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**The Female Body, Technology and Performance: Performing a Feminist  
Praxis.**

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## Abstract

This research project examines the relationship between the female body and technology and analyses how contemporary artists are exploring the creative and political potential of technologies within their performance practice. By interrogating the culturally constructed gendering of technologies and theories of the female body through contemporary feminisms, this study shows how by working against existing patriarchal structures surrounding bodies and technology female artists are developing a technologised feminist praxis. The artists that I focus on throughout this thesis acknowledge, challenge and attempt to subvert dominant and conventional applications of the technologies, and therefore I read their work as feminist. This study analyses a range of types of technology and their applications in contemporary performance practice including: immersive technologies, digital and analogue technologies, the Internet, biotechnologies and cyborg technologised performance. Within each of these chapters the technologies are analysed in relation to the performing female body and I apply critical theory to enable me to read these works as “hybrid” and as illustrative of artists working within a “cyborg consciousness” to explore alternative political modes. This project is informed by the work of cultural critic and feminist theorist Donna J. Haraway whose “Cyborg Manifesto” (1985) altered the landscape of feminist discussions surrounding the technologised female body. Her utopian manifesto evokes the cyborg as a creature of social fiction and social reality and calls for a re-coding of bodies and approaches to political thinking. I argue in this thesis that the artists I am investigating attempt a re-coding of female bodies and of existing gender conventions surrounding bodies and technology to develop a new cyborg feminist praxis.

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## **Author's declaration**

I declare that all of the research included in this thesis is my own work. All of the readings of the performances are my own and I have indicated the views of others through referenced citations.

Laura Bissell September 2010.

# Introduction

## Scoping the Field

While a number of theatre and performance theorists have written on the integration of technology into performance practice and the affect of this on the live body, there has been little academic study on the relationship between the specifically female body and technology in performance.<sup>1</sup> Due to the gendering of various technologies through cultural and educational factors it seems that a critical assessment of how the female body interacts with technology in performance is urgent.<sup>2</sup> While in feminist film studies there has been some evaluation of how the figure of the cyborg as “technologised human” has been depicted through film there has been little acknowledgement of how female performance artists are using technologies within their performance practice to represent their own bodies and challenge dominant modes of thought surrounding the gendering of technologies.<sup>3</sup> I argue throughout this thesis that, by using technology in performance to subvert or challenge its traditional applications, female artists are re-coding the technologies and developing a feminist technologised praxis.

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<sup>1</sup> The body and technology in performance has been discussed in the following texts: Gabriella Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness* (London: Routledge, 2006); and Susan Broadhurst and Josephine McMahon, *Performance and Technology: Practices of Virtual Embodiment and Interactivity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Gender and education is discussed in Joel Cooper and Kimberlee D. Weaver, *Gender and Computers: Understanding the Digital Divide* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> See Claudia Springer, “The Pleasure of the Interface”, Jenny Wolmark, ed. *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

Performance theorist Steve Dixon's study *Digital Performance* (2007) provides a comprehensive historical overview of the genre of digital performance, and *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness* (2006) by Matthew Causey has also provided a significant contribution to the field. However discussions of the body and technology either refer to "the body" as the assumed male subject or are notably silent on the subject of gender and I want to offer my analysis of how the female body relates to technology in contemporary performance to existing debates. Jennifer Parker-Starbuck's research on cyborg performance and her insights into the links between animals and humans in relation to technologised performance have been relevant to my study. The feminist influences on this project have come from the writings of Elizabeth Grosz, Donna J. Haraway, Jill Dolan, Elin Diamond, Julia Kristeva, Sue Ellen Case, Helen Paris, Leslie Hill, Faith Wilding, Susan Kozel and Rebecca Schneider amongst others, and a recurrence of the feminist groundings of this research will be evident as this thesis progresses.

Like many feminists working in the field of technology, I am highly indebted to the work of Donna J. Haraway, whose seminal essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1985) provoked a wealth of feminist cyborg theory.<sup>4</sup> Haraway's cyborg literally embodied the hybrid figure of a cybernetic organism - part-human/part-machine - but also provided a metaphorical model, through her "ironic political myth", suggesting that the cyborg represented alliances between feminisms and modes of thought.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Such works include Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Kim Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2007); Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti, *Between Monsters Goddesses and Cyborgs: Feminist Confrontations with Science, Medicine and Cyberspace* (London: Zed Books, 1996); Gill Kirkup et al, *The Gendered Cyborg* (London: Routledge, 2000). Haraway's manifesto was first published in 1985 and republished in 1991. In this study I refer to the 1991 edition.

<sup>5</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (London: Free Association Books, 1991) p149.

Haraway's cyborg can be read as a way of imaginatively exploring affinities and destabilising existing binaries surrounding identity politics.<sup>6</sup> Haraway outlines three breakdowns in boundaries that she claims illustrate the basis of cyborg politics. These are: the boundary between human and animal; the boundary between animal-human and machine; and the boundary between the physical and non-physical. In the first of these, Haraway argues that many people no longer feel the need for a separation between human and animal, strengthening this argument with the claim that many branches of feminist culture affirm the pleasure of connection between humans and other living creatures. Haraway comments on how biology and evolutionary theory have reduced the boundaries between humans and animals. However as Parker-Starbuck assesses, this remains critically neglected in practical areas such as the treatment of the animals society elects to "process" as food, clothing, and medical testers.<sup>7</sup>

The second boundary transgression that Haraway tackles in her manifesto is the breakdown between animal-human and machine. She claims that pre-cybernetic machines were not autonomous but that more recent machines confuse the boundaries between natural and artificial, mind and body. Postmodern strategies, such as Haraway's "cyborg myth", destabilise the notion of organic wholeness, instead embodying a more fractured and hybrid form.<sup>8</sup> The third boundary that Haraway discusses is the distinction between the physical and the non-physical. Claiming that modern machinery is everywhere and has permeated all areas of experience, Haraway's image of the cyborg seems to be many things at once, multiple and altering: "People are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque. Cyborgs are ether, quintessence."<sup>9</sup> Haraway summarises: "So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, "Becoming-Animate: On the Performed Limits of 'Human'", *Theatre Journal*, 58.4, (2006), p654.

<sup>8</sup> Haraway discusses this further in her article "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others", Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler, eds. *Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* p153.

fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as part of much needed political work.”<sup>10</sup> Ideas of fluid identity and transgression of boundaries are evident in the cyborg and I believe that “potent fusions” are possible and can be explored through performance practice. Haraway’s cyborg will feature throughout this study and her feminist message permeates this project.

I consider all of the performances that I am analysing in this thesis as cyborg performances, partially because of the visual interplay and melding of live female bodies and technology within a performance space, but also because of the more figurative aspects of what cybertheorist Barbara Kennedy refers to as “cyborg consciousness” in her discussion of cyberfeminism:

As a concept it covers feminist simulations of technology, most literally through debates about power, identity and autonomy and the role of new technologies in the transformation of these characteristics... Cyberfeminism defines a specific cyborgian consciousness - a particular way of thinking which breaks down binary and oppositional discourses (see Haraway). A cyborg consciousness is one which is not defined within the parameters of a fixed subjectivity or identity; this cyborg consciousness has arisen out of the literal ideas of boundary crossing found in cyborg mythologies.<sup>11</sup>

I have found some debates surrounding cyberfeminism tend to reiterate problems and issues (such as disparate viewpoints) that have plagued feminism for years with minimal addition to the debate apart from the technological vehicle for these discussions. I am often disheartened by the lack of clear definition of what cyberfeminism is or wants to achieve but I embrace this idea of “cyborg consciousness” as a way of thinking beyond dichotomous positions. By taking this “cyborgian” approach to performance, theory, and feminism, I

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p154.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara M. Kennedy, “Introduction to Cyberfeminism”, David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, eds. *The Cybercultures Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000) p283.

explore feminist technologised performance as potentially hybridised and subversive and as an exciting site for political performance.

## Research Questions

I address various research questions throughout this thesis such as: how are women artists representing the female body via technology in performance? How do the artists use/work with the gendered connotations of the specific technology? Do they subvert these? Reinforce these? Challenge these? Does their use of technology alter perceptions/representations of the female body and if so are they using it to further a feminist agenda? How are the technologies I am investigating transposed onto a performative context to question the politics behind them? What are the political implications of these technological interventions into how women's bodies are controlled? By engaging these questions, I am contributing to existing debate surrounding technology and performance while offering a specifically feminist perspective on the development of a feminist technologised praxis. By completing this body of research I enhance discussions surrounding technology and performance which until now have largely focussed on male cyborg performance.<sup>12</sup>

## Methodology

My methodological approach is based in poststructural contemporary feminisms with influences from the cyberfeminist movement. Feminist Gayle Austin mentions her shift from the position of liberal feminist to that of radical and then to materialist feminist, finally positioning herself between “the cracks” of the different types of feminisms.<sup>13</sup> This is a useful analogy, and many other feminist writers seem reluctant to pin themselves to one branch of feminism,

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<sup>12</sup> With the notable exception of Gabriella Giannachi's discussion of French body artist, Orlan, in her chapter on “Cyborg Theatre” in her 2004 study *Virtual Theatres* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Gayle Austin, *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990) p1.

perhaps having sympathies with more than one “type”. This indicates one of the inherent problems with feminism: that it is so multi-faceted and diverse that to speak of “feminism” as a unified movement, or as women working towards a common goal, is problematic and unrealistic. More recently there has also been a sense that the lack of a unified movement has led us into a position of “postfeminism”.<sup>14</sup> Lizbeth Goodman comments on Haraway’s summary of this in her study *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own* (1993): “Donna Haraway, writing on cultural studies, has argued that examination of representation of women must recognise the multiple positions which women occupy in relation to ‘situated perspective’ foregrounding their differences and personal positions in relation to politics.”<sup>15</sup> While I find the term “postfeminism” unhelpful, as it connotes that we are at a stage “after” feminism and there is subsequently no more work to be done, I agree with Haraway’s appeal to consider the multiple subject positions that are embodied by women. Methodologically I am working within discourses of postmodernism and poststructuralism while maintaining an explicitly feminist perspective on the work.

Throughout this research I have also found feminist film theory a useful resource, particularly in relation to my interest in audiences and the performer/spectator role which I interweave throughout this study. Concurrently, sociological and cultural studies on the changing role of the body as it has become more technologised have also contributed to this body of work and thus I consider this research to have spanned various disciplines. I contacted many of the artists to enquire about their work and to obtain materials for my research. The analyses of the performances are my own readings of the work and for the majority of this thesis I am responding to and engaging with works that I have encountered first-hand as a spectator. I indicate throughout where I have been unable to view the performance and am working from documentation, and agree with Jane Blocker who claims that: “To write a history of performance

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<sup>14</sup> See Janelle Reinelt, “Navigating Postfeminism: Writing Out of the Box”, Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, eds. *Feminist Futures? Theatre, Performance, Theory* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Lizbeth Goodman, *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own* (London: Routledge, 1993) p21.



art is therefore to engage in the pleasures of the text.”<sup>16</sup> While experiencing a performance through its documentation is an inherently different experience from experiencing it live, I acknowledge this difference throughout and have aimed to make this study as factually accurate as possible while expounding my own interpretations of the work. In terms of methodology, while I integrate some textual analysis of the performances, I am providing an informed subjective response to these pieces and acknowledge my position as a white, middle-class, academic spectator. My interpretations are in dialogue with the performances themselves and I have strived throughout this thesis to engage with the feminist politics that I have identified within each performance.

While I understand that gender is inextricably bound to other aspects of identity such as race, class and sexuality, in this thesis I have focused on the work of feminist artists working within contemporary live art in the UK and US. Throughout the process of this research I have realised that the artists that I have had access to and that are currently producing work are - in the majority - white women from the UK or US. I acknowledge the lack of racial diversity in this thesis and ask why within contemporary art circuits there are very few black women working with technology in performance. An analysis of why this is the case is imperative, but it is a question that this thesis cannot answer. I hope that in my contribution to discussions around female bodies and technology in performance I can encourage and provoke more much needed work and analysis surrounding the multiplicity of female bodies and their relationship to cyborg performance. Part of Haraway’s vision for the cyborg was to destabilise the binaries that have led to inequalities. She states:

Certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systematic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals - in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jane Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History and Performance* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) pxi.

<sup>17</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* p177.

Her assertion that through cyborg politics these dominated “others” can create affinities and re-code existing dualisms is an indication of what the figure of the cyborg could be capable of.

The majority of the artists that I am analysing are working within a Western context, and therefore this study is mainly American and Anglocentric in its focus with a European example and one global troupe based partly in Australasia. Most of the critical theory that I am applying is also from a Western feminist or cyberfeminist perspective and while there is an urgent need for analysis of how technology is being applied to feminist performance globally and how the technological distribution has affected creative practice in other parts of the world, this is too large a task for a study of this size. For the purpose of this thesis I have chosen to analyse a small number of performances by women artists that have been devised or written since the early 1990s until the present day. Other artists have been written about widely already and I have chosen lesser known artists as I felt their work was underrepresented.

This thesis is organised into chapters in relation to types of technology and thus the chapters discuss: immersive VR technologies; digital/analogue technologies; Internet technologies; biotechnologies; and, in the final chapter, cyborgian performance. Although I have divided the chapters in this way there are a number of key threads that I trace throughout the thesis. These strands of ideas include issues relating to how the female body is represented, either through or alongside the technology in question, how the artists are working with/against the gendering of technologies and how they might subvert or challenge dominant usage. I discuss at length how technologies might be re-coded through feminist performance work and, from this, a feminist technologised praxis developed.

Peggy Phelan claims: “Redesigning the relationship between self and other, subject and object, sound and image, man and women, spectator and performer is enormously difficult. But perhaps more difficult still is withdrawing from representation altogether.”<sup>18</sup> Discussions surrounding representation will

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<sup>18</sup> Peggy Phelan, “Feminist Theory, Poststructuralism and Performance”, Carol Martin, ed. *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance: On and Beyond the Stage* (London: Routledge, 1996) p179.

feature heavily throughout this thesis as I am concerned with how the artists I am investigating use technology to avoid bodily representation altogether (as in the work of Brenda Laurel and Char Davies in Chapter One); represent their own bodies (as in the work of Anita Ponton, Caroline Smith and SUKA OFF in Chapter Two); are plagued by issues surrounding representation and the problems associated with trying to reassimilate existing ideas/images within an infrastructure that reinforces such images (as in the work of Avatar Body Collision in Chapter Three); complicate representations of reproductive bodies (which is explored in Chapter Four); and parody hybrid representations of the female body from the grotesque to the cyborgian (I conclude with this in Chapter Five). While the performances I am looking at are stylistically and aesthetically very different, I would suggest that they all fall within the broad category of “postmodern performance”. As Jill Dolan states in “In Defence of the Discourse” (1989): “If feminist poststructuralism is the tool of this critique (of united identity) postmodernism is the style that offers potential performance applications.” (original italics)<sup>19</sup> By categorising these performances under the rubric of “postmodern performance” I am suggesting that they all, to some extent, embrace a non-linear narrative and question a unified “identity” and the conventional position of “woman”. I also contend that they undermine existing ideologies and draw attention to conventions while rejecting an objective “truth” and therefore provoke analysis and discussion around their politics.<sup>20</sup>

## **Feminism and the “Body”**

As the relationship between the female body and technology in performance is the focus of this research, an overview of feminist perspectives on the female body is necessary to situate my discussions within existing debates. I believe that the body is socially and discursively constructed and that the equation of women

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<sup>19</sup> Jill Dolan, “In Defence of the Discourse”, Carol Martin, ed. *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance* p97.

<sup>20</sup> While this type of technologised work is often called multimedia, I prefer Geisekam’s term “intermedia” and consider the work I am looking at as both “postmodern performance” and “intermedial”.

with the body is largely as a result of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates and ideologies, with a prehistory in classical thought. The equation of man with mind and woman with body is discussed by philosopher Elizabeth Grosz: “The body has been and still is closely associated with women and the feminine, whereas the mind remains associatively and implicitly connected to men and the masculine. Exploring these phallogentric alignments is prerequisite to transforming the presuppositions underlying prevailing knowledges.”<sup>21</sup> This historical link between women’s bodies and the irrational, the natural or “other epistemologically devalued binary terms”, to use Grosz’s words, means that the male body is projected as pure, disembodied and uncontaminated.<sup>22</sup> The male body has been depicted as the classical, closed, impenetrable body while the female body is situated as penetrable, leaky, excessive, deviant and abject. It has also been highly objectified and the sexualisation and pornogrification of the naked female body has complicated representations of female corporeality.

Jeanie Forte states in her article “Women’s Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism” (1988):

Through the lens of postmodern feminist theory, women’s performance art (whether overtly so or not) appears as inherently political. All women’s performances are derived from the relationship of women to the dominant system of representation, situating them within a feminist critique. Their disruption of the dominant system constitutes a subversive and radical strategy of intervention *vis a vis* patriarchal culture.<sup>23</sup>

Forte is arguing that all performance by women artists is political as the act of a woman performing within a patriarchal system of representation can in itself be

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York; London: Routledge, 1994) p32.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p42.

<sup>23</sup> Jeanie Forte, “Women’s Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism”, *Theatre Journal*, 40.2 (1988) p217.

read as a feminist act.<sup>24</sup> Gerry Harris's views echo this: "In practice, female performance art always potentially carries some sort of 'political' message because, in being 'authored' by 'women', it inevitably implies a critique of the politics of representation."<sup>25</sup> I agree with these perspectives, but, using the female body as part of a feminist praxis has been problematic, as Janet Wolff claims: "Its pre-existing meanings as sex object, as object of the male gaze, can always prevail and reappropriate the body despite the intentions of the woman herself."<sup>26</sup> This raises the question of whether, or how, women can engage in a critical politics of the body in a culture which is so comprehensively coded and defines women's bodies as subordinate and passive, and as objects of the male gaze. While many feminists have different stances on this issue, I wish to use feminist Kathy Davis's definition of three problematics that are common throughout all feminist approaches to the body: difference, domination and subversion.<sup>27</sup> By taking these categories my chosen examples will illustrate how a feminist praxis is being developed through the technologised performing body. I look at difference, in acknowledging the different ways that women and men interact with technology; domination, in recognising that technologies have been culturally and socially gendered in order to maintain patriarchal power structures over women, and subversion, in the feminist action of working within these structures to challenge and re-code them.

I concur with Wolff who suggests that there is every reason to "propose the body as a privileged site of political intervention precisely because it is the site of repossession and possession."<sup>28</sup> I want to explicate this idea of the body as a site of intervention and analyse how the female cyborgian body (that is, the

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<sup>24</sup> This definition has proved problematic for feminist artists who use their bodies in performance and have found that they have been objectified by the male gaze. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen* 16.3 Autumn (1975) pp. 6-18.

<sup>25</sup> Geraldine Harris, *Staging Femininities* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) p22.

<sup>26</sup> Janet Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics", Jane C. Desmond, ed. *Meaning in Motion* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997) p82.

<sup>27</sup> Kathy Davis, ed. *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London: Sage Publications, 1997) p7.

<sup>28</sup> Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality" p82.

female body technologised in performance) is a particularly appropriate site for creating political work. As Grosz says: “Far from being an inert, passive, non-cultural and ahistorical term, the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles.”<sup>29</sup> While the female body is a highly contested site, I would argue that it can also be used as a site of cultural critique to question patriarchal power structures that dominate both bodies and technologies. I also contend that the performing cyborgian body can be used to explore anxieties surrounding bodies and their relationship to technology.

## Debates Surrounding Essentialism

I would argue that there is some agreement among feminists that deconstruction, poststructuralism and postmodern theories are useful tools for feminist analysis. They all work towards destabilising patriarchal norms and critique ideas of a unified subject or fixed identity of “woman”.<sup>30</sup> Feminisms were severely wounded by the debates surrounding essentialism that sprung up in the latter part of the twentieth century. Doubts over the category of “woman” and the assumptions of a unified female experience that second-wave feminists had expounded were critiqued by many as the views of white, middle-class women and seen as ostracising many women through class, race and geographical positioning. Because of this, there has been a reluctance to affiliate on the basis of gender as many want to avoid accusations of essentialism. It seems that these issues are much more complex and nuanced than is suggested by the binary essentialist/anti-essentialist, through which they are often depicted; if a feminist way of working through theory and performance

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<sup>29</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) p19.

<sup>30</sup> I concur with Gerry Harris’s stance on the contestation of terms. She states: “I take as a starting point the notion that terms like ‘femininity’, ‘woman’ and ‘feminist’ are contested and unstable categories, not givens. It is the various ways in which ‘woman’ or the ‘feminine’, is represented, performed and received in these works and the different sort of feminist readings these representations may be given which constitute my primary concerns.” Harris, *Staging Femininities* p7.

is to move forward, these problems surrounding the semantics of the category of “woman” must be left behind. Wolff, quoting Riley agrees: “At the same time, politically and experientially, it makes sense for women to mobilise around the social construct of ‘woman’ for as Riley says, modern feminism ‘is landed with the identity of women as an achieved fact of history and epistemology’.”<sup>31</sup> Grosz echoes this argument: “If we are not justified in taking women as category, what political grounding does feminism have?”<sup>32</sup> She responds to her own enquiry by claiming that either feminism clings to the principles that attempt to avoid essentialism - in which case its rationale as a political movement focussed on women is negated - or it accepts the limitations patriarchy imposes on it and abandons attempts to provide its own definitions, terms and rhetoric which can be applied to women. Grosz asks: “Are these the only choices available to feminist theory - an adherence to essentialist doctrines, or the dissolution of feminist struggles into localised, regional, specific struggles representing the interests of particular women or groups of women?”<sup>33</sup> These bleak options illustrate the complexity of feminism at this political moment and show how the lack of a definitive movement has led to a questioning of “where do we go from here?” In terms of my research project, I concur with Grosz’s view that there can be no feminist position that is not in some way or other involved in patriarchal power relations and that “all options are in their various ways bound by the constraints of patriarchal power.”<sup>34</sup> I additionally contend that by analysing my performance examples through acknowledgement of difference, domination and subversion in relation to existing masculinist power structures surrounding bodies and the gendering of technologies, there is the potential for the development of a feminist technologised praxis.

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<sup>31</sup> Wolff, “Reinstating Corporeality” p94.

<sup>32</sup> Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion* p55.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p55-6.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p56.

## Feminist praxis

“Praxis” is the process by which a theory, skill or piece of knowledge is enacted or practiced and I recognise the potential multiplicity of this. While throughout this thesis, I refer mainly to the performance practice of female artists, I would also agree with Beatrice Hanssen who claims that: “Feminist theory is a praxis insofar as it has fundamentally and radically reshaped conceptual categories or definitions of sex, gender, oppression, identity - always in an ongoing dynamic process of debate and continued, never-ending discussion.”<sup>35</sup> In this respect, feminist performance and theory can be seen to form together a feminist praxis. Through evidence from my performance analyses, I will show that, despite gendering of technologies and cultural bias, women artists are working with technology in performance as part of a feminist technologised praxis. While the potential of these experiments, interventions and subversions is very exciting to me, I am wary of overstating the case and practice a guarded optimism when it comes to the possibilities these performative pieces hold. Wolff comments on this: “For the dominant culture of patriarchy has already defined and situated the body, and the prospects of reappropriation are, to say the least, fraught with hazards and contradictions.”<sup>36</sup> Throughout my performance examples there is evidence of attempts to reappropriate and subvert dominant usage of technologies. Some are however more successful than others and the complexities of trying to work within different structures of cultural coding and convention are apparent.

## Feminist “Texts”

While many of the artists I am analysing identify their work as feminist, some do not, or remain silent on the matter. I have chosen to apply a feminist reading to these works and I am interpreting the artist’s practice as working against

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<sup>35</sup> Beatrice Hanssen, “Whatever Happened to Feminist Theory?” Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka, eds. *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) p71-2.

<sup>36</sup> Wolff, “Reinstating Corporeality” p90.



dominant modes of technology and gender. I have found Grosz's discussion of what constitutes a feminist text useful in my process of analysis. She claims:

A feminist text has no distinctive subject matter, not a distinctively feminine style. Indeed, it seems that there is no one characteristic which could ensure a text's feminine status. Rather, judgements about the political status of the text are a more complex and contextual matter.<sup>37</sup>

Elin Diamond states of the feminist performance art she analyses: "What makes their performance work feminist is not that it is 'by and about' women, or that it validates a woman's way of feeling and knowing (although both are important), but that it enacts a tension between the auratic body and dialectical image, between private recollection and cultural memory."<sup>38</sup> This interplay between the body as experienced and body as image needs to be acknowledged when analysing work by women artists. To count all work "by and about" women as feminist is inaccurate and ignores the complex structures that surround body, image and representation in performance. Grosz also asks a similar question in relation to feminist texts: "What, then, enables us to describe a text as feminist or feminine?" She attempts to answer her own question by considering four responses which she outlines: 1) the sex of the author; 2) the content of the text; 3) the sex of the reader; and 4) the style of the text.<sup>39</sup> Grosz concludes that there is no clear-cut criteria that can define a feminist text by the person writing the text, the reader, or how and what is written within the text. Grosz states: "For a text to be regarded as feminist, it must render the patriarchal or phallogocentric presumptions governing its contexts and commitments visible."<sup>40</sup> This is key to my reading of these performance "texts" as feminist as they challenge (to differing extents) the power structures regarding the cultural

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<sup>37</sup> Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion* p22.

<sup>38</sup> Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1997) p150.

<sup>39</sup> Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion* p11.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p22.

gendering of technologies, the access to technologies that women have, how these technologies are traditionally used, whether they are conventionally situated alongside female bodies, and how they represent female bodies. Grosz contends: “Any form of commitment to feminist principles and politics involve some degree of challenge to phallogentrism.”<sup>41</sup> I argue that the artists I am examining challenge the phallogentrism that has become culturally encoded into different types of technology and their applications through performance.

## Gender and Technology

In *Gender and Computers: Understanding the Digital Divide*, researchers Joel Cooper and Kimberlee D. Weaver offer a definition of the “digital divide” suggesting that it is “a term that has been used to refer to the gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not; between those that have the expertise and training to utilise technology and those who do not.”<sup>42</sup> At the outset of their study they point out that, according to Christopher Latimer in a report to the New York State Forum for Information Resources, social gaps in society *cause* the digital divide, but the digital divide, in turn, may intensify existing social gaps and create new ones.<sup>43</sup> This interestingly correlates with feminist Dale Spender’s argument that, while computers have not always been seen as male terrain since the first typists and word processors in the 1950s were women (as conveyed in the title of N. Katherine Hayles 2005 text *My Mother Was a Computer*). Nevertheless, the “power grab” happened swiftly.<sup>44</sup> She illustrates this with information detailing the decline in women enrolling in computing science courses, stating that while 28 per cent of students enrolling in 1978 were women, by 1985 this figure had dropped to 13 percent. Spender comments that when computers were new in schools, there was not such a gender gap since computers had not been defined as so exclusively male. However now “girls have

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p23.

<sup>42</sup> Cooper and Weaver, *Gender and Computers* p3.

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Latimer (2001) cited in Cooper and Weaver, *Gender and Computers* p3.

<sup>44</sup> Dale Spender, *Nattering on the Net: Women, Power and Cyberspace* (Victoria: Spinifex Press, 1995) p166.

got the message” and, with these ideas being reinforced by educational and parental influences, the digital divide has been growing.<sup>45</sup> Spender cites that in the UK in 1995 six times as many boys as girls had a computer bought for them, while the proliferation of gender specific games and gaming has also worked towards magnifying the digital divide and seriously segregating women technologically from a young age.<sup>46</sup>

Technotheorist Margaret Morse’s views correspond with this: “Western femininity and its ‘constitution of identities organised around technological impotence’ have apparently survived fairly intact into the present as well.”<sup>47</sup> This establishes her view that the conventions surrounding gender and technology are *constructed*, and have been transposed from existing circumstances onto the new technology of the Internet. Morse reinforces this statement by employing Freud’s metaphor of the mystic writing pad to describe cyberspace: “Lift the sticky plastic page off the surface and all the delicate overwriting of the last quarter-century is whisked away. On the other hand, put the page back down on the sticky matrix and the lines of the ‘frontier’ and ‘colonisation’ engraved deeply long ago map themselves unapologetically onto new cyberskin.”<sup>48</sup> This is a useful metaphor when considering how utopian ideals of the liberating potential of the Internet and other communication technologies seem to create a democratic space and provide those traditionally marked as “other” with a space/voice, but the same stereotypes of representation that have been furrowed still exist. Cyberfeminist Sara Diamond is in agreement: “Work patterns of prior industries are partially embedded in the Net. All of the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> It should be noted that Lisa Nakamura maintains that there is not a “digital divide” between “haves” and “have-nots”, but that there is instead a wide range of access to what she calls “digital visual capital”, conditioned by factors such as skill and experience. Lisa Nakamura, *Digitising Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) p18.

<sup>47</sup> Margaret Morse citing Roger Silverstone and Eric Hirsch, eds. *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p41, Margaret Morse, “Virtually Female”, Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert, eds. *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1997) p24.

<sup>48</sup> Margaret Morse, “Virtually Female”, Terry and Calvert, eds. *Processed Lives* p24.

bad gender habits of computer science, engineering, the television and feature film industries and high finance sectors have transferred to new media.”<sup>49</sup> While the Internet is the most notable example of a technology that has recently altered how we interact with others, communicate, work and spend our leisure time, the other technologies that I explore in this thesis have similarly complex relationships to the female body due to cultural and social constructions of meaning.

One of the first texts to tackle the issue of feminism and technology head on is feminist theorist Judy Wajcman’s *Feminism Confronts Technology*. This text was published in 1991, the year that the term “cyberfeminism” came into usage. However this particular study does not use the term itself, instead situating its arguments against and alongside liberal, radical, and material feminisms, and considering the effect of some technologies on feminisms. Wajcman acknowledges that there are many critiques of the areas she is attempting to look at, stating that

The technological determinism implicit in much of both the sociological and feminist literature on the impact of technology has recently been subjected to criticism. The new sociology of technology has turned the focus around to examine the social factors that shape technological changes.<sup>50</sup>

She defines her aims in this study as exploring the impact of technological change on gendered divisions in order to construct an argument that technology itself is gendered. This notion continually recurs in texts from the early 1990s. Discussions focussing on domestic technologies or technologies of the home considering appliances and household technologies as “feminine” technologies due to their usefulness and application in the home are contrasted to “masculine” technologies such as militaristic, industrial and computing technologies. Feminists Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert discuss this in their

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<sup>49</sup> Sara Diamond, “Taylor’s Way”, Terry and Calvert, eds. *Processed Lives* p82.

<sup>50</sup> Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) pix.

text *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life*:

By what assumptions can we, for example, entertain the claim that guns are masculine machines and curling irons are feminine machines? Do classifications of this sort depend on the design of the technology, or on its users? If women are particularly associated with “low-end” appliances such as blenders, toasters, hair dryers, breast pumps, and sewing machines, to what extent does this depend on the historically specific siting of these machines in the home, or to their status as accessories of women’s wifely and maternal duties.<sup>51</sup>

While Terry and Calvert consider the historical and social influence of gendered technologies, some earlier texts view technologies as inherently gendered whereas I argue that they have become gendered through their usage and how they are perceived. By claiming that technologies themselves are intrinsically gendered, I feel that some of these texts (including Wajcman’s) do not consider how these technologies have come to have these gendered meanings and associations and therefore ignore the potential for a re-writing or re-coding of their gendered connotations.

## Cyberfeminism

The term “cyberfeminism” was coined in 1991 by Australian collective VNS Matrix and began to be used in a number of articles and online discussions regarding feminism and technology.<sup>52</sup> In 1997 there was the first international recognition of cyberfeminism as a movement as the First Cyberfeminist International (CI) took place in Kassel, Germany, September 20-28, as part of the Hybrid Workspace at Documenta X. This consisted of eight days of intense work with over thirty participants. The conference that took place at CI and subsequent online discussions attempted to explore whether or not there should

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<sup>51</sup> Terry and Calvert, eds. *Processed Lives* p7.

<sup>52</sup> Through their “Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century” VNS Matrix attempted to destabilise and infect “Big Daddy Mainframe” with their manifesto and other web-based strategies.

- or could - be a definition of cyberfeminism. Artist Faith Wilding reflects on the significance of these discussions and their implications for both the attempts to define, and the arguments against defining, cyberfeminism. She states: "FACES (a women only on-line list) had been debating this issue with varying degrees of passion for months; the press and other interested parties wanted to know; we, the participants, wanted to know."<sup>53</sup> Wilding discusses the debate that took place and indicates that there was a reluctance to define the term. Instead, what happened was the creation of the "Anti-theses of Cyberfeminism." Wilding claims: "What strangely emerged from these discussions was the attempt to define cyberfeminism by refusal, evident not only in the intensity of the arguments, but also in the hundred antitheses devised there - for example: 'Cyberfeminism is not a fashion statement/ sajbrfeminizm nije usamljen/cyberfeminism is not ideology, but browser/cyberfeminismus ist keine theorie/cyberfeminismo no es una frontera.'"<sup>54</sup> The antitheses were written in a range of languages to indicate cyberfeminism's international aspirations. Wilding says that "The reasons given for refusing to define cyberfeminism - even though they may call themselves cyberfeminists - indicate a profound ambivalence in many wired women's relationship to what they perceive to be a monumental past feminist history, theory and practice, and its relevance to contemporary conditions facing women immersed in technology." Wilding argues strongly that a definition *is* needed and then goes on to tackle the issue before proceeding to locate what she deems to be four main factors or "ambivalences" around the issue.

The first "ambivalence" that Wilding outlines is the repudiation of "old style" feminism: i.e. the feminism of the 1970s. According to this argument, "old style" feminism is characterized as constricting (politically correct), guilt-inducing, essentialist, anti-technology, anti-sex, and not relevant to women's circumstances in relation to new technologies. Wilding points out the irony in this, because in practice cyberfeminism had already adopted many of the strategies of earlier feminist movements, including strategic separatism

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<sup>53</sup> Faith Wilding, "Where is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism?" (1998), 2/05/08, [http://www.obn.org/cfundef/faith\\_def.html](http://www.obn.org/cfundef/faith_def.html).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

(women-only lists, self-help, chat groups, networks, and woman to woman technological training); feminist cultural, social, and language theory and analysis; the creation of new images of women on the Net (feminist avatars, cyborgs, etc.) to counter rampant sexist stereotyping, feminist net critique and strategic essentialism.<sup>55</sup> Wilding believes that it is essential that cyberfeminists acknowledge previous feminisms. She states of cyberfeminists:

And if they are to expand their territory on the Net and negotiate issues of difference across generational, economic, educational, racial, national, and experiential boundaries, they must seek out coalitions and alliances with diverse groups of women involved in the integrated circuit of global technologies. At the same time, close familiarity with postcolonial studies, and with the histories of imperialist and colonialist domination-and resistance to them-are equally important for an informed practice of cyberfeminist politics.<sup>56</sup>

This resonates with Donna J. Haraway's suggestion that feminists should focus less on identity and more on affinity with other political groups and movements. I would agree that for cyberfeminism to re-code relationships between women's bodies and technologies, this acceptance of other modes of thought and approaches is essential as part of the "affinities" that Haraway encourages, and - I would contend - part of a more hybridised way of looking at politics, as an aspect of the "cyborg consciousness" that Kennedy promotes.<sup>57</sup>

Another "ambivalence" that Wilding claims is an issue for cyberfeminism is the fear of forced political consensus. She states: "Perhaps by refusing definition, regressive identity politics and party lines, political squabbling, and ideological formulations can be avoided."<sup>58</sup> Wilding acknowledges that, while there are many cyberfeminists who are developing extremely sophisticated

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Barbara M. Kennedy, "Introduction to Cyberfeminism", Bell and Kennedy, eds. *The Cybercultures Reader* p283.

<sup>58</sup> Wilding, "Where is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism?"

feminist theories of language, subjectivity, the body, technology, and female representation in cyberspace, there is little understanding of how these theories link to the mundane realities of diverse women's work and experiences with technology, much less how they could translate into a transformation of practices and structures.<sup>59</sup> This division between the theory surrounding “the Body” as a cultural construction and the body as lived experience is something that has recurred throughout my research. Kathy Davis claims that: “Bodies are not simply abstractions, however, but are embedded in the immediacies of everyday lived experience.”<sup>60</sup> Kira O'Reilly, whom I discuss in Chapter Four, outlines that one of the aims of her practice is to explore the space in between “the Body” and “my body” and an acknowledgment of this mutability is important. In this thesis, I am interrogating the body as a performing body and am therefore taking my lead from performance theorist Amelia Jones' analysis of the “double” body of artist Vito Acconci as appearing in performance as both *his* body and a *theatrical* body, i.e. he is performing his own body, but is simultaneously performing “the male body” - a character, a type, an ideal - both thrown together in one skin.<sup>61</sup> By appearing as both a specific body and a generically gendered body, issues of representation are problematised. I want to explore this notion using the female body.

## Chapter Synopsis

I open this thesis with an analysis of an embodied, immersed experience and examine two immersive artworks from the mid 1990s. By returning to this historical “moment” to re-evaluate how the work of immersive artist Char Davies and theatre maker and technologist Brenda Laurel worked against dominant uses of virtual reality technology and attempted to create an interface that would subvert traditional masculinist uses of VR, I assess how they created a more embodied and sensory experience through VR. By employing feminist

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Davis, *Embodied Practices* p15.

<sup>61</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) p16.



phenomenological theory, in particular the important work of Iris Marion Young on feminine spatiality and motility, I argue that spatial experience is culturally conditioned. I also apply the work of Young to virtual spaces. According to Davies, the spaces between the real and the virtual, nature and technology, embodiment and disembodiment, encourage a “semi-transparency” of perception and create an opportunity for a revision of existing dualisms. The attempts to re-code VR technologies in the work of Laurel and Davies inspire hope for new ways of using technologies to develop a contemporary feminist praxis. However, issues surrounding the technology (such as expense and limited audience numbers) has meant that other artists have failed to capitalise on these important developments and the genre of immersive performance is almost obsolete.

In Chapter Two I move on to look at how female artists use their own “live” bodies and their technologised doubles to explore notions of fractured identity and split subjectivity. The performative illustration of the fragmentation of the unified “subject” as well as the destabilisation of existing tropes of femininity can be found in the work of Anita Ponton and Caroline Smith. Ponton parodies depictions of femininity as constructed by popular culture, specifically through film and the genre of film noir and questions representations of the female as hysterical, narcissistic and mad. Smith interrogates depictions of the female body as a “fleshy container” and tells a historical and personal story about the devastation of anorexia. Both of the women use their virtual doubles (or in Ponton’s case multiple versions of her double) to tell their stories and, I argue, evoke the uncanny through their practice. In this chapter I assert that the female body is more evocative of the uncanny due to historical and cultural associations of the female body as “unheimliche”, arguing that through unconventional cultural critique the uncanny can be applied as part of a feminist praxis. In the second part of this chapter I analyse the work of SUKA OFF, a Polish company which employs digital and analogue technologies. I discuss how the doubling of performer and spectators renders the specifically female body uncanny, but analyse also how SUKA OFF morph the digital and Polaroid images in their bid to find a “third gender”.

The third chapter of this thesis looks specifically at Internet performance (or “cyberformance” to use Helen Varley Jamison’s term) that incorporates a

live performing body to stage two simultaneous events: a live performance in front of an audience, with a backdrop of the Internet activity and online performances, and an online event that is witnessed by spectators in disparate remote locations with a small number of online audience who are also participating via their own computers.<sup>62</sup> I focus on the work of globally dispersed cyberfeminist group Avatar Body Collision (ABC) and, in discussing the feminist intentions behind its work and the merits of the insertion of live female bodies into the comparably bodiless realm of Internet performance, I critique the lack of reassimilation of some of the images and texts that are used. I also examine the complexities of attempting to use the Internet for feminist work due to its complicity and participation in global markets of pornography and trafficking.

The focus of the fourth chapter of this thesis is the process by which artists are incorporating biotechnological practices into their artworks. Because of the nature of this type of “wet” technology, the artists I am discussing - cyberfeminist network subRosa and body artist Kira O’Reilly - primarily integrate biotechnologies in the research and development stage of their work to develop pieces that respond to the complex issues surrounding female bodies, biotechnological practices, and reproduction. subRosa’s work is a direct response to the global market in eggs and an examination of how this compromises women by redefining their bodily products as commodities. subRosa’s parodic delivery of spoof “expo-style” events mixes irony, humour and critique in an attempt to raise awareness and provoke discussion around the politics of technologies such as IVF and the economic factors that surround them. O’Reilly’s work is less direct. Her explorative laboratory work led to the use of pig skin cells in an attempt to create lace - a project that O’Reilly had wanted to develop using her own skin cells. The direct substitution of the pig’s body for O’Reilly’s in the laboratory translated performatively into *inthewrongplaceness* (2005) where the naked O’Reilly performed a lamentative dance with the carcass of a pig. O’Reilly’s poetic and ambiguous response to

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<sup>62</sup> The term “cyberformance” was coined by Helen Varley Jamieson. Helen Varley Jamieson, “Adventures in Cyberspace: Experiments at the Interface of Theatre and the Internet”, December 2008, 20/08/09.

what she describes as the “ethical ambivalences” she encountered during her work with non-human animals also provokes a questioning of the reproductive role of the body.

In the final chapter in this thesis I analyse the work of intermedial performance-maker Julia Bardsley, who, I argue, combines the hybrid figure of the cyborg body with the grotesque female body in her technologised performance practice. Focussing on her most recent piece - the final part of *The Divine Trilogy, Aftermaths: A Tear in the Meat of Vision* - I contend that Bardsley’s fusion of the cyborgian and the grotesque is a product of a historical and cultural construction of the female body as hybridised, animalised, abjectified and grotesque. Using in particular literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s seminal work on the grotesque, along with more recent feminist responses to this I offer a hybridised reading of Bardsley’s work. I suggest that, in this fusion of the cyborg and the grotesque female body, there lies political potential for re-imaginings of these culturally defined concepts, and the opportunity for a re-coding of the female body as part of a technologised feminist praxis.

## Political Potential of Performance

Throughout this thesis, I contend that the interplay between the live female body and various technologies within the context of contemporary performance practice can be read as a political act, and that performance can provide a vehicle for feminist appropriations and subversions of dominant ideologies. I agree with Lucy Lippard who argues that performance art can provoke a reconsideration of ideas: “Performance art, because it is a form of acting offers a model for action. The audience can identify with those who are doing something in front of them and may be tempted to act, too, or rethink how they are acting.”<sup>63</sup> The ability of performance to operate as a site of identification and of communication is key to my thesis. I contend that performance that explores the role of the female body in relation to technology furthers the development of a technologised feminist praxis.

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<sup>63</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Get the Message? A Decade of Art For Social Change* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984) p323.

Throughout this thesis, I apply such critical frameworks as the uncanny, the grotesque and the abject in my discussions of the female body, and will show that these concepts can have political value through an attempt to subvert dominant constructions and portrayals of femininity. I aim to use these unconventional cultural critiques throughout this thesis to situate the female body as a potential site of transgression and feminist intervention, and I perceive the performative context as providing an appropriate space for these bodies to “perform” alternative femininities. I embrace the idea of the body as a site of intervention, and want to situate the female cyborgian body (that is, the female body technologised in performance) as a body that can re-code the gendering of technology and the conventions surrounding cyborg performance.

# Chapter One - Immersive Performance as Feminist Praxis

## Introduction

In this chapter I analyse early immersive performances created by female artists working with virtual reality technologies in the 1990s, focussing specifically on the work of theatre maker and technologist Brenda Laurel and immersive artist Char Davies. In doing this I hope to explore how the creation of an embodied immersive experience can work as part of a feminist praxis and how the female spectating body can lose some of the inhibitions of female motility through the heightened sense of embodiment that immersive performance provokes. I argue that the subversion of the dominant usage of VR technologies, the alteration of the interface and the prioritisation of bodily experience over the visual by the artists can be read as a political act and that these performances raise questions about gendered experience and embodiment.

This chapter is unique to the rest of the chapters in this thesis since I am analysing performances that happened a number of years ago in the mid 1990s. Unlike most of the other types of performance that I analyse, I have not experienced these events first-hand and am therefore writing a response through the extensive documentation and critical theory that has been produced about these now seminal pieces. The reason that I believe that a return to these historical performance texts - which are very much of a particular technological “moment” - is crucial to this thesis, is to reassess their meaning, value and legacy within the context of my interrogation of the relationship between the female body, technology and performance. I have experienced immersive performance, having worked with Belgian company CREW in 2007 on *U\_RagingStandstill*, and will apply my knowledge as an “experiencing body” and my understanding of the pieces as a performance researcher to construct this chapter.

This particular type of technology (Virtual Reality technology) has been implemented more often in performance practice by female artists than male artists and it occurs to me that there is something compelling about the opportunity to usurp existing narratives surrounding VR technologies as well as

the freedom to create an embodied and sensory experience that has drawn feminist artists to the medium. As I will discuss in this chapter, it is the political potential of these technologies that both Brenda Laurel and Char Davies recognise and use in their work to interrogate how these technologies (which have been highly masculinised and culturally coded) can be developed into feminist tools. By moving away from bodily representation to bodily experience, both artists create virtual environments inspired by the natural world and generate immersive experiences that provoke phenomenological embodied responses. In addition to this, these events chronologically provide a useful starting point for the performances that I discuss in this thesis and exemplify many of the issues surrounding the body, technology and gender in performance that thread through all of my performance analyses. Bodily representation, representations of gender, embodied experience and spectator/performer roles and experiences and feminist agendas will be explored here as they are throughout the various chapters of this thesis.

## **Immersive Virtual Reality**

Before I embark on my discussion of Laurel's *Placeholder* (1993) and Davies' *Osmose* (1995), it is important that I outline some of the technologies that are being implemented within these performances. Virtual reality can be delivered in three forms: (i) in an "immersive" or "inclusive" way, through the wearing of a head-mounted display (HMD), a datasuit, or gloves to give the effect of being actually within a virtual world; (ii) through a "desktop Virtual Reality (VR)" which involves viewing a 3D world through a window or screen, manoeuvring through the world using controls; (iii) or through a "third-person VR" where you manoeuvre an image or avatar of yourself within the virtual world.<sup>1</sup> In exploring the immersive kind of virtual reality technology, I will be considering critical theory that interrogates the experience of the body. The work of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty has recently been employed by performance and film critics (such as Amelia Jones and Laura U. Marks) as his ideas about how we experience the world as a phenomenological body resonate with the work of

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriella Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) p9.

many contemporary performance artists who are seeking an embodied experience for their spectator. While Merleau-Ponty's work is relevant to performance theory, I have found the work of feminist phenomenologist Iris Marion Young more applicable to my specific topic and her article on feminine motility and spatiality has proved highly influential on my readings of Laurel and Davies' work. Another key text that has influenced this chapter is Oliver Grau's *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (2003) which is the first study to consider the entire history of immersion in art. Throughout my discussion I also refer to Mark B. N. Hansen's *Bodies in Code* (2006) as this study provides some of the most recent and relevant analyses of immersive performance.

## **Conventional and Non-conventional Use of Virtual Reality Technologies**

The first HMD was created by Ivan Sutherland in 1968 for the Bell Helicopter Company using military funding. Most applications of virtual reality technologies up until the 1990s were in flight simulators. However, one of the most renowned VR engineers, Jaron Lanier, founded VPL (Visual Programming Language) Research in 1983. He then created the first dataglove the following year, which led to applications in the art world. Since its inception, VR has been implemented in military exercises and other areas (such as architecture) but one of its main applications has been in the video gaming industry. Because of this, a certain set of conventions surrounding VR technology has appeared with most VR games demanding navigation in a virtual world via a joystick or a gun (in shooting games). This has been critiqued as a masculine mode of controlling the medium by Nicola Green and both Laurel and Davies expressed a desire to move away from the action-based and hand-controlled model of VR and explore other, more embodied ways of using the medium.

