewers, making them question why they feel compelled to watch me destroy myself. Here, I will discuss *I Touch Myself* and *ICERACK* in relation to the two strategies at subverting the male gaze that I have listed above, contextualizing my use of self-objectification and self-harm within contemporary (feminist) art.

Several contemporary feminist artists use durational performance, self-objectification, and/or self-destructive processes or actions to elicit strong emotional responses from viewers, in order to raise questions about power, bodies, and gender. Though I would argue that every instance of women artists utilizing their bodies in performance involves an element of self-objectification, my use of self-

Frohne and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 271, quoted in Julie Russo Levin, "Show Me Yours: Cyber-Exhibitionism from Perversion to Politics," *Camera Obscura* 73, no. 1 (2010): 131.

⁴¹ Mulvey, 8.

objectification and self-harm are directly related to the practices of Amber Hawk Swanson, Patty Chang, and several other feminist video and performance artists.

My decision to use self-objectification as a tool for disarming objectification (if only momentarily) was greatly informed by the work of performance and video artist Amber Hawk Swanson. Her expansive *Amber Doll Project* (2006-2008) consisted of a series of performances, involving a RealDoll (i.e. a “hyperrealistic, poseable, life-size sculptures made of silicone flesh over a PVC skeleton...initially designed as sexual surrogates”) that she had manufactured to look like her and which she took as her romantic partner.⁴² Recreating her image in the hyperrealistic form of the RealDoll and then committing to engaging in a romantic relationship with it represents “an extreme act of self-objectification on Hawk Swanson’s part—an attempt to cast herself as her own object of love and aggression,” while signaling “the ways in which we objectify ourselves to become another’s object of desire.”⁴³

In Hawk Swanson’s self-objectification I found the answer to how to make work about the Mulvey’s concepts without simply re-subjecting already objectified women to my own form of objectification. I was most interested in the affect produced when self-objectification, in Hawk Swanson’s work, comingled with self-harm. In a series of public performances and interventions titled *To Have, to Hold, to Violate: Amber Doll* (2008), she abandoned Amber Doll in various public places, subjecting “her self-image and her collaborator to uncontrolled audiences in order to document the actions taken by passersby on Amber Doll’s passive and unmoving

⁴² David J. Getsy, “Queer Exercises: Amber Hawk Swanson’s Performances of Self-Realization,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 19, no.4 (2013): 466-468.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 469.

body.”⁴⁴ I committed to Hawk Swanson’s self-objectification + self-harm model in my work, because it allowed me to replicate (and, therefore, call attention to) patriarchal violence in a symbolic way a) without harming anyone else in the process and b) while keeping the control of that replicated violence in my hands.



Betsy Johnson, *I Touch Myself (Raw)*, 2014

⁴⁴ Ibid, 470.

I Touch Myself (Raw), the first finished piece in the series, represents my transition from enacting violence on images of objectified women to imposing the gaze on myself using video.⁴⁵ In *I Touch Myself*, I present myself as an object to be consumed in the form of the Disney princess tv, activated by my pink flesh, which envelops the whole screen. The act of scratching is transformed into an erotic act by the piece's title, which alludes to a song about female masturbation and signifies my dual role of both subject and object within the video. Furthermore, the organic, somewhat bulbous television—my breathing, reactive flesh displayed on its screen—becomes a grotesque body in and of itself, a surrogate of my own. The hybrid video/sculpture, then, functions as a metaphor for my physical body in performance. It is the juxtaposition of compulsive, violent scratching and the over-the-top signifiers of normative girlhood and femininity that produces an overwhelming sensation of discomfort and anxiety in the viewer, who, nonetheless, is captivated by the moving images onscreen.