Laurel avoids using a dataglove or hand-held control, instead using a HMD and bodily sensors including dual "gripees" to allow movement in both hands as opposed to just the right hand which was common practice for the dataglove. Davies takes her rejection of traditional applications of VR even further. Davies' work has often been considered unique in the field of immersive performance because she has strategically avoided using handheld controls or joysticks and has instead developed a programme (with programmer John Harrison) that is

controlled by the immersant's breath. In an artist's statement she attempts to explain why she has chosen to do this. She claims:

My interest lies in going beyond VR's conventions of photorealism and joystick interfaces which situate the user as a probing hand (with gun) and disembodied eye among passive hard-edged objects in empty space. By working with the participant's breath as primary interface (enabling them to "float"), and using semi-transparency as a means of evoking cognitive ambiguity, I have sought to reaffirm the role of the subjectively lived body within the virtual realm and deeply engage the participant's sensory imagination.<sup>2</sup>

Davies' opinion of the "probing hand (with gun)" has connotations of the original militaristic intentions for VR technology.<sup>3</sup> The joystick or gun also suggests a phallic association and relates to a representation of the male technologised body as hard and muscular. I will return to Davies' idea of "semi-transparency" and the sensory imagination later in this chapter.

Davies claims that the origins of 3D digital technology lie deep within the Cartesian philosophic tradition, a tradition whose dualistic privileging of mind over body, male over female, and human over "nature", has "contributed to an historic devaluation and objectification of the body, women, and animals, and to the ongoing plunder of the natural environment as a resource for profit and human consumption."<sup>4</sup> I heartily agree with Davies that virtual reality technology is not gender neutral and also contend that the conventions surrounding VR have

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<sup>2</sup> Davies quoted in Mark B. N. Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006) p125.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Shilling discusses the Gulf war which Balsamo calls a "Nintendo war", claiming that there were many examples of "The deployment of a 'technological gaze' which effectively combined human visual steering systems with weapons of mass destruction." Chris Shilling, *The Body in Culture, Technology and Society* (London: Sage Publications, 2005) p181.

<sup>4</sup> Char Davies, "Rethinking VR: Key Concepts and Concerns", Hal Thwaites, ed. *Hybrid Reality: Art, Technology and the Human Factor* (9th International Conference on Virtual Systems and Multimedia) Montreal, Canada: International Society on Virtual Systems and Multimedia (2003) p253.



been culturally coded but the discourses around this *can* be overturned and the medium adapted for a feminist message.

Laurel explicitly has commented on the conventions of VR and how they hoped to subvert these through *Placeholder*:

One was the definition of the medium - thinking about what it was and could be, and how conventions could be used to shape its potential. If VR is to be used as a medium for narrative, dramatic, or playful activity, we should question the appropriateness of conventions derived from computer displays, teleoperations or training simulators. The other issue was the question of the interface - thinking about how people were being sensed and how they were being constrained to behave.<sup>5</sup>

What interests me here is how Laurel highlights the discrepancy between “what it is” and “what it could be” and challenges the appropriateness of computing conventions, suggesting the consideration of performative approaches or more exploratory uses of the technology. (The idea that people might be “constrained to behave” is something I will return to in my discussion of female motility and spatiality). Laurel follows this up with the statement that: “Our motto was ‘no interface,’ expressing our desire to maximize naturalness, to enable the body to act directly in the world, and to minimize distraction and cognitive load.”<sup>6</sup> This notion of the body acting directly in the virtual world and of an embodied experience is very similar to the aims of Davies in *Osmose*. Immersive performance highlights the dichotomy between the “real” world and the “virtual” world as the participant is always simultaneously inhabiting both. While the body remains physically in the “real” world, the immersant is concurrently experiencing the virtual world through the technological prosthesis.

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<sup>5</sup> Brenda Laurel, Rachel Strickland, Rob Tow, Interval Research Corp. “*Placeholder: Landscape and Narrative In Virtual Environments*”, *ACM Computer Graphics Quarterly*, Volume 28, Number 2, May 1994.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

This dual experience of inhabiting the real and virtual worlds simultaneously highlights the mind/body schism.

Davies' deliberate move away from ideas of the "cyborg" body and her attempt to subvert traditional ways of moving around virtual environments by using the breath as the interface rather than the hand, illustrates a desire to create a phenomenological way of experiencing the technology. Like Laurel, she felt that traditional methods of navigation encouraged a distanced and disembodied stance toward the virtual world. Her approach, based on breathing in to rise, out to fall, and leaning to change direction, brings the experience inward, "grounding" it within the core of the participant's physical body. She was inspired to develop this by her experiences of scuba diving and intended for the breath-led method to "reaffirm" the role of the subjectively experienced, "felt" body in cyberspace, in direct contrast to its usual absence or objectification in virtual worlds. The use of breathing and balance also tends to relax people and Davies compares this to meditative practice: "As in meditation, the practice of following one's breath and being centred in balance opens up a profound way of relating to the world."<sup>7</sup> One of the other reasons that I am reading this use of the medium in a feminist light is that Davies wants VR to act as a channel of communion rather than as a tool of control, which echoes Haraway's appeal for affinities through human/technological unions and feminisms.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Char Davies, "Landscape, Earth, Body, Being, Space, and Time in the Immersive Virtual Environments *Osmose* and *Ephémère*", Judy Malloy, ed. *Women, Art, and Technology* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: MIT Press 2003) p329.

<sup>8</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (London: Free Association Books, 1991) p155.

Davies claims:

I believe that it is only through the body, through body-centred interfaces (rather than devices manipulated at arm's length) that we can truly access this space and explore its potential. Such emphasis on the body's essential role in immersive virtual space may be inherently female. The whole notion of space as enveloping a body at its centre is probably feminine rather than masculine, as may be the desire to use this technology to re-integrate, re-sensitise, and re-affirm life itself.<sup>9</sup>

I am aware that there are a number of aspects of this description that are essentialist and I am anxious about this when considering this type of gendered experience. However, I believe that discussion relating to these types of experience can only be beneficial to ongoing dialogues around technology and gender. Davies' attempts to re-integrate, re-sensitise and re-affirm go hand in hand with Laurel's re-imagining of what VR applications in performance could be. I argue that by subverting traditional usage of VR technologies and creating an immersive embodied experience, both Laurel and Davies begin to open up a new type of bodily feminist praxis.

## **Experimentations with VR in Performance**

During the early 1990s there were a number of other creative attempts to destabilise the dominant interface of the joystick or gun and I will briefly discuss these as precursors to the work of Davies and Laurel. The fact that other artists (mostly female) were exploring alternative ways of integrating VR technologies into their artistic practice conveys a feeling of discontentment surrounding the masculine-inscribed uses for the technology. In exploring alternative ways of interfacing with VR and attempting to destabilise existing uses, these artists were attempting to rewrite how VR could be used in performance. Ulrike

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<sup>9</sup> Char Davies, "Osmose: Notes on Being in Immersive Virtual Space", Colin Beardon and Lone Malmborg, eds. *Digital Creativity: A Reader* (Lisse, The Netherlands: Swets & Zeitlinger Publishers 2002) p108, 01/06/10.

Gabriel's *Breath* (1992-3) seems to have pre-empted Davies' piece as it also utilised the breath to create images on a large screen as the participant breathed in and out. Although not providing an immersive experience (as there was no HMD involved), Gabriel's *Breath* seems to mark a point at which experimentation with other interfaces (in this case the breath) is being explored in an attempt to find a more embodied way of interacting with the technology.

While Gabriel's *Breath* has resonances with Davies' work due to the alternative mode of activating the technology, Agnes Hegadus' 1992 performance *Handsight* subverts the traditional way of viewing a virtual world via another sensory medium. The piece is comprised of three elements: a handheld ball interface that tracks the hand position of the participant; a transparent ball with an iris shaped opening for the hand; and, a round projection screen, initially displaying an image of an eye that opens into a virtual world. *Handsight* requires the viewer to initiate and control the operation of vision through the hand; only by manipulating the eyeball interface within the sphere is the viewer able to access the virtual world projected in the eye-shaped screen on the wall. As the viewer is forced to see the world with her hand the performance promotes the presence of tactility in vision. As Hansen states: "By coupling this form of tactile vision with the virtual, Hegadus displaces the focus from the differences and similarities between the physical and virtual worlds, revealing instead how the virtual comprises an extension of the essential technicity of embodied life."<sup>10</sup> The artist herself claims that the work evokes "the re-embodiment of the senses" and certainly the analogy being made here between sight and touch, and the relationship between the two as part of an embodied virtuality, seems to be working towards an overall heightening of sensation and, to use Davies' terminology, of the "sensory imagination" and a shift away from the purely visual.

Davies reminds us of Marshall McLuhan's claim that the role of the artist is to "open the door of perception to people otherwise numbed in a non-perceivable situation", and that this function of art is betrayed if the artist

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<sup>10</sup> Hansen, *Bodies in Code* p80.

"merely repeats the bias of the culture instead of readjusting it".<sup>11</sup> She responds to this:

Accordingly, it is only when virtual environments are constructed in ways that circumvent or subvert the technology's conventions (i.e., its bias towards mimetic representation, disembodiment, and will to dominate and control) that the medium of immersive virtual space can be used to convey alternative sensibilities and world-views. To use the medium otherwise (with the exception of didactic applications such as medicine and practical training) is to miss its unique potential as a perceptually and conceptually invigorating philosophical tool.<sup>12</sup>

It is this creation of "alternate sensibilities and world views" that encapsulates the "unique potential" that virtual environments provide, both for philosophical thought (as Davies says), and also to be used as a political space (as Davies does through her feminist re-imaginings). Gabriel and Hegadus attempt to circumvent the conventions and, like Davies and Laurel, wish to move away from mimetic representation, a disembodied stance and the hand-held interface that suggests control over objects in a space.<sup>13</sup>

## **Brenda Laurel *Placeholder* (1993)**

In 1993, Brenda Laurel, in collaboration with media artist Rachel Strickland, created *Placeholder* - one of the initial projects to come out of The Art and Virtual Environments project at the Banff Centre.<sup>14</sup> Brenda Laurel published her

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<sup>11</sup> Marshall McLuhan and H. Parker, *Through the Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) p241.

<sup>12</sup> Davies, "Rethinking VR: Key Concepts and Concerns" p260.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Daniel states in his article: "Re-Cognising Corporeality": "The artist seeks to focus greater attention on dynamic processes as an interactive communication of information between spectator, performer, and performing environment." Henry Daniel, "Re-Cognising Corporeality", Roberta Mock, ed. *Performing Processes: Creating Live Performance* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2000) p61.

<sup>14</sup> This was a series of projects that explored the integration of virtual environments into art works.

revised PhD thesis as *Computers as Theatre* in 1993: the first text to draw an analogy between computing technologies and theatre. She states: “Theatre bears some similarities to interface design in that both deal with the representation of action.”<sup>15</sup> Using Aristotle’s *Poetics* as a basis for dramatic theory, she explains how concepts such as catharsis, engagement, and agency manifest in digital (i.e. “representational”) contexts. Many of the concepts in *Placeholder* come from Laurel’s own theories about the amalgamation of theatrical forms and computers and HCI (human-computer interface). The performance project aimed to explore “a new paradigm for narrative action in virtual environments,” and involved two participants.<sup>16</sup> The participants in *Placeholder* would enter a green matted circle and would be fitted with a HMD and bodily sensors, which would allow their whole body to be tracked (rather than just putting one hand in a data glove, as was typical at the time.)<sup>17</sup> The virtual environment that participants enter is made up of filmed footage from three actual locations in the vicinity of Banff National Park in Alberta, Canada: the Middle Spring (a sulphur hot spring in a natural cave), a waterfall in Johnston Canyon, and a formation of mountains overlooking the Bow River.<sup>18</sup> Participants adopt characters to move through the virtual environment and can become one of four animated spirit creatures: Crow, Snake, Spider or Fish. Laurel notes in her responses to the piece how on adopting one of these “characters”, people immediately began to “perform”, as though the virtual animal identity was a costume. Perhaps this could be read as people feeling a sense of freedom from their own bodies when adopting an animal persona. Visitors move through the various spaces in the guise of their animal persona guided by the voice of the “Goddess”.

Note there is an onus on non-human animals: by recreating the natural world within a virtual environment and focussing on animal characters thereby removing the human (at least in terms of representation), *Placeholder* suggests a

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<sup>15</sup> Brenda Laurel, *Computers as Theatre* (Wokingham: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1991) p14-15.

<sup>16</sup> Laurel, Strickland, Tow, “*Placeholder*”.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

return to a pre-human or primeval time. Rachel Strickland describes the purpose of the piece as such:

One of our objectives with *Placeholder* was to experiment with capturing actual places - in the attitude of landscape painting traditions or documentary cinema, for example - using video and audio recorded on location as the raw material for constructing the virtual environment. It must be emphasized that we were not concerned with achieving a high degree of sensory realism - something bristling with polygons and MIPs that might induce a perfect audiovisual delusion of sticking your head in the “real” waterfall. No, it gets more slippery than that. What we have really set out to capture or reproduce is just the simplest “sense of place.”<sup>19</sup>

Strickland’s comments seem to indicate that the aim of *Placeholder* was to recreate a “real” sense of place as opposed to creating a space for the “sensory imagination” to be ignited. However, even in the attempted recreation of a “real” space, the space that audiences experience is not a real space; it is a virtual recreation of the real, while spectators also experience the duality of inhabiting real and virtual worlds simultaneously. As we shall see, this is in contrast to Davies’ work which does not attempt to produce “real” spaces, instead creating an immersive space of semi-transparent images and objects inspired by nature but with little realism. Although Strickland emphasises that the group were not aiming to achieve a high degree of sensory realism, they still wanted the senses to be evoked sufficiently to instil a sense of embodiment and of place. She suggests that while they were not aiming to make the illusion of place perfect (100% immersion is unsuccessful) they sought to produce a virtual version of place to be explored through the body using the technology available at the time.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

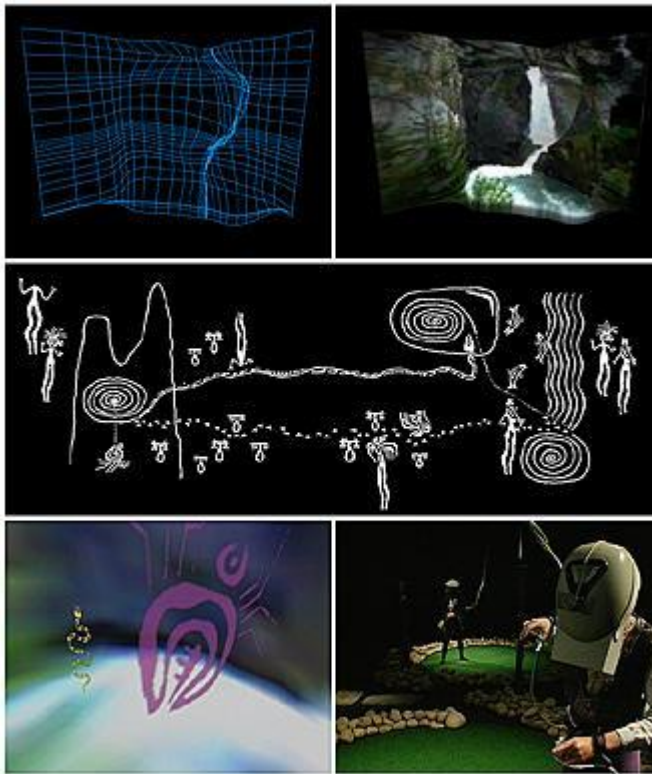


Figure 1 Brenda Laurel. Images from *Placeholder*, (1993).

In *Placeholder*, instead of having a movement sensor on the head, sensors are positioned on a belt worn around the waist to avoid people moving their heads independent of their torso, this reduces tension across the neck, shoulders, and upper back without resorting to an expensive and cumbersome body-suit. This affects the overall experience of the immersed body in that there is a sense of freer movement and less tension distributed across the participant's body. There are a number of feminist phenomenologists who have explored feminine motility and spatiality, taking their lead from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). I would argue that Young's essay "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality" (2005 [1990]) is one of the most compelling and relevant discussions of the female body and phenomenology and provides a useful way in to thinking about how immersed bodies might respond to an altered sense of spatiality. Young outlines three contradictory modalities of feminine bodily existence: ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity; these "have their root, however, in the fact that for feminine existence the body frequently is both subject and object for itself at the same time and in



reference to the same act.”<sup>20</sup> This duality of experience, Young asserts, is a specifically feminine experience. Her example is the circumstance outlined in the essay title - the act of throwing like a girl - a situation that Young explains in terms of feminine spatiality.<sup>21</sup>

By comparing how a young boy engages his body in the action of throwing (and in many other sporting actions) with a wide range of movement through the arms, legs and torso, to how a girl of the same age throws - mainly from the arm engaging one limb only - Young constructs a convincing argument about the bodily inhibitions a young girl subconsciously feels and that prove spatially limiting. Young argues that this is not due to the development of the breast or any other physical limitation (the examples she gives are very young girls of around five years old) but is instead due to the constraints of femininity in contemporary Western societies. By inhabiting the dual position of being a subject but simultaneously also perceiving oneself as an object viewed by others, constraints are put upon the female body. The claims that Young makes about the spatiality of the female body are persuasive and I shall apply some of her findings to my performance examples in this chapter when considering the movement of the body through virtual spaces as well as some of the culturally conditioned aspects of the gendering of spaces and technology and how this relates to the experience of the female body in immersive performance.

In *Placeholder* the creators steered away from the frequently used technique of “flying” around virtual worlds. Around the early 1990s, flying was enabled by pointing fingers in the direction that you wished to travel in. The gestures are formal (i.e. they do not imitate a natural movement to fly) and the team decided that they did not want immersants to have to learn formal gestures in order to view the piece, instead choosing to allow people to walk around the virtual spaces. By questioning the conventions surrounding the use of gestural language in virtual environments, the group ensured that participants would not be required to have certain skills to take part. I believe that this is

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<sup>20</sup> Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) p38.

<sup>21</sup> Throughout this chapter I refer to female motility and spatiality rather than feminine, as Young does, as I want to focus on the experience of the female body without getting into a discussion of the feminine and the various connotations this word might have to different feminisms.

important when considering the accessibility of the piece and also shows how the design can move away from the essentially masculinist conventions of VR where control is focused on a gun or joystick and on the skill level of the participant at gaming commands and gestures.

Interestingly, in *Placeholder* there was one character that was performed live. The character of the Goddess was performed by Laurel herself or by Jennifer Lewis, a research associate at the Banff Centre. It was also occasionally performed by others, including men. The Goddess was originally conceived as a playmate and trickster who would communicate with immersants aurally throughout the performance. Laurel describes the role of the Goddess as such:

The Goddess' character changed according to who was performing her and also in relation to the participants. With children, she tended to behave (and to be perceived) as a helper and friend. With adult couples, she was often a cupid and a tease. She answered questions about the worlds and about the interface and coached people who were having difficulties. She often made suggestions about things to do. Occasionally, as with a pair of young men who asked one another, “Can I eat you? Can I shoot you? Well, what can we do here?” - the Goddess became downright bitchy. Our interviews with participants after their experiences revealed that people had differing reactions to the Goddess, usually well correlated with the style of her performance in their session.<sup>22</sup>

I want to consider this quotation from Laurel in stages. Firstly, I want to think about the role of the Goddess figure within the piece and how this might relate to feminisms that evoke the figure of the Goddess, and secondly, I want to read the response to the Goddess figure that Laurel cites here in relation to the aims of the performance to assess how gender difference is evident in the interactions with the VR technology.

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<sup>22</sup> Laurel, Strickland, Tow, “*Placeholder*”.

Some historians and anthropologists assert that a matriarchal society had preceded a rise to patriarchy in Greece and Mediterranean society.<sup>23</sup> In the 1970s, a new movement of “Goddess” religion emerged, interpreting women’s position and role in ancient times as testimony of a positive view of women. Although this feminist appropriation and reading of the role of the Goddess provided a celebratory expression of feminist power, some critics have indicated that the matriarchal cultures that these goddesses were supposed to represent were not as empowering as they may first seem, or indeed as many feminists suggested. Rosemary Ruether, for example, explicitly critiques the assumption that evidence of Goddess worship points to the existence of a matriarchal society. Her study looks at the four main Mediterranean goddesses (Innana/Ishtar, Anat, Isis, and Demeter) and argues that the first three goddesses “express a construction of female divinity that sacralises not only male, but royal or class-dominated societies.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, according to Ruether, while the figure of the Goddess was seen by some feminists as empowering, the societal structures indicate that there was already a patriarchal society in place. Goddess feminism has also been criticised for the essentialist depictions of women that lie behind the image of the Goddess: woman as nurturing and as a maternal figure. Famously, at the end of her “Cyborg Manifesto” Donna J. Haraway claims “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” condensing her wider argument that the celebration of essential femininity by some feminists should be reconsidered to allow affinities between feminisms.<sup>25</sup> In opting for the Goddess figure as the only live person in the performance, I can only assume that Laurel and Strickland were aware of their decision to evoke the connotations that the Goddess might be read as feminist, and that the strong and empowering figure of a woman was specifically chosen to be their “guiding voice”.

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<sup>23</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether claims this in *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine* (2005). Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005) as does Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949). Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex* H. M Parshley, trans. (London: Vintage, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine* p7.

<sup>25</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* p181.

The example that Laurel provides of the two young men who, when meeting the Goddess figure within *Placeholder*, asked “Can I eat you? Can I shoot you? Well, what can we do here?” conveys some of the common gendered readings of virtual worlds. It seems that in this instance the young male participants, familiar with action-driven computer games where objects and figures are encountered to eat/shoot/gain something from, found the body-based immersive experience somewhat pointless. The popularity of computer games and virtual reality gaming with a largely young male market means that experiences and expectations of *Placeholder* differ according to the individual, their experience with technology and their familiarity with video gaming conventions.<sup>26</sup> The associations with the virtual reality technologies that these two young men highlighted is most likely linked to the gendered use of computers and their own experiences with VR in a gaming context.

Collaborator Rob Tow states:

An intent in the design of *Placeholder* is to cause participants to become more aware of what it is to be an embodied human. We sought to problematise issues around body and gender *in the realm of the senses* - in studied contrast to the usual literary post-modern deconstructionism, which denegates the visual sense and insists on the primacy of text, and results in a profound disembodiment of cognition and feeling.<sup>27</sup>

With the focus on being an “embodied human”, Tow indicates that one of the aims of the design of the piece was to challenge traditional VR representations of the body and interface designs. By privileging total sensory experience as opposed to the prioritisation of sight, Tow claims that the design is supposed to make the immersant aware of issues of embodiment/disembodiment. The sense of perceiving the experience through the body is heightened because of the virtual reality equipment, and the spectator’s sense of immersence in the piece

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<sup>26</sup> As outlined in Cooper and Weaver, *Gender and Computers: Understanding the Digital Divide* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Laurel, Strickland, Tow, “*Placeholder*”.

will be emphasised because of this. Tow specifies wishing to problematise issues around body and gender acknowledging that the issues of visibility over phenomenological experience, spatiality and motility within real and virtual worlds differ through gendered experience. *Placeholder* has been discussed extensively by academics such as Steve Dixon; however, like many of the seminal performance art works, it was seen by very few people. It is worth mentioning here one of the issues surrounding immersive performance and a possible reason for its subsequent demise to almost obsolescence: that audience numbers are incredibly limited. Although *Placeholder* could simultaneously allow two remote participants the experience instead of one, spectatorship is naturally very limited in this context.

The immersive work of Char Davies that was occurring around the same time as Laurel and Strickland's *Placeholder* used similar VR technologies to explore an embodied and sensory experience for one spectator at a time. There are many other notable similarities between the two projects, for example the recreation and re-imagining of natural environments occurs in both pieces. However, Davies is less concerned with applying filmed spaces to recreate the "real" but instead integrates her fine art practice while claiming to reconceive the natural world virtually. As Laurie McRobert states: "Some immersive virtual spaces can be referred to as depicting the virtually real, but the images in Davies' works are hardly meant to be *real*. They are bound only to the level of symbols, sometimes more literally executed while other times more abstractly."<sup>28</sup> I will now go on to look at Davies' seminal piece *Osmose*.

## **Char Davies *Osmose* (1995)**

Canadian artist Char Davies' training was in fine art and painting. However during the 1980s she began experimenting with the virtual spaces made possible by computing technologies. This was instigated by an intention to move painting into a more sculptural form and to explore spatiality in a way that painting could

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<sup>28</sup> Laurie McRobert, *Char Davies' Immersive Virtual Art and The Essence of Spatiality* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2007) p9.

not.<sup>29</sup> Davies became a founding director of Softimage in 1987, a 3D animation software company that went on to become a leading developer of software used in a number of Hollywood films such as *The Matrix* (1999) and *Jurassic Park* (1993). In the early 1990s, Davies was still working on her own projects, such as a series of digital still images (*Interior Body Series*, 1990-1993) and a large scale immersive virtual environment which was to become *Osmose*. *Osmose* opened at the museum of contemporary art in Montreal in 1995 and has since been shown worldwide. When her position at Softimage came to an end in 1997, she set up her own company Immersence and her second piece *Ephémère* opened at the National Gallery of Canada in 1998 and was also exhibited worldwide. After the huge success of both of her immersive art pieces, and the critical acclaim she received worldwide for her applications of immersive technology to performance/art practice, Davies took a break from creating performance to write a PhD about the philosophical groundings of her art practice. She received this degree from Plymouth University (UK) in 2005.

Both *Osmose* and her later piece *Ephémère* depict natural settings through virtual reality technologies and explore embodiment through technology. I will look at the binary between natural and unnatural through Davies work as well as the embodied and the virtual. Laurie McRobert, author of the first full length study of Davies' work states: "Davies' artistic intent, however, goes beyond the elements of nature - her artworks, she emphasises, are meant to depict an osmosis of self/world, interior/exterior, inside/outside, typical nineteenth and twentieth-century dichotomies explored by philosophers during this period."<sup>30</sup> McRobert explores the influence of the late-twentieth-century deconstructionist movement on Davies' work while also emphasising the philosophical underpinnings to her practice. One of the main influences on the phenomenological aspects of the pieces is a Heideggerian "being-in-the-world" and the idea of perception and knowing occurring through the body.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> These explorations are now being carried out in virtual worlds such as Second Life.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Heidegger's primary concern was to raise the question of being; to make sense of our ability to understand things. McRobert, *Char Davies' Immersive Virtual Art* p9.



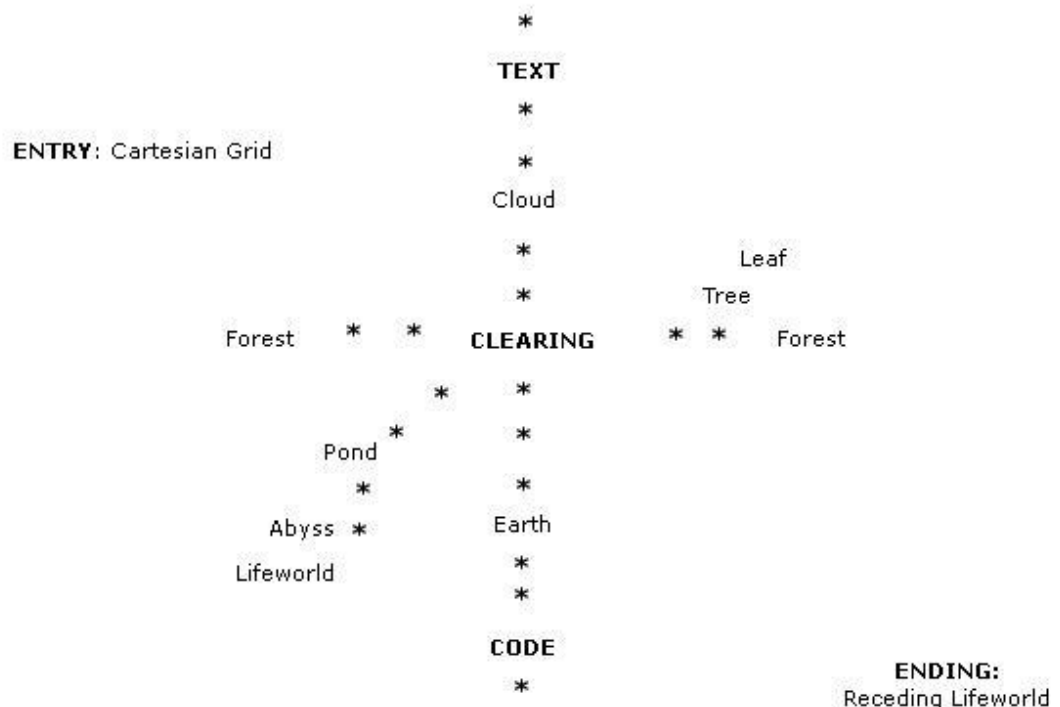
**Figure 2 Char Davies. Forest Grid, Osmose (1995). Digital still captured in real-time through HMD during live performance of immersive virtual reality environment Osmose.**

In its original form *Osmose* was experienced by one immersant at a time while a theatre audience watched a screen onto which was projected the virtual spaces as they were being experienced by the sole immersant. The immersant was located in a small chamber at the back of the theatre space and could be seen as a silhouette by the theatre audience if they looked behind them. The immersant is fitted with a vest that responds to their breath and controls their movement within the virtual worlds, a HMD and a head tracker which tracks the body movement and coordinates the eight-channel soundtrack which works in correspondence with the imagery. The immersant is informed that their



**Figure 3 Char Davies. Immersant wearing a stereoscopic HMD and breathing/balancing interface vest used in the performance of virtual reality environments Osmose (1995) and Ephémère (1998).**

movement is controlled through the breath, and that, while within the virtual world, inhaling will cause the body to ascend, and exhaling will cause it to descend. The immersant can also move their head freely to look around the spaces that they are exploring. This accentuates the feeling of being “inside” the world and of perceiving the virtual space through the body as though inhabiting it. The experience begins in one of the ten “stages” or “worlds” of the piece: a three-dimensional grid that is often associated with virtual reality graphics. The piece makes a journey through different stages: forest, clearing, cloud, leaf, stream, pond, abyss, lifeworld, lines of software code and excerpts of philosophical texts.

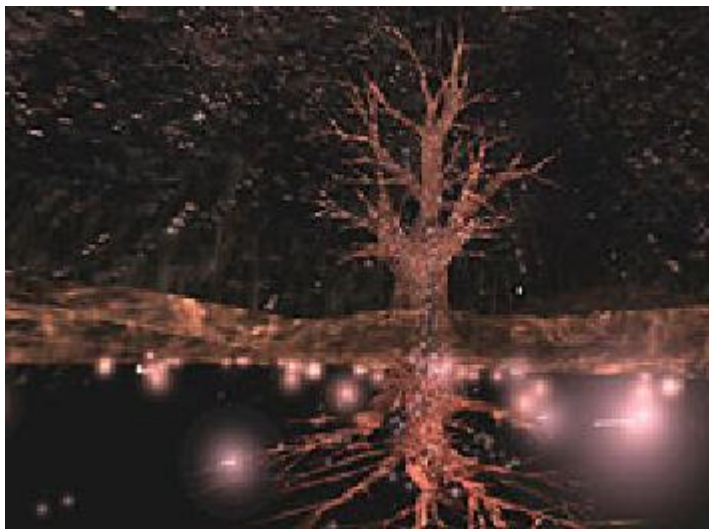


**Figure 4 Char Davies. Spatial-temporal structure of immersive virtual reality environment, *Osmose* (1995).**

The tree image is a central one to the piece, and one that immersants often remember vividly from the experience. McRobert theorises the tree as such: “The tree as verticalising image, as an upthrusting search of light, as an ecological witness. She focuses on the sacred tree, the cosmological tree, the



healing tree, the tree as lung of the earth (breath).”<sup>32</sup> The tree as symbolic of nature and the natural imagery throughout, alongside the awareness of the breath both aurally and in terms of motility, serves as a reminder that we are part of nature. In the notebooks that she kept while working on *Osmose*, Davies ponders on the forest and tree and how they should relate: “Their relation is one of time and not space. This is a very new approach to VR. Rather than popping from one world to another - exit one world, enter next - worlds can at moments co-exist in relation to each other and have immense effect.”<sup>33</sup> This is important when we look at how *Osmose* and her later piece *Ephémère* differ from other virtual worlds. In *Osmose* the immersant can move vertically as well as horizontally, and because of the breath-orientated movement much of the travelling occurs on the vertical axis which is unusual for virtual environments and emphasises the similarity with scuba diving. Despite Davies’ attempts to explore time within the piece and her hope that immersants could spend as long as they wished in *Osmose*, the slots were condensed to twenty minutes or less to allow the maximum number of spectators to experience it.



**Figure 5 Char Davies. Tree Pond, *Osmose* (1995). Digital still captured in real-time through HMD during live performance of immersive virtual reality environment *Osmose*.**

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<sup>32</sup> McRobert, *Char Davies' Immersive Virtual Art* p16.

<sup>33</sup> Davies quoted in *Ibid.* p17.

The twenty minute time slot nevertheless allowed participants to become accustomed to the new sensation of manoeuvring through the space by using their breath. McRobert discusses this artistic choice to use a breath-based interface: “Whereas the visual environments produced by the NASA computerised system are generally explored by a joy-stick or hand-held game controller, or with a data-glove that feeds back tactile information, Davies uses a body vest to achieve sensory feedback.”<sup>34</sup> By applying Young’s reading of feminine spatiality one can consider the female body in virtual environments such as Davies’ *Osmose* (and *Ephémère*) as freed from this restrictive space that Young insists exists. The fact that the body within the space is being moved through the breath, rather than the hand or the arm or through a joystick interface, frees movement from the restrictions that Young claims inhibit feminine spatiality. The immersant’s bodies control their own vertical and horizontal movement in the virtual worlds. Davies pinpoints this body-based practice as feminine, and I agree with her to the extent that, by removing the insistence for action and encouraging stillness and contemplation, the issues surrounding the motility and constraints on spatiality that have been culturally conditioned are left behind. In claiming this, however, Davies is perhaps leaving herself open to criticism that in referring to the still body, feminine cultural conditions of spectating are being reinforced. I would counter this argument that Davies’ work reiterates the gender divide and argue that it is not passivity that she is encouraging but an embodied and engaged experience that is stimulated through the breath.

## The Act of Naming

The titles of both *Placeholder* and *Osmose* are interesting when we consider the content of the performances. Laurel states: “Experiences are said to take place. One comes to know a place with all one’s senses and by virtue of the actions that one performs there, from an embodied and situated point of view.”<sup>35</sup> Place is the essence of *Placeholder*, both in terms of the recreation of “real” spaces

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p5.

<sup>35</sup> Laurel, Strickland, Tow, “*Placeholder*”.

virtually through filmed images of the actual locations but also, as Laurel states, in terms of the creation of a more metaphorical place. By creating a place for exploration and contemplation, a place where experiences happen through the body and to the body, Laurel's *Placeholder* allows the body to perform and spectate from an embodied and situated position. The idea that experiences take place is combined with the word "holder", with connotations of having, embracing, and intimacy, to give the sense through the title that the participant is holding the experience of immersion and that this is a *bodily* experience.

*Osmose* was named in September 1993 and is French for "osmosis". Davies' notations in her notebooks underneath the newly named *Osmose* read: "biological process, osmosis, spatial, three dimensional; relational, between a cell and surrounding solution, a self/world, entity/environment, a semi-permeable fluid boundary; inner/outer."<sup>36</sup> Throughout her writings and notes on *Osmose*, Davies continually refers to the idea of "semi-transparency". This concept suggests a way of looking through something to see something else: the creation of a liminal zone between hard, solid objects and ideas. While this is literally achieved in *Osmose* through the semi-transparent objects that appear in the virtual environment, it also suggests a way of thinking that avoids dualities and explores the spaces in between various subject positions. Davies' rejection of Cartesian dualisms and her search for a more fluid way of perceiving the world seem to be evident in her use of the concept of "osmosis" and of her naming of the piece *Osmose*.

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<sup>36</sup> McRobert, *Char Davies' Immersive Virtual Art* p16.

Damien Sutton indicates that ambiguity and “inbetween-ness” is a central theme in *Osmose*:

*Osmose* is about our relationship with Nature in its most primary sense ...Osmosis: a biological process involving passage from one side of a membrane to another. Osmosis as a metaphor: transcendence of difference through mutual absorption, dissolution of boundaries between inner and outer, inter-mingling of self and world, longing for the Other. *Osmose* as an artwork seeks to heal the rational Cartesian mind/body subject/object split which has shaped so many of our cultural values, especially towards nature.<sup>37</sup>

The phenomenological aspects of the performance are conveyed within this description, and Sutton’s comments that *Osmose* seeks to heal some of the schisms and divides that exist between bodies and the world seem to encapsulate a phenomenological ideal. The idea of biological processes further fits in with Davies’ preoccupation with nature/the organic. Nevertheless, I am dubious about critiques of Davies’ work that claim that *Osmose* “heals” the rift between human beings relationship to technology and nature as I believe that these statements can become utopian and hyperbolic in relation to the potential of the piece. However, through her practice, Davies does provoke thought around these matters and makes people question these aspects to her work and the binaries that she is attempting to destabilise. Sutton’s description also has resonances with the figure of the cyborg - a hybrid figure between technology and humanity - a figure going through the process of osmosis, from human to posthuman.

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<sup>37</sup> Damian Sutton, “Healing the Real”, Damian Sutton, Susan Brind and Ray McKenzie, eds. *The State of the Real: Aesthetics in the Digital Age* (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. 2007) p13-14.

## The Role of the Senses

The body as the conduit for perception is one of the key tenets in phenomenological theory and the role of the senses in this system is crucial. In Merleau-Ponty's terms:

The sensory “properties” of a thing together constitute one and the same thing, just as my gaze, my touch and all my other senses are together the powers of one and the same body integrated into one and the same action... Any object presented to one sense calls upon itself the concordant operation of all the others ... I perceive a thing because I have a field of existence, and because each phenomenon, on its appearance, attracts towards that field the whole of my body as a system of perceptual powers.<sup>38</sup>

The holistic bodily experience that immersive performance provides, and the sensory saturation that an experience such as this instigates, often create a feeling in the spectator of “embodiment”. As McRobert claims: “The underlying purpose of an immersive virtual display system is that it complements human sensory and cognitive capabilities, allowing a person to be viscerally interactive in it.”<sup>39</sup> I would argue that this sense of engagement and interaction with the artwork on this sort of sensory level is unique to immersive performance. In these virtual environments “not only the art forms but we, the participants, float.”<sup>40</sup> An embodied sense of spatiality is altered as a sense of floating and of freedom from the bodily “weight” is experienced. As Don Ihde claims: “Technologies can radically transform the situation, including one's sense of one's body” (original emphasis).<sup>41</sup> Technology is able to alter how people

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<sup>38</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* Colin Smith, trans. (Oxon: Routledge, 2008) p370.

<sup>39</sup> McRobert, *Char Davies' Immersive Virtual Art* p4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p3.

<sup>41</sup> Don Ihde, “Bodies, Virtual Bodies and Technology”, Donn Welton, ed. *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader* (Massachusetts; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001) p352.

perceive their bodies, particularly these types of VR technologies that evoke an embodied and immersive experience. McRobert explains the experience as embodied rather than cognitive: “*The transcendence immersants experience has everything to do with feelings for spatiality, and these feelings originate in the body and are generated by it, not by abstract or intellectual thought*” (original emphasis).<sup>42</sup> Both *Placeholder* and *Osmose* evoke a strong sensory response because instead of looking at images, the body is immersed within images creating a holistic sensory experience. The irony here is that often the experience of inhabiting “real” space while moving around virtual space via VR technologies should be disembodied as it accentuates the mind/body split, whereas in fact, many immersants find this type of holistic bodily experience heightens their feelings of embodiment.

Davies also highlights the aural experience in *Osmose*: “When visual acuity is decreased, one also becomes more aware of sound: and sound, as an all-encompassing flux which penetrates the boundary of the skin, further erodes the distinctions between inside and outside.”<sup>43</sup> The soundscape in *Osmose* is made up of modulated male and female voices and this idea of the sound penetrating the skin and dissolving inside and outside suggests a “semi-transparency” in the aural aspects of the performance as well. It seems that this idea of “semi-transparency” works literally as well as metaphorically throughout *Osmose*; literally through the aesthetic of the objects that are viewed throughout the virtual environment, and metaphorically in that by looking afresh at our perception of the world conventional dichotomies can be destabilised. In Laurel’s *Placeholder*, sound is also essential to the experience as the guiding voice of the Goddess acts as a navigational tool and a grounding in the real world as participants walk around the virtual spaces. In *Placeholder* participants are able to leave “voicemarks” which are bits of spoken narrative that are recorded and can then be listened to and augmented by other participants. Therefore, participants are adding to the textures of the virtual landscape by their presence.

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<sup>42</sup> McRobert, *Char Davies’ Immersive Virtual Art* p56.

<sup>43</sup> Char Davies, “Virtual Space”, François Penz, Gregory Radick, and Robert Howell, eds. *Space: In Science, Art and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p74.



Figure 6 Brenda Laurel. Symbols for “voicemarks”, *Placeholder*, (1993).

## Gender and Technology

In 1993 artist Joan Truckenbrod claimed that women create computer-based design differently from men.<sup>44</sup> She urged the creation of a computer that could be “designed to correspond to our sensory experiences, and allow us to create events that are experienced by the user or audience in an integrated manner.”<sup>45</sup> Truckenbrod was an advocate of knowing through feeling, as well as the difference between “doing” and “being” when it comes to virtual spaces - “doing” implies an action is necessary, while “being” suggests that simply to be a body in the space is sufficient. In many VR environments one is required to perform an action or “do something” to move on to the next stage. However, in *Osmose* all the participant has to do is breath naturally and they will experience the virtual world.

In her analysis of *Osmose* Margaret Morse suggests that Davies’ work with virtual reality technologies goes against the grain of traditional usage (as I discussed earlier) and she highlights how the use of breathing sensors and the self-moving apparatus subverts traditional VR systems. However, Morse goes on to describe her own experience as a participant as unpleasant and stifling, partially due to the fact that she is asthmatic; she describes how she experienced the “symbolic water” of the scuba-like experience viscerally and found it smothering. Perhaps her asthma, in these particular circumstances, rendered her body non-normative or unequal and hindered her progress through the virtual worlds. This is something to bear in mind when considering the otherwise democratic nature of the experience. We all breathe and can

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<sup>44</sup> Joan Truckenbrod, “Women and the Social Construction of the Computer Culture: Evolving New Forms of Computing”, No.4 (1993), pp. 345-57.

<sup>45</sup> McRobert, *Char Davies’ Immersive Virtual Art* p34.

experience this feeling of the breath controlling our movement but someone with respiratory problems is rendered unequal or uncomfortable in this situation.

Part of Morse’s panic, however, was also induced by what she calls her “math phobia” which was provoked by the sections where machine language (code) scrolls upwards. As the piece is controlled by breath, the more panicked she got, the faster the code scrolled and she had to be instructed by the programmer to sink into the piece and to relax her breathing. She states of this experience:

Despite my own reaction, I could understand the intention of the piece, to “encourage the immersant to effectively let go” in a meditative experience that reconnects the body and the world. The piece also underlines that we can and do experience symbols viscerally and emotionally and that these symbols do not have just one meaning, but many potential and experientially determined ones.<sup>46</sup>



**Figure 7 Char Davies. Code, *Osmose* (1995). Digital still captured in real-time through HMD during live performance of immersive virtual reality environment *Osmose*.**

As I said earlier, there seems to be contradictory views about embodiment and disembodiment when experiencing immersive performance and Morse encapsulates this with her idea of simultaneously “letting go” and becoming

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<sup>46</sup> Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art and Cyberculture* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998) p209.



“reconnected”. Davies mentioned the question of gender in relation to Morse’s response when asked: “In your experience, do men and women approach code differently?” Davies replies:

I cannot answer this question from experience because we did not do comparison studies. A female software engineer would no doubt experience as much curiosity in floating through John's code as any male programmer. While some people might assume that Maggie Morse's “math phobia” is related to gender, more likely it has to do with cultural biases in early math education.<sup>47</sup>

Here Davies is keen to stress that Morse’s experience is a result of programming code being unfamiliar to her and therefore frightening, and argues that a female programmer would have not reacted in this way. What Herbst’s study indicates is that women are more likely to react this way because of a lack of familiarisation with computer code, and that, while a female programmer might have experienced curiosity rather than fear, there are far fewer women software engineers with this specific experience. Davies confirms this in the last line of her statement where she recognises that “cultural biases” in early education surrounding computing and maths does affect the experience of sexes. Although she implies that Morse’s response is not due to gender, she then goes on to state that it is because of a cultural bias which is gendered. I agree that the gendering of spaces, technologies and bodies from a young age means that computer code and virtual reality technologies do have gendered meanings.

With the body as an integrative vehicle for navigation, *Osmose* takes a nonconformist approach to VR. Davies writes, “In conventional VR, the participating human subject is represented as an omnipotent, disembodied and isolated view-point, manoeuvring in empty space (and often, at least in terms of increasingly immersive computer games, looking for something to kill...)”.<sup>48</sup> In

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<sup>47</sup> Davies quoted in Claudia Herbst, *Sexing Code: Subversion, Theory and Representation* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008) p96.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

*Osmose*, conversely, the physical body and virtual worlds are brought into unison. Herbst asks:

You write that virtual space is not neutral and that “The origins of the technology associated with it lie deep within the military and western-scientific-industrial-patriarchal complex.” This heritage, as you suggest, resonates in the hard edges and the denial of the body that is so common to the majority of VR environments. In regards to language, scholars have suggested that letters are tools and embedded in every tool is an ideological bias. Do you see a relationship between the cultural bias inherent in VR and code?<sup>49</sup>

The language Herbst’s enquiry employs evokes a feminist questioning of the deeply masculinist technologies that underlie any experimentation with virtual reality technologies. Herbst sets up the question in a way that implies all aspects of virtual reality and code are culturally biased and male-oriented. Herbst’s book is an interrogation of the gendering of code, her thesis being that - as the majority of code and computer programmes are written by men - women are being rendered illiterate in this new language of technology.

Davies responds to Herbst’s question:

I don't think any tool or medium is culturally neutral. I am not a programmer and cannot speak specifically to the biases inherent in computer coding: however, if programming languages are indeed binary, based on 0s and 1s, there is no room for suggestion, evocation, ambiguity or in-between-ness. This is why semi-transparency became so essential in my approach to the medium of immersive virtual space.<sup>50</sup>

Davies’ idea of binary code as reducing the potential for “suggestion, evocation, ambiguity or in-between-ness” is reminiscent of much cyborg and cyberfeminist theory, which celebrates the borderline figure of the cyborg as a hybrid and

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

fluid form.<sup>51</sup> Davies wants to move away from the binary system of 0s and 1s to explore the liminal zone between these and the ambiguity of semi-transparent explorations of bodily experience. Interestingly, the gender divide between male and female has been expressed as 0s and 1s with the male being the 1 and the female being the 0.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, Davies' work appeals for some fluidity between gender positions and a rethinking of the cultural bias inherent in her chosen medium.

## Nature and Feminism

Steve Dixon states of Laurel's *Placeholder* and Davies' *Osmose*: "What is most striking about the two most famous (by some considerable margin) early VR artworks, *Osmose* and *Placeholder*, is that they both use *Virtual Reality* to place the user in spaces which represent and accord with *natural* reality, with nature."<sup>53</sup> This is a notable point of comparison and there is also the temptation to make a gendered reading of this, suggesting that women artists, even when using technology, still revert to "nature" and to the natural realm, while the machinic, robotic performances remain dominated by male artists such as Stelarc. Dixon's view on both artists' use of natural imagery is that a saturation of technology has made some artists revert to nature. He states: "For the artists, the strategy is not ironic at all, since high technology is conceived as a potent new means of return: of (re)discovering the true nature of things, and of contacting or representing one's inner spirit."<sup>54</sup> I agree with Dixon to an extent here, but argue that he pushes his analysis of the spiritual aspects of the works a little far and that actually the creativity in the design of the interfaces is the more noteworthy aspect of the performances. I feel that by making the immersive performances a spiritual endeavour he undermines the aim of both

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<sup>51</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.

<sup>52</sup> As in the title of Sadie Plant's cyberfeminist text *Zeroes and Ones: Digital Women and the New Techno Culture* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998).

<sup>53</sup> Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (London: The MIT Press, 2007) p375.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

artists to reconnect the body to the world and to explore an embodied immersive experience.



**Figure 8 Char Davies. Subterranean Earth, *Osmose* (1995). Digital still captured in real-time through HMD during live performance of immersive virtual reality environment *Osmose*.**

Dixon does correctly point out that in these new perspectives on the natural world both artists opt to represent primeval natural environments and he suggests that: “The search for the VR future in performance art has begun with the search for the ancient and primordial. There are no human beings in these two, apparently pre-Neanderthal worlds - just creatures and spirits (*Placeholder*), primordial bogs, ponds, and abysses (*Osmose*).”<sup>55</sup> While this could be read as using technology to evoke a pre-human time, arguably this is evoking a pre-gender world (which has some similarities to Haraway’s post-gender world). Historically the female body has been aligned with nature, while the male body has been aligned with the mind. By reducing the female to “the body” and the male to “the mind” the Cartesian schisms that Davies is trying to avoid once again become apparent, thus perhaps explaining her choice not to represent human bodies at all.

In *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998), Amelia Jones claims that body art is deeply political when engaged through a phenomenological and feminist model and she explores the feminist turn away from representations of the corporeal body and the literal removal of representations of female bodies

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

in artworks. Jones states: “Any representation of the female body was seen as necessarily participating in the phallogentric dynamic of fetishism, whereby the female body can only be seen (and again, the regime is visual in these arguments) as ‘lacking’ in relation to the mythical plenitude represented by the phallus.”<sup>56</sup> Jones discusses how, because of this, some feminist artists avoided representing the female body at all: “Feminist artists, then, simply must avoid any signification of the female body (since it is always already an object).”<sup>57</sup> Once again it is the dominance of the visual over the haptic or the tactile or the aural that is seen as problematic for feminist artists when representing the female body. Laurel and Davies avoid this by representing virtual environments, and therefore there are no representations of the female (apart from the Goddess figure in *Placeholder* who appears only aurally anyway) with the artists instead choosing to represent space and place. In doing this, the embodied experience is given priority over the visual and the only body that is experienced is the *immersant’s own body* as a living, breathing body in the virtual environments.

## Space and Gender

McRobert touches on the issue of gendered responses briefly in her chapter on “Cyberspace and Immersive Virtual Spatiality”. She states that scientists believe that differences in the spatial imaginations of men and women are due to hormonal and neural bases, and that therefore there is a biochemical aspect of spatiality that affects different types of spatial skills in men and women. McRobert also claims that: “Today we know that the early exposure to the influence of the hormone androgen enhances spatial functions in males and can do so in women if they are exposed to the hormone at an early age.”<sup>58</sup> Whether female spatiality is biochemical or conditioned socially (as claimed by Young) is not the focus of this study: what is interesting is the spatial aspects of

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<sup>56</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) p24.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> McRobert, *Char Davies Immersive Virtual Art* p104.

phenomenological study that can provide us with a gendered reading of experience - in my instance of the experience of participants in immersive performance.

Feminist theorist Kathy Davis claims:

The problem of difference has played a central role in feminist scholarship on the body. On the one hand, feminist scholars have been wary of any attempt to use the body as an explanation for socially-constructed differences between the sexes. On the other hand, they have been critical of approaches which treat the body as generic, thereby ignoring the specific features of women's embodiment. This has led to two separate - and opposing - strands within feminist theory on the body.<sup>59</sup>

I would agree with Davis' overview of some of the issues in discussing gender difference and her analysis of how many strands of feminism have been accused of essentialism when they have isolated the experience of the female body. The claim of a specifically female experience when within a virtual environment could be criticised in this way. However, I would suggest that the difference in gendered experience is relevant when we consider culturally encoded bodily practices surrounding motility and spatiality. Rather than being the consequence of biological differences, I would argue that the way female bodies navigate space and the motility of the female body in the real world and in virtual worlds has been influenced by societal expectations as argued by Young. I would add to this, however, that the way female bodies engage with technology is also affected by cultural factors such as technological use and the gendering of technologies throughout the education system and the workplace. When not constrained by conventional spatial rules governing motility, female bodies experiencing immersive virtual spaces feel a lightness and a freedom that "real" space often discourages. I am wary of the essentialist aspects of speaking about "female experience", but I would contend that theories of female spatiality and motility such as Young's avoid this to the extent that they do not focus on a

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<sup>59</sup> Kathy Davis, ed. *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London: Sage Publications, 1997) p8.

biological basis or reason but instead hold cultural conventions accountable. Because of this, it is possible to speak of a female experience of spatiality and to apply this theory to virtual space in a way that is both relevant and integral to a feminist praxis.

Other phenomenological areas such as perception and the constitution of meaning are altered in virtual worlds as immersants act less through cognitive processes and more through their experiencing body. The presence of the body is felt as is its relation to the virtual world as it navigates its way through the different spaces or “worlds”. Young asserts that feminine spatiality is contradictory due to the simultaneous experience of being spatially constituted and a constituting spatial subject (i.e. being simultaneously subject and object) and because of this the issue of the female embodied spectator is complicated. This is problematised when the spatiality is transferred to a virtual space, as this sense of spatiality is fractured further. I would argue, though, that in some types of VR work, when navigating a virtual world through the body, the female body is to an extent freed of its status as object due to the lack of representation and the focus on bodily experience. In this way I envisage immersive performance as a liberating bodily experience and as a medium with political potential when used to challenge traditional ways of using VR technology and conventional ways of thinking about feminine motility.

As I have suggested throughout this chapter, Laurel and Davies both use immersive performance to subvert dominant usage of VR. Davies claims:

I am not a techno-romantic. I do not believe in the techno-utopian view of VR, of cyberspace. The technology associated with this medium is not neutral - it has come out of the military/scientific/Western/industrial/ patriarchal paradigm. And so by default, the technology not only reflects but reinforces dominant values, unless deliberately subverted by the artist.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> McRobert, *Char Davies Immersive Virtual Art* p14.

This deliberate subversion of VR technology is what she calls her “political project”.<sup>61</sup> It is interesting that Davies implies that she would not work in the field if she felt that she was reinforcing these dominant values and perpetuating a Cartesian world view. She expounds on this:

As an artist, I therefore have two choices: I can either unplug and never go near a computer again or I can choose to remain engaged, seeking to subvert the technology from within, using it to communicate an alternative worldview. Up until now that has been my approach. My strategy has been to explore how the medium/technology can be used to “de-automise” perception via use of semi-transparency, seemingly floating through things etc., in order that participants may begin to question their own habitual perceptions and assumptions about being in the world, thus facilitating a mental state whereby Cartesian boundaries between mind and body, self and world begin to slip.<sup>62</sup>

This idea of “de-automising” how we approach technologies and their applications is crucial if we wish to rewrite some of the gender tropes surrounding various technologies. In terms of the political potential of the work, Davies has been criticised by Oliver Grau who claims that by immersion in the artwork through VR, all critical distance is lost. He states: “This full-body inclusion demands... that the observer relinquish distant and reserved experience of art and, instead, embrace eccentric, mind-expanding—or mind-assailing—experience of images.”<sup>63</sup> Davies has countered Grau’s statement by saying that this distance with its implied objectivity of the observer reflects the consequences of the Cartesian worldview that she is trying to offset. Performance theorist Frances Dyson sympathises with both Grau and Davies and argues that the issue is that we have not yet learned how to “read” immersive

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p35.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p48.

<sup>63</sup> Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, Gloria Custance, trans. Roger F. Malina, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003) p200.



performance.<sup>64</sup> I would hope to extend such a reading by suggesting that by being aware of the simultaneously embodied/disembodied experience and the initial strangeness of this duality, the schism between real and virtual worlds that immersants experience perhaps could be seen as a political strategy to encourage the reassessment of other binaries.

Another critique of Davies' immersive work has been caused by an inability to become immersed due to the cumbersome headgear. Morse and Dyson found this to be the case (Dyson's apparatus was unable to fit her small frame leaving her body not connecting properly with the technology). Richard Coyne also remarks that the fact all there is to do is "be" rather than "do" means that "you become aware of other sources of breakdown extraneous to the focus of the system: the heavy headset, the low image resolution, the noises in the museum, the time constraint, and so on."<sup>65</sup> This invasion of the "reality" of the immersive experience hinders the sense of immersion and in this way also the intended effect of the piece. From my own experiences of immersive performance through the work of CREW, I found that I was immersed to the extent that although I was aware of the "bodily" aspects of the technology (the weightiness of the HMD, the feel of the powerpack suit around my torso) this was a minor factor in relation to my experience of the virtual environment itself and the visuals I was experiencing via the VR technology. What was striking to me was the discrepancy between what I perceived my body was experiencing and what it was experiencing. The opportunity for play and experimentation with the real/virtual and the contradictory experience of embodiment/disembodiment seems to hold a lot of potential, both creatively and politically as Davies and Laurel attempt to illustrate.

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<sup>64</sup> Frances Dyson, "Sounding New Media", *Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* Berkeley: University of California Press (2009) pp.107-135.

<sup>65</sup> Richard Coyne, *Technoromanticism: Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999) p159.



Figure 9 Char Davies. Shadow screen silhouette of immersant during performance of virtual reality environments *Osmose* (1995) and *Ephémère* (1998).

## Conclusions

To conclude, what I have attempted to do in this chapter is to apply feminist phenomenological theory regarding spatiality and female motility to instances of immersive performance pieces created by women artists. By reading feminist phenomenological texts as a way into understanding how we perceive the world through *the body*, I have made the analogy between how the body experiences virtual worlds through the body as a synthetic sensory experience. Stanton B. Garner outlines the analogous areas between phenomenology and performance and states that the areas of common ground between the two are “perception and the constitution of meaning.”<sup>66</sup> I would argue that this is heightened in immersive performance as the holistic bodily experience that affects all of the senses is more immersive than a performance that prioritises the visual. Garner also cites other factors including: “objects and their appearances, subjectivity and otherness, presence and absence, body and world.”<sup>67</sup> Immersive

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<sup>66</sup> Stanton B. Garner, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994) p3.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

performance explores the simultaneous sense of presence and absence, the duality of the physical body inhabiting one space while also perceiving another virtual world through the body.

I believe that the work of Davies, and to a lesser extent Laurel, which has the objective of subverting and reconceiving not only existing conventions surrounding VR but our bodily interaction with technology, shows real promise for the integration of this type of performance into a feminist praxis. The rejection of “doing” in Davies work and its substitution by “being”, as well as the surrender of control through traditional hand-held interfaces, is a feminist act, as is Laurel’s choice to create a sense of place through the body. The subversion of dominant uses and the re-coding of the conventions surrounding VR can also be read as feminist. Whether this practice has been disseminated is another issue, however, for the purposes of this thesis the fact that this work was created in the mid 1990s illustrates an altered attitude to gender and technology in performance practice. I would argue that the integration of virtual reality technologies into immersive performance practice by Laurel and Davies marked a real conceptual shift in how women artists are working with technologies. Their questioning of existing usage of VR and its implications for an embodied female spectator illustrates a new way of working with technology. As Janet H. Murray contends: “Smart costumes and social avatars are encouraging steps in the direction of a more expressive and less gun-crazy medium.”<sup>68</sup> Technologies themselves do not necessarily bring with them specific social relations; it is the use to which technologies are put that develops these things. By trying to rewrite what these technologies have come to represent through their associations with Western militaristic practice and gaming conventions, the artists are presenting alternative ways of working with VR.

These performances occurred almost two decades ago and it is interesting that a genre of technologised performance in which the two seminal artists were both female and were both working to change the usage of VR is now almost completely obsolete. Unlike most of the other technological areas that I am

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<sup>68</sup> Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998) p114.

looking at, in which female artists are in the minority or are working within a male-dominated field, immersive virtual reality performance in the 1990s was dominated by female artists working to reassert the role of the body in technologised practice, and to stimulate experiences of “semi-transparency” and nature and beauty through the technology. It is somewhat bittersweet, then, that this technology, which I would argue had begun to develop as a *feminist technological praxis*, is now no longer being explored to the extent it was in the mid 1990s. There are many reasons for this. Firstly, as I mentioned within the body of my discussion, the fact that only one (or two) immersants at a time were able to experience the virtual environments was not only uneconomical in terms of revenue for the venue but also restricted audience numbers so that fewer people were able to see the performance. This negative aspect of immersive performance became apparent to me when I was working with Belgian company CREW. For every immersive participant, eight members of the company were needed to make the technology for that performance operate, creating a real discrepancy between the ratio of company members to spectators, and during the entire run a very small number of people got to experience this highly technologised and expensive piece. Because of the small audience capacity, many venues may have felt that these types of performances were unviable.

Another reason why immersive performance became less popular is the type of equipment used. While Davies sees the body suit and HMD as very little encumbrance compared to her scuba diving equipment, nonetheless many participants felt frustrated by the bulky and sometimes uncomfortable prosthesis that they were asked to wear.<sup>69</sup> These performances occurred in a specific “moment” in the history of technologised performance and as technology developed fewer HMDs were being produced, making the equipment more expensive to obtain and perhaps curbing further experimentation in this field.<sup>70</sup> There is often a perception in technologised performance of wanting to be

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<sup>69</sup> In particular Richard Coyne points out his lack of immersion in *Osmose* because of these factors. Coyne, *Technoromanticism*.

<sup>70</sup> When I was working with CREW in 2007 they told me that their main expense and issue surrounding working with VR was being able to obtain the HMDs which are almost obsolete.

working with the most recent technological development which leaves a lot of potentially exciting areas for exploration and artistic development unexplored. Had the feminist use of immersive technologies in the 1990s, as explored by Laurel and Davies, continued to be developed, perhaps a genre of phenomenological feminist practice could have been established. Nevertheless, Laurel and Davies' work, although not creating the paradigm shift between gendered technologies and performance that might have been possible, still asserted the need for a body-based practice and a creative approach to human/computer interfacing.

In the next chapter I move away from the phenomenological experience of the female body to representation of the female body and consider the work of artists who use doubling in their work to create an interplay between their live and virtual bodies. By exploring how the digital and analogue versions of bodies relate to the live body in performance I argue that the specifically female performing body often evokes the uncanny.

# Chapter Two - Live and Virtual Bodies: The Uncanny Double in Performance.

## Introduction

In this chapter I use the framework of Freud's "*das unheimliche*" (the uncanny) to explore the work of artists who use the doubling of bodies in their performance practice. In doing this I hope to assess how the connection between the female body and the uncanny might be used as part of a technologised feminist praxis. The uncanny was first discussed in Ernst Jentsch's 1906 essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny", while Freud's later essay "*Das Unheimliche*" (1919) went on to investigate the concept more fully. At the outset of his essay Freud notes the difficulty in defining the uncanny and states:

It undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible - to all that arouses dread and creeping horror; it is equally certain, too, that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with whatever excites dread.<sup>1</sup>

He refers to the "fertile but not exhaustive" paper by his predecessor Jentsch and states that the latter has not adequately dissected the uncanny as he does not look to literature. Throughout the rest of "*Das Unheimliche*", Freud does use examples from literature, most notably E.T.A. Hoffman's tale *The Sandman* (1816) in which a boy, Nathaniel, confuses his father's lawyer (Coppelius) for the sandman and fears that he will throw coal at his eyes.<sup>2</sup> When Nathaniel is a little older he falls in love with Olympia. However, Olympia is actually a man-made animated doll with eyes made by Coppola, the optician.<sup>3</sup> After recovering from a long illness, Nathaniel is up a tower with his newly betrothed and sees

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimliche", Ben Nelson, ed. *On Creativity and the Unconscious* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009) p122.

<sup>2</sup> Freud also discusses this common fear of losing or damaging the eyes in his essay. Freud, "Das Unheimliche" p137.

<sup>3</sup> Freud points out that dolls are also connected to infantile life. Ibid. p139.

Coppelius/Coppola from the tower and throws himself off it. Freud explains the uncanny effect of the sandman as the child's dread in relation to his castration complex and uses Hoffman's story as an example of many of the characteristics of the uncanny: animated dolls, an association with eyes, doubling.

Freud's essay also explores the linguistic variations of the uncanny and provides a number of other illustrative examples: when a person sees the number 62 numerous times in one day, or a man called Hering is contacted by other men with the same name over a short space of time inferring something more sinister than coincidence. Freud also discusses the dread of the evil eye and the double as a symptom of repression. Of interest to my thesis is what he says about women, and I shall focus on this throughout this chapter exploring how the female body evokes the sense of "dread" that Freud attributes to the uncanny. I will discuss the work of UK artists Anita Ponton and Caroline Smith and Polish group SUKA OFF in relation to the uncanny in performance.

There have been a number of feminist responses to Freud's claims that the uncanny is associated with the female body and many feminist theorists have responded to Freud, most notably Hélène Cixous in her direct reply to this particular essay, "Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche*" (1976), and Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991).<sup>4</sup> In this chapter I aim to consider the gendered aspect to the uncanny to assess if it is more often evoked by the female body and if this association between the female body and the uncanny can be used within contemporary performance practice as a tool for a technologised feminist praxis.

## Freud's Uncanny

I will begin by discussing what Freud outlines as some of the key characteristics of the uncanny. Throughout all of his illustrative examples from literature and real life he shows a number of different aspects that can be attributed to the uncanny while maintaining that it is difficult to clearly define. The feeling of

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<sup>4</sup> Kristeva distances herself from feminism in her writings, but Kelly Oliver discusses how Kristeva perhaps renounced feminist ideals too quickly, and how Kristeva's writing can influence feminist thought.

dread he mentions initially he puts down partly to an association with death. Freud claims: “Many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps as a continuation of this fear of death or bodily harm, Freud also maintains that fragmented limbs and disembodied body parts often evoke the uncanny:

Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, feet which dance by themselves - all of these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when, as in the last instance, they prove able to move themselves in addition.<sup>6</sup>

Freud agrees with Jentsch that it is what appears to be inanimate moving as though alive and vice versa that evokes the uncanny and cites Jentsch who “doubts whether an apparently animate object is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate.”<sup>7</sup> On a similar note the aesthetic of the uncanny often includes waxwork figures, artificial dolls and automata.

In Freud’s account of his own experience of the uncanny in Italy when he continually came across the same small street with women at the windows, he writes: “Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses”. He continues: “a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny.”<sup>8</sup> It is interesting that it is the image of the painted women that Freud here finds uncanny, as the uncanny is often associated with dolls, or automaton. This provokes the question of whether there is an intrinsic link between the uncanny and women’s bodies (or their cultural representations). This connection between the female body and the uncanny is further emphasised in Freud’s conclusion to “*Das Unheimliche*” in which he relates an instance from

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<sup>5</sup> Freud, “Das Unheimliche” p149.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p151.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p132.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p143.



his psycho-analytical experience. He says:

It often happens that male patients declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This unheimliche place, however, is the entrance to the former heim [home] of all human beings, to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a humorous saying: “Love is home-sickness”; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, still in the dream, “this place is familiar to me, I have been there before”, we may interpret this place as being his mother’s genitals or her body. In this case, too, the unheimliche is what was once heimsch, home-like, familiar; the prefix “un” is the token of repression.<sup>9</sup>

What was once familiar (the womb) has been rendered unfamiliar and thus, according to Freud, the female body evokes the uncanny. Simone de Beauvoir argues that the female body evokes horror in the male subject: “In all civilisations and still in our day woman inspires man with horror, it is the horror of his own carnal contingency, which he projects upon her.”<sup>10</sup> This horror evoked by a remembering of the female reproductive role, a repression of the former “heim”, has led to the female body as being coded as uncanny. I explicate the link between the female body and the evocation of the uncanny throughout this chapter in order to assess the value of this for a feminist praxis and a feminist reading.

Whilst the literal translation of *das unheimliche* is “the unhomey”, as mentioned earlier, there is debate surrounding the linguistic aspects of this word and the literal translation tends to be substituted for “the uncanny”. Film theorist Susan E. Linville discusses the translation of the word: “Paradoxically, then, the German word *Heimliche* (homely, domestic, domesticated) can mean its opposite, *unheimliche* (uncanny; literally unhomey), and thus contains a

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p152-3.

<sup>10</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M Parshley, (London: Vintage, 1997) p180.

darker double of itself - the double being a defining element of the uncanny.”<sup>11</sup> This definition of the uncanny is interesting as it indicates that the uncanny itself has a double denotation: there is a doubling already implicit in its linguistic meaning. There is also the added element of the domestic sphere conjured up in this word (a space traditionally gendered as female).

The female connotations with the “home” and the womb as the original “heim” (home) to all humans is discussed in relation to reproductive technologies by Rebecca Schneider. Schneider suggests that the fear of the double is “Not just that it renders the original as secondary but that *pace* Freud, it relates to our regressive wish to return to a state before birth.”<sup>12</sup> Schneider is exploring Freud’s concept of the fear of the repressed in relation to cloning technologies and the implications that these technologies have in terms of redefining the role of the mother. A wish to return to the womb, or to return “home” is overshadowed by the connotations of the word “uncanny” in this context. The womb is rendered as something frightening, a place of dread.<sup>13</sup> There are also other connotations to the word in German; for example, *das unheimliche* can refer to the eerie, the unearthly, the sinister and the unnatural. Freud points out that in Arabic and Hebrew the word is synonymous with “daemonic” and “gruesome” and states that “it undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible - to all that arouses dread and creeping horror.”<sup>14</sup> Considering the darker elements to the uncanny and its connotations with the diabolical, such a statement in relation to women’s bodies has political implications. By aligning the female body with a concept that reflects the demonic and the evocation of horror, the female body is being positioned as non-normative and deviant.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Susan E. Linville, *History Films, Women, and Freud’s Uncanny* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004) p27.

<sup>12</sup> Rebecca Schneider, “Hello Dolly Well Hello Dolly”, Patrick Campbell, Adrian Kear, eds. *Psychoanalysis and Performance* (London: Routledge, 2001) p110.

<sup>13</sup> In Chapter Five I explore how female genitalia was depicted as grotesque on building facades as a warning about female sexuality.

<sup>14</sup> Freud, “Das Unheimliche” p122.

<sup>15</sup> I shall return to this idea in my final chapter where I explore the concept of the grotesque female body.

Freud's acknowledgment in his essay that many of his male patients find female genitalia uncanny seems to reflect this view. I argue in this thesis that these anti-feminist associations with the uncanny (and later the grotesque) can be re-coded via technology as part of a feminist praxis.

One aspect of Kristeva's discussion of Freud's "*Das Unheimliche*" that I wish to look at is her differentiation between the uncanniness provoked by aesthetic experience and that by reality. Kristeva states: "Artifice neutralises uncanniness and makes all returns of the repressed plausible, acceptable, and pleasurable."<sup>16</sup> I think that this definition, although it problematises the relationship between performance and the uncanny, still works within my thesis, as the artifice of a traditional theatre form has been rejected by the performers that I am examining and instead they are working with their own bodies as opposed to characters. I would argue that in a technologised performance practice devoid of traditional devices such as character and narrative, the uncanny can be evoked through the presence of the female digital double amongst other things.

In much of the theory surrounding the double there is the notion of the double as ourselves, but *not ourselves*, both and also, present and absent. I use the uncanny as a framework in order to explore the images of women as reduced to "eerie dolls and abject monsters" in the words of Linville, and consider how artists are using, challenging or subverting this image. Linville is discussing films but I want to use this concept of the uncanny in the context of performance.<sup>17</sup> I therefore want to consider how the uncanny can offer a way of re-evaluating representations of women's bodies. The concept of the uncanny has been made more relevant by the possibilities of technological doubling and I wish to make links between the aesthetic connections and the gendered connotations of the uncanny through the work of women artists who explore this doubling.

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<sup>16</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1991) p187.

<sup>17</sup> Linville, *History Films, Women, and Freud's Uncanny* p3.

## The Uncanny in Contemporary Performance

Matthew Causey and Avital Ronell argue that the experience of the uncanny is a more prominent occurrence because of our growing relationship to technology and propose that we are more likely to encounter our “digital double” (to use Steve Dixon’s term) than ever before.<sup>18</sup> With CCTV images capturing our movements almost every second of the day, and our use of avatars to move within virtual worlds, our own experience as technologised and as being shaped by technology is undeniable. When we consider this in a performance context, it is the witnessing of a performer and their technologised double that brings about this uncanny effect. Causey argues that “the experience of the self as other in the space of technology can be read as an uncanny experience, a making material of split subjectivity.”<sup>19</sup> In the first section of this chapter I consider women artists who explore split subjectivity by employing a virtual body to perform alongside their live one, and analyse specifically the work of Anita Ponton and Caroline Smith.<sup>20</sup>

I would contend that in his argument Causey moves too easily between the experiences of seeing your own double and viewing another body with agency in a performance space and its double. I will interrogate this idea further, questioning how these experiences are phenomenologically different. I will examine whether this experience of uncanniness is a personal and individual experience, as Linville argues in her discussion of film theory.<sup>21</sup> How can seeing your own image recreated by technological means be the equivalent of seeing another body and its double? The live performing body and its virtual double are

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<sup>18</sup> Steve Dixon, *A History of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (London: The MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness* (London: Routledge, 2006) p17.

<sup>20</sup> When I am considering the work of “women artists”, I am looking particularly at women artists working in a Western context here. I am aware of what Donna Haraway describes as the “non-innocence of the category ‘woman’”. Haraway’s description refers to a word that is overloaded with meanings and connotations while the signified itself is a complex and ambiguous cultural construct.

<sup>21</sup> Linville, *History Films, Women, and Freud’s Uncanny*.

instantly recognisable as a body and its simulacra; however, the experience of seeing your own double is different - you do not always recognise the body you are confronted with when faced with an image of yourself.<sup>22</sup> I think that this experience needs to be more deeply explored and I hope to bring this discussion of the phenomenological aspects of this recognition in terms of a spectator's points of view to the existing debate about the presence of the digital double in performance. This part of my discussion will be related to the group SUKA OFF which actually employs images of audience members within its performance; thus within the audience there are people experiencing watching the doubling of the live and virtual bodies of the performers, but also a select few who are experiencing the witnessing of their own double. The visual merging of genders is highly uncanny and the fact that all of the morphed faces are projected onto the face of the female performer adds to this uncanniness. I am thus contributing a consideration of the gender politics that are at work within the idea of the uncanny to existing theoretical debate.

## The Double

Freud has outlined that the “double” is a key aspect to the uncanny. Before examining my performance examples themselves, I shall discuss the “doubling” that occurs in performances that feature a live and a virtual version of the performer. Ronell, Linville and Causey agree with Freud that the double is a defining element of the uncanny. Often in a performance context the doubling is a play on the binary of the live and the virtual body. The uncanny may emerge, according to Freud, when the subconscious is triggered, creating a double reality where what was once familiar becomes frighteningly unfamiliar. It is the feeling of seeing your own death or of meeting your doppelgänger. The German word “doppelgänger” refers to a look-a-like, a double, and is often associated with death and is described by Freud as a “ghastly harbinger of death.”<sup>23</sup> As a literary motif, many writers have employed the doppelgänger in their work, most

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<sup>22</sup> Sabine Melchoir-Bonnet discusses this in her text *The Mirror: A History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Freud, “Das Unheimliche” p141.

notably Dostoyevsky in his novel *The Double* (1846). Psychoanalyst Otto Rank's study *The Double* (1925) provides an overview of the history of the double in literature and anthropology and provides insights into some of the superstitions and beliefs surrounding the double which I have found relevant to my discussion of the uncanny as gendered.<sup>24</sup> The fear of the doppelgänger, according to literary and theoretical history, can only be experienced by men; women are deprived of this fear. Perhaps this has to do with a lack of female subjectivity and an invisibility of women throughout history. If a fear of the doppelgänger is a fear historically reserved for men, then how can we read the double of the female body? Does the female body not also evoke the uncanny, perhaps even more so than the male body, because of the cultural association with the "heim" and the womb that Freud explores?

Royale claims in his study *The Uncanny* (2003): "Uncanniness entails a sense of uncertainty and suspense, however momentary and unstable. As such it is often to be associated with an experience of the threshold, liminality, margins, borders, frontiers."<sup>25</sup> It is this element of the uncanny in particular which I am interested in discussing in relation to women artists, their own bodies liminal and marginalised throughout a patriarchal trajectory of history. Elin Diamond writes of the female body: "Historically women, especially lesbians and women of colour, have struggled to appear, to speak, be heard, be seen. In the history of Western metaphysics, the female body is figured as both crude materiality and irreparable lack."<sup>26</sup> The simultaneous fetishisation of the female body and the marginalisation of real female bodies are relevant to my discussion of the uncanny in relation to gender.

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<sup>24</sup> Otto Rank, *The Double* Harry Tucker, Jr. trans. and ed. (New York: New American Library, 1979).

<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Royale, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) pvii.

<sup>26</sup> Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1997) p152.

## Dixon's Digital Double

In the chapter of *Digital Performance* entitled “The Digital Double”, Dixon categorises the different types of digital double that appear in performance. He defines these as a reflection, an alter-ego, a spiritual emanation, and a manipulable mannequin. I wish to briefly consider each of these definitions and relate them to the concept of the uncanny. In doing this, I am exploring whether it is the double itself that evokes an uncanny effect, or whether it is the way the digital double is used that determines its effect. I also want to consider each of these categories in relation to gender. Dixon's first category is that of the double as a reflection. In Sabine Melchior-Bonnet's *The Mirror: A History* (2001), the mirror as both a physical object and as a metaphoric and magical entity is documented throughout history. She begins initially with the Narcissus myth (notably picked up on by Freud in his paper “On Narcissism” [1914]) in which Narcissus was captivated by his own reflection - the image of his double in the water - but then moves on to consider a gendered reading of the mirror.<sup>27</sup> Melchior-Bonnet states that the mirror was and is particularly ambiguous for women; woman “awakens to life when she has access to her own image” and the mirror will always be “the privileged and vulnerable province of femininity.”<sup>28</sup> Perhaps as women have historically been disallowed a doppelgänger, their mirrored reflection is the female version of “a double”.

Melchior-Bonnet states of looking in the mirror:

To see oneself in the mirror, to identify oneself, requires a mental operation by which the subject is capable of objectifying himself, of separating what is outside from what is inside. This operation can be successful if the subject recognises the reflection as his own likeness and can say, “I am the other of that other.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism”, Peter Gay, ed. *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage, 1995) p545.

<sup>28</sup> Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History* pxi.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p5.

Mirrors are often used symbolically in literature to suggest a self-realisation, or recognition of the self, and an example where these ideas are explored through performance are Anita Ponton's *Company* (i) and (ii) which I will discuss later in this chapter.<sup>30</sup> Melchior-Bonnet suggests in this excerpt that seeing oneself in the mirror and "separating what is outside from what is inside" provokes this self-recognition. When considering the gendered response to a mirrored reflection, de Beauvoir would argue that phenomenologically this experience is different for a woman due to her status as subject and object. However, the double in the mirror is an illusion, a trick with reflective glass, and only when we crack the mirror and its image do we see the split subject.

Dixon's second definition of the digital double as an alter-ego is commonly used to explore conflicting/alternate sides of personality in performance. By situating the live body and the virtual body as opposites, as two disparate sides of one personality, subjectivity as split and fissured can be investigated. I shall consider Ponton's *Unspool* in this light. Dixon's third definition of the digital double is as a spiritual emanation, a ghost-like apparition. This can be linked to the definition of the uncanny due to the implicit connotations with death that ghosts have, and links to Freud's description of the uncanny as something that confuses the realms (and the roles) of the living and the dead. Dixon's final category is that of the manipulable mannequin. This version of the double also has connotations of the uncanny and is often linked aesthetically to dolls that come to life and to animated corpses. It recurs frequently through literature as Freud's example of Hoffman's *The Sandman* indicates. At this point I would bring in an aspect of the uncanny that moves beyond the definition of the uncanny as the return of the repressed, illustrating the ambiguous relationship between life and death that Freud specifies in his essay: Jenstch "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate."<sup>31</sup> For the last two of Dixon's categories in particular, this element of

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<sup>30</sup> Mirrors feature prominently in the work of Angela Carter, most notably in *Several Perceptions* (1968), *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), and the short stories *Flesh and the Mirror* (1974), *Reflections* (1974) and *The Bloody Chamber* (1979).

<sup>31</sup> Freud, "Das Unheimliche" p132.



the uncanny applies. However, I would argue that all four of these categories of the double evoke the uncanny to some extent.

Dixon states:

The digital double is a mysterious figure that takes various forms and undertakes different functions within digital performance. This reflection double announces the emergence of the self-reflexive, technologised self, conceived as becoming increasingly indistinguishable from its human counterpart. The alter-ego double is the dark doppelgänger representing the Id, split consciousness and the schizophrenic self.<sup>32</sup>

In this definition we do get a sense of the double as being inherently uncanny; the diabolical elements and the mystery surrounding the uncanny seem evident in Dixon's description, although I find it slightly reductive in its scope. The last sentence of this citation focuses on one of the categories that he has outlined. By specifying the alter-ego double in this context and with this description, Dixon seems to be implying that this version of the digital double is the most likely to evoke the uncanny. The references to psychoanalytic terms imply that Dixon views the digital double-as-alter-ego as a product of repression and I will now go on to consider psychoanalysis and performance, drawing on Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear's study of that name.

## Psychoanalysis and Performance

In his introduction to *Psychoanalysis and Performance*, Campbell discusses how many post-Freudian ideas influenced a new wave of performers who wished to challenge their audience's responses and confront the relationship between the

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<sup>32</sup> Dixon, *A History of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* p268.

performer and the spectator. Campbell states:

But they had also appealed to marginalised groups who have seen in the notion of the heterogeneous “Other” - that part of the subject alienated from itself - a fruitful principle for exploration in performance. Feminists, post-colonialists, proponents of gay, lesbian and disabled politics have all recognised an identity which is “Other” than that inscribed in hegemonic discourse - that is to say white, male, bourgeois, Western, heterosexual and dominant.<sup>33</sup>

I would argue that the discussions of psychoanalysis by marginalised groups offer a greater insight in to our understandings of subjectivity and experience, in particular the experience of the “Other”, than Freud’s original writings did. Freud has been heavily criticised by feminists because of his claim that femininity is essentially linked to passivity and hysteria.

Nick Mansfield explains in his study *Subjectivity* (2000) that: “Accidentally, yet somehow inevitably, the human becomes the intense focus of processes of identification and meaning-making that find in the body signs of stable identities and truth - gender, family role and sexual orientation.”<sup>34</sup> By using technology to create a number of virtual bodies and personas, the artists are, instead, referring to the multifaceted nature of concepts such as “woman” and “the body”, and are reacting against an essentialised stable version of these ideas. In working with these ideas, common debates within cybertheory and digital performance theory regarding the Cartesian split between body and mind and the divide between the “real” or “live” and the virtual, or the absent body and the present live performing body, are rendered more nuanced and complex.

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<sup>33</sup> Campbell and Kear, eds. *Psychoanalysis and Performance* p7.

<sup>34</sup> Nick Mansfield, *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (New York: New York University press, 2000) p171.

## The Uncanny and Performance

An aspect of theorist Nicholas Royale's description of the uncanny is relevant to my application of the concept of uncanny to performance. He states: "We speak of having had an uncanny feeling or experience, as something that came to an end, something now past."<sup>35</sup> This is important when considering the ephemeral nature of performance and the notion of the uncanny in this context. Ernst Fischer discusses how in the performance moment, objects and spaces are in a state of flux, "of not yet - or any longer - *being* either absent or present but, potentially, being *both and also*."<sup>36</sup> As Peggy Phelan describes the performance moment, it "becomes itself through disappearance", as does the uncanny.<sup>37</sup> Experiencing the uncanny in a performance through doubling is almost equivalent to *experiencing it doubly*, as the two moments pass: the moment in the performance and the moment of the uncanny.

Perhaps there is something in this idea of being "both and also" when considering the gendering of the bodies. Here it is useful to return to early feminist performance artists who were grappling with these ideas, in particular the works of artists like Carolee Schneemann who in her performances is both artist and image, both creator and creation of her body-based pieces. A related argument could be applied to feminist video artists who both control their image and are the image they create.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Ponton's and Smith's position regarding their own solo performances could be seen as encompassing this experience: their bodies are both present, but there is also this virtual body, there as a trace of the body, as a representation of the absence, as evidence of the absence. By combining both the present (in the form of their live body) and the absent (the filmed body as a trace of the body), the uncanny is evoked through the digital doubling of bodies. I am now going to turn to my examples to apply this framework of the uncanny to specific performances.

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<sup>35</sup> Royale, *The Uncanny* p320-1.

<sup>36</sup> Ernst Fischer, "Writing Home", Campbell and Kear, eds. *Psychoanalysis and Performance* p119.

<sup>37</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993) p146.

<sup>38</sup> This can be seen in Julia Wilson's piece *Some/Body* (2006) where she uses a remote control to control her own image and virtual double, as she simultaneously films her live body.

## Anita Ponton

*Unspool* by Anita Ponton was premiered at “Projet/Projo,” a Studio 303 event in Montreal Canada in May 2003. It has since been performed at the “Back Up” festival in Dublin in October 2003, the City of Women festival Ljubljana 2005, and the (re)Actor festival in Leeds 2007.<sup>39</sup> Ponton describes it as “A performance in which a woman meets her other selves as onscreen phantoms. This is a dark performance, verging on hysterical, in which she plays out her internal melodrama publicly.”<sup>40</sup> The word choice used in Ponton’s description gives us an insight into some of the themes that she is playing with in *Unspool*. Ponton refers to her performing self as “verging on hysterical”. This has connotations with how psychoanalysis has depicted women as hysterical, and how hysteria has been viewed as an innately female condition. With the roots of the word in the Greek medical term for the uterus (*hystera*), the condition has always been associated with the female gender. Ponton also mentions an “internal melodrama.” By referring to a type of film and theatre that often uses the stock character of the “damsel in distress”, Ponton draws attention to stereotypes of women within these media so that she can deconstruct them. In a similar way Ponton also plays with the aesthetics of film noir in her exploration of film versions of femininity.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> I am working from documentation footage from the performance in Ljubljana where the performance space was set up in end-on formation with Ponton performing in front of a large screen.

<sup>40</sup> (re)Actor2: The Second International Conference on Digital Live Art Proceedings. Broadcasting House Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds UK, September 10th, 2007, p80, 06/06/09, [www.digitalliveart.com](http://www.digitalliveart.com).

<sup>41</sup> Ponton discusses the filmic influences on her practice in her doctoral thesis *Vertigo: The Technophenomenological Body in Performance*, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 2005.



**Figure 10** Anita Ponton. *Unspool*, Goldsmith's College, (6/01/06).

In the Ljubljana performance of *Unspool* in October 2005, the performance space is set with a vast pile of celluloid lying in front of a large screen.<sup>42</sup> This unspooled film perhaps illustrates the unravelling of these filmic stereotypes that Ponton explores.<sup>43</sup> The piece opens with the sound of white noise and then an image appears of static on the screen: the visual version of the noise. Gradually an arm emerges from the pile of unspooled film, and the upper body of the artist appears through the film until she is sitting waist deep in the pile. As this is happening, on the screen black and white images of the performer in two different personae fade up. These images of the performer in different guises fade in and out of each other in silence. Already, this performance evokes elements of the uncanny as the audience is confronted with

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<sup>42</sup> I am working from the DVD of this performance.

<sup>43</sup> I find Ponton's work very self reflexive in the way that Cindy Sherman's photographic work responds to the gaze and returns the gaze while questioning representations of women. Although spanning different mediums I find there are similarities between the work of Ponton and Sherman.

the performer and her image - her double. Her live body is recognisable to us; however the filmed versions of her are at once familiar but also strange.

Atmospheric music fills the space and voices begin to be heard. Ponton states of this: “The women, live and recorded, appear to speak but the words have been taken from old movies and reworked into the soundtrack.”<sup>44</sup> Ponton often refers to old films in her performance practice; for example, in *Say Something* (1999), she sings songs from *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* This 1962 film also features some of the themes that are recurrent throughout Ponton’s performances: fame, femininity, image, hysteria and female destruction. In *Unspool*, as the performer lip-synchs along, the screen versions of her (self?) speak of suicide, madness, despair, at points seeming to taunt the live female who moves tensely and uncomfortably. As she struggles for her voice to be heard, she addresses the audience or the other versions of herself projected behind her. Her voice is always undermined by the voices of the screen versions as they are continually heard over hers and eventually she submits and disappears into the heap, pulling the celluloid over herself until she is invisible and the space returns to how it was at the beginning.

Ponton seems to be implying that female subjectivity is intrinsically bound up with the fictional images of femininity that recur through film (and, I would add, through art and literature), and is subsequently trapped within this world of images. The image of the live body drowning in the black slippery mass of celluloid conveys this: the real live body is redundant and is hidden at the outset, while the voices of the screen images dominate and their images pervade the space. The size of the projected face, looming over the tiny figure of the live performer also seems to insinuate this. In doing this the artist is also playing with the live and mediated versions of herself and implying that the mediated version “wins out” in this case. In this performance it seems that the artist is also critiquing the medium of film itself and positioning herself as a live body as dominated by the medium.

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<sup>44</sup> (re)Actor2: The Second International Conference on Digital Live Art Proceedings p80.



Figure 11 Anita Ponton. *Unspool*, (“Still” Photo by Flip Wibbly Jelly).

Ponton frequently works with her virtual double and plays with her own image in a number of ways. For example, in *Company (i)* (2002), Ponton performs a dance duet with her life-sized digital double; her live body and virtual body interact and appear to respond to each other’s movements. Both the live and virtual versions of Ponton speak, creating a dialogue and a relationship between the two. Gabriella Giannachi states that: “The interplay of the real and the virtual is schizophrenic in nature” and Ponton’s performance often takes this literally with the split identity of the subject being played out over the medium.<sup>45</sup> Like many of her other performances, the piece is exploring the representation of femininity and issues of identity. Ponton comments on this: “The work uses specific tropes of feminine representation, in particular that of the excessive woman enacted as voracious and narcissistic.”<sup>46</sup> Woman as narcissistic is a common motif throughout art and literature. Often represented by a woman holding a mirror, narcissistic women repeatedly feature in artworks such as *Vanity* by Han Memling (c1500). Christian texts and iconography often portray sin in feminine forms, due to the supposed vanity of Eve.<sup>47</sup> The mirror

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<sup>45</sup> Gabriella Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) p106.

<sup>46</sup> 16/03/09, <http://www.anitaponton.com/companyi.htm>.

<sup>47</sup> From the thirteenth century onwards Eve is frequently depicted as brandishing a mirror.

and the double are very closely related.<sup>48</sup> Jones reiterates de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* that men in Western patriarchy have had access to transcendence while women have been resigned to a bodily existence which has instigated a connection between the female body and narcissism as a failure to relate to the world beyond the self.<sup>49</sup>

A development of *Company (i)*, *Company (ii)* utilises two large screens projecting images of the performer, while the live performer is situated between the screens. All of the bodies are dressed identically, although they perform in very different styles. The fact that they are all dressed the same suggests that perhaps they are all parts of the one whole. However throughout the performance the artist and her virtual doppelgängers converse and address each other and the audience. Because of the positioning of the projectors, the space is also occupied by two shadows that appear on the screens next to the doubles (although much smaller). The shadows are interesting as they are untechnologised "doubles" in the space - they are also playing the part of "absence" to Ponton's "presence" in the same way that the virtual versions are, but these shadow images are a more primitive way of signifying this. Because of this a multitude of versions and traces of the body are visible. For the duration of the performance the live body is centred; all of these shadowy or mediated bodies and recorded or electronically-altered voices have stemmed from this one body, the live body amidst the technological representations. By having the live body as central and as both the creator of the image and the image itself, the live body is prioritised; the one dimensional virtual versions are the back-drop for the body. Unlike *Unspool* where the live body is literally immersed in the media, in *Company (ii)* the live body is the focus. In emphasising the role of the live body Ponton seems to be reasserting the live body in technologised performance and the centrality of the body to performance.

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<sup>48</sup> According to Melchoir-Bonnet: "Femininity is a creation of the mirror". Melchoir-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History* p214.

<sup>49</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) p194.





Figure 12 Anita Ponton. *Company (i)*, (2002).

## Caroline Smith

Caroline Smith's performance *Spank* was performed at the (re)Actor festival in Leeds in September 2007, the Intimacy festival in London in 2007 and the NRLA in Glasgow in 2008. I saw this performance at the Intimacy festival where it took place in a small space with Smith performing in front of a large screen to an audience of artists, academics and theatre makers. Smith describes her performance as:

A performance duet [that] explores female roles, memories and desire. The female body, whether fetishised, queered, starved or nourished, becomes a fleshy container; a space for experience and fragments to merge and collide.<sup>50</sup>

The suggestion that the female body is a “fleshy container” is interesting in light of this performance as Smith is exploring how women perceive their own flesh, specifically in relation to body image and diseases that are provoked by a concern over bodily flesh, such as anorexia. By situating it as a “container”,

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<sup>50</sup> (re)Actor2: The Second International Conference on Digital Live Art Proceedings p45.

Smith implies that the female body is a vessel for ideas and ideals. The performance is a duet between “the Reader”, which is a video projection of Smith’s body, and “the Performer”, who is a live female performer (Smith). The performance is based on the story of Harriet Staunton, a woman who died in the nineteenth century near the artist’s home in London. At the time Staunton’s family were tried for her murder, although it was later revealed that the cause of death was severe anorexia. Smith was interested in using the story of Harriet to play with ideas of remembrance and to explore issues of trauma and identity.

As Smith devised the piece her own memories became interwoven with Harriet’s story. To explore this, Smith projects a life sized version of herself next to her live body in the space. Her “digital double” reads excerpts from Harriet’s inquest notes and newspaper reports of the events. I would argue that there is an element of the uncanny in the doubling here. As Royale states: “It is impossible to think about the uncanny without this involving a sense of what is autobiographical, self-centred, based in one’s own experience.”<sup>51</sup> Smith’s marrying of her autobiographical material with the stories of Staunton conveys the uncanny. As the ghostly apparition reads out the information from the inquest, it becomes clear that Staunton is dead and that she died of anorexia. At the same time as seeing the virtual version of Smith playing Staunton, audiences *also* see the live body of Smith in the flesh, as though to refute the fact of Staunton’s death. The artist comments on this: “Flickering ghost-like on a wall with her monotonous news-reader voice, she’s offset by me, the live performer as I recount small tales about growing up in 70s suburbia, near to where Mike Leigh would make *Life is Sweet*.”<sup>52</sup> Smith reminisces about her childhood growing up with her sister, her comment “we were really like twins” resonating with the visual “twins” that the live and virtual Smith embody.<sup>53</sup> There is also the implication that her own sister died of anorexia, which reinforces the link between the autobiographical content and the historical figure that she has chosen to use in her performance. There is a double haunting in the piece, a further doubling as the presence of Smith’s sister is felt throughout the

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<sup>51</sup> Royale, *The Uncanny* p16.

<sup>52</sup> (re)Actor2: The Second International Conference on Digital Live Art Proceedings p45.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

performance; she is present as another ghost as Smith shows a photo of her sister - a frozen moment of a body no longer living.