Conceptualizing scratching as a violent extreme of touching, I was interested in the way scratching can be both pleasurable and destructive. It is important to note that pain is always accompanied (and therefore complicated) by pleasure in my work. This facet of my work, especially in relation to *I Touch Myself*, recalls Janine Antoni's *Lick and Lather* (1993). *Lick and Lather* consists of seven soap and seven chocolate self-portrait busts cast from life, which Antoni then repeatedly licked and

⁴⁵ To reiterate, *I Touch Myself (Raw)* is a video shown on a pink, Disney princess tv. The video consists of several different close-up shots of me scratching patches of my skin until they become raw.

washed down with her hands.⁴⁶ The object-based durational performance combined self-objectification and the blurred distinction between pain and pleasure in many of the same ways as *I Touch Myself (Raw)*: both works slightly modify and extend ordinarily pleasurable acts to the point of discomfort, in order to call attention to certain anxieties that arise from living in a woman's body.

The self-objectification in *ICERACK* takes the form of the pornographic mode I adopt: as the ice breasts switch between representing my own and those of another woman, I lead the viewer to think of my body and actions in relation to both masturbation and "girl-on-girl" porn created for straight male viewers.



Betsy Johnson, still from *ICERACK*, 2015

The specific manner in which I offer myself up as a sexual object to the viewer (i.e. performing with an object in a hypersexual, overwhelming way) has several parallels

⁴⁶ "Janine Antoni: 'Lick and Lather'," *Art21*, accessed April 19, 2015, <http://www.art21.org/texts/janine-antoni/interview-janine-antoni-lick-and-lather>.

in other works by feminist artists. In Cheryl Donegan's video *Head* (1993), for example, the artist captures in her mouth the milk that is streaming out of a hole at the bottom of a milk only to spit it back into the top of the jug in a repetitive cycle. Her sexually charged performance mirrors that of *ICERACK*, particularly in terms of its futility and humor.

Though Donegan's video matches *ICERACK* in tone, Patty Chang's practice more closely resembles my own because of the way her work "perverts and troubles the lines between ecstasy and torture, and between desire and anxiety" by deliberately blurring "the line between her own body and the props of her performance."⁴⁷ Similarly to my own, Chang's work explores the forces that control women's bodies.⁴⁸ The subtly grotesque sense of self-mutilation in *Melons (At a Loss)* (1998)—in which Chang places two cantaloupes in her bra, slices into them, and eats them scoop by scoop as she narrates a story—is amplified in *ICERACK*, the melons and the ice breasts playing extremely similar roles as extensions of our bodies.⁴⁹ As I project my sexual desire onto a breast-shaped block of ice, the pleasure supposedly embedded in the action of touching and fondling breasts is supplanted by the sensation of pain. Pain and pleasure are fused to an even greater extent by the audio: it is unclear whether my heavy breathing and moaning are in response to the intensely physical and painful act of holding a heavy block of ice for a long period of time or to the sexual nature of the my performance with the ice breasts. Despite the painfulness of the act—which makes my arms and hands

⁴⁷ Eve Oishi, "Interview with Patty Chang," *Camera Obscura* 18, no. 3 (2003): 120-121.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 121-122.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 120.

redder and redder as the performance goes on—I futilely continue on in my apparent attempt to realize my sexual desire.

Returning to the sense of deficiency that I feel in relation to my position outside of normative womanhood, within the performative space of *ICERACK* I projected onto my body the sexual objecthood that I feel denied in my personal life. Seeing myself (as normative sexual object for male consumption) through the gaze by performing sexuality on and/or through the object of the “icerack”—a novelty ice luge manufactured in the idealized image of the hypersexualized female breasts—served to alleviate some of the personal anxiety I feel as a result of that sense of lack as well as to raise questions about how power operates to enforce heteronormativity by controlling our relationships to (our own) bodies.⁵⁰

IV. Conclusion

In this paper, I have unpacked the theoretical underpinnings that guided my decisions in making *I Touch Myself (Raw)* and *ICERACK*, and I have contextualized my choices in terms of other contemporary feminist performance and video work.