Figure 13 Caroline Smith. *Spank*, (2007), Photo credit: Sarah Pucill.

The virtual body remains emotionless throughout as the live body recalls her memories, sharing stories of fear, intimacy and desire. The live body plays with a sink plunger and sex toys, lip-synching along to Cilla Black's *Step Inside Love*. This is interrupted by the fetishised descriptions from the monotonous virtual double as she describes the details of the inquest: Harriet's body parts, her organs, her eyes, mouth and heart are evoked by the ghost-like double. While the virtual body holds the public report - a document - and attempts to remain detached and authoritative, the live body is constantly moving, active, *alive*. Once again, the ambiguous mixture of life and death that is connected with the uncanny is evident in the ghostly figure of the virtual body of Smith, as well as through the invisible ghost of the memory of her sister.

Towards the end of the performance the results of the inquest are revealed and Harriet's family are blamed for her death. With this the digital double departs leaving the live performer alone in the space. Interestingly, unlike Ponton's *Unspool*, it is the live body that is triumphant in this battle of wills; it is the live body that remains standing in the final scene. In *Spank*, however, the virtual body and the real body are the same size; the life-size projection is not, however, *life-like* with the monotone delivery and stillness of the virtual body being set in sharp contrast to the energetic, playful, and vulnerable live body with which it shares the space. In this respect, the live

female body in *Spank* “wins out” to her virtual double and the double leaves, with implicit connotations of exorcising the past and of laying ghosts to rest.

It should be noted that in the performance of *Spank* at the NRLA 2008, Smith had an injury that meant that she had to perform in a wheelchair and with the use of crutches.<sup>54</sup> The effect of this highlighted the fragility of the live body and I think that the meaning of the piece is altered here. Her live body cannot be as mobile as usual and so the live body is almost as inanimate as her digital double. The lack of animation of her live body creates a different relationship between the live and virtual body as there is not the same friction and interplay between the live and the dead/virtual. Instead, the live body becomes cyborgian, as Smith’s body fitted with a prosthesis (the crutches or wheelchair) is the more prominent image. Smith spoke in an interview at the NRLA 2008 about how the physical changes in her own body demanded changes in the piece. For example, when she had first conceived the piece in 2006 she had filmed herself; however, her body changed over time and the alterations in her physical appearance in the twelve to sixteen months between performances meant that the filmed version had to be re-filmed in order to portray a recognisable virtual double.<sup>55</sup> I think this is intriguing when we consider the medium itself, as here we have an example of the live body moving away from the image of the virtual body; the virtual body is no longer a representational version of the live and must be retraced.

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<sup>54</sup> For a discussion of disability in technologised performance see Petra Kupperts, “Addenda, Phenomenology, Embodiment: Cyborgs and Disability in Performance”, Susan Broadhurst and Josephine Machon, eds. *Performance and Technology: Practices of Virtual Embodiment and Interactivity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) pp.169-180.

<sup>55</sup> 22/02/09, <http://www.carolinesmithonline.com/text/We%20Need%20to%20Talk%20about%20Live%20Art.pdf>.



Figure 14 Caroline Smith. *Spank*, (performed in wheelchair), NRLA, (2008).

## The Performing Female Body as Uncanny

The focus of both *Unspool* and *Spank* on body parts is not unintentional; when working with the female body the connotations of the *image* of the female body are never separate. This image as an often fragmented consortium of sexualised parts is conveyed through both pieces. This is visible in relation to representations of femininity in film in Ponton's piece as we see her huge filmic face looming over the live body. The fragmentation of the female body is also evident in Smith's piece as the long lists of Staunton's body parts turn her body into a document - a piece of evidence. I would argue that this also has resonances with the uncanny, since body parts or disjointed limbs are, as we have seen, part of the aesthetic motifs surrounding the uncanny.<sup>56</sup> Both pieces also incorporate lip-synching at points. I find this interesting as although we have a live body and a virtual body in both of these pieces, at times they are silenced, or silence each other. This could be read as a reference to the idea of the silent woman; of a woman with no voice for herself. By lip-synching in their pieces, both Ponton and Smith mimic the substitution of their voice by a different voice. I would read this action as a comment on patriarchal culture providing a voice for women having silenced their own.

In Ponton's piece there is also a critique of femininity in film; an evaluation of female representation and of the parts that women play in film,

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<sup>56</sup> These aesthetic motifs are discussed in Linville's text as such: "Doubles, dolls and automata; a severed head or limb; psychological experiences such as déjà vu; and the fears of being buried alive or castrated." Linville, *History Films, Women, and Freud's Uncanny* p16.

particularly in film noir.<sup>57</sup> The fact that Ponton is using soundbites and excerpts from films would suggest this as, by cutting and pasting feminine tropes from film, she is making them be heard anew and demanding critical assessment of them in a similar way to Cindy Sherman's photography. Causey considers lip-synching as a kind of "technological-ventriloquist" act and asks: "How do contemporary theatre and performance artists stage this drama? The performer appears live and videated simultaneously, one image in the process of living, being-unto-death, one image held in abeyance, virtually present."<sup>58</sup> Here Causey is referring to the uncanny doubling of the live and the virtual which conveys the notion of the doppelgänger as a sign of impending death - to meet your doppelgänger is to confront your own death. Arguably the live body is always dying and the mediated images will transcend death - the photo of Smith's sister is an image of a body that is no longer living. Ironically the live body is closer to death than the virtual body.

As Austrian analyst Otto Weininger in his study *Sex and Character* (1906) states:

No animal is made afraid by seeing its reflection in a glass, whilst there is no man who could spend his life in a room surrounded with mirrors. Can this fear, the fear of the doppelgänger, be explained on Darwinian principles? The word doppelgänger has only to be mentioned to raise a deep dread in the mind of any man. Empirical psychology cannot explain this; it reaches the depths.<sup>59</sup>

Weininger is making the association between the mirror and the double and the sense of dread that this double evokes due to its positioning between life and death. I would reiterate my point from earlier here; that the analogy between seeing your own double and seeing the double of another in performance is

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<sup>57</sup> There is a wealth of film theory surrounding women's role in film, see for example Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen* 16.3 Autumn (1975) pp. 6-18. There is also the notion that women are often complicit in regarding themselves as objects which Ponton may be playing on here.

<sup>58</sup> Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture* p22.

<sup>59</sup> Otto Weininger, *Sex & Character* (London: W.Heinemann, 1907) p210.

flawed. I think that this experience is very different, mainly due to the moment of instantaneous recognition that you have when witnessing the double image of a performer on stage, as opposed to the dawning realisation that an image is your own when confronted by it. I do think that both of these experiences *can* evoke the uncanny. However these experiences are not the same, and do not evoke the same uncanniness. The feeling of dread is subjective as you confront your own image, your own death.<sup>60</sup> Whilst we most often encounter a live performing body and their virtual double in performance, the work of SUKA OFF combines both of these uncanny experiences to create a doubly uncanny moment.

Returning to Ponton and Smith, the fact that both performers are also subordinate to their digital double at points would indicate to me a diffraction of voices, a split and conflicting subjectivity and a feeling of an unstable identity. The themes that the artists explore here also convey this feeling of a splitting or a schism between their image and their self. Mental illness, trauma, death, and anorexia are illustrated through the way the live body and the virtual body communicate.<sup>61</sup> The medium is being employed here as a way of exploring the self in different forms and of showing the multifaceted nature of femininity; in Ponton's *Unspool* it is through the merging of onscreen versions of herself to eventually shout down the live body and make it disappear, and in Smith's performance to remember stories of herself and another woman like her from a different time while her own intimacies are laid bare and her own ghosts laid to rest.<sup>62</sup> In Ponton's case, the representations of "woman" through film overpower her own live body and cause it to drown in celluloid while Smith's "liveness" against her static digital double highlight the "liveness" of her body.

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<sup>60</sup> In his essay Freud describes his own experience of catching sight of his reflection in a mirror, and, before realising it was himself, taking a thorough dislike to the image. Freud, "Das Unheimliche" p156.

<sup>61</sup> Anorexia also seems to have this idea of the real live body and the perceived body as an implicit part of the disease. The schism between the real live body and the body-as-viewed-by-the-world is evident.

<sup>62</sup> Ponton explicitly states of her work that it is exploring the multifaceted nature of femininity as well as critiquing existing representations.

Although Ponton and Smith's performances have different aesthetics and themes, there are clear similarities. The relationship between the live and the mediated is here set up as a kind of a duality by the use of the screen, only slightly complicated by the way the medium is used in these performances.<sup>63</sup> While both artists use the interplay between their live and virtual bodies to explore other themes (filmic representations of women in *Unspool* and memory and anorexia in *Spank*) I would argue that the doubling of their own bodies evokes the uncanny, and calls into question what the representation of their body multiplied means in a performative context. I now want to consider a performance example that problematises the roles of virtual and live further while also rendering a number of other areas more complex. Gender divisions, audience/performer divisions and body boundaries are disrupted and corrupted in the work of SUKA OFF.

### **SUKA OFF *tranSfera* (2007)**

Polish digital performance and body art group SUKA OFF performed their hour-long piece *tranSfera* at the Intimacy conference in London in December 2007.<sup>64</sup> Performing since 1995, SUKA OFF outlines some of its main recurring themes as: exploring human carnality through all its biological and physical aspects; investigating the possibility of the creation of a third gender by blurring the codes between male and female genders; exploring “the mechanisms of human nature, the virus of violence and fear symbolised by synthetic fluids,” and searching for alternative forms of communication through the relationship between the body and electronic devices.<sup>65</sup> Its performance *tranSfera* includes all of these themes to one extent or another.

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<sup>63</sup> See Auslander's discussion of the definition of real and virtual. Philip Auslander, “Live From Cyberspace: or, I was sitting at my computer this guy appeared he thought I was a bot”, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 24.1, (2002) pp.16-21.

<sup>64</sup> The performance took place in an auditorium at Goldsmiths College, London with a semi-circular seating bank and large stage area. In subsequent performances smaller, more intimate venues have been used.

<sup>65</sup> 01/02/09, <http://www.sukaoff.com/indexeng.html>.



SUKA OFF is made up of Piotr Wegrzynski and Sylvia Lajbig and in *tranSfera* they were collaborating with female body artist Trauma Unit. I want to consider SUKA OFF's performance as an example of how virtual and real bodies can be hybridised in performance through technology, and also wish to draw attention to how SUKA OFF problematise traditional gender roles through its explorations to find a "third gender". I also want to discuss how, in doing this, it situates itself in a very complex position regarding the use of women's bodies throughout the performance, as they are manipulated and shown via performance. Finally, I want to consider how SUKA OFF involve the spectating body in their performances, both literally (through its photographic techniques) and also phenomenologically and viscerally through its incorporation of blood-letting and piercing throughout.



Figure 15 SUKA OFF. *tranSfera*, (2007).

*tranSfera* opens with an androgynous looking figure dressed in black sitting in front of two screens. One screen has a projected image of a red circle with the image of a heart monitor on it. The sound effects coincide with the image and the sound of a heart monitor can be heard over some atmospheric mechanical sounds. The figure is a woman (Lajbig), but her short hair and tall,

lean body create an androgynous and ambiguous image. A man dressed in black (Wegrzynski) approaches her and ties a blindfold over her eyes. Wegrzynski then moves around the space with a Polaroid camera taking pictures of individual audience members. He positions the woman's hands in front of her and places one of the photographs in her hands. Audiences are watching the woman, but on one of the screens behind her there is a projected image of her holding the photo (via a live-feed camera). The way the camera is positioned means that in the screen version the audience also see the screen and in this they can see the screen again, so there is the effect of the image repeating endlessly. In this repetition there is not only a doubling, but a multiplying of the body image (the double is mirrored repeatedly). However the origin does not disappear - the live body remains in the foreground of the space while her simulacral image repeats endlessly behind her on the screen.

Because of the quality of the live-feed, the image that we see looks like a kidnap - the thought that this might be a ransom video passed through my mind. On the other screen, images of anatomy drawings are flashed up quickly in a montage, suggesting that how the body functions is a key motif to this performance. The juxtaposition of these anatomy drawings that belong to another era (when the workings of the body were taught through anatomy classes and human vivisection) seem incongruous next to the technological, steely aesthetic of the rest of the staging. When the male performer places the photo between the female performer's hands the image is grey, the photograph has not yet developed. However, before our eyes (and before the camera which is projecting the image behind) the photograph develops; a shadowy image of a face becoming clearer and clearer. This is a strange thing to watch as an audience member, and although my picture was not taken and placed between the woman's hands, I felt an uncanniness as I looked around the auditorium for the face that would match the image that had just appeared before my eyes. Once the photo was fully developed it was replaced by another grey square, which over time also developed.

The use of an "old" technology (Polaroid photography) alongside digital technologies deserves comment. The photograph itself has been examined at length. Roland Barthes has discussed the photograph as a record of a moment

(amongst other things), an idea that Rosalind Petchesky expands upon.<sup>66</sup> The latter writes of the simultaneous empirical and magical meaning of a photograph, and claims that photographic imagery in particular when compiled into a family album becomes a “magical source of fetishes that can resurrect the dead or preserve lost love.”<sup>67</sup> Catherine Waldby states of the photograph:

Photographic images are traces which point back to a once real event by recording a reduced version of it, a two-dimensional pattern of light on emulsion. Digital images...are three dimensional simulacra which approximate a visual cloning of the fleshly body, a one-to-one reproduction which effectively substitutes voxels for organic cells.<sup>68</sup>

Waldby’s claim that digital images are the simulacra of the image, rather than the evidence of the original, links directly to Baudrillard’s assertion that we are no longer in the realm of the double, the mirror or the concept since: “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”<sup>69</sup> When considering the situation of a real without origins, the analogy of the photograph compared to digital technologies is an effective one - SUKA OFF utilises both of these things. The fact that a Polaroid camera is used so that the images gradually appear adds to the uncanniness of this section as there is the double appearing - at first only ghostly and then becoming recognisable as the image is complete.

After this sequence there is a section where Lajbig blindfolds Trauma Unit and Wegrzynski and they undress each other without being able to see; the clumsiness of Trauma Unit and Wegrzynski’s movements without sight is notable.

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<sup>66</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (1982), Rosalind Petchesky, “Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction”, *Feminist Studies* 13, (1987): pp.263-292.

<sup>67</sup> Rosalind Petchesky, “Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction”, *Feminist Studies* 13, (1987): p269.

<sup>68</sup> Catherine Waldby, “Revenants: The Visible Human Project and the Digital Uncanny”, The Aberdeen Body Group, eds. *The Body: Critical Concepts in Sociology – Volume V Alternative Bodies* (London: Routledge, 2004) p417.

<sup>69</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings* Mark Poster, ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2001) p166.

Once again audiences are reminded of the other senses as they witness the bodies performing actions without their sight. During this Labjig is undressing herself on the platform at the back while watching them. As they finally remove the remaining articles of clothing, the male performer then takes off his blindfold. Trauma Unit is left blindfolded on the floor as the other two performers remove the clothes. While Wegrzynski sets up the cameras at the back Labjig applies lipstick to Trauma Unit's mouth and kisses her passionately, smearing her lipstick. This is reminiscent of how Labjig's lipstick is smeared at another stage of the performance and this recurrence of lipstick as a sign of femininity and its continual smearing seems to be highlighting how genders are signified.

Wegrzynski moves towards another camera and begins piercing himself on the sides of his head. Because of the proximity of his face to the camera this was a very difficult thing to watch and many audience members turned away at the large mediated image of his head with rivulets of blood running down it. The technology here heightens our sensory reaction to this action as the image of his face is very large: every detail of his face is visible, the sweat on his lip, the skin puckering as he inserts the needles. As my own body flinched and turned away at this point, I was aware of a number of other bodies doing the same. The empathetic relationship that you have as a spectator with the performing body stimulates a response in your own body. However, some spectators did not flinch when observing the piercing and blood-letting which reminded me of the subjective nature of a bodily response to masochistic performance. It is impossible to quantify these responses that are not my own; I can only state that a range of responses to the piercing sections occurred, and that a number of bodies responded with physical discomfort as a result of the actions of the performer.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> A number of body artists specifically confront these issues with intersubjectivity and the unavoidable relationship between subjectivity and a performative response. For example the work of Dominic Johnson and Franko B evokes visceral and subjective responses and the artists pose questions around intersubjectivity through their practice.



Figure 16 SUKA OFF. *tranSfera*, (2007).

Following this, Wegrzynski places Lajbig on the white cloth situated at the back of the space with two cameras already fixed on it: one at the top and one at an angle to it. Lajbig is gagged and lies on the cloth while the male performer brings in another female performer (Trauma Unit) and places a syringe (with a tube attached) in Trauma Unit's arm. Trauma Unit sits static and passive for several minutes with the blood from her arm pouring through the tube into a bowl. During this section of the piece I was aware of my own blood pounding in my ears as I watched the performer's blood trickle into a growing pool of deep red. Once again, my body was highly engaged in this process of spectating, and also in transferring the experience of the performer's body onto my own. This was not a conscious thing, instead my body responded before I had time to analyse what I was seeing. This instinctive bodily response (not always a pleasant response) is something that I associate with the work of SUKA OFF and would argue that at these moments they achieve the communication between the bodies on stage and in the audience, and the transferral of bodily experience through empathetic response. By involving the spectator both literally, in terms of the use of the facial images in the photos, as well as phenomenologically, through a visceral bodily reaction, SUKA OFF creates a double involvement for the audience. This engagement with both the body and the mind simultaneously demands a more holistic and phenomenological response to the work.

After the lengthy blood-letting section, Trauma Unit is moved by Lajbig onto the white cloth. Lajbig seems to have acquired some agency by this stage and she wraps white gauze around the whole of Trauma Unit's neck and face to create a mummified effect with all Trauma Unit's features obscured. Due to the

positioning of the cameras, the white of the bandages in which her face is covered provides a projection surface for her own image, endlessly repeating. Lajbig now manipulates the inanimate woman's body so that she is lying down, then kisses her on the bandages where her lips would be. Wegrzynski enters, and it seems that he and Lajbig are now in collusion as they take the bowl of blood and cover Trauma Unit's body with it. The audience is witnessing this live, but also seeing it via two projected images of what the cameras are capturing live. The projected images have resonances of an autopsy, a mummification, or of some awful ritual, and the body lying down on the cloth appears dead. These images evoke a sense of the uncanny and the abject as we see this live body rendered inanimate and doused in her own blood. Here we are reminded of Freud's assertion about the uncanny that it sometimes evokes "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive."<sup>71</sup> There are uneasy moments in this performance where watching what is being done to the female body becomes uncomfortable and sometimes very disturbing. There is a feeling of complicity in the voyeuristic aspect of this performance. However, while the female bodies of Lajbig and Trauma Unit appear to be submissive and passive during most of the performance, the performers do still have agency. By choosing to participate in the performance the women are in control of what happens to their bodies. Judging by the multiple scars on Trauma Unit's body she has participated in many similar events and her body markings indicate a desire to mark and cut her body. This desire to hurt and be hurt involves power and roles within sado-masochism often play out in terms of control and sex and desire. However, within this performance context the signifiers are not explicitly proposing sexual pleasure which is why I find the work of SUKA OFF complex and ambiguous.

Once the body is covered in blood, Wegrzynski takes four Polaroid photographs of four segments of Trauma Unit's body: her feet to thighs, thighs to stomach, stomach to neck and breasts upwards. These photos are laid out on the floor in front of the body and they gradually develop. Here we have a literal example of the fragmented body - visual representation of the disembodied body parts that are so often associated with the uncanny. Meanwhile, Wegrzynski and Lajbig take a large white sheet and cover Trauma Unit's body in it, pressing

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<sup>71</sup> Freud, "Das Unheimliche" p132.

down. When they lift it up the blood has transferred onto the sheet leaving an imprint of the body; a trace of the body in its own blood. The two performers then cover the naked bloody body of the woman with the sheet with the imprint facing up so that it looks like it did when it was uncovered. As the body disappears, the imprint of the sheet is visible, and the photos have developed, a mini version of the image that the audience can simultaneously see full scale. The body itself can now not be seen, but what can be seen are the two traces of the body that have been left, as well as the two projections of the shrouded figure. Spectators are left with images of two sets of doubles here evoking the uncanny while the mummified “cadaver” that Trauma Unit’s body has become also marks the questionable border between life and death.

As well as the literal transference of blood in the final part of the performance, the title *transSfera* could also be referring to the transferring of roles throughout the piece. Wegrzynski first sits in the seat with the black leather mask over his face. While this hides his face and renders him anonymous the material and style of the mask is reminiscent of S&M-wear. He then puts the woman in the seat and there is a lengthy sequence of taking photos of audience members and sticking them on a white wall. This image is being filmed by a live-feed camera and so we see this image projected onto a screen. Lajbig sits in a seat with another camera pointing at it and then we see her image appear on the screen. The male performer then mixes the images together so that they morph creating an uncanny image of the photographed face and the live female performer. The female performer puts on lipstick and this sequence is repeated using another image of an audience member that has been pinned to the wall. In putting on the lipstick the woman is marking herself as “female”. However Wegrzynski quickly smears this across her face so that what, a moment before, had been a poised femininity becomes a smeared and damaged looking visage. The male performer moves between the audience (taking pictures of faces and pinning them to the wall), and the woman - moving her and doing things to her body to alter the images that are being projected.

As the images are being projected a number of text statements appear over the images. The messages refer to infection, contamination, identity confusion and so on. This goes on for around ten audience images; in between taking these, the male performer is cutting the woman’s clothes off (so her breasts are exposed), manipulating her body, covering her head in cling film,

piercing her, painting her and moving her face to fit the frame of the picture. In performing these actions on the static and expressionless body of Lajbig, the male performer appears to remove all agency from the female performer and becomes completely in control of her image (both live and filmed). In her stillness she becomes like a doll (one of the aesthetic examples of the uncanny) and also like the manipulable mannequin that Dixon counts as one of his categories in his definition of the digital double. However, in this instance both the live body and the virtual version are inanimate as the filming is being done in real time. Because of this, the live body and the virtual body are the same, but simultaneously not the same. The image is the same, but our perspective on the image is different; one is three-dimensional, while one only seems to be. This concurrent moment of witnessing the live body and the virtual body, familiar and yet unfamiliar, evokes the uncanny.



Figure 17 SUKA OFF. *tranSfera*, (2007).

After this sequence Lajbig is manoeuvred over to the floor where a white body bag lies empty. Wegrzynski puts her in the body bag, before turning the camera on himself and taking his own picture. He then places it on the wall next to the photos of the audience members. He positions the camera on this so that now the image of his face in the mask is projected onto the screen. Wegrzynski then sits on the seat again with the live-feed video camera focussed on him and removes the mask. This is slightly ambiguous as it seems to imply that he is now ready to be subjected to the “*tranSfera*” that the woman performer



experienced, and there is the sense that perhaps he is next on an assembly line of manipulation and transferred identity. However, this is refuted by the fact that the male performer has held the camera throughout: he has chosen who to photograph, he has had the agency throughout, and has chosen what to do to the female performer's body. At the end when he turns the camera on himself, he is still in control and his image has not been transferred in the way that hers was. The image that he morphs into is the image of his unmasked face from his masked photo, whereas the female performer was subjected to a visual morphing into a multitude of images, male and female. Her identity was visually diffracted throughout and her body manipulated while she remained devoid of agency, and while the male performer subjected her to violence and pain.

I would argue that as well as referring to the final transfer of blood onto the sheet, and of the images onto the photographic paper, the *transfèra* of the title refers to the transfer of bodily fluids throughout. The bloodletting and blood painting as well as the insertion of needles into the face and body (a number of times throughout the performance) are a physical representation of the fear of the body boundary being broken.<sup>72</sup> In the section where the woman performer's face is being pierced and the face of an audience member is being morphed into it, the words on the screen appear: "She had been in contact with an infected person." References to infection, disease, and contamination in the text that flashes up in front of the screen reinforce the images of the disruption of the skin and the fluids that come from within. As Julia Kristeva states in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982):

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> In particular the face is seen as a taboo place to cut or disrupt. This was made evident in Gina Pane's performance *Le Lait Chaud* (Warm Milk) in 1972 where audiences shouted "No! Not the face!" when Pane went to cut her face with a razor.

<sup>73</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* Leon S. Rouliez, trans. (New York: Columbia University press, 1982) p4.

There is a strong link between Freud's uncanny and Kristeva's theory of abjection. In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva discusses the reaction to that which has been cast out of the symbolic order. The uncanny and the abject also both inspire a sense of horror or revulsion in the body that is encountering it. In *tranSfera*, the performer's bodies become abject through the body modification techniques that are practised within the performance. I think that this idea of "the in-between, the ambiguous and the composite" are at the heart of SUKA OFF's work as it explores these liminal areas between bodies and technology.

In *tranSfera*, there is the binary of the live bodies in the space and the static Polaroid images; however, the space in between these is explored through the morphing and the images. Rather than the oppositional sides that we have witnessed in the work of the solo female artists I looked at in the beginning of this chapter, SUKA OFF moves around the spaces in-between, exploring these uncanny spaces. The gender distinctions of male and female are traditionally seen as oppositional, but SUKA OFF specifies one of its aims is to explore the potential of a third gender, a marrying of the male and female to create an ambiguous and androgynous "body" in its work. In *tranSfera*, however, I think it falls short of achieving this. Despite the steely futuristic aesthetic and the visually androgynous image of the clothed figures, once the performance progresses beyond the initial few minutes, it becomes very clear that the gender roles and demarcations of the bodies are falling into traditional roles and are in fact reinforcing the image of the female body as passive, masochistic and submissive to male violence and authority. The male performer comes across as sadistic, voyeuristic and violent. These portrayals - combined with the sinister camera work throughout, and the exposure of the women's breasts by cutting her clothes off with scissors, asphyxiating her, piercing her face and breasts as well as the props of body bags and leather masks - create an ambience of sexual violence and death.

The use of the morphing technique to move between the live-feed focussed on the Polaroid of an audience member that has been pinned to the wall and the image of the live female performer is one of the most visually uncanny moments I have experienced in a performance. The gradual morphing makes the ghostly face of the audience member appear like an apparition onto the face of the live female performer and, as she slightly moves and the photographed image remains static, there is a sense of the features shifting, so that her face moves

from being recognisable one moment to being rendered unfamiliar the next. The male performer manoeuvres the female performer's head slightly also to fit the image, or zooms in slightly to make the head sizes fit to create an uncanny effect. At the point at which he is cling-filming the female performer's head, he jerks her head around so that the projected image of the two faces - one static and one animated - have a nightmarish quality about them. This morphing of the faces visually literalises the transference of identity that the performance is exploring. As Laura U. Marks discusses:

The uncanniness of morphing speaks to a fear of unnatural, transformable bodies. If digital video can be thought to have a body, it is a strikingly queer body, in the sense that queer theory uncouples the living body from any essence of gender, sexuality, or other ways to be grounded in the ontology of sexual difference. Untroubled about its naturalness (is it indexical or simulacral?) digital video refuses the doomed search for origins.<sup>74</sup>

Here Marks is reiterating Waldby's assertion about the lack of origins of digital video. The origins of the image of the photographs that SUKA OFF uses are the live bodies and the photo acts as a frozen moment of a body in action. However, the digital video elements, manipulated, morphing and constantly moving, have no such origins; they are a fiction of the real, a simulation of the function of the photo. The nightmarish quality of the morphing sections are perhaps due to this combination of the real and the virtual, as the repressed hyperreal of digital video comes to haunt the older medium.

In *transSfera*, SUKA OFF experiments with digital and analogue technologies as, by mixing the "moments" captured by the instant Polaroid camera with the more sophisticated live-feed digital camcorder, the two mediums are played off each other. The static image from the instant camera is unalterable: the moment has been captured and cannot be recreated. The images from the digital live-feed camera are constantly manipulated, altered, the image shifting continually. This relates to Marks' discussion on the idea of digital mortality. She

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<sup>74</sup> Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) p152.

states: “Digital media are as fragile as analog, if not more. Digital video’s vulnerability is most evident in low and obsolete technologies.”<sup>75</sup> Marks’ word choice here links the medium of digital video to death and in exposing the vulnerabilities and the differences in the technologies we can also see how these work together to create an uncanny effect. Added to the fact that these technologies are being used to film and capture bodies that are incredibly vulnerable in the performance space, once again we have this idea of doubling recurring. Marks continues her discussion of digital and analogue technologies:

Machine error creates new opportunities for randomness, which is the source of life. Digital video knows its body is not natural but is nonetheless mortal. It perceives for us humans the uncanniness with which it is possible to slip out of life and into virtuality.<sup>76</sup>

Once again we return to the uncanny experience of a marrying of the live and the virtual, of the liveness of the body, and of the death-in-life of the recording. There is also the potential for the uncanny in the digital doubling of the performer’s body, as I looked at initially, as well as in the female performer’s body itself. The work of SUKA OFF - in its hybrid, abject and ambiguous performance style - illustrates the liminality that exists between these things.

## Conclusions

In this chapter I have explored the relationships between live and virtual bodies in performance, and considered how the doubling of the female body can evoke an uncanny aesthetic to question existing representations of female bodies. In my examples I focussed initially on solo female artists who have explored virtual/real bodies through their practice, examining the work of Ponton and Smith. Both of these artists have integrated technology into their practice and used their digital doubles alongside their live bodies to explore a number of issues. For example, Ponton and Smith use doubling as a comment on women’s

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid p157.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid p159.

relationship to technology, to explore and illustrate a fractured female subjectivity, to work against traditional essentialised notions of woman, to explore other women's stories; and to share their own stories. In doing this they are making analogies to some common experiences of women and exploring some of the stereotypes surrounding gender roles and dominant images of femininity. By employing the technique of the digital double to explore these things, the uncanny is evoked. In the work of SUKA OFF there are numerous sets of doubles; digital and analogue doubles, performer and spectator doubles, bloody doubles of inert bodies. As well as the uncanny doubling, there are also the extremely uncanny moments of morphing that occur when the still photographic image comes to life and is rendered animate by the live mixing of the digital filming. These morphing images that visualise the liminal space between the doubles not only evoke the uncanny but also seek visually the "third gender" that SUKA OFF aims to explore. I would argue, though, that the female body is rendered the most uncanny throughout. Her body (often doll-like), is as still as a mannequin as the female body is manipulated, morphed, doubled, and eventually made to symbolise the in-between state between life and death when placed in the mummifying bandages or the body bag. This animate/inanimate female body and her shifting, melding, morphing features which the technology manipulates, rendering her both familiar and unfamiliar, both present and absent (or doubly "present" as we see her virtual double and her live body) epitomises the uncanny in performance.

Fischer claims, in his essay "Writing Home" (2001) that "The uncanny, as a characteristic feature, eschews solid boundaries between oppositional terms."<sup>77</sup> Fischer's statement here is in accordance with Marks' viewpoint that the dualisms that are often employed are redundant and the issues are more complex than a binary system allows for. I would contend that the relationship between the live body and the virtual body is much more complex than conveying a simple schism of subjectivity, and I think that Freud's notion of the uncanny is useful when considering the use of the digital double and the relationship between live performing female bodies and virtual bodies. In particular, when we bear witness to the fusion of the live body and the virtual or

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<sup>77</sup> Fischer, "Writing Home" p119.

mediated body (as in the work of SUKA OFF) and see the morphing between these states, the uncanny moment is undeniable, and our own body typically responds in kind.

Human/computer interfacing plays an important part in the next chapter of this thesis which investigates the role of the live female body in Internet-based performance. While the body is absent from much cybertheatre, in Chapter Three I move my discussion on from live and virtual bodies as doubles to investigate the work of a specific cyberperformance group who attempt to amalgamate online performance and a live performative event (ensuring the performing body is central to the work). In my next chapter globally dispersed group Avatar Body Collision attempts to make cyberfeminist work within an infrastructure that is teeming with images and texts that portray the gendered body. By working against existing discourses at play within the Internet itself (which as a medium is heavily complicit in the objectification, pornogrification and often the degradation of the female body) Avatar Body Collision attempt to challenge these aspects of the Internet while championing their new type of bodily cyberformance as a cyberfeminist praxis.

# Chapter Three - Performing Bodies in Virtual Spaces

## Introduction

In considering the structure and content of this thesis, I was initially unsure whether to include Internet performance (or “cybertheatre” as it has often been called) within the parameters of my research due to the lack of “bodies” in this type of work. At the outset I felt that I should as the transposition of theatrical texts, forms, and styles onto the virtual stage of cyberspace has been one of the most prolific and documented aspects of Internet art. Brenda Laurel’s *Computers as Theatre* (1993) drew an analogy between computers and Aristotelian modes of theatre, but this work predated the rise of Internet technology, and it was with this technological advancement that the possible marrying of theatre and networking technologies began to be explored by a number of artists. In this chapter I will consider how gender politics are at work within Internet performance (and within the framework of the Internet itself) and how feminism (or cyberfeminism as it might be called in this context) features in these types of performances. I will be analysing the work of one particular company, Avatar Body Collision, and exploring how its performances could be read as feminist within the arguably masculine structures of the Internet and traditional theatre practice, and showing how these pieces highlight some of the issues surrounding gender and this type of technology.

In the 1990s, companies such as the Plaintext Players and Desktop Theatre began using virtual worlds as theatrical spaces, with the famous MOO space, ATHEMOO, also setting the stage for a number of experiments incorporating playtexts and virtual spaces.<sup>1</sup> These experiments in the mid to late 1990s were focussed on using the virtual space literally as a stage and were attempting to use this space for the re-enactment and revitalisation of a number of texts from

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<sup>1</sup> MOO stands for Multi-User-Dungeon, Object Oriented and refers to a multi-user text-based virtual reality space that predated the world wide web.

the traditional theatrical canon. Re-workings of texts from seminal playwrights such as Shakespeare and Beckett were popular and often there was opportunity for online audiences to contribute to the cyber-performances. While these types of narrative explorations have been explored by Janet H. Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1998), they are out with the remit of this thesis (being both traditional text-based examples from a well-worn theatrical canon as well as solely being performed for an online audience). One thing that does interest me about these early theatrical examples is the shift in spectatorship; from an audience that is watching a piece of cybertheatre online to an audience that is also actively contributing to that performance.

This new role of audience as spectator *and* performer was touched on in relation to immersive performance in the first chapter of this thesis. However, this particular mode of active spectatorship is different as it is not an individual experience; for the most part these performances are available to be watched by anyone with a computer that is online and with a few basic IT skills. In this chapter, I want to explore how online performance has altered modes of spectatorship, and also how it has altered perceptions of “performance”. However, as my research focus is the *body* and how performances that integrate technology represent the female body I will only be looking at pieces that situate the body alongside Internet performance and will consider whether the Internet can be used within a feminist performance praxis.

## **Feminism on the Net**

When Internet communications technologies first appeared they were described as “new media”, a term which failed to acknowledge the Internet’s capability for being more than just a new way to access news and events. While the Internet does function as a form of media on many levels, it also works as a means of communication - a network - as its name implies. In their article “Cyberfeminism: Networking on the Net” (2003), founders of website Feminist.com, Amy Richards and Marianne Schnall state: “It might be more



appropriate to call it a new *medium*, a new *means* toward feminism's goals."<sup>2</sup> They recognise that an initial feminist Internet aim was simply to *get* women on-line. In 1995 only 15 percent of Internet users were women, but by early 2000 women comprised 50 percent of users (a 32 percent increase since 1999).<sup>3</sup> While this indicates that there was a vast increase in women going online, Schnall and Richards point out that men largely controlled the content and earned the profit that was produced. Simultaneously, a gender gap emerged in how women and men accessed the Internet with men generally surfing, hopping from site to site and women going directly to specific sites or searching for information on particular topics.<sup>4</sup>

The study *Women@Internet* (1999) edited by Wendy Harcourt, emerged out of the dialogues between an online group called Women on the Net (WoN) which was set up by the Society for International Development (SID).<sup>5</sup> One of the aims of WoN was to create a resource base which could be tapped into by different women's groups to access knowledge and skills in navigating the Internet. A participant of WoN, Lis, who worked at the headquarters of a UN agency, states:

My main interest is... to learn about the different users of the Internet and how this medium serves and could serve for women's empowerment. Specifically, how to make the Internet useful (and accessible of course) for women in remote urban or rural areas of developing countries, and how they can make optimal use of the medium in support of their process of (economic) empowerment.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Amy Richards, Marianne Schnall, "Cyberfeminism: Networking on the Net", 2/6/08, <http://www.feminist.com/resources/artspeech/genwom/cyberfeminism.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> SID's aims were to encourage women, particularly women in developing countries to use the Internet more easily, to open up and contribute to the new culture that was being set up on the Internet from a gender perspective at once both global and local, and also to bring together individual women and men working from different institutional bases. Wendy Harcourt, ed. *Women@Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace* (London: Zed Books, 1999) p7.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

This notion of optimising Internet usage in developing countries is a key issue for the group so as to take advantage of the Internet's democratic potential which has been theorised and written about much more than it has actually come to fruition. Something else that is of vital importance within the group is recognising the difference and multiplicity of the women that are participating in the discussions and the different views and experiences that they can bring to each forum.

With regard to this, another participant Pi points out that: “‘We’ are also different from one another. ‘We’ have different points of reference.”<sup>7</sup> This is important when considering what is referred to on WoN as “ventriloquism.” Participant Marisa discusses this:

We are using “ventriloquism” to give a metaphor or an example to the “performance of voices that are not ours”. A ventriloquist offers her/his body to the expression of the voices, concerns, dramas etc. of others. This may be willingly so, in case of forms of representation (elected members of communities) or unwillingly, when you reproduce positions that you have not analysed carefully. The Internet as a complex communication media may be used productively as another vehicle to ventriloquism in both senses.<sup>8</sup>

This is useful when considering the voices that can be accessed on the Internet, female and otherwise. Whose voice is this? Are they speaking for me? Are they speaking for all women? Does this include *all* women? The Internet has highlighted and challenged multiple knowledge boundaries, including those dividing women on many different grounds. Harcourt concludes with the statement: “I guess what I want to stress is the actual circulation in cyberspace of information without a body, which can be appropriated for many uses. In this precise case ‘ventriloquism’ alludes to the politics of voice and impersonation of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p8.

voices.”<sup>9</sup> I will consider this idea of appropriation of voices and images throughout this chapter in relation to the work of Avatar Body Collision.

Lourdes Arizpe states in the preface to *Women@Internet* that there are four main feminist challenges in the Webworld. Firstly, woman must not be left behind in the gap between those that have access to the new information technologies and those that do not. She says that: “There is the danger of sliding into a world divided by the info-poor and the info-rich, with women, as we know only too well, ending up at the gates of technology and information.”<sup>10</sup> Arizpe claims that the second issue is that women should be active agents in ensuring that the potential of the Internet and other information technologies is directed towards: “enhancing human wellbeing rather than strengthening existing power monopolies.”<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, Arizpe contends that it is not only a question of having large numbers of women using information technologies, but of them also having influence over the construction and creation of cyberspace: “The meanings of tomorrow must be created today and women, especially young women, now have greater freedom of spirit and of experience to be creative.”<sup>12</sup> Her fourth point suggests the magnitude of the potential and possibilities that these new technologies and forms of communication hold for women and she states: “It is up to us now to navigate them for our place-based knowledge and action.”<sup>13</sup> *Women@Internet* offers a collection of articles and multiple voices collating a mixture of academic articles with other sorts of texts, images and excerpts from web-based dialogues. The overriding message of the montage of texts and other materials is that, whether or not the Internet is perceived as a masculine space, women *must* play a part in what happens from now on. Arizpe states that, “The main thing is that women must now be active agents in experimenting and interpreting the new forms of communication that the new technologies offer

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p9.

<sup>10</sup> Lourdes Arizpe, “Freedom to Create: Women’s Agenda for Cyberspace”, Harcourt, ed. *Women@Internet* pxv.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

us.”<sup>14</sup> Avatar Body Collision is taking up this challenge to assert feminist performance online.

## Online Performance – Towards a Definition

As well as debating whether or not to include online performance (given that this type of performance is the least concerned with bodies), I have struggled at times over whether I would even define this work as “performance” as it seems to be lacking many of the key elements of performance that would make me identify it as such. For example, I would reiterate Simon Shepard’s statement that: “Theatre is an art of bodies and an art grounded in body.”<sup>15</sup> In online performance, although my body is sitting at a keyboard and is actively engaged with the events that are unfolding on screen and I am aware that around the world other bodies are sitting in front of other screens and are going through the same motions as me, my sense of embodiment is not overtly stimulated; the experience is perhaps on the opposite end of the sensory spectrum from, say, a piece of immersive performance. I am also *not* watching bodies in a space as I might be if I was watching a piece of theatre by SUKA OFF or Anita Ponton; instead, I am watching avatars moving within a virtual space. Some of these might be used to represent bodies (and the representation of bodies within this context is something I will return to later), but what I am seeing is a graphic representation that a body somewhere in the world is controlling via their computer. The distinct lack of tangible bodies has always concerned me about the definition of online “performance” as such.

Another aspect of online performance that makes me averse to defining it as “performance” is the spatiality of the experience. In watching a performance online I am not inhabiting a performance space; I am (usually) inhabiting my kitchen and, for me, there is no distinction between my experience of sitting at my kitchen table checking emails or writing parts of my thesis that differentiates my proximal space as a performance space. Of course, the idea behind online performance is that the online spaces created *are* the performance space and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. pxiii.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Shepard, *Theatre, Body and Pleasure* (London: Routledge, 2005) p7.

that cyberspace provides a virtual stage on which the performance will occur. However, the distinctions between real and virtual are, in this instance, all too easily dissolved in the rhetoric surrounding Internet performance, with little actual evidence that this analogy is fruitful.

Theatre theorist Marvin Carlson says, “The very presence of an audience watching an action, however neutral or non-matrixed, and presented in whatever unconventional space, inevitably called up associations with theatre.”<sup>16</sup> While I agree with him to some extent, I want to differentiate between what he refers to as “whatever unconventional space” as an alternative performance space (perhaps outside, a piece of site-specific work, a piece of street theatre, or a performance that takes place in a shopping centre or another non-theatrical space) and the “space” that is used for online performances. While these other types of spaces are also places (i.e. actual physical locations), the online “space” of Internet performance is a metaphorical space: a location that has been constructed either through text or graphics to portray a performance space that we can see via our computer monitors. This “space” that brings together people from a number of remote locations around the globe, although certainly unconventional, is pushing the definition of “space” in the same way that this type of “performance” is also stretching the term. Doreen Massey comments on this in her study *For Space* (2005): “But more importantly, space is not anyway reducible to distance. Distance is a condition of multiplicity; but equally it itself would not be thinkable without multiplicity.”<sup>17</sup> In *For Space*, Massey discusses some of the common myths surrounding the relationship between time and space as well as championing the diversity of space. By stressing that space does not mean stasis, Massey makes the analogy between cyberspace and physical space in terms of the potential for multiplicity.

Watching an online “performance” on my laptop bears little resemblance experientially to visiting a local performance space or theatre and watching a performance there. As a spectator I would much rather do the latter and must

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<sup>16</sup> Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2004) p114.

<sup>17</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage Publications, 2005) p91.

confess that I often find online performances, unengaging and frustrating to watch. For me, the excitement and enjoyment of live performance is evoked through watching bodies within a space move and interact with the people and objects around them. Specifically, my interest is in watching the interplay between the body and different kinds of technology in performance; how a performance artist has built up a physical rapport with her virtual double; how the face of a live performer might suddenly morph into that of a spectator; how a robotic arm can be attached to a live person's arm and be moving as though alive. In online performance, I am only witnessing the outcome of that interaction - the interplay between the body and the technology is not visible to me - it is happening elsewhere, isolated and removed from what I can see on my screen.

## **Avatar Body Collision (ABC)**

While there have been many online experiments in “cybertheatre”, “net art”, “online performance” and so forth, all of which have been vital in positioning the Internet as an artistic and creative tool for artists to use to distribute their work globally, the issues I have discussed above still plague me about calling this type of work “performance”.<sup>18</sup> However, there is one company that has worked via the Internet as part of a performance that takes place simultaneously as a live event and online. Avatar Body Collision, a group of three female artists globally distributed between London and the north and south islands of New Zealand, therefore challenges definitions of online performance by its use of multiple locations as well as a specific physical performance location.<sup>19</sup> Avatar Body Collision (ABC from here on) also inserts live performing bodies into its pieces, with the Internet “performance” (including audience interactions and participations) being projected as a backdrop to the performance. ABC complicates the role and positioning of audiences by having a simultaneously live

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<sup>18</sup> These were preceded by hypertexts by Stuart Moulthrop (1991), and Shelly Jackson (1996).

<sup>19</sup> Avatar Body Collision was made up of Karla Ptacek (London), Helen Varley Jamieson (New Zealand) and Vicky Smith (New Zealand). Leena Saarinen (Finland) was a founding member and with ABC until 2007. *Belonging* (2007) was their final collaboration as ABC.

and online audience. Within these two audiences there are also further schisms; in the Internet audience there are people spectating and also people spectating *and* contributing, that is, commenting on what they see on screen and chatting to other audience members while their conversation is streamed onto the performance screen so that it is visible to both Internet and live audiences. Because of the insertion of the live body into Internet performance, and because of the duality of their performances as a live and online event, I would argue that ABC's type of work is highly relevant to my study. As they are a group of female artists who claim their work as feminist and who tackle political issues in their performances, I believe that it is imperative to explore their work in depth within this chapter.

Between 2002 and 2007 ABC made overtly political work that questions the power relations that govern cyberspace and wider society in general and queries the role of the female body within these structures. Helen Varley Jamieson was involved in Desktop Theatre and went on to be one of the founding members of ABC. The work of ABC is more explicitly political and also has more of a feminist agenda than the earlier Desktop Theatre, while its aesthetics and mode of creation and reception are more aligned with performance practices of devising as opposed to the text-based format and use of canonical texts that Desktop Theatre had mainly adhered to. In avoiding scripts, opportunities for experimentation are left open, which is why I think the work of ABC is more innovative, not just in terms of technology (notably, both companies have kept the software they use as accessible and user-friendly as possible) but also in terms of exploring concepts and ideas in original ways. I would also argue that devising can be read as feminist; the company's choice to devise the majority of their pieces is an assertion that they wish to move away from the male-dominated canon and create their own work about gender, power and technology.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Dee Heddon suggests that women's translation of their experience and of the "everyday" into performance was instigated by feminist consciousness-raising that claimed "the personal is the political". The use of autobiographical material and devising techniques instead of well-worn theatrical texts that re-instated patriarchal ideas was a political act in itself. Deidre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) p21.

For the purpose of this chapter I am using Helen Varley Jamieson's term "cyberformance" when referring to the work of ABC. Jamieson invented the term in 2000 as she found a proliferation of terms surrounding Internet performances both confusing and misleading. Jamieson explains:

When I first coined the term cyberformance in 2000, I was struggling to find a way to describe this emerging form. I knew that two aspects at least were fundamental: location and liveness. The site for this new form was the Internet, or rather the spaces created within and between the Internet, or rather the overlapping and fluid spaces emerging between physical realities and the ethereal digital/electric space: a third space grafted from the real-time confluence of the stage and remote locations. The time of this new form was a specific, limited and shared time where performers and audience came together in the same moment to experience a live event.<sup>21</sup>

Jamieson's assertion that location and liveness were crucial in exploring this "third space" created between the physical and the ethereal /virtual acknowledges the difference between these spaces, and while she makes the analogy between performance and the location and liveness that are also inherent, her definition does not seem as contrived as some explanations of "cyberspace" can be. In this citation, she also mentions the temporality of what she describes as a "new form" as "a limited and shared time" - a "moment". This works in contrast to some of Robert Hassan's theories on temporality in cyberspace and I would argue is specific to this type of online performance where audiences and performers (both online and proximal) share the same "moment". In his recent study, Hassan suggests that network time, though it does not destroy clock time, gradually displaces and neutralises it.<sup>22</sup> In the example of this type of simultaneously live and online performance this is not the case as there is an allocated and agreed performance time and there is an

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<sup>21</sup> Helen Varley Jamieson, "Adventures in Cyberspace: Experiments at the Interface of Theatre and the Internet" (December 2008) p32.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Hassan and Ronald E. Purser, eds. *24/7: Time and Temporality in the Network Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) p187.



understanding globally that this will be when the event will occur.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, online performance can be seen as comparable to more traditional site-based performance.<sup>24</sup>

Jamieson recently completed a master's thesis entitled "Adventures in Cyberspace: Experiments at the Interface of Theatre and the Internet" (December 2008). While this thesis is not the product of a practice-as-research project, but instead is part of Jamieson's reflective practice on the work of ABC and others, there is a real sense of her processes as a practitioner throughout, and Jamieson's reflections on the work of ABC have been invaluable to this chapter. Another "collider" (as they call each other) Karla Ptacek is also a researcher and has written on the work of ABC amongst other things. The reflective practice of these members of ABC, as well as the thorough documentation of their work, has been an excellent resource in researching this chapter. However, one of the resonances of Desktop Theatre's belief in liveness remains when encountering the documentation. As they state on their now archival website: "This archive might appear to be comprehensive, but it is not Desktop Theatre. Desktop Theatre is at its core a live, immersive, and often unexpected encounter."<sup>25</sup> ABC maintains the same message about the documentation of its work and Jamieson is quick to point out that the experience of watching ABC is similar to watching any performance in terms of its ephemerality - that the performance happens in the moment and cannot be recreated.

## Audience

One of the most convincing arguments for considering cyberformance within the realm of performance is the presence of an audience. ABC is an interesting

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<sup>23</sup> Doreen Massey discusses at length how time and space are constantly linked in a plethora of theory, and while time is often analysed and dissected as a terminology, "space" does not receive the same critical analysis. She states: "Over and again space is conceptualised as (or rather assumed to be) simply the negative opposite of time." Massey, *For Space* p17.

<sup>24</sup> These discussions of time and space constantly recur throughout conversations about cyberspace and specifically about cyberformance.

<sup>25</sup> 1/09/09, [http://www.desktoptheater.org/~ajenik/desktoptheater\\_content/archive/files/a\\_fr\\_01.htm](http://www.desktoptheater.org/~ajenik/desktoptheater_content/archive/files/a_fr_01.htm).

subject for analysis when exploring audience because of the dual nature of the audience watching its works. Many recent theatre theorists have pointed out the lack of critical material surrounding audiences; apart from Herbert Blau's *The Audience* (1990) and Susan Bennett's *Theatre Audiences* (1997), there are few texts that make the audience the sole focus of study. This is not the case in film and television studies as, since the publication of Laura Mulvey's seminal text "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema" (1975) there have been a plethora of responses and of different analyses of film audiences. I draw upon some of the more recent of these throughout this thesis when considering a gendered response, notably Michele Aaron's *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On* (2007) and Marie Gillespie's *Media Audiences* (2005). Other texts that have influenced my readings of the work of ABC in terms of audiences are Susan Kattwinkel's *Audience Participation: Essays on Inclusion in Performance* (2003) (in particular the chapter by Nina LeNoir which I will return to later) and Roberta Mock's edited collection *Performing Processes: Creating Live Performance* (2000). I also revisited Jill Dolan's *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1991) amongst a number of other feminist texts while researching this chapter.

The issue of the *performance* audience, it would seem, has been somewhat critically neglected, and Bennett's study provides a good starting point for a contemplation of the role of the audience. However, because she is writing before 1997, she only hints at what might occur in terms of audience patterns and behaviours with technological advancement. She states: "New technologies (especially in the area of interactive media) may offer other new tools for understanding spectatorship as well as the production-reception dynamic in general."<sup>26</sup> What she does not seem to anticipate in this statement is the fracturing and splitting in terms of audiences that these new technologies also herald. Although her study is a useful starting point (and is still, as yet, the only book-length study on this topic) some of her observations can be moved forward to consider the impact of the Internet on performance practice and modes of

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<sup>26</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1997) p211.

spectatorship. For example, Bennett points out:

Geographic location is always important. A play must be produced in a location that attracts an audience. Audiences who never attend the mainstream theatres of urban centres, either by choice or by lack of access, may be regular theatre-goers at community theatre, clubs, or even through their place of work.<sup>27</sup>

What is interesting about this statement is that one of the main attractions for an artist or company who/which wishes to reach a vast number of spectators is that, in an online context, geographical location is not always important and that how we think about space and location is altered when considering online performance. One oft-quoted statement about the Internet is that it diminishes distance.<sup>28</sup> This is another of those hyperbolic statements surrounding the utopia of the Internet that is evidently not true as there are a number of vast geographical areas which do not have Internet connections or access to computers.<sup>29</sup>

Massey comments on this:

For all that so many of the tales of the effect of cyberspace revolve around its ability to render space insignificant, in the context of its own material production and operation (on the ground, as it were) space is of fundamental importance. The producers of cyberspace actually know very well that space is more than distance, and that it matters crucially.<sup>30</sup>

While cyberspace is talked of as ethereal and intangible, Massey makes clear the actual physical space that is inherent in this neologism. In light of Bennett's

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p120.

<sup>28</sup> See Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> See Lisa Nakamura on "virtual tourism". Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura and Gilbert B. Rodman, eds. *Race in Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Massey, *For Space* p96.

statement, if we consider that more people than ever work on a computer and have access to the Internet, while the last part of Massey's statement may ring true in this context, perhaps the first part is not as resounding as it once was.<sup>31</sup> As Nina LeNoir states in her essay on online audiences: "The promise of vast audiences connected worldwide by the Internet to experience performances is tantalising to artists. But the problem is that the audience demands involvement in the performance, because the digital connection goes both ways."<sup>32</sup> What LeNoir here defines as a "problem" other companies and individuals have seen as an opportunity for creative exchange and interaction.

I am going to look at two pieces of cyberformance by ABC and interrogate the company's choices in terms of content, its use of gendered images, and how the gender politics and the actual use of the media relate in its work. In doing this, I will analyse cyberspace as a potential site for feminist performance and consider whether the use of female bodies in ABC's cyberperformances is a move away from conventional representations found in an Internet context. It should be noted that the type of cyberformance that I am exploring here is not the only type of work the company has done. Some of their performances happen solely online, some are collaborative pieces and some are specifically created with an event in mind (e.g. *Dress the Nation* [2003] was created as part of the Lysistrata Project, a global theatrical protest against war). In 2006 the colliders were supposed to meet physically for the first time in New Plymouth for a piece called *Trip the Light Fantastic*; however circumstances meant that this was not possible and so they created a fictional blog of the trip, spread rumours and doctored photographic evidence of their "meeting".

ABC's continual efforts to create online performance spaces such as Upstage, that can be used with minimal technical or IT knowledge and on software that is accessible convey their desire to make their work as democratic

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<sup>31</sup> For a full discussion of Internet and spatiality see Jack Goldsmith and Tim Wu, *Who Controls the Internet? Illusions of a Borderless World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Nina LeNoir, "The Audience in Cyberspace: Audience-Performer Interactivity in Online Performances", Susan Kattwinkel, ed. *Audience Participation: Essays on Inclusion in Performance* (Westport: Praeger, 2003) p125.

as possible.<sup>33</sup> Upstage is an open source venue for online performance which means that anyone with an Internet connection and Flash player installed can watch the performances online without having to download additional software. Because the focus of my research is the body and because I am interested in how the performing body can be integrated into online performance, I have specifically chosen to analyse their first cyberperformance as a collective, *Screen Save Her* (2002), and also *Belonging* (2007) which I saw performed live (and online!) at the Intimacy Across Digital and Visceral Performance event in London.

### ***Screen Save Her* (2002)**

*Screen Save Her* was the first collaboration between the four colliders and was performed at 12-12 Time-based Media Festival in Cardiff, Wales on the 18th May 2002 for a proximal theatre audience while also being simultaneously remixed and webcast live.<sup>34</sup> All four members performed simultaneously from their different locations while a live audience watched one live performer and the other three via live-feed imaging. Collider Karla Ptacek states: “With *Screen Save Her*, I wanted to see if we could construct a playmaking system composed of animate and inanimate actants.”<sup>35</sup> The story revolved around action heroines in an escape and rescue scenario and integrated cartoon and comic book aesthetics into the Internet-based event. The style of the pop-up windows that appear in online spaces mean that they lend themselves well to a comic book aesthetic, the boxes providing a visual similarly. The plot of *Screen Save Her* revolved around a gene-stealing operation and was structured as a game: the proximal stage character, “BP” - a software/wetware cyborg for a multinational corporation (played by Ptacek who is wearing a costume) - has to complete a

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<sup>33</sup> Although only one member of ABC was originally a part of Desktop Theatre, in 2007 the colliders attempted to work in a similar way to the cybertheatre company and decided to perform an existing text (as opposed to their usual process of collaboration and devising). They chose Beckett’s play *Come and Go* (1965) and performed it as part of the 070707 Upstage festival – the annual festival of online performance.

<sup>34</sup> I did not see this performance and am working from documentation.

<sup>35</sup> 20/08/09, <http://www.avatarbodycollision.org/screensaveher/ssinfo.html>.

series of tasks within the half hour timeframe in order to win a DNA makeover. Here some of the preoccupations of ABC's work are already evident: an awareness of genetic technologies and their implications; the power relations in a capitalist society in which multinational corporations rule the roost; and the tongue-in-cheek prize of a DNA makeover reminiscent of the proliferation of makeover shows that are becoming more and more extreme (e.g. *The Swan* and *Ten Years Younger* where the 1990s format of the makeover, such as a new outfit and hairdo, is replaced by extensive cosmetic surgery procedures to "right" nature's wrongs and to give participants the body they have always deserved - to use the rhetoric of the show). At one point, the avatar of BP mutates into "Monstrous Body" - an avatar representing a skeletal torso with the organs visible - and then finally morphs into "Surgical Face" avatar.



**Figure 18 Avatar Body Collision. Karla Ptacek as "BP", *Screen Save Her*, (2002).**

BP's progress is tracked and controlled by the three colliders, while in the Palace chatroom three avatars plan to leave cyberspace behind. Ptacek states: "The grand plan was a cyberplay that would function like a cyborgian organism within a complex adaptive system. The actual narrative content of the play was always secondary to the structure of the vehicle, and secondary to the *how* of human and non-human interaction."<sup>36</sup> In this instance, Ptacek was the collider who was performing live and her performance took place in front of a proximal audience while also being viewed via live-feed as part of the online performance.<sup>37</sup> On a screen behind Ptacek were a number of web windows in

<sup>36</sup> 20/08/09, <http://www.avatarbodycollision.org/screensaveher/ssinfo.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Karla Ptacek was also the live proximal performer in *Belonging* (2007).

which the live audience could see a combination of avatars and live colliders performing in their remote locations. The company use Palace editing tools which allow users to add wigs, glasses, costumes, and so on to customise standard smileys. There is also an option for members to create their own avatars using these editing tools. Ptacek says: “These Avs can be graphical representations, photographs, drawings, icons that take any form as long as they remain within the total pixel size boundary. They can also be given emotions such as sleepy, bashful etc.”<sup>38</sup> Ptacek states that the inspiration for *Screen Save Her* was Murray Gell-Mann’s writing on complex adaptive systems theory. Ptacek claims that the constant exposure to the demands of a computer environment has prompted us to adapt and evolve new acting techniques and formulae, which in turn extend definitions of performance and drama. Ptacek states: “If I consider this system to be both complex and adaptive, I also acknowledge that it is a system co-determined by humans and machines.”<sup>39</sup> Ptacek also claims the influence of the works of Bruno Latour who writes about the potential connections between humans and non-humans and the complexities of networks between them.<sup>40</sup> ABC states on its website:

This was the first show for the newly-formed *Colliders*, and some of the discoveries we made here have become part of our performance toolkit. For example, previously we'd used webcams solely to cue performers, but in *Screen Save Her* I used webcams as a third performative stage across and within which we performed. The webcams almost doubled the data streams and tripled the occurrences of electronic failure (lag, buffering, delay). However, they gave us enormous scope to create visual gags, tricks and illusions, and little acts of magic.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Karla Ptacek, “Avatar Body Collision: Enactments in Distributed Performance Practices”, *Digital Creativity* 2003, Vol. 14, No. 3, p185.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p182.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> 26/08/09, <http://www.avatarbodycollision.org/screensaveher/sshinfo.html>.

Visual gags and trickery often feature in technologised performance and companies such as CREW, The Builders Association and Forkbeard Fantasy frequently utilise illusions in their work.<sup>42</sup> At one point in *Screen Save Her* a sheet of paper makes an impossible journey from one webcam window to another, visually uniting the globally dispersed performers in New Zealand and Finland; the paper is then eaten on webcam and reappears in the mouth of the proximal stage performer (Ptacek).<sup>43</sup> While ABC playfully explores the potential for visual gags in this performance, in later developments of this form these sorts of interactions are less frequent as the performers focus on the online interactions.<sup>44</sup>



**Figure 19 Avatar Body Collision. Paper making a virtual journey, *Screen Save Her*, (2002).**

It seems that in this instance, while the faces of the women are contained within the screen windows, literally boxed within the media, the paper can appear to transcend the distance across the globe and can make the journey from screen to screen. While the women are trapped within the windows, the paper has broken through the screen barriers to appear in the mouth of Ptacek. While the passing of the paper, the swallowing of it and its regurgitation, is a

<sup>42</sup> See Greg Gieseckam, *Staging the Screen: The Use of Film and Video in Theatre* (Palgrave MacMillan: London, 2007). John Potts and Edward Scheer discuss the relationship between technology and the supernatural in their study *Technologies of Magic: A Cultural Study of Ghosts, Machines and the Uncanny* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> Ptacek, "Avatar Body Collision: Enactments in Distributed Performance Practices" p185.

<sup>44</sup> As Ptacek points out in her article, the nature of making work from disparate locations means that no performer knows exactly what is going on in each location and the possibility of connection problems, lag-time and the interactions becoming out of synch or losing communication with other colliders is high. Ibid. p184.



playful and amusing visual gag, the way that this object is passed from woman to woman suggests that the women are condemned to remain within their allocated box only able to communicate in this section via the visual. Ptacek acknowledges that this first performance as ABC set the style and tone and created the aesthetic that the company was to continue in for subsequent performances:

Using webcams, we were able to create a series of illusions and affects that have become part of our company's repertoire: switching images from black and white to colour denotes personal transformations; placing moving images behind the remote performers adds depth and layering to the webcam image. Lighting effects can refigure the remote performer as Javanese Puppet: JPEGs of texts pasted into the webcam windows form dialogic billboard.<sup>45</sup>

These elements of the company's work can be traced through a number of its pieces and are evident in ABC's 2007 performance *Belonging*.

### ***Belonging (2007)***

*Belonging* was performed as part of the Intimacy Across Visceral and Digital Performance event at Goldsmiths in London in December 2007. The venue was laid out so that there was a screen with a performance space in front of it and then audience seating in front of this in a typical "end-on" formation. At the side of the performing space, collider Ptacek was seated at a computer. She was facing diagonally towards the spectators and therefore her screen was facing away from them. The large screen behind her was where the other colliders performed via the Internet. It should be noted that what was visible on the large screen is not what was on Ptacek's screen. Ptacek had the large screen as a window amongst other windows as she also engineered and controlled other parts of the performance and communicated with the other colliders when necessary without it being visible to the proximal audience. While the live performance was happening in front of the proximal audience, simultaneously an

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

online audience was watching the image that was on the large screen on their computers. A number of online audience members (in this case around ten) were also able to interact and contribute to the piece. Their comments were visible to both proximal and online audience, appearing in a scrolling window down the side of the screen. I want to stress that not all of the online audience was participating; only a select number of online audience are allowed to interact, otherwise the online space could get very messy and cluttered. While ABC aims to nurture the improvised and spontaneous aspect of their work, it also needs to have a level of control and structure so that the point it is trying to make is not lost.

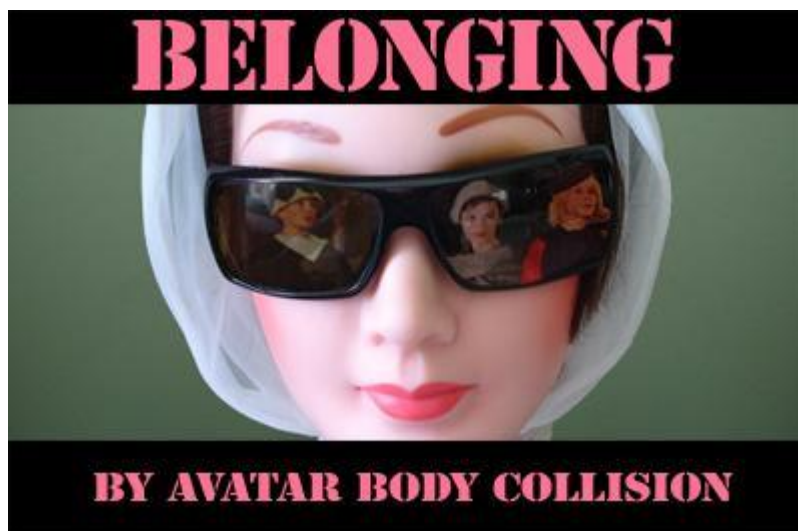


Figure 20 Avatar Body Collision. Press image, *Belonging*, (2007).

The narrative of *Belonging* revolves around the story of Daria, a woman from an unspecified location who enters into global trafficking.<sup>46</sup> ABC describes *Belonging* as such:

Daria is stuck. She was supposed to be en route from the insular world of her village and the tatters of her personal life. She was supposed to be following those brave, glamorous heroines from the 1950s movies of her childhood - stepping out across borders to a new life in the west. But Daria is stuck. Unable to articulate any sense of “home”, nor comforted by the sentimental objects she has packed in her suitcase, her journey has been waylaid in the worst possible way.<sup>47</sup>

The “brave, glamorous heroines from the 1950s movies” are visible in *Belonging* through avatars of stereotypical images of 1950s women. The press image for *Belonging* is a doll wearing a scarf around her head which is suggestive of this era, and large dark glasses, reflected in which are three other figures, also reminiscent of this time. While evoking 1950s movies, there is also something vaguely sinister about this image. Perhaps it is the inability to see the eyes, perhaps it is the reflection of the three shadowy figures, or maybe it is the fact that the face itself is that of a doll and our knowledge that behind the glasses there is nothing, only plastic eye sockets and marble eyes.<sup>48</sup> The use of a doll also evokes connotations of vacuity and the chosen era, the 1950s, is important as it was a period where many women who had joined the workforce in the war returned to the home and to family life. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan discusses this era at length and blames this trend on a return of men to positions of power, particularly within the media. The media convinced women

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<sup>46</sup> Thematically *Belonging* is very similar to The Paper Birds performance *In A Thousand Pieces* (NRLA 2009), a devised piece that explores issues surrounding the global sex trade and the exploitation of women within this industry. Both performances explore the idea of the shattered dreams and grim reality of the lives of women who attempt to make a better life for themselves.

<sup>47</sup> 24/08/09, <http://www.avatarbodycollision.org/dtn3/index.html>.

<sup>48</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, dolls often evoke the uncanny due to their imitation of the lifelike – the re-enactment of a living body.

that marriage and a family were the important parts of a woman's role.<sup>49</sup> The subsequent image of the 1950s housewife remains indexical of these views.

The idea of romanticising a different time or place is present at the outset of *Belonging* when we meet Daria and witness her feeling "frozen" in scene two before her "departure" in scene three. The image on the screen is constantly shifting as the colliders move around different avatars and manipulate the images. At one point we see a live-feed image of Helen, in New Zealand, "performing" Daria. We know that she is alone and performing to a proximal space without people, however the image of her performing alone in a room is transmitted via live-feed so that we see Helen playing the character of Daria on the screen. Other colliders then manipulate this image, at one point adding lines around her body (reminiscent at times of a chalk outline around a body). The technology here seems to be marking her as a dead body, for although her body is animated, the computerised lines that appear around her figure contain her even further within the boxed image while also connoting her virtual death. In scene eight there is a range of philosophical conversations. One avatar asks "If there is a difference in the body, how much more in the soul", a quotation from Aristotle. The response to this is: "There is nothing beautiful about women. They have no souls."<sup>50</sup> These references from Aristotle - who famously positioned women as inferior beings - become ironic tongue-in-cheek quips when said by the colliders. It seems, however, in instances such as this, that sometimes the lack of contextualization lends an ambiguity to some of the statements so that whether they are tongue-in-cheek or serious is never completely clarified. I would argue that this also happens in ABC's use of visuals and that the constructed meaning of some of the images/texts can result in ambiguity or can have the *opposite* effect of reinforcing the dominant online usage that they are attempting to disrupt.

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<sup>49</sup> Friedan's analysis of this explains that the fallout was fewer women attempting university, with more dropping out of university to raise families, and more and more women experiencing "the problem with no name", which she defines as the feminine mystique.

<sup>50</sup> Avatar Body Collision, *Belonging*, Intimacy Across Visceral and Digital Performance event at Goldsmiths College, London, 08/12/07.

In scene nine there is an auction at which Daria is being bid for by colliders and by the audience that is interacting online. There are some uncomfortable and tense moments during the typed dialogue as this excerpt illustrates:

Daria - nicest piece of European cunt

Best littel cocksucker

No father and brother shit on her

She is 15

Fuck you and your bitch

London capital of world

No pissing Euros either.<sup>51</sup>

Jamieson recognises that this is one of the most commanding moments of the performance and, I would argue, one of the most uncomfortable. She states: “This was one of the most powerful moments in the performance, as suddenly everyone became complicit in what was happening - accessories, one could say, to the crime.”<sup>52</sup> The format of having a simultaneously live and online audience means that there is a level of risk that some of the contributions might be uncomfortable or inappropriate and provoke feelings of voyeurism in the wider audience as spectators become complicit in the performance moment. The online interactions in this section serve as a reminder of what the Internet’s biggest industry is and how pornography and the sex industry are present in

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<sup>51</sup> Live-feed streaming from scene nine *Belonging*.

<sup>52</sup> Jamieson, “Adventures in Cyberspace: Experiments at the Interface of Theatre and the Internet”, p77. This notion of audience complicity has plagued discussions of audience roles since the 1960s, most notably in relation to Marina Abramovic’s infamous performance *Rhythm 0* (1974) where audiences were left in a room with the artist and 72 objects for a number of hours. Some people cut off Abramovic’s clothes and cut her skin. The performance was supposedly stopped when one audience member held a loaded gun to her head.

online environments.<sup>53</sup>

This reminds me of a performance I saw by Avatar X as part of (re)Actor: The First International Conference on Digital Live Art. Avatar X was performing *Telematic Performance Feast/Interplay* which had been billed as a participatory performance that would take place during the lunch hour. While performers in Australia performed via live-feed over the Internet and controlled avatars on a large screen, there were also proximal performers in the space moving around as people were having lunch. One performer was wheeling around a laptop with pornographic images on it, most notably an image of a woman with her legs apart masturbating. This image was replicated numerous times on the screen and was continually popping up and reappearing in the manner which Internet pop-ups do. It was only when I went to get a sandwich that I realised that the woman in question was actually poised on a desk behind me masturbating and being filmed via live-feed and then digitally mixed to appear as a pop-up on the laptop that was moving around ensuring everyone caught a glimpse of it while eating their lunch. I realised then that this disconnected body that I had assumed to be a pornographic image taken from the Internet was in fact a live performing body less than three foot away from me. In fact, had I been paying more attention I might have recognised the surroundings of the location, or perhaps even noticed the side of my own head in shot! However, I took this image as read and was unaware of the liveness of this as it came to me through the mediation of the computer and through the familiar lens of Internet pornography. I think that this is an example of how we disconnect images from bodies when they are filtered through these mediums.

The rise in access to pornography since the inception of the Internet has been staggering, but what has also risen since Internet technologies have progressed is the ease with which sex-trafficking can occur. In an article on this topic, journalist Mark Iype cites Cpl. Nilu Singh, with the RCMP Human Trafficking National Co-ordination Centre, who claims that the Internet has become a way for underage sex-traffickers to reach from coast to coast:

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<sup>53</sup> I found this was also the case when researching virtual world Second Life. An estimated 30% of all commerce in Second Life is associated with the sex industry. 22/08/09, [http://www.secretlair.com/index.php?/clickableculture/entry/whats\\_the\\_truth\\_about\\_the\\_sex\\_industry\\_in\\_second\\_life](http://www.secretlair.com/index.php?/clickableculture/entry/whats_the_truth_about_the_sex_industry_in_second_life).

“Investigations have been made into advertisements across the country,” she said, “The Internet can be used anywhere, anytime, by anyone.”<sup>54</sup> A recent report by La Strada International entitled *Violation of Women’s Rights: A Cause and Consequence of Trafficking in Women* (2008) explores some of these issues with regard to gender.<sup>55</sup> Dr Helga Konrad states:

It is generally known that women are disproportionately affected by the social and economic factors that are known to be root causes of trafficking, namely, poverty, discrimination, gender-based violence, armed conflict, unemployment and inequality and oppressive social structures. If we are sincere in our determination to end trafficking, then we have to start looking into the factors that cause trafficking and examine the social and economical structures that put people, and in particular women, in a position that increases their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.<sup>56</sup>

When we consider this, ABC’s choice of theme in *Belonging* not only addresses power, ownership and modern slavery, but Daria becomes emblematic of an issue that is a predominately female one. ABC’s use of the Internet which as an infrastructure assists in the global market of trafficking and is complicit in many of these practices that perpetuate the objectification, pornogrification and

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<sup>54</sup> 20/08/09, <http://www.calgaryherald.com/news/Craigslist+police+partner+stop+trafficking/1779594/story.html>.

<sup>55</sup> La Strada International (LSI) is a network of nine independent human rights NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) in Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Macedonia, Moldova, the Netherlands, Poland and Ukraine. Bregje Blokhuis, La Strada International (LSI) Amsterdam, 8/03/08, [www.lastradainternational.org](http://www.lastradainternational.org).

<sup>56</sup> 22/08/09, [http://www.humantrafficking.org/uploads/publications/lastrada\\_08\\_rights\\_0708.pdf](http://www.humantrafficking.org/uploads/publications/lastrada_08_rights_0708.pdf).

discrimination of women is an attempt to use the technology for feminist means.<sup>57</sup>

Ptacek shared with me some of the experiences the company had initially with participants online:

In our early days of working with webcams we would have windows opening on our screen revealing various men masturbating or displaying their genitalia. Flashers. We quickly moved to using “locked” web rooms to prevent this. At the time the media was stating that 40% of Internet use was for purposes of pornography. This was in the ether when we were working and influenced us.<sup>58</sup>

The fact that the Internet is used for such blatant pornography is a problem that ABC has encountered throughout its work and has subsequently influenced the type of event it creates. Ptacek also describes instances of sexual harassment and bullying she has experienced online in a graphic/sonic chatroom in The Palace. Ptacek had assumed role of Vince, the Performance Poet, in what appeared to be a conservative, dominantly male environment. She states:

Vince looked a bit like Eddie Izzard, i.e. cross dressing male, little fey. My schtick was bad performance poetry. Don't know why I was so surprised when they threatened to kill me. Vicki, our primary avatar constructor, was very conscious of the affect of the visual gender representations we made and part of the fun of playing in the early days, was in assuming different or amalgamated genders, and also non-gendered roles - i.e. playing objects or machinery etc.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> When I told Ptacek how I found the subject matter of *Belonging* resonated with the choice of medium (the Internet as complicit in practices of trafficking and the sale of women's bodies) and asked her about how she felt that the form and content of the work interrelated, she answered that it was a crucial aspect of the work and that “The staging was site specific.” Email communication between myself and Karla Ptacek 06/09/10.

<sup>58</sup> Email communication between myself and Karla Ptacek 06/09/10.

<sup>59</sup> Email communication between myself and Karla Ptacek 06/09/10.



This awareness of the visual gender representations is important, as is the opportunity for non-gendered (or non-human) roles. What is interesting here is the hostility that Ptacek experienced for exploring these things through Vince - an indication that gender demarcations online are not as fluid as has been suggested.

To return to *Belonging*, as a spectator at the event I was aware that both the live performing body and the online backdrop were going to be present which I hoped would work together to create an engaging and captivating performance. However, the live performing body, in this case, was very much inhibited in her movement because of her role in the piece. While watching Ptacek swiftly type and respond to the onscreen stimuli, as a member of the proximal audience I felt that the technology had almost paralysed her body. Because she had to sit and type her body was nearly completely still apart from her hands and her eyes and the computer screen brightness reflecting back on Ptacek's face (while being a mildly theatrical image) seemed to emphasise the stasis of the body. As a body in the performing space (and the only actual body we have got) Ptacek is still performing, but her performance is in the combination of her skill at typing and reacting to all of the information she is receiving and her deftness at executing various commands on the computer. ABC is aware of this issue in its work, and in her article Ptacek discusses the problems with what she calls "waist-up acting". She says: "Experiments with avatar movement has prompted me to consider the limitations of the 'waist-up' acting mode that we deploy as remote performers."<sup>60</sup> This waist-up mode, which in *Belonging* included minimal movement unlike *Screen Save Her* (which was also "waist-up" mode but much more active) does inhibit the performing body: the body controlling the technology is also controlled by the physical action of doing so.

The frustrating thing is that we are unable to see most of what she is doing as her computer faces away from us and blocks our view of her actions. Therefore we are unaware of what Ptacek has on her screen; we can only guess at which avatar or action she is controlling. While the screen image was entertaining to watch, it was not as far removed from the sort of online

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<sup>60</sup> Ptacek, "Avatar Body Collision: Enactments in Distributed Performance Practices" p182.

performance that could have been watched on a laptop as I had expected. However, the context was completely different and it is the set up of the space with a designated performance area where a body “performs” that differentiates this experience and set up various expectations about the performance. While in *Screen Save Her*, the narrative moved between the live performance body (and in this case “performing” did refer to performing definitive actions that were a part of the piece) and the online presences, in *Belonging* this playful interaction is kept to a minimum and for the most part all we see is Ptacek. This calls into question what one does when one is “performing”.

Watching this performance in which the visual images and the text on the screen move quickly and energetically while the live body in the space remains still and serious, a frozen mask illuminated by the faint blue/green glow from the screen, reminded me of one of Haraway’s comments in her “Cyborg Manifesto”. She states:

Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.<sup>61</sup>

The inert body of Ptacek in the performance space and the continually shifting on-screen images, text and characters made me consider what place the live body has in online performance. It also made me think about what the online audience might be experiencing and how their experience would be different to mine. Apart from the use of space and the fact that we were gathered in a collective audience within the space watching a body in front of a screen, I do not think that our experiences would have been as different as I had first anticipated. Had the body in the space been “performing” in the way that it did in *Screen Save Her*, then perhaps this would have been the case. However, I felt that the addition of the body in the space here did little to augment the

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<sup>61</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (London: Free Association Books, 1991) p152.

experience. I could not help feeling that I would have rather been watching Jamieson live, who in solitude in New Zealand was performing via live-feed. Her movements and performance as “Daria” were interesting to watch and I felt perhaps could have provided a more engaging live performance free from the “waist-up” restrictions that a computer operator has imposed on their body. The company’s choice to make Ptacek the live performer rather than Jamieson who was not physically connected to her computer was perhaps for pragmatic reasons. However it left me with numerous questions about what a live performing body does in front of an audience.

Whether or not the performance was entertaining is not the issue here; what I am interested in is how the body and technology were working together within these performative spaces (both proximal and online). In this particular instance the presence of the body in the space emphasised the *disconnection* of bodies. It highlighted to me the distance between the collider’s bodies, and it also made me think about the disconnected bodies globally that were watching this and interacting in a similar manner to what we, the live audience, could see Ptacek doing. It also made me feel very disconnected from the “performing” body in front of me: I had no eye contact with this body; this body was disengaged from the audience in a way that perhaps another sort of performer would not have been; and I felt ostracised by the fact that I could not see what she was seeing. I did not know what she was doing on her computer but instead only got to see the amalgamation of the live event and the remote contributions. In conversation with Ptacek about this at a later date she indicated that an intention of the piece was to show both her and Daria as trapped by the medium. She claims: “Here the form mirrored or elaborated the content - the sexual slave bound by the webcam frame.”<sup>62</sup> I can understand the intention behind this, but, watching *Belonging* I felt very alienated from this performance. I have written previously about the way technology can be used in performance to heighten the phenomenological aspect of a theatrical experience and how technology can emphasise bodily engagement (as in the

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<sup>62</sup> Email communication between myself and Karla Ptacek 06/09/10.

work of CREW and al-Ka-mie amongst others).<sup>63</sup> However, in this particular performance I felt very ostracised by the use of technology. Of course, I am speaking here from my own subject position; a gendered response to this type of work (as well as a response influenced by race and class) is inevitable and I make no presumptions about the experience of the male spectator to watching the work of ABC. After discussing the stasis with Ptacek, I can understand this as an intentional device within the piece to highlight the issues surrounding the relationship between female bodies and the medium itself, but in the performance this was not clear to me.

Another of the problems with this type of work was emphasised by a situation at the end of the performance. A number of proximal audience members had arrived late and had missed Ptacek's explanation about the company and their remote locations and how the technology worked. They enquired about all of these things and claimed that they had not understood what was happening as they were watching it nor what she was doing at the side of the space on a computer. Some latecomers had thought she was an operator and were waiting throughout for performers to appear. This instance highlights some of the issues surrounding audience expectations when in a performance space that has been labelled as such. While the online audience would have all been fully aware of what they were watching and of the conventions of cyberformance, the proximal audience, some of whom obviously had no prior knowledge of what they were about to see, were left in the dark about this. Perhaps if the role of the body in question and its situation in relation to the technology had been slightly altered this would not have occurred.

In her article, Ptacek discusses how ABC's first cyberformance *Screen Save*

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<sup>63</sup> Laura Bissell, *The Posthuman Body in Performance* MPhil by Research thesis, University of Glasgow, 2007.

*Her* was misinterpreted by the proximal audience. She explains:

Feedback from the performance events reveals that I seriously misjudged audience competencies: spectators were unable to recognise the fundamental mechanical-human connections at work. Many spectators thought they were watching a video recording; they were not aware that the animated avatars were occurring in real time. The relationship between the three live performers on the webcams and the graphic/ sonic avatars that these performers were simultaneously operating may have been lost to the majority of spectators.<sup>64</sup>

This simple lack of comprehension of what they were seeing and the fact that many audience members were “lost” as to what was technologically occurring shows one of the problems with this type of performance. Ptacek also acknowledges that there are issues with having performers simultaneously operating computers and discusses some of the feedback they got from spectators:

Mixing two phenomenological states, that of watching a performance and of watching someone operate a computer was considered a flawed choice by one spectator who insisted that the latter state can never become an immersive experience. Although this comment highlights the difficulties of theatricalising within such vacuous timing, I would counter that much contemporary performance has involved watching human-mechanical operations. As anticipated, spectators produced their own totalising account of the show despite the loss of key narrative data. What I had overlooked however, was their absolute expectation that everything would be virtual, and their willingness to incorporate all data into this belief system.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ptacek, “Avatar Body Collision: Enactments in Distributed Performance Practices” p189.

<sup>65</sup> Ptacek, “Avatar Body Collision: Enactments in Distributed Performance Practices” p189-90.

Interestingly, Ptacek states that much contemporary performance has been about these human mechanical interactions, which is true if we consider work from the Italian Futurists onwards.<sup>66</sup> The fact that spectators were unfamiliar with the form and assumed that everything was recorded indicates that without an explanation or introduction to the cyberformance and a basic knowledge that the company is globally dispersed, it is likely that the events witnessed will be misunderstood or misconstrued.

Despite the limitations that I have described, I believe that ABC's integration of bodies into online cyberformance has the potential to complicate this relationship between the live body and online performance and to create an engaging and thought-provoking practice. In *Belonging*, I did not feel it had achieved this; however, on reflection I can see that ABC chose the stasis of the performing body to visually illustrate the idea that Daria is "stuck" by her circumstances. The company have been creative in adapting its work to attempt to reduce incidences of pornography, sexism and sexual representations of female bodies. However, because of the democratic nature of its work in terms of allowing audience participation ABC is not always completely in control of the end result. Similarly, the decision to work globally via the Internet generates numerous problems about representation, but it has also provided much of the content of the work as the company attempts to explore the issues surrounding the Internet using the medium itself.

## Upstage

I now want to explore in more depth how this type of Internet performance or cyberformance is altering or augmenting the role of the audience, and to what extent we can use the analogy of a theatre audience for online performances. In this section I will not be solely looking at Internet performance that involve live performing bodies as ABC does in some of its pieces, but instead will be widening my discussion to include other types of online performance to consider the ontology of this and to interrogate the different modes of spectatorship that

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<sup>66</sup> See Roselee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc, 2001).

they inspire. In doing this I hope to evaluate how a gendered response to Internet performance within audiences occurs and how feminist work can be created using cyberspace. ABC has been developing Upstage since 2003 and for the last three years this has provided the online space for a festival. So far there has been the 070707 festival, the 080808 festival, and the most recent event occurred online on 090909.<sup>67</sup> A number of different artists perform over the entire day and night (information on different time zones is provided on the website).

In an article about the Upstage festival 080808, theatre reviewer Bree Hadley writes: “What was most engaging about the cyberformance experience was the sense of the performances forming in the very moment of the encounter, and the sense that spectators participated in this encounter.”<sup>68</sup> Here Hadley specifies two important elements to the performance - the liveness of the moment, and the audience’s sense that they were a part of that moment. This is very much the rhetoric that surrounds live performance, but the analogy does not stop there. Hadley continues: “The notion that contemporary performance pushes meaning-making out into the space between stage and spectator, instead of prescribing interpretations, was made concrete.”<sup>69</sup> This idea of the space between stage and spectator, a liminal space of exchange and mutual creativity is summarised by the notion of the “interface” as discussed by LeNoir in her article. LeNoir also states that the notion of mediation is key to

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<sup>67</sup> 08/09/09, [http://upstage.org.nz/blog/?page\\_id=463](http://upstage.org.nz/blog/?page_id=463). I took part in the 090909 festival online.

<sup>68</sup> Bree Hadley, *Australian Stage Online*, 26/08/09, <http://www.australianstage.com.au/reviews/international/080808-upstage-festival-1745.html>.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

understanding Internet performance. She claims:

In order to begin to understand how computer-mediated performance compares to traditional, “live” performance, it is necessary to explore the artistic conventions that govern the interactions of performers and spectators through the conventions defined at the computer interface.<sup>70</sup>

By picking apart these conventions, LeNoir hopes to provide some insights into the types of performances that are being created online, and the modes of spectatorship they require.

In her essay, LeNoir takes two examples of online performances to analyse what role the audience has played in these and to infer from this how audiences in cyberformance (although she does not use this term) function and how their experience might be different from that of an audience watching a more “normative” performance. Her first example is one of the early experiments in this field, The Virtual Drama Society’s performance of *Playground* (1996). Her second is Blast Theory’s *Kidnapped* (1998). When considering LeNoir’s examples it is worth noting the time period that she is discussing, for while she makes many interesting points about the interface between performer and audience and how audiences interact with her two examples, there has been a tangible reallocation of how the Internet is being used in the last decade. Having said this, I think that she poses some interesting questions that remain relevant today. LeNoir asks: “What do Internet performances have in common with live performances? What do Internet audiences have in common with live audiences? What traditions of theatrical ‘spectating’ are drawn on in creating Internet performances? And what new forms of interactive participation are being developed in cyberspace?”<sup>71</sup> I contend that all of these questions can be posed in the context of more contemporary work. I would like to add my own questions to LeNoir’s list: What are the implications of cyberformance in regards to the

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<sup>70</sup> LeNoir, “The Audience in Cyberspace: Audience-Performer Interactivity in Online Performances”, p116.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p122-3.



future of feminism? How does gender influence readings of cyberformance? And, how are feminist agendas working within this type of performance (if at all)?<sup>72</sup>

So how can we relate these new types of cyberformance to the female body and feminist agendas? The impact of the proliferation of 1990s cyberfeminist networks online and rhetoric surrounding the potential of the Internet for women, most vehemently championed by cyberfeminist Sadie Plant as one example, is evident in the volume of women now using the Internet to make artworks and performances.<sup>73</sup> However, what has been hailed as a new space for women to explore, flourish within, and commandeer (according to Plant), has all too quickly been rewritten in similar patriarchal patterns as the real world.<sup>74</sup> Anne Balsamo challenges the concept or what she calls the “dominant myth” of cyberspace as a gender-and-race-neutral space of “disembodied and democratic exchange.”<sup>75</sup> This is in response to the many theorists who have suggested that cyberspace, where the body can be left behind as the mind surfs the web, is a liberating medium for all those that have traditionally been marked as “other”. This is a problematic idea as obviously the body is always present; however the potential for exploring different identities/genders online is there, despite the liberating potential sometimes succumbing to hyperbole.

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<sup>72</sup> In considering these types of performances, I am not analysing role-playing games, as while this format has influenced dramatic experimentation in virtual worlds, there is no audience that is solely an audience in these instances – all performers participate and the context is framed in gaming terms as opposed to a theatrical event. My focus of analysis is the body - in the case of cyberformance the performing and spectating bodies that are engaged in each performance - and I feel that to explore role-playing in gaming would detract from this. Role playing games have been examined by Sherry Turkle (1997), Sandy Stone (1991) and N. Katherine Hayles (1999).

<sup>73</sup> Amongst other things such as running businesses, communication and social networking.

<sup>74</sup> Plant discusses at length the utopian potential of the Internet for women. Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Techno Culture* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998).

<sup>75</sup> Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) p15.

Prominent technothorist Rosi Braidotti also advises caution around discussions of net utopianism:

I would like to argue therefore that the central point to keep in mind in the context of a discussion on cyberspace is that the last thing we need at this point in Western history is a renewal of the old myth of transcendence as flight from the body. Transcendence as disembodiment would just repeat the classical patriarchal model, which consolidated masculinity as abstraction, thereby essentialising social categories of “embodied others”.<sup>76</sup>

Braidotti warns of reiterating the rhetoric surrounding disembodiment and draws attention to experience as embodied. Plant’s and other cyberfeminist’s claims that the Internet can be a space where people will be free of their bodies as raced, gendered, classed entities are naive and undermine some cyberfeminist discussion. Cybertheorist Barbara Kennedy outlines her definition of cyberfeminism:

As a concept it covers feminist simulations of technology, most literally through debates about power, identity and autonomy and the role of new technologies in the transformation of these characteristics.<sup>77</sup>

By acknowledging that power, identity and autonomy are at the heart of cyberfeminism, Kennedy reminds us that these technologies are altering social and cultural activities; how gender is represented and how gender power relations work online will have an effect on the real world.

Gerry Harris and Elaine Aston’s *Feminist Futures?: Theatre, Performance, Theory (Performance Interventions)* (2007) discusses what has happened to feminism within the rhetoric of postfeminism and with the 1990s ambivalence to

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<sup>76</sup> Rosi Braidotti, "Cyberfeminism With a Difference", 02/05/08, [http://www.let.uu.nl/womens\\_studies/rosi/cyberfem.htm](http://www.let.uu.nl/womens_studies/rosi/cyberfem.htm).

<sup>77</sup> Barbara Kennedy, "Introduction to Cyberfeminism", David Bell, Barbara M. Kennedy, eds. *The Cybercultures Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000) p283.

the term. The question mark in the title of the text indicates that it is questionable whether there is a future for feminism as we have known it with no women's movement to speak of at this time and that a sense of backlash politics is pervading gender debates. Many feminist critics seem to have lost their way in theorising about feminism with many declaring that the fight for equality is over. Clearly this is not the case with a 29% disparity between the wages of men and women existing even in 2009.<sup>78</sup>

Faith Wilding states:

“Feminism” (or more properly, “feminisms”) has been understood as a historical - and contemporary - transnational movement for justice and freedom for women, which depends on women's activist participation in networked local, national, and international groups. It focuses on the material, political, emotional, sexual, and psychic conditions arising from women's differentialized social construction and gender roles. Link this with “cyber”, which means to steer, govern, control (especially automated systems), and we conjure up feminism at the helm: New political, social, and cultural possibilities which are quite staggering.<sup>79</sup>

In this excerpt Wilding acknowledges the potential implications of cyberfeminism, and later describes this linking of words as a “radical” step. Wilding also correctly speaks of “feminisms”, recognising the feminist movements that have preceded cyberfeminism. As part of her discussion, Wilding also talks about the cybergrrrl culture that has proliferated online since the 1990s. Sarah Chaplin describes this as such: “The cybergrrrl phenomenon is a more proactive version of cyberfeminism, which situates the feminist project in

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<sup>78</sup> Information from Sam Ainsley (GSA) *Subject in Process* event, CCA, 5/09/09.

<sup>79</sup> Faith Wilding, “Where is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism?” 2/05/08, [http://www.obn.org/cfundef/faith\\_def.html](http://www.obn.org/cfundef/faith_def.html).

the realms of cyberspace by invoking a plethora of Net-orientated tactics that are designed to disrupt and question the status quo.”<sup>80</sup>

Cyberfeminist Nina Wakeford, discusses the cybergrrrl phenomenon in her article “Networking Women and Grrrls with Information/Communication” (2000). Amongst other things, Wakeford’s article talks about web presences which women have created in response to certain images of computing culture. She examines “grrrl” webpages and their formation as a response to the pornographic degrading images of women that search engines throw up in responses to “woman” or “girl”. Sites such as Cybergrrrl, geekgirl, NerdGrrrl and Homegrrrl use codes to “explicitly subvert the easy appropriation of women, and to resist stereotypes.”<sup>81</sup> However Wilding disagrees with Wakeford’s argument and has a different perception of the images that cybergrrrls project:

While cybergrrrls sometimes draw (whether consciously or unconsciously) on feminist analyses of popular representations of women - and on the strategies and work of many feminist artists - they also often uncritically recirculate and re-present sexist and stereotyped images of women from popular media - the buxom gun moll; the supersexed cyborg femme; the 50's tupperware cartoon women, are favourites - without any analysis or critical recontextualization.<sup>82</sup>

I would argue that the work of Desktop Theatre and ABC could be accused of this as the avatars the companies use, while intended to ironically reassimilate images of femininity, can come across as ambiguous. For example in *Screen Save Her* the avatars include Jay Fondle (a spoof of Jane Fonda the exercise guru but with weapons), Beaut 1 (a sexy mermaid), Trashed 2 (a doll in a frilly dress holding a machine gun) and Trashed 3 (pretty Siamese twins joined at the bust). While ABC seem to be attempting to destabilise these traditional images of

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<sup>80</sup> Sarah Chaplin, “Cyberfeminism”, Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska, eds. *Feminist Visual Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) p273.

<sup>81</sup> Nina Wakeford, “Networking Women and Grrrls with Information/Communication”, David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, eds. *The Cybercultures Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000) p355.

<sup>82</sup> Wilding, “Where is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism?”

femininity by adding weaponry and tongue-in-cheek names, the images themselves in some ways reinforce dominant modes of thought surrounding women rather than challenge them.



**Figure 21 Avatar Body Collision.** Avatars used in performance: Jay Fondle, Trashed 2, Beaut 1, BBQ Tongs, Trashed 3. *Screen Save Her*, (2002). (Avatars constructed by Vicky Smith).