Heteronormativity—by means of various mechanisms, including the male gaze—demands that men and women perform their respective roles in normative ways that, when taken together, maintain the patriarchal order. Feeling deeply invalidated under this structure because of my identity as a queer, gender non-

⁵⁰ In the intended context for the “icerack,” shots of liquor are poured into two holes in the top of the form that lead to the nipples. The user(s) drinks the shots from the nipple.

conforming woman, I was compelled to undertake the project explicated by this paper in an effort to reclaim my value as a human being. I have analyzed my personal feelings of deficiency through a compound lens of Laura Mulvey's arguments about the male gaze and objectification and Judith Butler's conceptions of gender performance and normativity. The male gaze disallows me, as someone who identifies and has been socialized as a woman, from *not* seeing myself; therefore I am always keenly and uncomfortably aware of my non-normative performance and presentation of womanhood and my failure to garner sexual attention from men.

Through this body of performance-based video art, I have attempted to disrupt and subvert the male gaze, using self-objectification and anxiety-producing imagery (of sexualized self-mutilation, in the case of my work) as strategies. By making viewers uncomfortable with their consumption of my body, I hope to stimulate more complex thought and discussion about the intersections of femininity, sexuality, the female body, and the power of the gaze.

Closing Remarks

I. Acknowledgements

Though I know that work about what it means to be a queer, gender-nonconforming woman in a heteronormative culture heavily invested in and

sustained by the hypersexualization and objectification of women is important, it is also important not to ignore the limitations of this project. The narrow scope of this project necessitated that I exclude a host of interesting and relevant concepts. Here, I will briefly outline the concepts that I would like to explore in future work and/or apply to future analyses of this work.

I begin with Donna Haraway's concept of the feminist cyborg and the "collapse of [the] distinctions between human and non-human,"⁵¹ which I believe would be fruitful to discuss in relation to my work, particularly *ICERACK* and *Consummate (or, Be Mine)*, a performance not covered in the scope of this paper.

I also believe that this work would benefit from a discussion of Michel Foucault's concept of the "spectacle of the scaffold," which seems related to my strategy of publicly displaying self-mutilation. Relating these things to the internalized homophobia and misogyny that I have briefly touched on would be very interesting.

In discussing one set of social issues, despite how interconnected all social problems inherently are, it is impossible to address every other issue. The present body of work and this thesis are characterized and limited by my personal experiences as a white, able-bodied, American woman. The scope of the work is also limited in terms of its reliance and strong foundation in Second Wave theory, which is often problematic because of its erasure of the experiences of those outside of white, normative heterosexuality. Furthermore, I have not addressed trans experiences, though I believe that future consideration of theory around trans and

⁵¹ Pablo Baler, "Interrupted Reading: The Aesthetics of Metastasis," in *The Next Thing: Art in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Pablo Baler (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013), 125.

other gender variant identities (by others and/or myself) would be fruitful and is perhaps of even greater criticality at the current political and cultural moment.

Finally, I feel compelled to mention the rejection of the concept of men as objectifiable upon which this work rests.⁵² Mulvey, who expresses that “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification,” informs this premise of my work.⁵³ She bases this claim on the idea that the structure through which we recognize representations of men and women in film forces us to identify automatically with the male protagonist.⁵⁴ Though Mulvey does not necessarily claim that the structure that dictates how we understand traditional narrative film extends to how we understand men and women in everyday life, patriarchy subconsciously teaches everyone to “apply some degree of humanity to men that women are always denied.”⁵⁵ From this understanding, it follows that “women can participate in female subordination without involving power in production and reproduction of sexist culture.”⁵⁶ Because men are positioned, within power, to benefit from the subordination of women in a way that women are not, reducing men to their bodies does dehumanize them in the same way that objectification dehumanizes women. Certainly, other oppressed groups (e.g. Black men) experience dehumanization; however, in order to make certain points about my experience of womanhood under patriarchy, this project does not attempt to address those factors.

⁵³ Mulvey, 12.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 13.

⁵⁵ Joy and Venkatesh, 352.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

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