Although the company took steps to prevent the “flashers” who used webcams to show their genitalia, there is still opportunity for participating audiences to represent themselves as they wish. By allowing audiences to choose their own avatars (within a preset category of “types”) these images of gender stereotypes end up recirculating. When audiences have text-based input this is less evident but I would argue that the medium which ABC is working with (the Internet) has its own associations and connotations which means that a revision of these images and a subversion of their meaning is more complex. I asked Ptacek how she felt about the audience interactions and contributions in terms of diverting or obscuring the cyberfeminist politics of the work. Her response was that “if it’s doctrinal it becomes social activism not art.”<sup>83</sup> Striking the balance between interactive art and the politics ABC wish to communicate is not easy particularly when working within the infrastructure of the Internet. ABC’s choice to provide a space for audience interaction and contributions is a key part of its art practice and the experimental nature of its work.

## Conclusions

To conclude, I wish to return to some of the questions that I have posed throughout this chapter about the role the female body has in online performance. I would say that in online performance the physical presence of the body is downplayed, the member of the online audience is not in the

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<sup>83</sup> Email communication between myself and Karla Ptacek 06/09/10.

presence of a live performing body and although able to type interactions that appear on the screen as part of the performance, the body itself is not key. Instead the graphics and avatars dominate the performance. The exception to this is the type of performance where there is a live and an online audience (as in *Screen Save Her* and *Belonging*) and where there is a designated physical performance space in which a live audience meets to watch a live performer perform in real time while the other colliders perform remotely and an online audience can simultaneously watch the events and contribute in the manner described above. I contend that this interaction between live bodies and Internet performance and the possibilities of dual audiences spectating and interacting with the live technology holds potential for a technologised feminist praxis. With more work to be done in re-coding the patriarchal structure of the Internet and reducing the complicity of the Internet in anti-feminist activities, there is still a long way to go before the Internet can be seen as an unproblematic feminist tool. However, with companies like ABC setting an example of how online spaces can be adapted for feminist performance experiments, there is a possibility of it becoming part of a technologised feminist praxis.

I also asked the question, how do audiences interact with online performances? Throughout this chapter I have explained that the relationship that online audiences have with cyberformance is more interactive than a conventional audience as they are able to contribute to and shape the performance.<sup>84</sup> However, this contribution is limited and not all online audience members are able to do this. While the proximal audience will perform as a conventional theatre audience, the online audience is not constricted by these rules. The online audience will not have the experience of watching the live body in the space. The analogy between virtual space and performance space has instigated these discussions, but has the marrying of the Internet and performance altered the role of the audience, or is this perhaps an effect of this

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<sup>84</sup> This is what Axel Bruns concept of the "produser" refers to. Axel Bruns, (2005) "Axel Bruns at iDC," Institute for Distributed Creativity, 7/09/09, [http://distributedcreativity.typepad.com/idc\\_events/2005/09/axel\\_bruns\\_at\\_i.html](http://distributedcreativity.typepad.com/idc_events/2005/09/axel_bruns_at_i.html).

new form? These questions remain to be answered and possibly further experiments in this area will shed more light on this issue of audiences.

In this chapter I was interested in exploring whether the Internet as an arguably masculine/military tool had the potential to be utilised by women artists. While Plant claimed that the Internet is a giant feminist matrix (mother) and web, in reality it has been mainly a construction created and controlled by men. Studies such as Joel Cooper and Kimberlee D. Weaver's *Genders in Computers* (2003) expose the cultural way that the relationship between gender and computers is formed through early education.<sup>85</sup> Despite these facts, many women (cyberfeminists and others) have found in the Internet an artistic outlet where other more traditionally male-dominated art forms have seemed uninviting.

While Avatar Body Collision are using the Internet alongside performing bodies to create performances with online and proximal audiences, we must remember that they are using an existing system within which to stage their work. In fact, they are working within two existing systems, each with their own specific power structures and conventions. By integrating a performing body, utilising a proximal performance space as well as an online one and by engaging the rhetoric of theatre and performance, ABC are also choosing to work within the theatrical system and some of the connotations and conventions that surround this. In some respects, this has been an issue for them; as I explained earlier, the expectations of the live audience within this performance context led to confusion when audiences were confronted with a body at a computer in front of a screen.<sup>86</sup> Many were unaware of what the images on the screen were, and without an explanation of the globally dispersed set-up of the company, audiences were unable to understand how the performance was working. In contrast to this, Internet audiences were completely aware of what they were seeing, having logged in to watch and participate in the performances.

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<sup>85</sup> Cooper and Weaver, *Gender and Computers*.

<sup>86</sup> Bennett claims: "Spectators are thus trained to be passive in their demonstrated behaviour during a theatrical performance, but to be active in their decoding of the sign systems made available." Bennett, *Theatre Audiences* p206.

While I have used the work of ABC as a unique case study in this chapter it seems to be representative of some of the issues surrounding cyberfeminism. The feminist agenda of the group is sometimes rendered ambiguous by its interception and interruption by participants and the improvisational aspects of their work allows for a range of views and beliefs to filter through. Although some of the texts and images of bodies that the company use are intended as tongue-in-cheek or ironic, the inclusion of gender representations via avatars or images is often not reframed for audiences and this lack of recontextualisation leads to ambiguity about their intention and perhaps a recirculation of these images. The nature of the Internet makes it a problematic medium to use; however ABC attempts to explore and highlight the problems of making feminist work online, often taking the anxieties surrounding the Internet and female bodies as the subject matter for its work.

In this chapter I have argued that one of the issues with the work of ABC is its often ambiguous end result with audiences often not comprehending what they are watching, or, audiences not “getting” the fact that the images and texts that ABC are using are being recontextualised to put across their cyberfeminist message therefore leaving the political impetus of the performance negated and the message itself hazy. I have argued that this is largely due to the medium that ABC has chosen to work with and the heavily ingrained portrayals of the female body that permeate the Internet. In a similar vein, in my next chapter the artists I am looking at attempt to take on a highly gendered and compartmentalised type of technology as they try to break down the boundaries of scientific knowledge and enter the laboratories to explore a feminist bio-art practice. In this next chapter I will consider how feminist artists are using biotechnological practices in their work in an attempt to subvert dominant discourses surrounding bodies of scientific knowledge and to provoke discussion around the politics of how biotechnologies and the female body intersect.



# Chapter Four - Productive/Reproductive Bodies: The Female Biotechnological Body in Performance.

## Introduction

In this chapter I examine how women artists are engaging with the feminist debates surrounding biotechnologies through the medium of performance. In the 1990s French “beauty nymph” Orlan was one of the first feminist artists to incorporate medical procedures into her performance practice, relocating her performance pieces to a surgical setting and utilising cosmetic surgery techniques in her work to physically alter her face and thereby critique Western ideals of beauty.<sup>1</sup> While Orlan’s extreme surgeries provoked discussion about the politics of cosmetic surgery and women’s bodies she also instigated a new-found interest in the use of “wet” technologies in art practices.<sup>2</sup> The term “wet” technologies refers to the medical and biotechnological procedures that involve the use and augmentation of bodily matter such as skin and cells within a laboratory or surgical setting.<sup>3</sup> As Orlan has been written about prolifically I will not discuss her in this chapter, nor will I focus on the medical/surgical side of

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<sup>1</sup> Between 1990 and 1993 Orlan had a series of nine surgeries entitled *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*. At this time she was also writing her *Carnal Art Manifesto*. Orlan, *Carnal Art Deke* Dusinberre, trans. (Paris: Flammarion, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993) and Virginia L. Blum, *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Performance that involves surgical and medical procedures is discussed in Maaïke Bleeker’s edited collection *Anatomy Live: Performance and the Operating Theatre* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 2008). Karen Ingham’s essay, “The Anatomy Lesson of Professor Moxham”, discusses the rise in the use of medical procedures and apparatus in performance after the Second World War and how artists abandoned figurative painting and drawing, turning instead to abstraction. She claims that when medical imaging technologies became available (CAT and MRI scans) artists “were attracted to this new type of bodily abstraction.” *Anatomy Live: Performance and the Operating Theatre* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 2008) p81.

this type of work.<sup>4</sup> Instead, I wish to look at a more recent generation of performance artists who use biotechnological techniques within their performance practice to engage audiences with some of the political issues and ethical debates surrounding bodies and biotechnologies.

As my project is focussed specifically on the female body, my key research questions in this chapter tackle some of the concerns that the use of biotechnologies on the female body provoke and how these are played out within contemporary performance practice.<sup>5</sup> Because biotechnologies have most recently been used to assist the reproductive process in the form of IVF and other fertility treatments the links between the female body and biotechnologies have become intrinsic and in urgent need of analysis. Another prominent application of biotechnologies has been the development of animal organs and skin cells to replace human ones in medicine to elongate the lives of people on transplant lists. These procedures are also “life-giving” in a way (if not in the traditional sense of biological reproduction); by extension work *is* being done to create “semi-living beings” grown in laboratory settings from human cells creating an alternate type of birthing. The artists that I am analysing in this chapter explore each of these strands of biotechnology, and in using these practices in their work are drawing attention to the idea of the female body as a “birthing” body, a body that can reproduce or create life.

In this chapter I intend to interrogate to what extent the idea of the female body as a reproductive body in an age of biotechnologies is represented (or subverted) through my performance examples. I also want to ask to what extent these artists are using performance to break down the barriers between art and science and to make accessible bodies of medical knowledge to an art audience. My performance examples include the work of cyberfeminist network subRosa looking specifically at its performances *Expo EmmaGenics* (2001) and *US Grade AAA Premium Eggs* (2002), and UK-based solo performer, Kira O’Reilly,

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<sup>4</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) and Gabriella Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> I say “on” here as some feminists (such as Janice G. Raymond) feel that the use of biotechnologies to assist with fertility treatments cause women to feel a lack of agency or control over their own bodies. Janice G. Raymond *Woman as Wombs: Reproductive Technologies and the Battle Over Women’s Freedom* (Melbourne: Spinifex, 1995) pxxxii.

focussing on her performance *inthewrongplaceness* (2005).<sup>6</sup> I intend to explicate some of the feminist issues surrounding the relationship between biotechnologies and women's bodies through these performative examples and to question whether the work of subRosa and O'Reilly can be read as feminist in the light of this discussion. Finally I want to consider what affect the different performative methods used by subRosa and O'Reilly have on audience engagement with the politics surrounding biotechnologies, and how the artists' bodies themselves contribute to how these performances are potentially read.

As I stated previously, it should be noted that in this chapter the technology that I am discussing is not a form of media (as the majority of the technologies encountered within the context of this thesis are) but is instead a "wet" technology that physically interrupts the body boundary and uses bodily cells and tissue. Although some bioartists such as Eduardo Kac and Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr of the Tissue Culture and Art Project have physically used biotechnological procedures within their gallery pieces or performances, the focus of this research is the female body and so I wish to maintain attention on this rather than discussing the semi-living beings that have been created and displayed within a fine art context.<sup>7</sup> While in my performance examples the biotechnologies themselves are not visible to audiences (having occurred in the research and development stages of the projects) the content of the performances has evolved from an artistic engagement with these practices.

## **Feminism and Biotechnologies**

Before I move on to scrutinize the performances themselves, I wish to outline some of the prominent issues surrounding the advancement of biotechnologies in relation to feminist politics. There are a number of texts that have been key to my research. The radical feminist study *Woman as Wombs* (1995) by Janice G.

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<sup>6</sup> I have not seen these performances live and am working from documentation of these events including DVDs, images and articles.

<sup>7</sup> Examples of this include Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr's *Tissue Culture & Art(ificial) Wombs* installation presented at the Ars Electronica festival in 2000 and Eduardo Kac's *Genesis* 1998/9.

Raymond provides a scathing critique of how women's bodies are being violated by biotechnological practices, asserting that these invasive procedures are a threat to women's basic human rights.<sup>8</sup> Medical lawyer Colin Gavaghan's study, *Defending the Genetic Supermarket* (2007) makes clear from the outset that he is not arguing in favour of the technologies he is discussing but is merely providing the other side of the story to Raymond's and advocates individual decisions by prospective parents.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, *Children of Choice* (1994) supports a similarly parent-driven practice, what its author, John A. Robertson, calls "procreative liberty".<sup>10</sup> Nancy Lublin's *Pandora's Box: Feminism Confronts Reproductive Technology* (1998) attempts a "praxis feminism" with the central research question "Is technological intervention in the womb the friend or foe of women?"<sup>11</sup> Lublin focuses on the core principles of feminist theory based on her activist work and offers a new framework for constructing public policy through a model of praxis feminism.

From reading the literature surrounding biotechnologies, it has become clear that some of the issues that feminists have been debating include: biotechnologies as offering liberation from the reproductive role assigned to women (Firestone, 1970); new reproductive technologies as publicly sanctioned violence against women (Raymond, 1995); the sexualisation of reproduction and accessibility of women's bodies (Raymond, 1995); foetal rights and the separation of the embryo/foetus from the woman (Lublin, 1998); how the rhetoric of choice surrounding abortion and the right to choose a safe legal abortion has been transposed onto debates surrounding reproductive technologies (Wilding and subRosa, 2002); the market value that the consumer movement confers to reproductive technologies (subRosa, 2002); the idea of

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<sup>8</sup> In her study Raymond devotes a chapter to investigating the repercussions of these technologies on trafficking and international exchange of women's bodies as commodities. Raymond, *Woman as Wombs* pp.138-187.

<sup>9</sup> Colin Gavaghan, *Defending the Genetic Supermarket: Law and Ethics of Selecting the Next Generation* (Oxon: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> John A. Robertson, *Children of Choice: Freedom and the New Reproductive Technologies* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Lublin, *Pandora's Box: Feminism Confronts Reproductive Technology* (Maryland: Bowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc, 1998) p43.

infertility as a technical problem that can be fixed by a professional elite (Raymond, 1995; Horsey and Biggs, 2007); the trafficking of women in international markets for surrogacy, foetal tissue and eggs and the implications this has on women of varying races and classes (subRosa, 2002); technological reproduction as the appropriation of the female body (Raymond, 1995); and the ethics of technologies that allow for a new eugenic consciousness and the much discussed “designer baby” concept (Rifkin, 1998; Gavaghan, 2007). I will be analysing how both subRosa and O’Reilly explore some of these issues within their work and how the choices they make as artists in terms of their performance style and delivery relate to feminist perspectives on the body.<sup>12</sup>

## subRosa

subRosa was established in 1999 and is a cyberfeminist network that produces artworks, activist campaigns and projects, publications, media interventions, and public forums that make visible the effects of the interconnections of technology, gender, and difference; feminism and global capital; new bio and medical technologies and women’s health; and the changed conditions of labour and reproduction for women. subRosa states on its webpage: “subRosa practices a situational embodied feminist politics nourished by conviviality, self-determination, and the desire for affirmative alliances and coalitions.”<sup>13</sup> The assertion that the group strive for affirmative alliances and coalitions is reminiscent of Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” where she evokes the figure of the cyborg as the embodiment of hybridity and alliances. That subRosa also locates

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<sup>12</sup> There have been a number of other performative responses to some of these issues, notably Helen Chadwick’s installation *Unnatural Selection* (1996) which was the result of Chadwick’s residency at the IVF unit at King’s College in London. Chadwick used Perspex-cased images of fertilised eggs that had been discarded due to possible “flaws”; the title of the piece passes comment on this procedure and on the ethics of IVF procedures. Chadwick died unexpectedly in 1996 and the exhibition was displayed posthumously. More recently the work of dancer and theatre-maker Anna Furse has created several works around infertility/reproductive technologies, including *The Peach Child* (Little Angel/Japan Festival 2001), *Yerma’s Eggs* at Riverside Studios/Explore@Bristol (2003) and *Glass Body*, a performance installation for the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital.

<sup>13</sup> subRosa website 5/10/09, <http://www.cyberfeminism.net>.

its work as embodied and convivial is also relevant to my analysis. The “Rosa” part of the name honours feminist pioneers in art, activism, labour, science, and politics: cited as Rosa Bonheur, Rosa Luxemburg, Rosie the Riveter, Rosa Parks and Rosie Franklin.<sup>14</sup> Although exploring very recent technological developments, subRosa utilises a number of second wave feminist approaches to its task, employing consciousness-raising tactics and activist strategies to communicate its message. David Bell, in his *Introduction to Cybercultures* (2001), discusses cybersubcultures. He states that the problem with the prefix “sub” is that it suggests that subcultures are beneath cultures. He argues, however, that this should not mean they are subsumed or relegated. He states, “‘Sub’ doesn’t mean substandard, then. It might instead be taken to indicate, as Sarah Thornton (1997) says ‘subordinate, subaltern or subterranean,’ the excluded, the oppressed, the underground.”<sup>15</sup> It is notable that subRosa have opted for this prefix as it situates them as a cybersubculture, a group working against the grain of the normative reading of biotechnologies.<sup>16</sup>

subRosa’s practice includes collective work on performances, publications, residencies, web-sites, and actions; self-education and consciousness-raising; technical training and skill sharing; “flesh” meetings, and collaboration with other groups and individuals. There have been a number of publications, books, documented performances and DVDs produced by subRosa with a wealth of materials available online as part of the ethos of the network. In keeping with its agenda of the sharing of knowledge and the democratisation of information, subRosa’s mode of production is reproducible; everything it generates is anti-copyright and on the website visitors are even invited to start

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> David Bell, *An Introduction to Cybercultures* (London: Routledge, 2001) p164.

<sup>16</sup> Another interpretation of this is that it means “under the rose”, from the Latin, which denotes secrecy or conspiracy.

their own subRosa cell if they wish.<sup>17</sup> The network is described as such: “subRosa is a reproducible cyberfeminist cell of cultural researchers committed to combining art, activism, and politics to explore and critique the effects of the intersections of the new information and biotechnologies on women’s bodies, lives, and work.”<sup>18</sup> Here subRosa explicitly states that it is working between art, activism and politics while the language used in this description has connotations of reproduction and biology.

Biotechnologies and the effect of reproductive and prosthetic technologies on women’s bodies are some of the main preoccupations of subRosa’s work, and have provided the basis for a number of its performative experiments. But this is not unique to subRosa: many texts which explore the relationship between women and technology refer to biological technologies that are disrupting traditional reproductive gender roles.<sup>19</sup> As Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert state in the introduction to their collection of essays: “Several contributors to *Processed Lives* underscore the point that technological interventions into biological reproduction profoundly transform the ways in which we think about

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<sup>17</sup> This is similar to Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), another company engaging with the politics of biotechnologies which also shares material and resources. Both CAE and subRosa use the same publisher, the small Brooklyn-based radical press Autonomedia, and have a similar ethos of sharing and anti-copyright regarding their materials. There was also a collaboration in 1999/2000 between CAE, Paul Vanouse and Faith Wilding of subRosa called *Cult of The New Eve* which was performed at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toulouse, France. CAE and subRosa’s united interest in questioning the politics surrounding biotechnologies means that there have been overlaps in their subject matter. CAE’s performance *Flesh Machine* (1997/8) staged live testing of participants to pass their genes through a “donor program” which emphasised the new eugenic consciousness that fertility treatments and the commercialisation of these things provoke. It is evident that subRosa has been influenced by the work of CAE and that the themes of *Flesh Machine* have been revisited in *Expo EmmaGenics* and *US Grade AAA Premium Eggs*.

<sup>18</sup> subRosa website 5/10/09, <http://www.cyberfeminism.net>.

<sup>19</sup> See Monica J. Casper’s “Fetal Cyborgs and Technomoms on the Reproductive Frontier: Which Way to the Carnival?” Chris Hables Gray, Heidi J. Figueroa-Sarriera and Steven Mentor, eds. *The Cyborg Handbook* (New York; London: Routledge, 1995) pp. 183-199.

the body and the meanings we attribute to both gender and sexuality.”<sup>20</sup> The fact that biotechnologies are altering bodies and how we think about bodies, as well as bodies of knowledge (particularly those bodies of scientific knowledge governed by the scientific community, as Kira O’Reilly points out in *Marsyas: Running Out of Skin*), makes it a highly relevant area of study for feminist scholars and artists.<sup>21</sup> subRosa puts these concerns at the fore of its agenda and over recent years has focussed on Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) “because there is a need to address the gendered and raced effects of this branch of biotechnology.”<sup>22</sup> subRosa states:

We wanted to analyze how in the Biotech century the female body has become the pre-eminent laboratory and rich body-parts mine for a lucrative and largely untested medical/ pharmaceutical industry. And specifically we wanted to address and de-code Repro-tech’s historical connections to eugenics and colonizing ideologies.<sup>23</sup>

By claiming that the female body itself is a “laboratory” for these biotechnological practices - a site of experimentation and trial and error - the statement implies that the female body is a guinea pig to these technologies, a laboratory animal to be tested upon.<sup>24</sup> The comparison to a “mine” reinforces this idea that the female body is devoid of agency and is something to be acted upon, an source that precious parts can be extracted from - in this case eggs. subRosa addresses these issues surrounding the female body and technology by using a participatory theatre model and a variety of media to reach a range of

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert, *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1997) p13.

<sup>21</sup> Beatriz da Costa and Kavita Philip acknowledge how the biological knowledge of life was: “always inscribed by racial, classed and gendered contours of Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe and its colonies.” Beatriz da Costa and Kavita Philip, *Tactical Biopolitics: Art, Activism, and Technoscience* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2008) p1.

<sup>22</sup> subRosa website 5/10/09, <http://www.cyberfeminism.net>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> This link between the female body and the experimental subject is also depicted in O’Reilly’s performance *inthewrongplaceness* (2005).



audiences. An example of this is the performance *Expo EmmaGenics* (2001) which I will look at now.

## ***Expo EmmaGenics* (2001)**

*Expo EmmaGenics* was the fifth performance project created by subRosa and was commissioned for the Intermediale ART HAPPENS! Festival in Mainz, Germany March 2001.<sup>25</sup> Steffi Danke, Christina Hung, Laleh Mehran, Lucia Sommer, Faith Wilding and Hyla Willis were all performers and contributors to the expo-style performance that staged a faux marketing trade show for Artificial Reproductive Technologies (ART). In this performance subRosa staged a three-hour American-style commercial Trade Show in a large performance space, to “familiarize Europeans with the convenient consumer marketing of Repro-Tech now available to Americans.”<sup>26</sup> The fact that subRosa describes the performance this way immediately puts the event within the context of American marketing strategies as well as acknowledging the performance location of Mainz, Germany. The beginning of this performance is rich with political strategy and worth dissecting carefully. At the start of the performance the narrator (a female authorial voiceover speaking as a sales representative for the fictitious company *Expo EmmaGenics*) states: “This women-friendly trade show is designed to familiarise Europeans with cutting edge US consumer products and services developed for Assisted Reproductive Technologies, or ART.”<sup>27</sup> In this opening gambit, audiences already get a sense of a cultural schism between America and Europe with America being portrayed as the leader in the field, doing outreach work to educate Europeans who are less scientifically sophisticated than the US. The idea that the US is at the “cutting edge” of science is explicit, while the reference to “consumer products and services” introduces the idea of the commercialisation of these technologies and their market value - a concept that

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<sup>25</sup> This was supported by the Studio for Creative Enquiry, Carnegie Mellon University.

<sup>26</sup> subRosa website 5/10/09, <http://www.cyberfeminism.net>.

<sup>27</sup> subRosa, *Expo EmmaGenics*, Intermediale ART HAPPENS! Festival in Mainz, Germany, March 2001.

is critiqued in this performance and in its subsequent performance *US Premium Grade AAA Eggs*.<sup>28</sup>



Figure 22 subRosa. *Expo EmmaGenics*, (2001).

Perhaps this emphasis on the current eugenicist strategies of the US is a tactic to deal with the issue of performing a piece that critiques eugenics in Germany, where the eugenicist legacy of the Nazi regime is still remembered. subRosa's focus on the US is a way of deflecting these issues within this specific performance location. The idea of superiority of the US is reiterated: "As the strongest nation in the world, the US plays a leading role in ensuring the future survival of a genetically superior human race."<sup>29</sup> This statement suggests that subRosa is trying to warn where experimentations in genetic science can lead. Once again the language used by the narrator is very seductive and the word choice is shrewdly employed to add to the impact of the overall statement. For example, the US is the "strongest" nation, "leading" (with the implication that it is the "leader") and responsible for "ensuring" the survival of the world and of a genetically "superior" (i.e. eugenically selected) race. By inserting these cultural references about America's superiority in a performance with an audience made up mostly of Europeans (specifically Germans) subRosa is also

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<sup>28</sup> The commercialisation of eggs is also discussed in Marilyn Strathern's article "Enterprising Kinship: Consumer Choice and the New Reproductive Technologies", Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco, eds. *The Body: A Reader* (Oxon: Routledge, 2005) pp.295-299.

<sup>29</sup> subRosa, *Expo EmmaGenics*.

conveying that it takes issue with the role that the US as a superpower has in relation to the rest of the world.

subRosa critiques what Faith Wilding calls the “stolen rhetoric of choice” in the slick statement that: “*Expo EmmaGenics* supports a woman’s choice to participate in the fertility industry.”<sup>30</sup> The idea of “women’s choice” has been appropriated from the feminist campaign for women to have rights over their own bodies in the form of birth control and abortion rights.<sup>31</sup> The choice of word in the second part of this statement also seems to evoke an early feminist strategy. The notion of “participating in the fertility industry” has connotations of women actively participating in what is presented as a new industry for women. The voice of the narrator is masquerading as a saleswoman for *Expo EmmaGenics* but is in fact the mouthpiece for subRosa’s critique. It is crucial to realise the parodic intention of subRosa’s performance and “products”; it is creating a spoof trade-show as a performative strategy to highlight the issues surrounding these technologies.

Throughout the performance there is a reiteration of the terms “products and services” and the slick rhetoric of the saleswomen removes the *body* from the procedures which are portrayed as easy, convenient and safe, as opposed to the reality of the invasive, messy, (often unsuccessful) procedures in which the specifically female body is acted *upon* a number of times. The use of voiceovers throughout the performance (and in the subsequent DVD of the piece) immediately removes the body from the processes that are being marketed. By using a disembodied voice to narrate the event it immediately becomes apparent that bodies are somehow *absent* here and within the dialogues surrounding the procedures. There is a play on words in the title of the piece as well as subRosa rebel against the use of a male name within the terminology used. The word “eugenics” includes the male name “Eugene” and subRosa subverts this by naming its parodic version “Emma”. This feminist gesture of the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

renaming of *Expo EmmaGenics* is reminiscent of feminist appropriations and retellings of “herstory”.<sup>32</sup>

Around the large performance space there are a number of different stalls set up, as in a real trade show. There are also stations with computer screens where people can look at subRosa’s *Expo EmmaGenics* resources and an area set up for demonstrations of the procedures to be performed by members of subRosa, using members of the public as volunteers. Mingling amongst the people attending the event there are also individuals going around the venue with trays of products like ice cream vendors, allowing the public to sample some of the products on display on the stalls. These products include some rather delicious looking “human caviar” as a solution for the problem of an “excess of eggs” which can be produced by women due to the injection of powerful hormones like Pergonal, Clomid, and HCG which are used in infertility treatments.<sup>33</sup> These little delicacies look like empire biscuits and evoke connotations of home-baked goodies. By aestheticising these products to look like baked goods, a comment is being made about women’s productive output within the domestic sphere with the implication being that producing eggs and baking cakes is the culmination of women’s productivity. I would argue that the similarity between the human caviar samples and baked goods seems to evoke connotations of domesticity and illustrate the role of the mother as feeder and nurturer.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> “Herstory” is a term coined in the 1960s as a critique of historiography – of history as “his-story”. It was a way of re-writing history from a feminist perspective telling women’s stories or explaining events from a female point of view.

<sup>33</sup> 10/12/09, <http://www.cmu.edu/emmagenics/home/comProf/CAVIAR.html>.

<sup>34</sup> The phrase “having a bun in the oven” springs to mind and the links between baking and motherhood seem implicit here.



Figure 23 subRosa. “Human caviar”, *Expo EmmaGenics*, (2001).

The fact that the staging of this event mimics a trade show also conjures up the idea of the American trope of a “bake sale”, an event often co-ordinated by women (mainly mothers) as a fundraising tool. Once again, the idea of commercialisation reappears in this image, however wholesome and homely it pertains to be. In fact, the wholesomeness and prettiness of the images of the human caviar treats run contrary to the actuality of what they are, or rather what they represent (obviously the treats were not made from actual human eggs but are there to represent them). The *idea* of eating human eggs that have been removed from a woman’s reproductive organs may induce disgust from some participants, while the delicacies themselves look delicious. Image and actual do not correlate here and subRosa plays with this subversion of the image of domesticated motherhood. I would also argue that the fact that this is human “caviar” is important as caviar is often perceived as a food reserved only for a certain class of people due to its cost. In offering human caviar at this event subRosa are implying that this event is for the wealthy as are these ART technologies. As “Martha” (subRosa’s very own “Martha Stewart”) states later in the performance: “[ART] allows people, anyone in fact, who has the money, to make the perfect baby.”<sup>35</sup> This glib move from the democratisation of “anyone” to the disclaimer “who has the money” reinforces the notion that these biotechnological developments are only for the wealthy, caviar-eating,

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<sup>35</sup> subRosa, *Expo EmmaGenics*.

comfortable, middle and upper class potential parents as opposed to “everyone”. By framing the event in this way it is made apparent to audiences how subRosa feels about the economic factors behind ART.<sup>36</sup>

Some of the other edible products being “promoted” at the event are “Megabite Tasties” for virility and “Lupro” bars for reproductive health. As well as these, there are also a range of fictitious gadgets designed to make baby-making in the ART age easier, more convenient and less wasteful. For example, the comical “Sperm saver condom” is a condom designed to avoid any waste of fluids during intercourse and is marketed as: “the ergonomically designed condom for men who care about their genetic heritage.”<sup>37</sup> Other technological advancements are incorporated with the “XYgo monitor”, a hand-held device that allows consumers to monitor all aspects of their baby’s development: “Now you can monitor your baby’s first cell division from home, car or office.”<sup>38</sup> This suggests that a busy working parent can have the convenience of being able to access the baby’s progress (including its biological developments) wherever they are. This device also supposedly promotes the idea of control over the baby’s development, a control that is implicit in the process of ART and that can be seen to create unsettling undertones in these procedures of surveillance and social control.

The parody of the idea of convenience and of baby-making fitting into the busy, working lifestyle of modern parents is continued through the concept behind the “palm XY’s”, a handheld device designed “For people on the go.”<sup>39</sup> The “XY” in the title of this product and of the “XYgo” refers to the X and Y chromosomes that make up human beings.<sup>40</sup> The narrator tells us to “leap into parenthood sex free with palm XY’s; now make finding your ideal genetic match

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<sup>36</sup> The economy behind ART is discussed by Marilyn Strathern in her essay “Enterprising Kinship: Consumer Choice and the new Reproductive Technologies”, Fraser and Greco, eds. *The Body* pp. 294-299.

<sup>37</sup> subRosa, *Expo EmmaGenics*.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Men have one X chromosome and one Y chromosome while women have two X chromosomes.

easy wherever you are.”<sup>41</sup> This “product” is designed to remove the messy part of reproduction altogether and bodies are replaced with technological gadgets to procreate.<sup>42</sup> By removing the bodily contact from sex, subRosa’s fictional gadgets parody the overly efficient and bodiless processes that these “products” are supposed to promote. The idea of “sex-free” parenthood is suggested but not explored, and by the absence of information on this particular product, I would assume that the female experience of birthing is not yet as easily replaced by a marketable product. Anne Balsamo argues that perhaps the most obvious form of the labouring body “is the maternal body which is increasingly treated as a technological body - both in its science fictional and science factual form as a container for the foetus, and in its role as the object of technological manipulation in the service of human reproduction.”<sup>43</sup> Here, we get a sense of the capitalism intrinsic in the idea of the productivity of the worker. Once again, the convenience of this “product” is stressed, since being able to find your ideal genetic match “wherever you are” seems to be one of the spoof product’s main selling points. The focus on an “ideal” genetic match also reinforces the eugenic aspects to these types of technologies.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> subRosa, *Expo EmmaGenics*.

<sup>42</sup> As a continuation of this parody, the “products” that subRosa has created have their own marketing websites confusing the truth value of their performance. By varying its registers, using irony and a hypertext of web pages, products and events, subRosa aims to generate debate.

<sup>43</sup> Anne Balsamo, “Forms of Technological Embodiment: Reading the Body in Contemporary Culture”, Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, eds. *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) p282.

<sup>44</sup> In her article “The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles”, Emily Martin discusses how medical rhetoric surrounding reproduction enforces a patriarchal reading of gender roles. Emily Martin, “The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles”, Price and Shildrick, eds. *Feminist Theory and the Body* pp.179-187.



Figure 24 subRosa. Demonstration of ART techniques, *Expo EmmaGenics*, (2001).

While sex-free reproduction is heralded by *Expo EmmaGenics* for the sake of convenience (and critiqued by subRosa), there is also the suggestion that these matters are of societal consequence.<sup>45</sup> The narrator claims that: “The world’s genetic future is too precious to be left to nature and random sexual chance.”<sup>46</sup> What is being revealed here is the implication that nature can be improved upon by technology, a theme often found in cybertheory and cyberpunk literature.<sup>47</sup> By ensuring that reproduction is monitored and engineered as opposed to being left to “randomness” and “chance”, *Expo EmmaGenics* insinuates that it is protecting the future. subRosa works against these ideas by its method of delivery within the *Expo EmmaGenics* trade show style performance and by its continual merging of the real and the unreal for ironic effect.

At one point in the event there is a demonstration of the ART techniques performed by subRosa in which audience members are asked to volunteer to take part in the experiments. “Martha”, dressed in a white doctor’s coat (a symbol of medical authority) and a clinical cap demonstrates the process of

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<sup>45</sup> Hazel Biggs discusses the legal side to ART in her article “The Quest for a Perfect Child”, Kirsty Horsey and Hazel Biggs, eds. *Human Fertilisation and Embryology: Reproducing Regulation* (Oxon: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007) pp.1-15.

<sup>46</sup> subRosa, *Expo EmmaGenics*.

<sup>47</sup> The idea of nature itself and of what is “natural” is highly contested.



inserting eggs. The large and frightening-looking apparatus that she is using to mime the insertion of eggs into the vagina illustrates the physical act of the procedure itself, and while the body is still absent (she is miming into the air) this is the first time in this slick marketing expo and smooth sales spiel that the procedure itself has been talked about. While the expo has been about ART technologies, there has been little reference to the body itself with the glib sales rhetoric of convenience, ease and practicality for “those on the go” concealing the very bodily and embodied procedures that ART demands. The spoof products have been “marketed” with very little mention of the body and the glib delivery by subRosa’s faux sales women for *Expo EmmaGenics* ignores the reality of the biotechnological procedures themselves. The invasive, surgical, messy, bodily side of the technologies is glossed over with marketing slogans and images of the “lifestyle” choice that these technologies offer proliferating. “Martha”, in her doctor’s garb, exudes the aura of medical authority, of the doctor-as-expert and as unchallenged authorial voice. However, her role within the performance is as chief saleswoman to this sales team in *Expo EmmaGenics*. Of course, she is neither of these things. She is really a subRosa performer, playing out these extreme parodies and sales mantras to show audiences a heightened version of reality, a hyperreal version of the marketing surrounding ART and the sinister economic aspects of the biotechnological industry. As pointed out before, at the beginning of her demonstration when “Martha” is talking about how wonderful and democratic these technologies are she claims: “It allows people, anyone in fact, who has the money, to make the perfect baby.”<sup>48</sup> This assertion seems to invert statements that are pro-ART which claim to make it possible for people that were unable to have children to conceive. This statement seems to suggest that when it comes to reproduction all humans are equal, but some are more equal than others, i.e. those who have the money to pay for it.

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<sup>48</sup> subRosa, *Expo EmmaGenics*.



**Figure 25** subRosa. “Biowitches Against Technological Reproductions” demonstration, *Expo EmmaGenics*, (2001).

While this expo is happening inside the performance space, there is also a counter-performance outside the space in the form of a staged “demonstration” against the event. The tradeshow is being picketed by “Biowitches Against Technological Reproduction” (BATR). By staging this performance simultaneously, subRosa depict an image of the wider social debate surrounding the use of biotechnologies themselves. By showing the counter-response to the event outside in the form of a traditionally activist event - a demonstration - the company attempts to add to the demonstration inside with a simultaneous demonstration outside. What this does, rather cleverly, is stage a spoof protest to a spoof event, a supposed “counter event” to the expo event which is itself attempting to highlight the problematics that these technologies provoke. In doing this subRosa is also parodying and critiquing itself and its own methods of practice. subRosa is the “Biowitches Against Technological Reproduction” that it depicts. This dry humour and its own portrayal of itself and its methods seem to illustrate how it feels it is represented against the bio-industries. While everyone is inside watching the large scale expo event supposedly *for* the bio-industries, subRosa remain on the outskirts, outside the event, few in number with a tiny audience while everyone inside is exposed to the sales rhetoric and marketing strategies of the repro-tech companies. By having the protesters identify themselves as “biowitches” subRosa evokes a history of persecution of

women as witches and references the labelling of women as witches by a patriarchal culture that has misunderstood or wanted to silence them. This is also reminiscent of how “witches” used to perform the role of midwife, further embedding the performance in a history of reproduction.<sup>49</sup> The protester’s placards read “Autonomy to the Mother!” and the protesters shout this as they march around the entrance to the expo. In this event, the members of subRosa *are* the “biowitches” speaking out against technological reproduction and the fact that they portray themselves in this humorous and self-deprecating way indicates that they are aware of the duality of the argument that they present. Wilding and other subRosa members have discussed this in their own analysis of subRosa’s work and have implied that this type of crude portrayal of the issues is in some ways necessary and that what the company aims to do is instigate debate and provoke discussion around the more complex issues.<sup>50</sup>

Returning to *Expo EmmaGenics*, towards the end of the expo people can win tote bags and t-shirts in the raffle, further adding to the ambiance of a marketing expo. Finally, the narrator advises audiences to “Get in on the genetic ground floor and take advantage of ART.”<sup>51</sup> This statement plays on people’s anxieties of being left behind as technology advances. As the event draws to a close, the final statement audiences are left with is that “The Sun Never Sets on *Expo EmmaGenics*.”<sup>52</sup> The language used here has connotations with women’s biological clock and the pressure that many women feel to have a baby before their fertility begins to decrease after age thirty-five. Once again the freedom, choice and convenience of ART is suggested; the older woman who has chosen career over family and conventionally would struggle to conceive is now given the opportunity of the “sun never setting” on her biological

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<sup>49</sup> For a full discussion of this see Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (New York: Feminist Press at The City University of New York; New Ed. edition, 1972).

<sup>50</sup> See Maria Fernandez, Faith Wilding, and Michelle M. Wright, eds. *Domain Errors: Cyberfeminist Practice* (New York: Autonomedia, 2002).

<sup>51</sup> subRosa, *Expo EmmaGenics*.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

resources.<sup>53</sup> By playing on women’s anxieties about fertility and claiming to provide “solutions” to bodily “problems” *Expo EmmaGenics* is defining non-procreating female bodies as defective or abnormal.<sup>54</sup> These ideas are further explored in subRosa’s performance *US Grade AAA Premium Eggs* (2002) which I will now turn to.

## ***US Grade AAA Premium Eggs (2002)***

In 2002, subRosa staged a performance at Bowling Green State University in Ohio as part of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Music and Arts Festival. The performance was entitled *US Grade AAA Premium Eggs* and was created as a response to the fact that students at the university were being invited to participate in the “flesh machine” through the “donation” (sale) of their eggs and sperm cells. There had been a series of advertisements in newspapers appealing to college level students to donate eggs for a monetary reward around this time.<sup>55</sup> In this performance subRosa took on the guise of “Express Choice”, a subsidiary of the Technical Advantage Genetics Corporation (TAGC). By creating a parody of a corporate marketing set-up (as in *Expo EmmaGenics*) subRosa aimed to make explicit the connection of this commodification of the body in the global medical industry to the global traffic in human organs and tissues.<sup>56</sup> subRosa states, “While the traffic in human organs is officially illegal in most countries, it is central to the global medical industry, and in it, the ‘flow’ of organs goes from ‘Third’ to ‘First’ world, from poor to rich, from female to male, etc.”<sup>57</sup> subRosa

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<sup>53</sup> See Jana Sawicki, “Disciplining Mothers: Feminism and the New Reproductive Technologies”, Price and Shildrick, eds. *Feminist Theory and the Body* pp.190-201.

<sup>54</sup> subRosa, *Expo EmmaGenics*.

<sup>55</sup> Student Andrea Gurmankin wrote an award-winning study on egg donation programs. Her paper, “Risk Information Provided to Prospective Oocyte Donors”, won the 2001 Association for Politics and Life Science Graduate Student Paper Award and exposed 49 newspaper adverts offering thousands of dollars to students in return for their eggs, the highest sum offered being \$100,000. 05/12/09, <http://www.upenn.edu/pennnews/current/2002/030702/student.html>.

<sup>56</sup> The international market surrounding organs is discussed in Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ article “The Global Traffic in Human Organs”, Fraser and Greco, eds. *The Body* pp.208-215.

<sup>57</sup> subRosa website 5/10/09, <http://www.cyberfeminism.net>.

argues that the economy of these technologies is something that cannot be ignored particularly as the expense of ART technologies excludes a vast majority of women experiencing infertility from even considering the procedure. Following on from this, many of the women that donate eggs or their bodies through surrogacy are working class women to whom the monetary reward is crucial.<sup>58</sup>

subRosa describes its performative experiment thus:

To reach this particular audience we set up in the Student Union just like any corporation marketing to students - credit cards for example - and assumed the identity of Express Choice, a subsidiary of the Technical Advantage Genetics Corporation. Students used a website to Calculate their Net Worth on the Flesh Market. Participants scoring above a certain value received a Certificate of Flesh Worth. Of course there were some disqualifying factors: If one was “not a normal woman”, if one was an artist, or not of Northern European descent, one's gametes were determined to be genetically less desirable.<sup>59</sup>

Once again, subRosa takes on the guise of a marketing company to expose some facts surrounding the repro-tech industries. Using selection procedures to emphasise the eugenic elements that these technologies evoke, subRosa critiques the idea of selecting egg donors because of certain characteristics and identifies the racist and capitalist motivations behind this.<sup>60</sup> Jeremy Rifkin also voices his concern over the eugenic implications of some biotechnologies: “The prospect of creating a new eugenic man and woman is no longer just the dream of wild-eyed political demagogues but rather a soon-to-be-available consumer option and a potentially lucrative commercial market.”<sup>61</sup> Rifkin explicitly states

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<sup>58</sup> Raymond discusses the danger of this type of exchange which she argues could develop into a “breeder” class of women. Raymond, *Woman as Wombs* pxxii.

<sup>59</sup> subRosa website 6/10/09, <http://www.cyberfeminism.net>.

<sup>60</sup> This is explored fully in an article by Terri Kapsalis entitled “Making Babies the American Girl Way” included in Fernandez, Wilding, and Wright, eds. *Domain Errors* pp. 223-234.

<sup>61</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *The Biotech Century: Harnessing the Gene and Remaking the World* (London: Victor Gollncz, 1998) p116.

that the new genetic engineering tools are eugenics instruments and that the implications of this “choice” will create new levels of racism and discrimination - a concern that permeates subRosa’s work.<sup>62</sup>

Students who approached the stall were asked to fill out online forms to find out their net worth on the flesh market. These forms specified prices for various attributes. For example:

I am a female between the ages of 18 and 33	add \$2500
I am a female between the ages of 18 and 25	add \$500
I am of Northern European descent	add \$1000
I am of Asian, Jewish or Southern European descent	add \$500
I am of African, Latino, or First Nations descent	subtract \$1000
My eyesight is 20/20 or better	add \$1000 <sup>63</sup>

In creating these fictional forms for the public to fill out subRosa is highlighting the market-driven interest of the biotech industry, and it is evident from these monetary returns who the most desirable donors would be. The explicitly eugenic undercurrents to this practice are clear and many essays in the subRosa 2002 publication *Domain Errors!* discuss this aspect of the biotechnological market in eggs.<sup>64</sup> By staging this event as a spoof trade show and employing the rhetoric of market value of eggs, organs and bodies, subRosa is using its performative address as a vehicle to critique the idea that bodies can have market worth. This anti-capitalist and anti-racist gesture and the parody of a commercialised set-up attempt to highlight the problem that eggs have gained commodity status because of biotechnological advancements in fertility

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p128.

<sup>63</sup> subRosa website 6/10/09, <http://www.cyberfeminism.net>.

<sup>64</sup> Fernandez, Wilding, and Michelle M. Wright, eds. *Domain Errors*.

treatments.<sup>65</sup> In *US Grade AAA Premium Eggs*, if the students they were “testing” turned out to be a “Non-reproductive Donor” then they were given the option of selling their organs instead. Through this performance: “It became apparent that within this global market, biotechnologies have different effects and place different values on different bodies in different locations.”<sup>66</sup> Here subRosa is highlighting the racial politics behind the “flesh market” as well as the gendered implications. Lisa Nakamura discusses this in *Digitising Race* (2008): “Women and people of colour are both subjects and objects of interactivity; they participate in digital racial formations via acts of technological appropriation, yet are subjected to it as well.”<sup>67</sup> The complexities surrounding race and gender within this context are worthy of further research and, although there is not space within this thesis to go into these issues, I nevertheless wish to acknowledge the problematics that surround race, class and gender within these types of technological advancements and their applications.

As a follow up to the performance the next day, an interdisciplinary seminar examined the local and global impact of the “revolution” in Advanced Reproductive Technologies and other bio-technologies. This was intended to provide information and a context to the spoof egg donation and fake “information” stall. By explaining the politics and the facts behind the event, subRosa is providing an elucidation for the previous day’s event. The company states of its performative tactics: “subRosa has found this strategy of using various registers of irony and truth-value in our performances to be generative of criticality.”<sup>68</sup> This mixing and combining of different registers and the use of humour, irony and parody is intended to explode some of the preconceived ideas surrounding ART. Haraway recognised the potential of irony in her manifesto:

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<sup>65</sup> Raymond gives an interesting analysis of the supposedly altruistic act of being a surrogate as providing “the best gift that a person can give” and demonstrates how the notion of women as givers perpetuates this societal expectation for women to become surrogates. She also highlights that often a monetary “gift” is given in return, even in situations of inter-family surrogacy. Raymond *Woman as Wombs* p41.

<sup>66</sup> subRosa website 6/10/09, <http://www.cyberfeminism.net>.

<sup>67</sup> Lisa Nakamura, *Digitising Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) p16.

<sup>68</sup> subRosa website 6/10/09, <http://www.cyberfeminism.net>.

“Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method, one I would like to see more honoured within socialist-feminism.”<sup>69</sup> subRosa’s utilisation of irony as a political strategy could be read as a response to Haraway’s appeal in her seminal text. In addition it seems within the different registers used within *Expo EmmaGenics* and *US Grade AAA Premium Eggs* a more complex re-presentation of these messages is at work. While it is unlikely that any student who turned up for the event misconstrued it as “real” there were a number of different levels of re-assimilation going on. For example, in the website questionnaire on “Flesh Worth” where a link is supposed to take the user onto a site which will inform them of how to sell their organs the site actually links to a webpage of an anthropologist at Berkeley devoted to critically addressing this issue. Another link takes participants to a “Glossalalia” (subRosa Glossary of Sex and Gender in the Biotech Century). subRosa states:

By combining performative texts that re-present and recontextualize - and sometimes slightly exaggerate - the strategies and logic of consumer marketing, with texts that are informative and critical, the reassurance of authorizing voice is removed and the participant/performer must think for h/erself.<sup>70</sup>

subRosa argues that it is this layering of different texts that make audiences think for themselves and that using activist performative strategies provokes critical thinking around these issues.

In attempting to combine information and a pedagogical discourse, subRosa is also trying to find critical ways of working through feminist concerns about biotechnologies and exposing the societal and cultural drives behind these discourses. In destabilising the authority of medical representatives it is relocating the responsibility so that it then falls on subRosa to re-educate or to reframe these technologies. Wilding states: “So there is an interesting combination of the Real, the metaphorical, and the critical - which is where the

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<sup>69</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (London: Free Association Books, 1991) p149.

<sup>70</sup> subRosa website 6/10/09, <http://www.cyberfeminism.net>.



art of it comes in, I guess. Irony, mimicry, appropriation, detournement mingle with the Real in complex and not always transparent ways.”<sup>71</sup> This collage of strategies and appropriation of performative gestures to assert its own slant means that while creating a pedagogical performance in terms of its cyberfeminist message, subRosa is also creating a hyperreal and hypertextual version of the biotech industry to destabilise belief in medical knowledge and authority.

*US Grade AAA Premium Eggs* explores many of the anxieties that permeate issues of reproduction, women’s bodies as commodity, and biotechnological advancement. These are very much feminist concerns and are themes that have recurred in subRosa’s subsequent performance works such as *International Markets of Flesh* (2003 and 2005), *Epidermic! DIY Cell Lab* (2005) and *Gestation* (2008) amongst others. While almost all of subRosa’s performative responses to biotechnologies have been focussed on their application in the field of reproduction and fertility, I now want to turn to an artist who has engaged with biotechnologies in a different way. While also attempting to explore how life can be created, assisted and experienced through new biotechnologies, Kira O’Reilly moves away from traditional ideas of reproduction, instead working with cells rather than eggs in a laboratory setting to attempt to create life in an alternative way - to grow cells from her own skin. O’Reilly’s work in this area is complex and ambiguous, a response to what she calls the “ethical ambivalences” she encountered when working in laboratories.

## **Kira O’Reilly**

UK-based artist Kira O’Reilly is renowned for her one-to-one performances and her explorations of intimacy through performative actions and body-based practice. Since 2003 she has also been working with biotechnologies and has had a number of residencies at various arts and medical institutions where she has been exploring the limits of her body and how biotechnological practices can be

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<sup>71</sup> 12/12/09, <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/meaning/02/wilding-subrosa.html>.

integrated into a body-based art.<sup>72</sup> She undertook a residency with SymbioticA, the only art and science collaborative research facility of its kind based in The Department of Anatomy and Human Biology at the University of Western Australia in 2003 and 2004. SymbioticA is a research laboratory dedicated to the investigation of scientific knowledge from an artistic and humanistic perspective created by artists Oran Catts and Ionat Zurr who set up the Tissue Culture and Art Project in 1996. In 2000, Catts, alongside cell biologist Professor Miranda Grounds and neuroscientist Professor Stuart Bunt founded SymbioticA as a permanent space for artists to engage with wet practices of biotechnologies and other aspects of science. Since then they have had over fifty artist residencies with a range of renowned international bioartists using the facilities to research and develop their practice, including Marta de Menezes (2004), Orlan (2007), Critical Art Ensemble (2007/2008) and Adam Zaretsky (2002) amongst others.<sup>73</sup>

O'Reilly began her residency in 2003, “exploring convergence between contemporary biotechnical tissue culturing and traditional lace making crafts, using the materiality of skin at its cellular level as material and metaphor.”<sup>74</sup> By attempting to grow living lace out of her own skin O'Reilly was engaging with the potential of biotechnologies while also integrating the craft of lace making as a feminine craft and exploring the intersection of the old and the new through her research.<sup>75</sup> This residency was her first time situating her practice in a laboratory and working with the technologies of tissue culture and also the textile craft of lace making. These themes have remained preoccupations throughout her subsequent work and most recently she has been working with applying biotechnological practices to spider webs to grow lace on them (*Finger*

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<sup>72</sup> In 2007 O'Reilly was awarded the position of artist in residence within the School of Biosciences at the University of Birmingham as a result of the School of Biosciences' response to an Arts Council of England initiative to position artists within contexts of industry or academia with a view to creating new partnerships and possibilities of cultural production.

<sup>73</sup> 29/10/09, <http://www.symbiotica.uwa.edu.au/residencies/residents2>.

<sup>74</sup> 24/10/09 <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/depts/theatre/womenwriting/pages/Symposiumpages/Kira.htm>.

<sup>75</sup> Sadie Plant discusses traditional “feminine” crafts such as weaving in relation to technologies in her study *Zeros and Ones*. Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Techno Culture* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998) p61.

Webs, 2009).<sup>76</sup> While O'Reilly has attempted to grow semi-living beings from her own skin cells, she has not to date worked with biotechnological reproductive technologies (in the sense of fertility and reproduction). This decision to explore alternative ways of creating life or of "birthing" semi-living beings is interesting if considered from a feminist perspective. While subRosa's preoccupation in its work is the politics surrounding the commercialisation of reproduction and women's bodies in light of biotechnological developments, O'Reilly's engagement with these technologies has little to do with reproduction in the traditional sense, but is to do with creating life from her own body in a laboratory setting as part of an ongoing explorative art practice. By choosing to create a semi-living being from cell tissue O'Reilly is positioning herself as artist as literal creator as opposed to woman as mother.

### **"Marsyas: Running Out of Skin"**

O'Reilly entitled the multiple outcomes of her residency at SymbioticA "Marsyas: Running Out of Skin". At the end of her ten month period of research and development conducted at the SymbioticA laboratories, she created a number of performative responses to her research and it is one of these specifically that I am going to focus on in this chapter: the performance *inthewrongplaceness* (2005). The umbrella title of the performative outcomes of her research comes from the Greek myth of Marsyas, which throughout history has been a popular vehicle through which to express both the anxieties and excitement of

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<sup>76</sup> <http://www.kiraoreilly.com/blog/> blog entries October/ November 2009.

accelerated anatomical exploration:

Marsyas, a satyr - mixed species human and goat, lost in a competition of musicianship to Apollo, and as punishment was flayed alive, becoming “one whole wound” and rendered “into the matter of art”; material, as locus, contextual fabric, a destabilised body indicative of a multiplicity of potent alterities. This mutability of body including species boundary collapse has been an enduring preoccupation from ancient times to the post-digital contemporary.<sup>77</sup>

This idea of species boundary collapse has been written about by Donna J. Haraway in her “Cyborg Manifesto” and is something that O’Reilly’s performative responses to her research would eventually embody in her performance *inthewrongplaceness*.<sup>78</sup> O’Reilly comments on the relevance of the Marsyas myth to her research:

These themes echo the speed of innovations within contemporary biotechnical and biomedical practices and are reflective of the concerns of my practice of *how to be a body - now*. This has considered the body as a material and as site, attempting to articulate between the material and the metaphorical, *sign* and *stuff*.<sup>79</sup>

This notion of “how to be a body now” has permeated much of O’Reilly’s work over the years and it was this enquiry that directed her initially towards biotechnological practices. By beginning with the body and encompassing different cultural influences that affect the body, O’Reilly was led to technology and specifically biotechnology because of its ability to alter the body physically and chemically while simultaneously altering our perception of our body in the

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<sup>77</sup> Kira O’Reilly, “Marsyas: Beside Myself”, Jens Hauser, ed. *Sk-Interfaces: Exploding Borders - Creating Membranes in Art, Technology and Society* (Liverpool: FACT / Liverpool University Press, 2008) p96.

<sup>78</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*.

<sup>79</sup> 24/10/09, <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/depts/theatre/womenwriting/pages/Symposiumpages/Kira.htm>.

world. Because O'Reilly experiments with biotechnologies during the research and development stage of her work I will discuss her process in this chapter.

It was O'Reilly's interest in both the material and the metaphorical that instigated her initial investigation into growing lace from skin - a rather romantic idea that was then developed through working with spider webs as natural lace and growing cell and tissue cultures from these. The metaphorical and mythical aspects surrounding skin, webs and lace appealed to O'Reilly greatly, as did the hands-on, wet-ware-handling laboratory work that this type of exploration demanded. Her preoccupation with the "sign and the stuff" or "material and metaphor" seems to epitomise the binary states in which the technologised body is often rendered: the typical cyborgian model of part human and part machine and the cultural construction that surrounds it. By acknowledging the body as both a cultural construction and as a lived body, both semiotically rendered and phenomenologically experienced, O'Reilly draws focus to the fact that the body is both of these things as well as a myriad of others.

During the residency at SymbioticA, O'Reilly worked on developing her lab skills and getting used to working in a laboratory as a non-science trained body.<sup>80</sup> She practised culturing skin from non-human animals, mainly pigs. At this stage she also embarked on the process of applying for approval from the human ethics committee to conduct work from her own body by growing the lace from her own skin. O'Reilly states of this process:

Both of these activities became central to the work and indeed become the work; the use of non-human animal tissue, the relations I built with these materials that I cultivated for substantial time periods, the very real ethical ambivalences I experience from hands on engagement with other lives and the very living materials I extracted from them.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> More recently O'Reilly has been exploring her "non-dance trained body" and how she can use this in physical dance-based performance (see *Syncopé*, 2007 performed at the Spill festival of performance in London). O'Reilly revels in her status as a non-scientist and a non-specialist within a range of fields and appropriates different mediums and styles as part of her art practice.

<sup>81</sup> 24/10/09, <http://www.ibmc.up.pt/hybrid/content.php?menu=6&submenu=43>.

As this was an explorative residency O'Reilly's process took her elsewhere and she did not complete the lace work from her own body, instead using animal tissue to garner cells. The majority of the tissue she was working with was taken from pigs' bodies. This proved to be a crucial factor in her research stage and I would suggest that her use of the body of a pig in her performative outcome *inthewrongplaceness* was a response to these "ethical ambivalences" she experienced when working with the bodies of other living things. Although she did eventually get ethics approval to use her own body, there were issues with getting someone to perform the biopsy and then time and money ran out for the project.<sup>82</sup> Because of this, a pig's body did *literally* act as a substitute for her own body at this experimental stage.<sup>83</sup> O'Reilly felt that this unexpected outcome "further served to locate the work in the vital ethical considerations of working from the pig's bodies."<sup>84</sup> It was the ethics of working from the body of another living being in this period of laboratory research that brought her to her final outcomes and to the substitution of pig cells and tissue for her own; and finally, as I will demonstrate in *inthewrongplaceness*, the substitution of a pig's body for her own.<sup>85</sup>

The outcomes from the research that she did at SymbioticA were multiple: firstly a performative lecture entitled "Marsyas – Running out of Skin", presented at the Biennial Electronic Arts Perth (2004), and (on her return to the UK) a performance, *inthewrongplaceness* (2005) hosted by HOME London and

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<sup>82</sup> In "Marsyas: Beside Myself" she attributes this to a wrong turn and a missed appointment. She states: "Then the non-biopsy of myself, to have what seemed like the final moment, the cutting off of me, the miniscule flaying of my skin by 'the surgeon', deferred ad infinitum." O'Reilly "Marsyas: Beside Myself" p99.

<sup>83</sup> Her first skin biopsy of a pig is referred to as "MAKING A PIG'S EAR OF IT" in her *Sk-Interfaces* article. Ibid. p97.

<sup>84</sup> 24/10/09, <http://www.ibmcp.up.pt/hybrid/content.php?menu=6&submenu=43>.

<sup>85</sup> O'Reilly is not the first artist to work with pig skin. In 2001 the Tissue Culture and Art Project were invited to do a residency at Harvard Medical School where they attempted to grow wings from pig cells. This was called the *Pig Wing Project* and they grew three sets of wings according to the three wing types that occur in nature. The common saying "when pigs fly" is being used here to acknowledge scientific progress.

performed subsequently at various UK venues.<sup>86</sup> Some of the other outcomes of this research included “Marsyas: Beside Myself”, a performative text that spoke in a number of registers about the process of the work and was subsequently published in *Sk-Interfaces: Exploding Borders - Creating Membranes in Art, Technology and Society* (2008), edited by Jens Hauser.<sup>87</sup> There was also a video entitled *Marsyas: Beside Myself* to accompany the reading of the text. In addition, *Red Lab Coat Intervention* involved the artist wearing a specially made and highly theatricalised red laboratory coat while doing her research in the laboratory to signal herself as “artist” among scientists. The red itself is a signal of otherness, a sexualised colour, a sign for danger amongst other things and the wearing of this constitutes: “a commentary on the conventions and rituals that construct the laboratory as much as the processes, equipment, furniture and architecture.”<sup>88</sup> By signposting herself as an outsider, a non-specialist and an artist, O’Reilly marks herself as “other” and in doing so comments on the disparity between different types of knowledge (most notably medical knowledge) and draws attention to who has access to this information. In this next section I am going to explore the performance *inthewrongplaceness* that was created as a response to this period of research at SymbioticA.

### ***inthewrongplaceness* (2005)**

*inthewrongplaceness* was a durational performance created for one person at a time, made on O’Reilly’s return to the UK from SymbioticA. She returned in 2004 and *inthewrongplaceness* was not performed until 2005. The time that had elapsed between the period of research and the performance itself implies that there had been a period of reflection after the residency and I believe that this comes through in the pace and the lamentative and meditative feel of the performance. O’Reilly states of her performance: “It was a response to my

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<sup>86</sup> O’Reilly acknowledges six different versions of *inthewrongplaceness*. I am discussing the Home version in 2005 which I have not seen myself but have researched through documentation.

<sup>87</sup> Jens Hauser, ed. *Sk-Interfaces: Exploding Borders - Creating Membranes in Art, Technology and Society* (Liverpool: FACT / Liverpool University Press, 2008).

<sup>88</sup> 24/10/09, <http://www.ibmc.up.pt/hybrid/content.php?menu=6&submenu=43>.

experiences of working from pigs' bodies in a scientific research environment and encountering the non-human."<sup>89</sup> In *inthewrongplaceness*, O'Reilly installed herself nude with a freshly slaughtered pig (a pig that had already been killed for scientific use) and a dead stuffed swan, a seven-legged lamb, and a three-legged piglet.<sup>90</sup> The swan is reminiscent of the Greek myth of Leda and the swan, where Zeus turned himself into a swan and raped Leda, a tale that has been explored in art and literature extensively. What is interesting about this mythic example is not only the sexualisation of the animal but the ability of a human form to metamorphose into that of an animal. Some of the animals situated around the space were damaged (such as the taxidermied piglet). There were also lilies at various places around the performance space. Traditionally a flower associated with funereal occasions, the inclusion of lilies in this performative space contributes to the idea that O'Reilly is mourning the deaths of these animals, while glass jars of embryos and the stuffed animals in cases add to the effect that we are in some sort of fantastical laboratory.

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<sup>89</sup> Kira O'Reilly, "Marsyas - Running out of Skin", presented at the Bio Difference conference, Biennial of Electronic Arts Perth, 11 September 2004, p1.

<sup>90</sup> The pig was not killed specifically for this performance. It was killed for use in the laboratory and once they had taken some samples from the pig, O'Reilly was able to use the carcass. I think that this is an important point to make in terms of the ethics surrounding the use of animal bodies in performance and also in the light of the media attention that the performance received because of its use of a pig's carcass.





**Figure 26** Kira O'Reilly. *inthewrongplaceness*, HOME, London. January 2005.  
Commissioned by HOME for One to One Salon series. Photo credit: Manuel Vason

The space seems like a cabinet of curiosities and there is a certain voyeurism implicit in the collection of bodily bits in jars that harks back to freak shows of years gone by. As O'Reilly positions herself among these objects it is unclear whether she is humanising the creatures or animalising herself, while the small mirror in the space challenges the binaries of who here is on display.

Before audience members enter the space, they read from a piece of paper:

You will have approximately ten minutes in the room.

You may move around the space or sit.

You may touch the human animal and the non-human animal.

Before doing so:

Put on the gloves.

Spray the gloves with the ethanol using the sprayer in the room.

Do not do anything you don't want to do.<sup>91</sup>

While one audience member at a time entered the space, O'Reilly stroked and held the pig, eventually putting her head into its chest cavity creating an image of an interspecies entity. Her body and the pig's body are intertwined; pig flesh and human flesh becoming indistinguishable.<sup>92</sup> O'Reilly describes the scene as one between a "human animal and non-human animal" and as in *Marsyas* she becomes a combination of animal and human. In *inthewrongplaceness* she is the pig's stunt double (just as in animal testing the pig is inevitably the human's "stunt double").<sup>93</sup> O'Reilly comments on her use of a pig's cadaver: "[I am] using the pig as dummy, stand in, double, twin, other self, doll, imaginary self; making fiercely tender and ferocious identifications with the pig, imaginings of mergence with the pig."<sup>94</sup> I employed Freud's uncanny in chapter one and it

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<sup>91</sup> O'Reilly "Marsyas: Beside Myself" p101.

<sup>92</sup> O'Reilly also acknowledges the influence of a book called *Pig Tales* by Marie Darrieussecq, about a woman who turns into a pig and is neither entirely one nor the other. Marie Darrieussecq *Pig Tales* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003).

<sup>93</sup> Jennifer Willet describes O'Reilly as a "stunt double" in her article "Bodies in Biotechnology: Embodied Models for Understanding Biotechnology in Contemporary Art", *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*, Volume 14, Issue 07-08, November 2006, p7.

<sup>94</sup> O'Reilly "Marsyas: Beside Myself" p99.

seems pertinent to remark on its evocation here. We have a double, a “doll” and a confusion and mixing of animate and inanimate with O’Reilly’s body and the pig’s cadaver; the dead pig is a “dummy” of her body.<sup>95</sup>

The “inthewrongplaceness” of the title could refer to the experience of the audience member walking into the performance space alone; a sense of being in the wrong place, of intruding on this shared moment between O’Reilly and the pig; the spectator is a voyeur on this tender moment between the two naked bodies in the space. The idea of “inthewrongplaceness” also suggests a misplacing of the objects in the space. There are a number of taxidermied animals in a room that is indeterminate in its function due to the juxtaposition of different paraphernalia, an amalgamation of living and dead creatures. The artist is alive but the pig is dead, the flowers are alive but the swan is dead while the jars of embryos and organs appear to be semi-living or are being preserved in an in-between state. To use O’Reilly’s words, the “stuff” is placed in such a way that the “sign” becomes more ambiguous and less fixed. Her aim to work with materiality and metaphor to convey the “ambivalence” that she encountered during her period of laboratory research is visible through her choice of aesthetic.

The title of the performance could also refer to the status of pigs as lesser beings and (in this context) as experimentees; O’Reilly’s body in the space seems to visually suggest an interchangability between her body and the pig’s body. The pig is in the wrong place - its body is being used as a substitute for a human body - and O’Reilly offers her body instead in this performance. O’Reilly seems to want to stress that the pig *is* in the wrong place in the context of biotechnologies; it inhabits the cage instead of the field or farm, the operating lab instead of the abattoir. Where is the place of the pig in the world? Or has our perception of this become so distorted that we are unclear? Is a pig in a performance space any more in the wrong place than a pig in a lab or a pig in a cage or a pig in an abattoir? In this performance, the pig that was killed for biotechnological research has become the star of the show; its body has been

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<sup>95</sup> Patrick Duggan discusses his experience of what he calls a “violently uncanny” moment during O’Reilly’s performance of *Untitled (Syncope)* (2007). Patrick Duggan, “The Touch and the Cut: An Annotated Dialogue with Kira O’Reilly”, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, Volume 29, Number 3, 2009, p8.

transposed onto this performance space.<sup>96</sup> The performance becomes a memorial for the pig and others like it. In an article discussing the pig as a symbol for waste in our society, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck examines how: “The pig is perhaps a symptom of the world, of illness in the world. It is so often an animal abjected, cast aside, eaten, treated humorously and degraded.”<sup>97</sup> She refers to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s chapter on “The Fair, the Pig and Authorship” which shows how throughout history the pig has frequently been employed as a metaphoric representation of the human as well as symbolising the grotesque or the other. As Stallybrass and White have noted:

From early records of Greek and Latin slang . . . porcus or porcellus were used to describe the female genitalia, through modern uses of “pig” to mock the police, the fascist and the male chauvinist, pigs seem to have borne the brunt of our rage, fear, affection and desire for the “low”.<sup>98</sup>

That female genitalia has been linked to the pig seems relevant to O’Reilly’s female identification with the animal in the performance. The historical link between human and animals seems to be gendered, in that very often it is the female body that is animalised for degrading or derogatory purposes.

I would argue that there is also a sense of “inthewrongplaceness” through the integration of science and medical practices into an art setting. While many technological practices have been used within performance and art, the

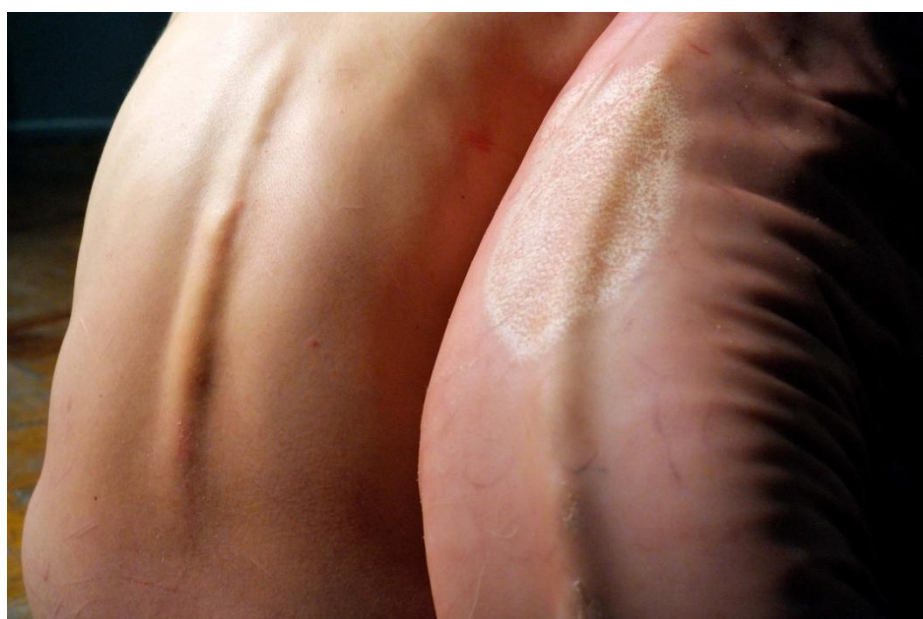
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<sup>96</sup> Elizabeth Grosz argues that: “As an organism, the body is merely a more complex version of other kinds of organic ensembles. It cannot be qualitatively distinguished from other organisms: its physiology poses general questions similar to those raised by animal physiology. The body’s sensations, activities, and processes become ‘lower order’ natural or animal phenomena, part of an interconnected chain of organic forms (whether understood in cosmological or ecological terms).”, Elizabeth Grosz, “Refiguring Bodies”, Fraser and Greco, eds. *The Body* p50. It seems that O’Reilly is highlighting these physiological similarities while also questioning the status of bodily sensation as “lower-order”.

<sup>97</sup> Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, “Pig bodies and vegetative states: Diagnosing the symptoms of a culture of excess”, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, (2008) 18: 2, p139.

<sup>98</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1986) p44, cited in Parker-Starbuck, “Pig bodies and vegetative states” p136.

integration of the “wetware” of the biological sciences, until very recently, had not been attempted. Within the discourse of biotechnological practice, there are also the connotations of the word “wrong” in the title of the piece which evokes some of the ethical discussions surrounding the use of animals in research with the idea of animal experimentation as a “wrong” against nature.<sup>99</sup> The image of the dead pig evokes images of the butcher shop, of carcasses of meat prepared for human consumption as opposed to having connotations of biotechnology, and O’Reilly plays with this within the piece. The fact that O’Reilly is dancing lovingly and tenderly with a *carcass* is unsettling as humans often feel averse to images of death and uncomfortable about the reality of the processes that are behind meat production and animal testing.<sup>100</sup> By positioning herself alongside



**Figure 27 Kira O’Reilly. *inthewrongplaceness* (2004 - 2009) Photo Credit: Axel Heise, *sk-interfaces: Exploding Borders – Creating Membranes in Art, Technology and Society*, Casino Luxembourg.**

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<sup>99</sup> This is an argument often used by animal rights activists.

<sup>100</sup> In Nicholas Ridout’s discussion about animals in performance he argues that when a live animal on stage looks back at us what we experience is a form of shame over our domination of animals. He states: “The truth of the division of labour makes itself felt, and what we are ashamed of is that we never saw it before, not until the animal returned to the stage and made us stare it in the face, smell it, sense it in our shuddering.” Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p127.

the pig, O'Reilly seems to be presenting her own body as a sacrificial offering; her body is suggesting that she replace the pig, evoking the Buddhist belief that all lives - human and animal - are equal.<sup>101</sup>

When O'Reilly situates her own naked female body alongside that of a dead pig, the aesthetic link between the two is evident. The pink skin, the size of the two bodies and the likeness in shape accentuate the similarities between the two bodies in the space - the two animal bodies both exposed and vulnerable, one living, one dead. However, in making this visual link between her body and that of the pig, O'Reilly is creating a number of questions specifically relating to the use of a pig's body. Is she implying that the female body is animalistic? That a female body and a pig's body are one and the same?<sup>102</sup> Pigs are often perceived to be dirty - is this comparison implying that women are dirty, that a sexual animalistic comparison is implicit? Or, perhaps the idea of the breeding sow is evoked through the body of the pig and its taxidermied piglet. Or is she critiquing all of these things? The performance itself provides no answers, just a series of ambiguous and meditative images and moments between O'Reilly and the pig.

It is interesting that she should use a pig in this performance; the connection between the use of pigs' bodies in biotechnological research as a substitute for pig's skin is made explicit by her previous research, but what underlies this is the idea of the female body as the reproductive body - the breeding sow. O'Reilly does not articulate her own female body as reproductive in the traditional sense as her own "birthings" are from alternative means; she grows skin cells from her skin to create lace. By avoiding genital or sexually

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<sup>101</sup> There is a Buddhist fable about a man and a woman who wished their son to be a butcher. When he refused to kill a sheep because of his Buddhist beliefs they locked him in a room with the sheep and said he could not come out until he killed it. When the boy compared his life to that of the sheep and considered how many animals he would have to kill as a butcher he took the knife and slit his own throat. His parents opened the door to find the sheep alive and their son dead.

<sup>102</sup> Nicholas Ridout argues that: "Historically it has been women rather than men who have more often run this risk of a relapse into states construed in terms of infancy and animality by means of exclusion from intellectual labour, and men who have sought to transcend such infancy and animality by dominion in the domain of authorship and its associated trades." Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* p113.

dependant “births” and by creating life from her own body in a non-traditional manner, O’Reilly seems to provide an alternate image of the reproductive female body, while simultaneously showing us the pig’s body as an example of this.

Having already created the visual similarities between her own body and the pig’s body, O’Reilly seems to evoke connotations of the female body as meat, as flesh to be consumed. The idea of the female as a “fat pig” suggests dialogues surrounding women and weight,<sup>103</sup> the notion of woman as greedy and the insatiable female appetite for food and sex that Marie Darrieussecq parodies in *Pig Tales*.<sup>104</sup> Darrieussecq’s portrayal of the animalistic sexual side of human nature as bestial, the sexual act as a messy, noisy act involving grunting and the female squealing like a pig (as in *Pig Tales*) is not explicitly evident in O’Reilly’s meditative performance, but the image of female sexuality as bestial is subtly implied by her eventual transformation into the pig, when she enters the pig’s carcass head first creating the final image of the piece (and the image the audience is left with) of the upper half of the pig and the bottom half and genitalia of a woman.<sup>105</sup> O’Reilly discusses a moment where a male spectator

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<sup>103</sup> Kim Chernin, *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994).

<sup>104</sup> Marie Darrieussecq, *Pig Tales* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003).

<sup>105</sup> Elizabeth Grosz discusses the gendering of animal sex in her essay “Animal Sex: Libido as Desire and Death,” Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn, eds. *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism* (London Routledge: 1995) pp. 278-299.

touches her body during the piece:

I didn't see his face.

He put the gloves *on* and proceeded to *touch*, to feel out, was I flesh, meat, body, lover, carcass, piece of meat, who knows and what was she?

He stayed off erogenous zones, *just about*.

Latexed and ethanолled hands opened

her between my legs with expert determination, touch and gaze merged in squeeze, caress, stroke and pulling of both of us.<sup>106</sup>

Here the invitation to touch the “human animal and non-human animal” has been taken up by the male spectator in a sexualised and invasive way. The faceless male with his ethanолled gloved hands explores the artist and the pig's body with “expert determination”, his sterilised hands probing and feeling out the bodies in the space. It is difficult not to read this moment as an intrusion, as a betrayal of trust as the man sexualises both the bodies and touches them in ways that shift the power in the situation and resurrect ideas of the bestial and sexualised female body. However, it must be remembered that O'Reilly has invited this, stating only “don't do anything you don't want to do.”

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<sup>106</sup> O'Reilly “Marsyas: Beside Myself” p99.





**Figure 28** Kira O'Reilly. *inthewrongplaceness*, HOME, London. January 2005.  
 Commissioned by HOME for One to One Salon series. Photo credit: Manuel Vason

While *inthewrongplaceness* stemmed from a period of biotechnological research in a wetware laboratory, I am interested in how the final performance reflects these practices and how it might be read by audiences in the light of this. I have found myself asking the question, do people normally associate pigs with experimentation? Perhaps most people think of mice and rats (or more sensationally of media coverage of testing on dogs and monkeys) when thinking about research involving animal specimens.<sup>107</sup> O'Reilly has worked in laboratories for the last six years of her practice and within this time has used animal tissue and parts frequently in her research. While her own personal ethics have obviously impinged on her work, there is a wider societal debate surrounding the

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<sup>107</sup> Jean Baudrillard discusses the use of animals in experimentation in his essay "The Animals: Territory and Metamorphoses": "We use and abuse animals in laboratories, in rockets, with experimental ferocity in the name of science, what confessions are we seeking to extort from them from beneath the scalpel and electrodes?" Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* Sheila Faria Glaser, trans. (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994) p129.

use of animals in research and in biomedical practices.<sup>108</sup> I would argue that when confronted with the carcass of a pig, most people would associate this image with butchery rather than experimentation. What is the cultural difference here between butchery and experimentation and why do people seem to ethically object more to the idea of experimentation on animals as opposed to their consumption? Perhaps this is due to a sense of unease with the idea of interfering with “nature” through scientific experimentation. In H.G. Wells’ novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), scientific experimentations to create hybrid humans/animals are met with revulsion and the idea of “playing God” has been condemned throughout literature. However, if we move beyond literature and into the realm of the modern day science lab, such interspecies experimentations and procedures have been occurring for the last few decades. Parker-Starbuck’s research explores the relationship between humans, animals and technology and she has recently written about *inthewrongplaceness* in light of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “becoming animal” through “contagion” or “infection”.<sup>109</sup>

Concerns over the use of biotechnologies to integrate animal organs and skin onto human bodies has been voiced in recent years. While currently 60% of patients waiting for organ transplants die on waiting lists due to a lack of organs, the process of xenotransplantation (the interspecies transfer of organs and body

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<sup>108</sup> One of the most controversial research centres that uses animals widely in its research is Huntingdon in Cambridgeshire, a contract research organisation working within pharmaceutical, biopharmaceutical, chemical, crop protection, veterinary and food industries. Huntingdon has often been targeted by extremist animal rights groups such as the Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty group (SHAC). According to Huntingdon Life Sciences, the vast amount of their experimentation is on rodents, with the category of pigs, sheep and cows being the third largest testing group after fish and birds (2003 figures). 02/12/09, <http://www.huntingdon.com/index.php?currentNumber=4.2&currentIsExpanded=0>.

<sup>109</sup> Parker-Starbuck also discusses this in her article “Becoming-Animate: On the Performed Limits of Human”: “The alliance formed in becoming-animal is based not on hereditary or identificatory factors, but by ‘contagion,’ epidemic, or affect, as in the age of bird flu in which the threat is not the flu that produces anxiety, but the concept of becoming-bird. The idea of becoming through contagion is for me one of the most provocative ideas of Deleuze and Guattari’s essay.” Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, “Becoming-Animate: On the Performed Limits of ‘Human’”, *Theatre Journal*, 58.4, (2006) p661.

parts evolving from the Greek *xeno*, meaning foreign) has been heralded as a way of meeting the organ transplant demand. However, there has been growing apprehension over the consequences of such procedures. The merging of human and animal parts has meant a cross contamination of diseases with many animal diseases developing new strains and affecting human bodies.<sup>110</sup> This idea of a fear of infection through the merging of different species is reminiscent of how literature has played out anxieties about scientific creations of beings such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Similarly, the fear of contamination of blood lines in terms of racial mixing at the beginning of the last century is evident in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) which ties in to how popular and widespread the eugenics movement was at this time.

At the beginning of *this* century it is the recombinant technologies that are mixing pig skin and organs with people and which pose the problem of new strengths and strains of different bio-diseases working across species. Dr Alan Cantwell questions these practices:

Why do virologists rush to blame pigs for the virus causing the current flu pandemic? Why do they ignore their own viral experiments where pig viruses (and viruses from various other species) are transplanted into humans and into human tissue - and then allowed to swap genes and mutate with human viruses? Could the current new "swine flu virus", which is a mix of human, pig and bird viruses, have its origin in gene-swapping viral lab experiments that have been going on extensively over the past half-century?<sup>111</sup>

Dr Cantwell is suggesting that the amalgamation of human and animal genes is the cause of these new strains of diseases and that the use of animals in medical research should be scrutinized. The interchangability between O'Reilly and the pig in *inthewrongplaceness* conveys the breakdown of the species boundary and illustrates some of the ethical and physical issues that this sharing of body parts

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<sup>110</sup> The most notable recent example of this is swine flu which has killed 66 people in Scotland to date. 20/08/10, <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2010/01/08114110>.

<sup>111</sup> Dr. Alan Cantwell, "Swine Flu And Dangerous Virus Experimentation Transplanting Pig Viruses into Human Beings", 1/12/09, <http://www.rense.com/general85/swwi.htm>.

and organs provokes. As in many cases of scientific discovery, the scientific findings and procedures occur unbeknownst to the general public and often the consequences of such actions are not realised until some irreparable damage is done.<sup>112</sup> It seems we now inhabit a time in which, as Bruno Latour claims: “Heads of state, chemist, biologists, desperate patients and industrialists [have] caught themselves in a single uncertain story mixing biology and society.”<sup>113</sup>

Having read *Pig Tales* by Marie Darrieussecq which O’Reilly identifies as one of the other influences on this performance, it seems to me that *inthewrongplaceness* is also about metamorphosis and the idea of “becoming” a pig. Towards the end of Darrieussecq’s novella, the protagonist is constantly shifting between pig and human states, often embodying a half pig and half human hybrid in the conversion. The book is about transformation, about being both and also about a body in flux between a human and an animal state. Reading Darrieussecq’s text influenced my understanding of the final moments of the performance when O’Reilly enters the body of the pig, creating a half-pig half-human entity. Initially I had seen this moment as an image of the pig giving birth to her and was aware of this image as an act of birthing. In the performance space there is also the taxidermied piglet, three-legged and stuffed. This paradoxical image shows us a baby (the pig’s baby?) which is obviously “older” than her and has died before her as her carcass is fresh while the piglet is stuffed and missing a leg, like a broken exhibit at a museum. This image of the two pigs suggests mothering, and there is something very tragic in the image of the two separate fates of this piglet and a mother, both killed in the name of human interest, both having ended up in this space with O’Reilly. It

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<sup>112</sup> See Charlene Crabb “Insect Resistant Plants could harm Insect Helpers”, (*New Scientist*, 16 Aug 1997) which discusses how plants that have been genetically engineered to ward off destructive insects are killing helpful ones such as bees. This has caused a crisis in the bee population worldwide (particularly in the US where genetically modified farming is prolific) as well as creating different viral recombinant species of plants. There are a number of examples like this where scientific findings have been widely applied within large global companies without a full understanding of the environmental and ecological consequences. 04/12/09, <http://www.dhushara.com/book/genes/genaug/gtdec1.htm>.

<sup>113</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge; Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993) p2.

is highly unlikely that this pig *is* the piglet's mother, but in juxtaposing the two pigs - one little, one large - O'Reilly is evoking this thought, an idea that is continued in the final moments of the piece where the adult pig appears to become *her* mother, as we see the tableau of the pig seeming to giving birth to the artist.

Having read *Pig Tales*, however, my reading of this moment has somewhat altered. It now seems to me that this image is more of a being in-between states, of a mythical centaur-like creature, half-human half-animal. O'Reilly herself states: "I am left with an undercurrent of pigginess and fantasies of mergence, interspecies metamorphoses."<sup>114</sup> The Buddhist belief that all beings are equal and that we become other beings when we die - namely animals - also adds another reading to this moment.<sup>115</sup> Is O'Reilly playing out for us the moment of death in this instant; the moment of transformation between living states?

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<sup>114</sup> O'Reilly "Marsyas: Beside Myself" p98.

<sup>115</sup> O'Reilly acknowledges Buddhist beliefs as having an effect on her practice and in her writing on her blog. 20/08/10, <http://www.kiraoreilly.com/blog/?s=buddhism>.

In the *Brahma Net Sutra* it states:

A disciple of the Buddha must maintain a mind of kindness and cultivate the practice of liberating beings. He should reflect thus: “All male beings have been my father and all females have been my mother. There is not a single being who has not given birth to me during my previous lives, hence all beings of the Six Destinies are my parents. Therefore, when a person kills and eats any of these beings, he thereby slaughters my parents. Furthermore, he kills a body that was once my own, for all elemental earth and water previously served as part of my body and all elemental fire and wind have served as my basic substance. Therefore, I shall always cultivate the practice of liberating beings and in every life be reborn in the eternally abiding Dharma and teach other to liberate beings as well.” Whenever a Bodhisattva sees a person preparing to kill an animal, he should devise a skilful method to rescue and protect it, freeing it from its suffering and difficulties.<sup>116</sup>

A number of aspects of this statement resonate with *inthewrongplaceness*. The idea that there is “not a single being that has not given birth to me” is embodied in the final tableau of the pig giving birth to O’Reilly while the idea that anyone that intentionally kills an animal “kills a body that was once my own” is visualised through the aesthetic similarity between O’Reilly’s body and the pig’s body. Through this, O’Reilly becomes the pig. The idea of “rebirth” can also be read into this moment of transformation when the body in front of us (an amalgamation of O’Reilly and the pig) is in-between human and animal states. I would argue that in this final union of her body and the pig’s body, O’Reilly is showing us the moment of death, of transformation between states of being: human to animal. In doing this she is offering her own body up and illustrating her kinship with the pig. While the technological basis of this performance is not

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<sup>116</sup> *Brahma Net Sutra: Moral Code of the Bodhisattvas* p162, cited in Ronald Epstein’s article “A Buddhist Perspective on Animal Rights” presented at the conference “Animal Rights and Our Human Relationship to the Biosphere,” at San Francisco State University, March 29 - April 1, 1990.

evident in this final image, what is visible is the embodiment of the species boundary collapse that Haraway prophesied in her manifesto and which Bojana Kunst has also discussed.<sup>117</sup>

## Conclusion: Production/ Re-production

I want to now make some analogies between the work of subRosa and O'Reilly to draw conclusions about the relationship between women's bodies and biotechnologies in contemporary performance. Through these performance examples I have explored how biotechnological practices have been used, subverted and critiqued, however I wish in this concluding section to focus specifically on the bodies of the artists themselves. What are these performances saying about bodies and what are the bodies themselves saying? In the two performances by subRosa that I analysed only the reproductive bodies are discussed within the expo style events. In depicting the female body as a reproductive body, subRosa seems to be restricting its portrayal of the female body to a solely reproductive role.

If we consider alternatively how O'Reilly engages with these concepts in *inthewrongplaceness*, she reproduces herself in the performance as a pig while also creating images evocative of motherhood through the damaged taxidermied piglet and the pig carcass as mother. But what are the bodies of the women performing signifying; what are the performers' bodies themselves saying in these performances? In subRosa's work, the bodies of the performers are *authoritative* bodies; they present demonstrations, steer the public through the expos directing audiences to various products and events, always in control of their message. In this respect, they are very different bodies to the bodies that subRosa discuss within the work itself. subRosa portrays women through its performative events as naive, weak and likely to be preyed on and manipulated by the repro-tech industries; however the women that make up subRosa are not at all like this. In distancing themselves from the "women" whose rights they represent, the members of subRosa stand separate as authoritative, didactic

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<sup>117</sup> Bojana Kunst, "Restaging the Monstrous", Bleeker, ed. *Anatomy Live* p216.

bodies. In these instances, are authoritative bodies not women's bodies? Whose bodies are they talking about if not their own?<sup>118</sup>

In both *Expo EmmaGenics* and *US Grade AAA Premium Eggs*, the members of subRosa notably separate their own bodies from the bodies whose rights they are supposedly fighting for. While these women have a voice, power and an authority as bodies within the performance, they represent women's bodies as either invisible (as in the *Expo EmmaGenics* example where references to bodies and bodily procedures are notably absent from the slick sales spiel and the invisibility itself is parodied) or as powerless and suppressed by these technologies and devoid of agency over the situation. While they are demanding that women take control of their own bodies, they are also only representing a specific type of woman - passive, submissive, likely to be preyed upon and seduced by ART marketing - and it seems to be that the women in subRosa are *not* representative of this. Between their own authoritative bodies and the bodies that they are discussing there is a discrepancy.<sup>119</sup> In particular, the figure of "Martha" in *Expo EmmaGenics* seems complex as she dons the universal symbol of medical authority (the white lab coat) to demonstrate procedures, indicating that she is portraying a source of scientific authority. However, at the same time, the work is claiming that scientific authority is solely a patriarchal and closed-off institution and that women's bodies are the "laboratory" and never the scientist. While the performance event says one thing about the

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<sup>118</sup> Grosz discusses this: "In many feminist political struggles (those for example, which utilise the old slogan 'get your laws off my body') which are openly and self-consciously about women's bodies and their control by women (e.g. campaigns around such issues as sexual harassment and molestation, rape, the control of fertility, etc.), the body is typically regarded as passive and reproductive but largely unproductive, an object over which struggles between its 'inhabitant' and others/exploiters may be possible. Whatever agency or will it has is the direct consequence of animating physical intentions. Its inertia means that it is capable of being acted on, coerced, or constrained by external forces." Elizabeth Grosz, "Refiguring Bodies", Fraser and Greco eds. *The Body* p50.

<sup>119</sup> This reminds me of Manuela Infante-Guell's analysis of Sasha Waltz's piece *Korper* (2000). She states: "These bodies on stage perform images of 'the body' rather than expose or show themselves as bodies." Manuela Infante-Guell, "Performance Documentation B: Korper", Bleeker, ed. *Anatomy Live* p249. It seems that subRosa are doing both – they are attempting to depict images of "the female body" while they are also showing themselves as female bodies.



female body, the bodies of the subRosa performers tell their own story about the relationship between women's bodies and the politics of biotechnologies.

O'Reilly's work removes the subverted symbol of authority that she wore in the laboratory (her noticeably red lab coat to mark her as artist and "other") and in her performance space a specifically female body is visible through her nakedness. In doing this she is also making visual links between her own body and the pig's body, provoking questions around the hierarchy between humans and animals and questioning (and exposing) biotechnological uses of bodies. As Baudrillard states: "We are all animals, and laboratory animals, whom one continually tests in order to extort their reflex behaviours, which are like so many confessions of rationality in the final moment."<sup>120</sup> Having said that, although there are many aesthetic similarities between the bodies in the space, it is apparent that these are two very *different* bodies. One is human, one is animal; one is alive, one is dead; one is in control of its image, one is not. While O'Reilly is creating an ambiguous image evocative of motherhood and suggesting a range of readings around the female body her own body is both the "sign and the stuff" - both the culturally inscribed female body and the embodied and performing artist. In *inthewrongplaceness* O'Reilly is both image and creator of the image, both the art and the artist; as she explains in her *Sk-interfaces* text "there is a "constant flickering between The Body and *my* body" - that is, between the lived body and the body as a cultural construction.<sup>121</sup>

In posing questions of what subRosa and O'Reilly's performances are saying about bodies and about specifically birthing bodies in light of biotechnologies, I have been interrogating how the female body is portrayed in *Expo EmmaGenics*, *US Grade AAA Premium Eggs* and *inthewrongplaceness* by *female bodies*. Although a body is arguably always performing its gender, in my performance examples the specifically female bodies of the artists have been saying more about what the female body is and does through their actions and

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<sup>120</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Animals: Territory and Metamorphoses", *Simulacra and Simulation* Sheila Faria Glaser, trans. (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994) p130.

<sup>121</sup> O'Reilly "Marsyas: Beside Myself" p97.

words.<sup>122</sup> While subRosa illustrates one type of female body via its performance event, the members of the company's own bodies' performance is discordant with this. O'Reilly draws analogies between her own body and the body of an animal to raise questions about what it is to be a woman - what it is to be *human* and female - while offering no answers to the scientific "ethical ambivalences" that she encounters in her laboratory research.

Both subRosa and O'Reilly engage with issues surrounding biotechnologies and bodies and the ethics, politics and problems that these new scientific breakthroughs have created and engineer performances that play out some of these concerns. However, the bodies of the artists in the performances as specifically *female* bodies create another reading to these events and evoke new ambiguities and ambivalences. Both subRosa and O'Reilly engage with the idea of the female body as the reproductive body; however what I find interesting about these examples is what the performing bodies themselves are signifying. The concept of the artist as creator and of producer of the artwork juxtaposed against the concept of the female body as *re-producer* makes me question if the female body as the re-productive body has been positioned as such to suppress its urge to be a productive body - a maker of art and performance.<sup>123</sup> subRosa and O'Reilly epitomise both; to some extent both of them depict the female body as the re-productive body, while the women themselves embody productive female bodies as they generate and create their performance pieces.

In my next chapter I will consider the female body as rendered cyborgian and grotesque through a model of hybridisation and animalisation. The female body and its reproductive functions are illustrated as grotesque in the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin and other critical theorists and the links between the feminine

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<sup>122</sup> Judith Butler discusses gender as performance in her study *Gender Trouble*. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>123</sup> Anne Balsamo discusses the gendered division of labour "whereby women occupy the lowest paying positions because of active discrimination, beliefs about women's inferiority, their socialisation to service roles, and the social and cultural pressures to marry, bear children and forego compensated employment in favour of unpaid domestic labour." Anne Balsamo, "Forms of Technological Embodiment: Reading the Body in Contemporary Culture", Price and Shildrick, eds. *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* p283.

and the body and its functions conveys a patriarchal and Cartesian distinction between the male (mind) and female (body). By associating the reproductive role with the grotesque and situating only the female body as grotesque, the specifically female body has been perceived as deviant, monstrous and animalised. While subRosa and O'Reilly raise questions about acts of "birthing" in the light of new applications of biotechnologies through their practice, intermedial artist Julia Bardsley, who I shall look at next, parodies a number of feminine tropes in her performance of the cyborgian grotesque.

# Chapter Five - Hopeful Hybrids: The Female Cyborg as Grotesque in Performance

## Introduction

The concept of the cyborg - a “cybernetic organism” consisting of human and non-human parts - has been in circulation since 1960, when the term was coined by scientists Nathan S. Kline and Manfred E. Clynes.<sup>1</sup> However, the notion of hybridity predates this by centuries and depictions of hybrid beings permeate art and literature from medieval times onwards. Jennifer Parker-Starbuck reminds us that the first cyborgs were animals, with the coupling of animal bodies and technology providing a testing ground for human/technology unification. Her example of the rat attached to an osmotic pump as the “first cyborg” serves as a reminder of the original cyborg bodies that are often overlooked.<sup>2</sup> Parker-Starbuck’s analysis also points to a reassertion of the role of animals within dialogues surrounding the cyborg. Though hybrid creatures part-human part-animal, can be located in discourses of the cyborg, it is notable, particularly for the purposes of this thesis, that they are also an intrinsic part of grotesque imagery. The concept of the grotesque has only recently been critically analysed (most notably by literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin) but has featured throughout art and literature since medieval times and is notoriously difficult to define. However some characteristics of it include: a hybridisation between human/animal/plant; gargantuan size; protruding bodily parts; and an association with carnival, low culture and humour.<sup>3</sup> The grotesque has recently

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<sup>1</sup> In 1960 Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline coined the term when working on a project for NASA exploring the advantages of self-regulating machine systems in outer space.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, “Becoming-Animate: On the Performed Limits of ‘Human’”, *Theatre Journal*, 58.4, (2006) p655.

<sup>3</sup> Grotesque imagery often features as decoration around medieval manuscripts and on building facades. Alixe Bovey, *Monsters and Grotesques in Medieval Manuscripts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

been identified by Margaret Miles as gendered specifically female.<sup>4</sup> The hybridised female body as depicted in grotesque imagery throughout art and literature indicates a historical and cultural association between the feminine and the hybridised. As Michelle Henning asserts: “Femininity also had historical associations with fluidity - the female body ‘spills over’ while the (idealised) male body has defined boundaries.”<sup>5</sup> In this chapter I will explicate the similarities and distinctions between the concepts of the cyborg and the grotesque (both hybrids) as conveyed through contemporary performance, to assess the potential usefulness of these representations of the female body in relation to a feminist praxis.

Since the appearance of Donna J. Haraway’s seminal article “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1985 [1991]), discussions have proliferated around the potential of the cyborg body for feminism. I would argue that the recent affiliation of the figure of the cyborg with the female body is simply the latest in a long list of associations between the female body and the hybridised. Throughout this chapter I will illustrate how, in hybridising the female body and situating it as deviant, leaky, and non-normative next to the classical (male) body, the female body has been historically rendered grotesque. My discussion will focus on how the grotesque female body is also rendered cyborgian in an example of contemporary technologised performance. I am using Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and his World* (1984) as a starting point for my comparison between the grotesque and the cyborgian bodies and will be drawing on feminist responses to Bakhtin, most notably Mary Russo’s *The Female Grotesque* (1994) and Margaret Miles’ “Carnal Abominations” (1997).<sup>6</sup> I am integrating these debates with contemporary theory (such as the work of Haraway) that analyses the figure of the cyborg and applying this critical theory to an example of intermedial performance. The

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Miles, “Carnal Abominations: The Female Body As Grotesque”, James Luther Adams, Wilson Yates, Robert Penn Warren, eds. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Michelle Henning, “Don’t Touch Me (I’m Electric)”, Arthurs, Jane and Jean Grimshaw, eds. *Women’s Bodies: Discipline and Transgression* (London: Cassell, 1999) p26.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York; London: Routledge, 1994) and Miles, “Carnal Abominations”.

artist that I have chosen to analyse in this chapter renders the female bodies in her practice as both grotesque and cyborgian and utilises historical and contemporary depictions of the female body as hybrid, diseased, pregnant, animalised, abject and monstrous to question these conventional representations and, in doing so, re-codes these images of the grotesque/cyborgian female.

An analysis of performance in which the female body becomes cyborgian is imperative. While many theorists (such as Gabriella Giannachi [2004] and Marquand Smith [2005]) have analysed male performance artists working with the concept of the cyborg, apart from Giannachi's discussion of Orlan in *Virtual Theatres*, the female cyborg body in performance has been critically neglected.<sup>7</sup> In seeking to redress this balance and explore the feminist potential of the "potent fusions" (to use Haraway's term) that the cyborg embodies, I will examine the work of intermedial artist Julia Bardsley. Bardsley incorporates a range of technologies to stage an apocalyptic party - a parodic celebration of the grotesquery of bodies - while revelling in the monstrosity of her creations. In her discussion of cyborg bodies Haraway claims that: "The cyborg is a kind of dissembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code."<sup>8</sup> I argue that the reassembled beings in Bardsley's work are a montage of old/new, male/female, human/non-human, and that the female body she is coding is complex and ambiguous - ultimately cyborgian and grotesque; in these hybridised re-imaginings there is potential for feminist readings of the bodies she performs.

## The Grotesque

Some feminist theorists, such as Miles, argue that there has been an idea of the female body as defective from its inception due to the supposed creation of

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<sup>7</sup> Australian artist Stelarc, for example, has been theorised extensively as he has been experimenting with extending his body for over forty years. Performances such as *Exoskeleton* (1998) and *Muscle Machine* (2002-3) are examples of his cyborgian performance experiments.

<sup>8</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (London: Free Association Books, 1991) p163.

woman from a bent rib.<sup>9</sup> The acceptance of the male body as normative and the female body as non-normative from a very early stage has led to an affiliation of the male body with the classical body and the female body with the grotesque. From medieval times the female body was associated with some of the standard features of the grotesque such as gargantuan size, a mixture of the body parts of different species and inversion (in particular the female genitals were thought to be an exact inversion of male genitalia) as well as unanticipated transmutation.<sup>10</sup> The hybridisation of the female body through a mingling of species is notable and, as I shall argue later, can also be witnessed in contemporary portrayals of cyborgian women.

Miles claims that this intrinsic association between the feminine and the grotesque indicates that it is “not merely that some women were thought of as grotesque in socially defined, culturally specific ways, but that an element of grotesque is present in every woman.”<sup>11</sup> If, as Miles suggests, the grotesque is specifically gendered as female or that the female is always partly grotesque then the implications of this on how female bodies are read are immense. Neither Miles nor Russo deny that there are male depictions of the grotesque, however both theorists are in agreement that when a male body is depicted as grotesque it is through a *feminisation* of the body. Miles discusses how in the best-known instances of the grotesque, from the Palaeolithic caves of southern France to medieval cathedral facades or depictions of the grotesque in literature, male as well as female bodies are subjected to grotesque figuration.

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<sup>9</sup> Miles, “Carnal Abominations” p83.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p85.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p85.

Miles states:

Yet it was women's bodies, permanently shaped by Eve's sin, that symbolised the fact that humanity exists in a state of sinfulness and punishment. Furthermore, as grotesque, male bodies take on precisely the characteristics regularly attributed to female bodies; they lose form and integrity, become penetrable, suffer the addition of alien body parts, and become alternately huge and tiny.<sup>12</sup>

As with the female body, the grotesque male body is no longer “clearly differentiated from the world but is transferred, merged, and fused with it.”<sup>13</sup> I am interested in how this analysis affects readings of other hybrid bodies such as cyborgs.

To return to the alliance between the female body and the grotesque body, another illustration of this is through the association of the female body with bodily acts and functions - particularly those associated with what Bakhtin refers to as the “lower stratum” - meaning the base bodily functions.<sup>14</sup> The three main bodily functions that are allied with the grotesque are sexual intercourse, the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p91.

<sup>13</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* Helene Iswolsky, trans. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) p339.

<sup>14</sup> Miles claims that: “The association of the female body with materiality, sex, and reproduction in the female body makes it an essential – not an accidental – aspect of the grotesque.” Miles, “Carnal Abominations” p90.



act of birth, and death. Bakhtin contends that:

The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. The relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other indispensable trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis.<sup>15</sup>

This ambivalence between death and birth, growth and becoming, is seen as performed through the female body and its functions; however, in his discussion Bakhtin does not consider the gendered implications of his analysis.<sup>16</sup> Miles states: “For it was not only female behaviour - loquaciousness, aggressiveness, stubbornness - that could at any moment reveal a woman’s identity with Eve, but her body itself.”<sup>17</sup> Women’s bodies and their functions such as menstruation and pregnancy were depicted as grotesque by those in control of images and literature - the male artists and writers. While the normative classical body is closed, smooth, impenetrable and male, the female body in opposition is rendered non-normative, open, penetrable, monstrous and grotesque. Bakhtin’s analysis of the grotesque body as protruding (showing what was inside coming out), as associated with the low, base functions of the body and linked to the carnival are all aspects that I will explore in relation to Bardsley’s work.

## “The Cyborg” and the cyborg

The title of Haraway’s collection in which “A Cyborg Manifesto” features is *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (1991) and in this study she explores biological

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<sup>15</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* p24.

<sup>16</sup> The hybridity of embodying the dying and the procreating, or the mingling of human and animal – the “ambivalence” as Bakhtin calls it – can also be witnessed in the body of the cyborg through its melding of human and machine.

<sup>17</sup> Miles, “Carnal Abominations” p92.

links between humans and animals through a number of essays. What becomes apparent in reading the theory surrounding the grotesque (and other critical theory) is that there is a constant recurrence of the animalisation of the female body and a reiteration of a hybridity between species that has been associated with the feminine for hundreds of years. It seems that while both the grotesque and the cyborgian have hybridity as a common factor, they also share an association with animals and with the feminine.

While film theorists such as Claudia Springer have commented on how Haraway's cyborg was appropriated by filmmakers in the 1980s to create a hyper-masculinised, muscular and violent cyborg (such as *Terminator* [1984] and *Robocop* [1987]) depictions of female cyborgs in cyberpunk comics and literature have also proliferated.<sup>18</sup> What seems notable about contemporary depictions of cyborgs is their visible gender distinctions (either sexualised as female or hyper-masculinised as male) as opposed to the "post-gender" creatures that Haraway envisioned in her manifesto. While in film and performance cyborgs tend to be male, there are also many examples of female cyborgs (such as the cyborg Eve from the 1991 film *Eve of Destruction*) and feminist theorists have taken Haraway's feminist utopian ideal and subsequently gendered the cyborg as intrinsically female due to its status as a boundary creature - as culturally constructed Other.<sup>19</sup>

While the grotesque body has been specifically gendered female, as Miles argues, the cyborg body - despite Haraway's hopes for a "post-gender" world - has been depicted so far as gendered male or female.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the grotesque, instances of the male cyborg are *not* feminised but are instead hyper-

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<sup>18</sup> Claudia Springer, "The Pleasure of the Interface", Jenny Wolmark, ed. *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> This is discussed in Gill Kirkup, Linda Janes, Kath Woodward, Fiona Hovenden, eds. *The Gendered Cyborg* (London: Routledge, 2000) p3.

<sup>20</sup> Haraway returns to this idea of a "post-gender world" in an interview with Nicholas Gane. She states: "We're in a post-gender world in some ways, and in others we're in a ferociously gender-in-place world." Donna Haraway, "When We Have Never been Human, What is to Be Done?: Interview with Donna Haraway by Nicholas Gane", *Theory, Culture & Society* 2006 (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE). Vol. 23 (7-8), pp. 135-158.

masculinised; though the “meat” of the body can disappear, visualisations of cyborg bodies have swung the other way and show highly visible and gendered bodies. While the presence of these male cyborgs is highly significant, for this study I wish to focus on the female cyborg and her lineage as a hybrid-being constructed through gendered cultural associations. I also want to focus on the grotesque cyborgs that Bardsley creates as she represents a different type of cyborg body than, for example, performance artist Stelarc does in his representations of the “hollow, hard” and definitively male body, while also avoiding association with the traditionally “feminine” or domestic technologies that artists such as Marsha McLuhan incorporate into their practice.<sup>21</sup> The grotesque and the cyborg differ slightly in their gendering, perhaps partly to do with their history. The grotesque has been around for hundreds of years and has developed a meaning and an association with the feminine while the figure of the cyborg has only been around since the 1960s with depictions appearing around the 1980s and ignoring Haraway’s call for gender demarcations to be left behind. A comparison of the hybrid nature of the grotesque body and that of the female cyborg is relevant to my overall thesis surrounding gender and its representation in contemporary technologised performance.

Londa Schiebinger has commented on the historical connection between the female body and hybridity, specifically focussing on the links that have been made between women and animals.<sup>22</sup> This animal (often simian) comparison to women has a long historical background and is evident in art and literature. The alignment between the female body and the animal can be seen in the eleventh-century Latin poem *Ruodlieb* where a woman is likened to a she-ape.<sup>23</sup> The description of an old woman which follows the ape simile in *Ruodlieb* illustrates

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<sup>21</sup> Marsha McLuhan (a pseudonym for Pattie Belle Hastings) is a self proclaimed “feminist new media theorist” who has taken her name from the late technothorist Marshall McLuhan. Marsha McLuhan is a performer and academic who explores the relationship between domestic technologies and femininity. She delivered a performance presentation called *Bad Girls, Gadgets and Guerrilla Performance* at the (re)Actor event in 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Londa Schiebinger, “Taxonomy for Human Beings”, Gill Kirkup, Linda Janes, Kath Woodward, and Fiona Hovenden, eds. *The Gendered Cyborg* (London: Routledge, 2000).

the changes wrought in a woman's body by old age. Jan Ziolkowski states:

It would be tempting to hypothesize that the *Ruodlieb*, with its juxtaposition of the ape simile and “ugly old age” description, influenced the English poet of “I haue a Lady where so she be”... The tradition provided models not only for catalogues of charms, but also for “ugly old age” descriptions; thus the tradition accounts for such startling similarities in texts written hundreds of years and miles apart.<sup>24</sup>

It seems that as well as linking the woman with the ape, this example illustrates the feminine association with ugliness or grotesquery, but also emphasises ugliness in old age. From the research I have undertaken it seems that the female body is *always* grotesque but epitomises it even more so when pregnant, elderly, or both, as in Bakhtin's example of the terracotta hags.<sup>25</sup>

To briefly revisit the summary of Haraway's manifesto that I included in my Introduction to this study, the three boundary collapses that Haraway identifies are: the boundary between the human and the animal, the boundary between the human/animal and machine, and the boundary between the physical and the non-physical. I would argue that the grotesque body also breaks down the boundary between the human and the animal due to its interspecies nature and this part-human/part animal aspect of the grotesque body is reiterated in the body of the cyborg. The hybridity that the grotesque body and the cyborg body share make the association between them relevant to my analysis of Bardsley's work.

## **Julia Bardsley**

Having located points of comparison between the cyborg body and the grotesque body, I now want to analyse the work of Bardsley who fuses the two aesthetics

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<sup>24</sup> Jan Ziolkowski, “Avatars of Ugliness in Medieval Literature”, *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 79, No. 1, (1984), p16.

<sup>25</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* p25.

to create a series of hybridised female bodies in her performance *Aftermaths: A Tear in the Meat of Vision* - a contemporary retelling of the Book of Revelations. *Aftermaths* makes up the third and final part of *The Divine Trilogy*, a series of intermedial performance works that Bardsley has been creating since 2003.<sup>26</sup> *Trans-Acts* (2003-7) and *Almost the Same (feral rehearsals for violent acts of culture)* (2008-9) preceded *Aftermaths* which was performed for the first time as part of the Spill Festival of Performance at London in 2009, and subsequently at the National Review of Live Art in Glasgow in March 2010.<sup>27</sup> The concepts of the grotesque and the cyborgian both confuse boundaries but, I would suggest that the previous troubling of boundaries that the cyborg and the grotesque epitomise have become normalised. In my analysis, I respond to how Bardsley confuses the zone between the cyborgian and the grotesque and picks up on grotesque theorist Harpham's view that: "confused things lead the mind to new inventions - and lie at the heart of all scientific discourses of a revolutionary character."<sup>28</sup> Harpham concludes that: "The grotesque implies discovery," and "disorder is the price one always pays for the enlargement of the mind."<sup>29</sup> I am interested in how - in this hybridisation of the already hybrid concepts of the grotesque and the cyborg - Bardsley provokes a questioning of traditional depictions of femininity and instigates a re-coding of these images. Parker-Starbuck argues that cyborg performance can open up avenues for re-evaluating thought on identity: "The cyborg performance space necessitates a face-to-face exchange between performers and audience, which can be instrumental in creating an ethical space—an open and visible space in which to

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<sup>26</sup> Bardsley has a long term collaborative relationship with musician and sound designer Andrew Poppy and he creates the soundscapes for her work and operates them. Bardsley creates the visuals and the video work herself and in *Aftermaths* also designed and made most of the furniture and garments of dis-ease.

<sup>27</sup> I saw both of these performances. Both performances at Laban in London and at the Tramway in Glasgow, were staged very similarly, utilising very large performance spaces with a black curtained section providing a more intimate space. In the area outside the curtained section the exhibit of the garments of dis-ease was situated.

<sup>28</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) p17.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p191.

stop and see what is before you.”<sup>30</sup> Parker-Starbuck suggests that the fusion and interplay between technology and live bodies and their “imaginative and metaphoric integration” in the performance space allows for “reciprocal response strategies”.<sup>31</sup>

This face-to-face exchange means that audiences are being physically confronted by Bardsley’s grotesque creations and are encouraged to interact with Bardsley as she moves amongst them at various points. Another device that Bardsley employs throughout *Aftermaths* is parody. Prior to the event the performance is framed as a “celebration” of the end of meat (the body). This celebration of death is itself parodic while her depictions of bodies are rendered so hyperbolically grotesque that they become unrecognisable in terms of gender and form. Linda Hutcheon’s study *A Theory of Parody* (1985) provides some insights on how parody might be employed for political means:

Parody today is endowed with the power to renew. It need not do so, but it can. We must never forget the hybrid nature of parody’s connection with the “world,” the mixture of conservative and revolutionary impulses in both aesthetic and social terms. What has traditionally been called parody privileges the normative impulse, but today’s art abounds as well in examples of parody’s power to revitalise.<sup>32</sup>

Hutcheon notably describes parody’s relation to the world as “hybrid”. I would argue that it is this ability of parody to renew and revitalise that resonates with these re-conceptions of grotesque and hybridised bodies and that the political potential of the performance lies here. Janet Wolff argues in “Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics” (1997): “If the body has thus been repressed since the seventeenth century, does it follow that the eruption of the ‘grotesque’ body, the explosion into visibility of its suppressed features (sex,

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<sup>30</sup> Parker-Starbuck, “Becoming-Animate” p657.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985) p115.

laughter, excretion, and so on) constitutes a political revolution as well as a moral transgression?”<sup>33</sup> In celebrating the substratum (that has been linked to the female) and the bodily transgressions Wolf mentions, there is potential for thinking beyond fixed categories of gender identity through liminal bodies that avoid binary identity politics but instead embrace the hybrid and realise Haraway’s vision. While identity politics have been discussed in recent years and notions of gender identity subsequently challenged, there is still much work needed to re-code fixed ideas surrounding these categories.

## ***Aftermaths: A Tear in the Meat of Vision (2009-10) (A hybrid reading)***

### **Meat**

Audiences are led by ushers into a dark space with four screens forming a square and a raised black plastic cross outlined in red neon which demarcates the performing area. The projections on the screens begin, opening with throbbing images of meat and the title of the show *Aftermaths: A Tear in the Meat of Vision*. Audiences are asked to dress in black as though in mourning and to bring a small black object no bigger than 4cm that they would be happy to part with, accentuating the funereal expectations of the performance. The effect of this is that most of the audience appears conspicuously different from your average theatre audience and this acknowledgement of other spectators dressed as you are does seem in some way to instigate this face-to-face exchange that Parker-Starbuck identifies in relation to cyborg performance. The images of fleshy organs and the “meat” of the inner body immediately evoke a visceral response, while the word-play between “tear” (as in rip) and “tear” (as in the tears you cry) provides the first of many linguistic puns and word plays. The former usage of this word adds to the visceral aspect of the images; the idea of tearing meat has connotations of animalistic hunger and urges. Here we also have our first example of the grotesque body - a theme that is prominent throughout

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<sup>33</sup> Janet Wolff, “Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics”, Jane C. Desmond, ed. *Meaning in Motion* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997) p86.

*Aftermaths*. Bakhtin states: “The grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs. The outward and inward features are often merged into one.”<sup>34</sup> The image of a heart with tendons coming from it that is projected on the four screens is a clear example of the grotesque aesthetic, an aesthetic that is continued throughout the course of the performance. An example of the abject is also displayed here as we see the body literally turned inside out and rendered grotesque. The fleshy insides of the body that are visible render the gender of the body ambiguous at this point.



Figure 29 Julia Bardsley. “A Tear in The Meat of Vision”, *Aftermaths*, Spill Festival of Performance, Laban, (2009), Photo credit: Simon Annand.

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<sup>34</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “The Grotesque Images of the Body and Its Sources”, Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco, eds. *The Body: A Reader* (Oxon: Routledge, 2005) p93.





**Figure 30 Julia Bardsley. Bardsley performing on neon cross, *Aftermaths*, Spill Festival of Performance, Laban, (2009), Photo Credit: Simon Annand.**

The alternative signification of “tear” has connotations of melancholy and adds to the funereal tones of the performance (set up by the request to wear black to the event as though in mourning and continued in the image of the cross in the centre.) Tears, of course, come from the eyes and so the word choice of “vision” links to this, adding another layer of signification to the title. On occasion, the image of an anatomical drawing of a cross section of a human eye appears superimposed onto the image of the meat. This illustration of the workings of the human eye with the meat visible through it seems to represent “the meat of vision”. The phrase “meat of vision” also suggests that the act of seeing is an embodied act. These visceral images encompass the whole space due to the positioning of the screens as the walls to this cave-like performance area and because of this the experience is immersive and affecting. With wall to wall images of fleshy meat there is a sense that perhaps we are inside a vast cavernous body; that we have entered the body and are immersed in its meat.

## **Cyborg/animal/hybrid**

In *Aftermaths* we see Bardsley turning herself grotesque and cyborgian partially through the adornment of animal appendages. Words flash up on the screen:

“This is the beginning of the end”, followed by projected images of Bardsley putting on her make-up, costume and various prosthesis for the event. Bardsley begins by making up her eyes; sight and vision are emphasised once again. This section has been filmed using a slow shutter-speed so the movements of the filmed face are blurry and halting - the body never being clearly defined, always smearing out with its boundaries. This blurriness is perhaps another visual illustration of the tear in the meat of vision - the meat of vision being corrupted and moving out of focus. We see Bardsley apply a hair band and then make up, a false moustache and gold fake teeth as well as a hat (with a light and camera attached). Here we witness Bardsley turning herself cyborgian, adding prosthesis to her body in preparation for the performance. Her female body becomes disguised by the various appendages such as hooves, a tail, electronic lights, a moustache, false eyelashes and contact lenses, until finally her gender is rendered ambiguous as she becomes part human/part animal/part machine.



**Figure 31 Julia Bardsley. Close up of Bardsley's face, *Aftermaths*, Spill Festival of Performance, Laban, (2009), Photo Credit: Simon Annand.**

Green fluorescent lights appear from behind the shimmery curtain at the “top” of the cross (the sound desk with Andrew Poppy engineering the music is opposite this). The frightening figure of Bardsley appears, assisted by two canes.

She seems to be part witch/part animal, part man/part woman, part evangelical prophet/part harbinger of doom.<sup>35</sup> Her strange hybrid appearance is immediately readable as cyborgian due to the technological appendages. However some of the prosthesis provoke other interpretations; her overtly theatricalised outfit includes a wig, glasses and false teeth which seem like joke-shop merchandise, while her exquisitely crafted costume with its sewn-on genitals indicates a more nuanced costuming of this character as well as signifying gender ambiguity. The combination of the witch-like wig and the helium balloons attached to her canes creates a comical appearance, while her hidden eyes, grimacing teeth and sinister gait give the character a more ominous appearance.<sup>36</sup> Bardsley drags herself up onto the illuminated cross and then painstakingly makes her way to all the points of it. She is partially obscured by a black veil which trails the length of the cross behind her. Here Bardsley's parody of a virgin bride decked in white for her wedding day consists of a complete subversion of the image as this cyborgian horror decked in black drags and clomps her hooves up the "aisle".<sup>37</sup> With a swift whisk, the bridal train disappears and Bardsley's grimacing face is visible for the first time. The animal appendages on her footwear associate her with the devil and Bardsley's engagement with the Book of Revelations and her appropriation of biblical imagery is evident through the cross-shaped catwalk. The cross is surrounded by red neon piping that is reminiscent of the neon lights of Las Vegas or some other contemporary, money-saturated, hedonists' paradise. The shape of the catwalk explicitly points to the religious ceremonies surrounding death and this use of a

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<sup>36</sup> The comic grotesque has come to be associated with the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin on carnival in *Rabelais and His World*. The grotesque as strange and uncanny is discussed in Wolfgang Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

<sup>37</sup> At times throughout *Aftermaths* Bardsley stamps and snorts like an animal making this animal/female connection explicit.

cross within the set (and Bardsley’s ironic “bride”) are early symbols of religious and superstitious ceremony that appear within *Aftermaths*.<sup>38</sup>



**Figure 32 Julia Bardsley. *Aftermaths*, Spill Festival of Performance, Laban, (2009), Photo Credit: Simon Annand.**

We are reminded of religious beliefs surrounding heaven and earth as Bardsley carries crutches with balloons attached, signifying that while her crutches connect her with the ground and the earth, the balloons acknowledge a transition in death into ether. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin explains the significance of the concepts of “upward” and “downward” to the grotesque and how they have an absolute and strict topographical meaning: “Downward is earth and upward is heaven. Earth is an element that devours, swallows up (the grave, the womb) and at the same time an element of birth, of renascence (the maternal breasts).”<sup>39</sup> While upward is heaven, the grotesque is more commonly aligned with depictions of hell. By using the balloons and crutches to anchor her

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<sup>38</sup> This veil sequence occurred in the Glasgow performance of *Aftermaths* but not in the earlier version performed in London.

<sup>39</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* p21.

body to both of these realms Bardsley is visually illustrating the locations of heaven and earth - life and death - key concepts to the grotesque.

Bardsley's face and gloved hands are illuminated by small green lights fixed to her clothes with an additional one on the back of her neck. All of these cast a green glow and illuminate specific parts of her body, drawing attention to that area - notably face, genitals, and elbows, the parts that protrude.<sup>40</sup> The lights are on antennae-like sticks giving an insect-like quality to their appearance; this again resonates with the idea of hybridity and of "becoming animal" to use Deleuze and Guattari's term.<sup>41</sup> Her animal hybridity is completed with a long pelt-like train to her coat and a rather splendid tail that swishes menacingly as she moves.

As well as drawing attention to the animalistic prosthesis that adorn her body, Bardsley is consciously highlighting different parts of her body to fragment specific parts from the whole. This also invites the act of looking, a guide for the voyeuristic gaze. Bardsley further accentuates specific parts of her body by reaching inside the fabric on her bicep and pulling out a series of black silk handkerchiefs. In literally performing the inside coming out Bardsley explicitly revels in her abject body and through her display of magic makes visible the exceeding of her own boundaries. It should be noted, however, that this is not a performance of horror. Bardsley's demeanour is comical and her performance parodic; perhaps she is gesturing towards contemporary performance art that does evoke horror through the disruption of the skin but Bardsley merely exceeds her body-boundary metaphorically using fabric and trickery. She waves the black silk flags delicately like a sinister damsel in distress (another parody of a female stereotype) before showing the audience the final handkerchief which has the letters R.I.P embossed on it. Like a comedic magician revealing the last part of a trick, Bardsley proudly displays the fabric: the lettering reminiscent of that of a personalised handkerchief only more sinister in tone. R.I.P being another wordplay: both "rest in peace" but also rip (tear). By this point Bardsley

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<sup>40</sup> The protrusion of certain bodily parts is a key aspect of the grotesque according to Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*.

<sup>41</sup> Kristeva refers to the "human animal" in her essay on abjection. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* Leon S. Rouliez, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) p10.

has shed whatever bodily difficulties she seemed to be suffering from initially as though she has been gathering strength from her performance and feeding off the presence of the audience.

## The Book of Revelations

Apart from the green lights, Bardsley's costume is made up solely of black garments but she has a single gold claw coming from one of her shoes and dragon-like appendages on the forearms of her jacket. As *Aftermaths* is a retelling of the Book of Revelations, the details on Bardsley's costume have connotations of the dragon that appears at the Apocalypse.<sup>42</sup> In Revelation 12:3-17 it is stated: "And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him."<sup>43</sup> These apocalyptic images of strange, living creatures figure in many of the visions from the Book of Revelations - "beasts" or "living creatures" that combine the properties of men, mammals, birds, reptiles, or purely imaginary beings.<sup>44</sup> In *Aftermaths* Bardsley is engaging with a number of historical narratives surrounding women's bodies and hybridity, as well as reincarnating a historical version of the devil.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "Dragons and other monstrous beasts appear in abundance in the final book of the Bible, the revelation of St John, also known as the Apocalypse. This book recounts St John's prophetic vision of the end of the world, describing the events leading up to the second coming of Christ and the Last Judgement. Rich in enigmatic symbols which defy easy explanation, St John describes how cataclysmic events are unleashed upon the world, including floods, plagues, earthquakes and falling stars. The advancing destruction of the Apocalypse is signalled by the reversal of nature. Monstrous creatures are a potent expression of the apocalyptic world. Beasts with multiple heads, plagues of insects and frogs, and demons with supernatural powers were depicted alongside the text of Revelation." Bovey, *Monsters and Grotesques in Medieval Manuscripts* p27.

<sup>43</sup> Revelation 12:3-17 (King James Version). 17/01/10,  
<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation%2012:3-17;&version=KJV>.

<sup>44</sup> As is written in Revelation 4.

<sup>45</sup> The "plagues" that appear towards the end of *Aftermaths* are also hybrid creatures of human/animal, male/female, human/machine.

As Bakhtin contends:

In the diableries of the medieval mysteries, in the parodical legends and the *fabliaux* the devil is the gay ambivalent figure expressing the unofficial point of view, the material bodily stratum. There is nothing terrifying or alien in him. At times the devils and hell itself appear as comic monsters, whereas the Romantics present the devil as terrifying, melancholy, and tragic, and infernal laughter as sombre and sarcastic.<sup>46</sup>

Bardsley's persona seems to be drawn from the devil figure of medieval mysteries: a gleeful host to this celebration of the end of meat who revels in the comical aspects of the end as Bakhtin emphasises in his study. This enables Bardsley to commandeer the performance in a mock-jovial manner while also parodying the mode of representation that she is using. Hutcheon states: "Parody is fundamentally double and divided; its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorised transgression" and there is a real sense of this "ambivalence", as both Hutcheon and Bakhtin call it, through the performance style of *Aftermaths*.

While many aspects of *Aftermaths* suggest that we have reached "end-time" with our diabolic host, the association of Bardsley's persona with some sort of devil figure and the discussion of death evoke connotations of hell. Miles argues that in Western Christianity the primary opportunity for figurations of the grotesque has been verbal and visual descriptions of hell.<sup>47</sup> There are some interesting historical analogies between the grotesque, hell and the feminine that are relevant to my discussion. The anatomy of the female body has been linked to the grotesque linguistically through the Latin root "grotto" as a cave. Russo has written of the metaphorical connection between the idea of the cave or "grotto-esque" as an unfilled and unknown space, and of vagina/cave comparisons. Like the cave or grotto, the vagina is "Low, hidden, earthly, dark,

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<sup>46</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* p41.

<sup>47</sup> Miles, "Carnal Abominations" p85.

material, immanent, visceral” according to Russo.<sup>48</sup> It has also been noted by other critics that all closed spaces tend to be perceived as female with domestic interior spaces being gendered as female.<sup>49</sup> Contradictorily the female body is often represented as a penetrable space while the closed, classical body is implicitly male. This is indicative of the ambivalent positions that women are made to occupy.

Simultaneously the cave has repeatedly been connected with the concepts of hell and the Hadean underworld.<sup>50</sup> While the grotesque is often associated with the feminine through the perceived “cave” of feminine anatomy, historically visual depictions of hell frequently portray it in the shape of a vagina or uterus while similarly the vagina appears covertly in icons and paintings as the mouth of hell.<sup>51</sup> Miles refers to the shared fascination and horror of the female genital organs in popular culture and theological discussions and points out how often female grotesques and sheelas<sup>52</sup> appeared on the facade of churches with splayed vaginas as a reminder of the dangerous power of the female sexual organs.<sup>53</sup> By creating an analogy between the pagan view of hell and grotesque perceptions of female anatomy, once again we see the female body rendered as

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<sup>48</sup> Russo, *The Female Grotesque* p1.

<sup>49</sup> Such as Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*.

<sup>50</sup> As in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1306-1321) and Virgil's *Aeneid* (29-19 BC).

<sup>51</sup> A similar analogy was made in Irigaray's discussion of Plato and of his famous cave as analogous to the feminine reproductive organs. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* Gillian C. Gill, trans. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

<sup>52</sup> Sheela-na-gig is the term used to describe the carvings on churches and other buildings of a woman displaying her vulva. These are mainly found in Ireland and Britain and are thought to date from around the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century. There are a number of theories surrounding the figurations; some argue that they represent fertility while others argue that they are positioned over doorways and entrances to ward off evil spirits. Most notable to my discussion is the theory that the ugly women are a religious warning about the lusts of the flesh and of women's dangerous sexual wiles.

<sup>53</sup> Miles, “Carnal Abominations” p99.



deviant and grotesque.<sup>54</sup> In *Aftermaths*, audiences enter the performance space through a grotto-like entrance concealed by a black synthetic curtain. The space itself could be perceived as a cave-like enclosure adorned with four large screens. This technological grotto that Bardsley has created seems to link the grotesque and the cyborgian while also perhaps suggesting a Hadean underworld by the use of black cloth to create the enclosed space while the fleshy images on the screen give off a reddish glow as though we are situated within the bowels of hell. Because of this, the effect is immersive and very visceral, engaging spectating bodies with their own embodied experience.<sup>55</sup> By having the performance in this cave-like (womb-like?) fleshy space Bardsley combines a number of aspects of Bakhtin's grotesque in the sceneography of *Aftermaths*.

### Lower stratum – phallus and bowels

Bardsley wears a PVC waistcoat and pinstripe trousers, attached to which is a large comic phallus (as in some of her other pieces - notably in the first part of the trilogy *Trans-acts*).<sup>56</sup> Bakhtin, in particular, focuses on the strange mixture of dread and comedy in the grotesque and this mixture is apparent in *Aftermaths* in terms of performance style and delivery, and in terms of thematics and costume. Bakhtin states of the grotesque: "It is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body's confines. Special attention is given to the shoots and branches, to all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside."<sup>57</sup> Here I would draw attention to the similarity between this description of the grotesque

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<sup>54</sup> Miles claims: "Women's mouths, tongues and speech have also frequently been correlated with the vagina – open when they should be closed, causing the ruin of all they tempt or slander. The association of garrulousness with wantonness was part of a well established polemic against women across many societies of the Christian West." Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> I have written previously on how technology can be used in performance to engage and heighten bodily responses. Laura Bissell, *The Posthuman Body in Performance* MPhil by Research thesis, University of Glasgow, 2007.

<sup>56</sup> This is reminiscent of costuming in early modern theatre where comic characters would wear brightly coloured phalluses for comic effect.

<sup>57</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* p316-7.

body and the rhetoric surrounding the cyborg body - the body as connected through technology to other bodies. Within the cyborg, the body is prolonged and extended through technology and the world outside becomes a network of information shoots and protrusions through cyberspace. The individual, specific body becomes the networked body, the shared body. It could be argued that the proliferation of metaphors surrounding the female body as either cyborgian, monstrous, grotesque and/or abject is to do with this perception of the female body as leaky, deviant and excessive: of moving beyond its boundaries. As Russo points out, “Blood, tears, vomit, excrement - all the detritus of the body that is separated out and placed with terror and revulsion (predominantly, though not exclusively) on the side of the feminine - are down there in that cave of abjection.”<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, we encounter images and representations of most of these things in *Aftermaths*; images of bloody, fleshy organs are projected around the cave-like space, tears feature in the title of the piece and references to the eyes and vision recur frequently. Although there is no literal vomit or excrement, the performance is interwoven with dialogues surrounding disease and the base functions of the body that are associated with the grotesque.

While the orifices such as the mouth and the vagina are symbolic of the liminal zone between inside and outside, another bodily characteristic of the grotesque is the exaggeration of organs and the presence of bodily protrusions that exceed the usual dimensions. As Bakhtin argues: “They are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolisation: they can even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life, for they hide the rest of the body, as something secondary.”<sup>59</sup> This hyperbolisation is evident in the phalluses that adorn both Bardsley and one of the plagues (who will emerge later). The large phallus has a slit in the top of it which when opened looks like a vagina and this hermaphroditic appearance is continued through Bardsley’s entire appearance - she has a moustache, but also long feminine false eyelashes emphasising the gender ambiguity that surrounds her persona. Everything about her is altered, disguised, hidden as well as being hybridised. Bakhtin claims that

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<sup>58</sup> Russo, *The Female Grotesque* p2.

<sup>59</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “The Grotesque Images of the Body and Its Sources”, Fraser and Greco eds. *The Body* p92-3.

“the androgyne theme was popular in Rabelais’ time”<sup>60</sup> and it seems as though Bardsley is utilising this notion of gender fluidity as part of her shape-shifting and hybridised persona that combines the cyborg and the grotesque.<sup>61</sup>

## Death as grotesque/abject

In *Aftermaths* we are faced with the ultimate border - of life into death - as “endtime” is performed for us by Bardsley as a harbinger of death. As the beat of the music becomes stronger, Bardsley’s persona seems to gather strength and her limp becomes more subdued, her body more supple, her manner more animated. The projections show the words “R.I.P” and also show a piece of paper being ripped. Here “the tear” is a literal tear as we see the ripping motion. I discussed Julia Kristeva’s concept of the “abject” in Chapter Two in relation to the blood-letting part of *transSfera* and would like to briefly return to this in relation to death. As Noelle McAfee states of Kristeva’s abjection: “Another phenomenon that sets off abjection is the presence of a cadaver. Here the very border between life and death has been broken with death seeming to ‘infect’ the body.”<sup>62</sup> The presence of a cadaver illustrates the transgressed boundary between life and death; the infection of death renders what was animate (the live body) inanimate (the cadaver) and the uncanniness of the cadaver itself is evident. While in this example, death infects the body, within *Aftermaths* the idea of disease and infection has already been witnessed through Bardsley imploring audiences to “feel my disease” and is continued later in the performance in the figure of the plagues - at least two of which are evidently abjectified by their disease. At another point in the performance, the video (and then live) presence of what Bardsley refers to as the “furniture and garments of dis-ease” portrays an objectified and commodified series of household objects

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<sup>60</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* p323.

<sup>61</sup> M. A. Screech claims that the androgyne was found by some in Genesis 1:27 providing a biblical link and also that Rabelais adopts the androgyne as an emblematic device for gargantuan to wear in his cap at this section of the story. Francois Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* M. A. Screech, trans. and ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2006) p229.

<sup>62</sup> Noelle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004) p47.

and fashions that are made up of medical paraphernalia and fleshy and abject materials that evoke diseased skin, illness and death. By affiliating the female body with disease, Bardsley highlights the abjectification and grotesquery of the female body as it has been constructed. As with any representation of culturally constructed bodies, there is a risk of reiterating or reinforcing the politics which are being challenged and I want to look at Bardsley's *Aftermaths* in some detail to assess how she evades this.

## Carnival

Bakhtin opens his discussion of Rabelais' work with an analysis of carnival and the carnivalesque elements to the grotesque are apparent in *Aftermaths* through Bardsley's performative style and also through the celebratory aspects of the performance. In the carnival tradition, woman is essentially related to the bodily lower stratum; she is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously.<sup>63</sup> Bakhtin comments on the form of the event: "In fact carnival does not know footlights in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators."<sup>64</sup> There are moments in *Aftermaths* where Bardsley comes down from her ascended position on the cross and moves amongst the spectators, circulating amongst the audience and speaking to them individually; such moments visually illustrate this lack of distinction that Bakhtin calls attention to. However, in *Aftermaths* Bardsley is very much in control of the event as she performs the role of the carnival barker. Critic David Berridge discusses this: "The carnival barker aspects of Bardsley's persona, too, invites a reading based on more old fashioned notions of theatricality, showmanship, and circus."<sup>65</sup> By evoking the carnivalesque and the grotesque, Bardsley is working with concepts of the "low": "low" culture, lower bodily stratum, and the "lower realm" of hell. As an audience we are sometimes situated as the "low", positioned gazing upwards at Bardsley as she performs on

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<sup>63</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* p240.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p7.

<sup>65</sup> David Berridge "Please Dress in Black Before Reading This Post", 11/01/10, <http://spilloverspill.blogspot.com/2009/04/please-dress-in-black-before-reading.html>.

the cross, at other times she moves amongst us negating the “footlights”, as Bakhtin expressed it.

The performance is described by Bardsley as such:

From the dazzling heights of the apocalyptic catwalk, from amongst the glorious atrocity merchandise, from the sumptuousness of the furniture of dis-ease, from within the abandoned, mourning mass, the spectacular fe/male host/ess emerges, delivering The Doctrine of Last Things - “let the happy endings commence!”<sup>66</sup>

Here, we not only get the sense of the carnival barker’s tone as s/he tries to drum up business, but we also get a feeling of some of the fissures and hybridisations within the piece. The “fe/male host/ess” implies an ambiguity surrounding the gender of our master/mistress of ceremonies which is realised within the piece. The carnival aspects to the performance further root it within the grotesque while the technology used alters and subverts this concept, creating a hybrid aesthetic of grotesque/technologised. When considering how Bardsley is using this I want to return to the work of Hutcheon who compares parody and the carnival. She claims:

Yet parody can, like the carnival, also challenge norms in order to renovate, to renew. In Bakhtin’s terminology, parody can be centripedal - that is a homogenising, heirarchicizing influence. But it can also be a centrifugal, de-normatizing one.<sup>67</sup>

It is my belief that Bardsley uses parody and the grotesque to de-normatise and re-code the bodies she constructs and in doing this encourages a move away from traditional tropes of identity and binary politics. I would argue that these tactics can be used in contemporary performance as part of a technologised feminist praxis.

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<sup>66</sup> 11/01/10, <http://www.hometag.net/customer/sites/juliabardsley/after/localframe.htm>.

<sup>67</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* p76.

## Critique of Capitalism

As her persona gathers strength, Bardsley grabs a megaphone and begins a litany of anti-capitalist cries. One of the opening images of the piece had been the image of the heart (throbbing red, and fleshy and meaty) being integrated with images of coins falling. Bardsley has described *Aftermaths* as a critique of capitalism, and her satanic character becomes a “prophet” denouncing “profit” and evoking an older theatrical tradition and type of showmanship.<sup>68</sup> In addition to using the megaphone to amplify and alter her voice (and also using a microphone later on) Bardsley shouts and vocalises in a faux American accent. Bardsley is British and this choice to distort her own voice into an American drawl evocative of an evangelical preacher or emphatic salesperson seems to be a nod to the American marketing strategies I discussed in my last chapter in relation to subRosa’s work as well as another form of disguise. Bardsley’s statements about the apocalypse, religion and the current economic situation, using phrases such as “Black Market”, make the links between these apocalyptic visions and our current society explicit.<sup>69</sup>

Bardsley employs a range of technologies throughout *Aftermaths* including digitally mixed video and live-feed filming. At one point she uses live-feed video to film the audience. However the image that appears on the screens is technologically altered so that the image of the audience appears like the negative of a photograph. She mixes these images of audience members with the imagery of flesh and money that we saw previously, making clear the connection between the audience and the society she is showing us. This literal implication of the audience in these images of flesh and money acts as an accusation of complicity in this capitalist, materialist world and also as a reminder of the

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<sup>68</sup> This is reminiscent of Peggy Phelan’s comments on the analogy between performance and finance: “Performance resists the balanced circulations of finance. It saves nothing; it only spends.” Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993) p148.

<sup>69</sup> There are points throughout the performance when it is ambiguous where the sound is coming from, i.e. whether Bardsley is speaking it live through the megaphone/microphone or it is recorded. This ambiguity between the live voice and the technological (the mediated) voice further adds to the “ambivalence” of the piece.

commercial aspect of the event itself. As Bardsley strives to remind us, we are paying for this performance. The commercial aspect of the event is further emphasised at the end of the performance as the small black objects that we were asked to bring are amalgamated into a piece of artwork which Bardsley attempts to sell for £66.06 - a final diabolic reference to the Book of Revelations where the numerals 666 represent the number of the Beast. This also serves as an ironic final reminder of the anti-capitalist sentiments of the performance. It has been argued that capitalism is a specifically anti-feminist infrastructure and it seems that the anti-capitalist sentiments in the work of Bardsley and other artists I have been looking at (such as subRosa) are part of this move towards a specifically feminist praxis.<sup>70</sup>

## Mouth/Meat

We see Bardsley at one point literally reading from the Book of Revelations as the negative of the pages are projected around the space. The book that she is reading from, however, has a flickering light inside, illuminating her face and thereby creating a monstrous cyborgian figure. At this point the light coming from the book illuminates Bardsley's mouth, leaving her other features in shadow.<sup>71</sup> In the grotesque, the mouth is a focal area: "The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss."<sup>72</sup> The mouth becomes the symbol for the boundary between inside and outside, and is also notably the orifice from which the voice comes - another cave-like orifice analogous to the vagina.<sup>73</sup> Bakhtin continues his discussion of the role of the mouth: "Of all the features of the

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<sup>70</sup> This is discussed by Michèle A. Pujol, *Feminism and Anti-Feminism in Early Economic Thought* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, 1992) p8.

<sup>71</sup> Laurie Anderson puts a battery powered light in her mouth in *Home of the Brave* (1986) also making the link between the cyborgian and the grotesque and illuminating her facial orifice.

<sup>72</sup> Bakhtin, "The Grotesque Images of the Body and Its Sources" p92.

<sup>73</sup> Jane Blocker writes a chapter on the mouth and its metonymic meaning in *What the Body Cost*. "I would like to suggest that the mouth can stand metonymically for the art of preference – the living, breathing, speaking body." Jane Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History and Performance* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) p19.

human face, the nose and mouth play the most important part in the grotesque image of the body; the head, ears, and nose also acquire a grotesque character when they adopt the animal form or that of inanimate objects.”<sup>74</sup> Throughout much of the literature surrounding the grotesque, the descriptions of what evokes the grotesque are reminiscent of the notion of *Das Unheimliche* - the uncanny. Bakhtin’s explanation here refers to the fluidity between animate and inanimate that Jentsch first noted in his 1906 article and which I discussed at length in Chapter One. The similarities between the uncanny, the grotesque, the abject, the monstrous and the cyborgian, then, lie with the confusion between states, the liminal zone between inside/outside and the fluidity of the body boundary.

The orifices that disrupt the clarity of the boundary between inside and outside (in this case the mouth) become the focal point of the action once more as the lights go off and the only illumination comes from Bardsley’s mouth where a white light shines. She mutters: “I am the dark angel” and we see images of her face onscreen covered with sores.<sup>75</sup> The film abruptly changes to the image of her phallus and Bardsley simultaneously pulls a zip on her phallus and reaches into the seam (which is lined with red satin and looks like a vagina) and pulls out a gold amulet. This focus on the orifices that confuse the body boundary and provide a way inside the body, such as the vagina and the mouth, emphasises the liminality of these bodily parts and the tension between inside and outside that the grotesque and the abject epitomise, as well as furthering the gender ambiguity through the combined phallus/vagina. This is further explored as we approach “end time” in which Bardsley calls for a “farewell to meat” and images of the insides of a body, filmed using an endoscopic camera, appear on the screen.<sup>76</sup> This farewell to meat and the final section before “end time” is reminiscent of the cyberpunk reference to the body as “meat” and of the potential of the Internet and technology to “leave the meat behind” while the visual and visceral images once again refer to the grotesque body and the abject body; what is inside has come out and is visible and our “vision” is of the

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<sup>74</sup> Bakhtin, “The Grotesque Images of the Body and Its Sources” p92.

<sup>75</sup> This correlates with the idea that she is Lucifer, the fallen angel.

<sup>76</sup> This is reminiscent of Stelarc’s *Stomach Sculpture* (1993).



grotesque body. The materiality of the body appears inescapable and the cyborg utopian vision of leaving the meat behind is rejected as the fleshy images remind us that our bodies *are* meat, and our “aftermaths” in reality are cadaverous inert bodies.

While the screens reiterate that “the end is in sight” this euphemistic phrase is complimented with uplifting music and a calming of the images to soothing pale yellows after the visceral blood reds of the meat. Words such as “see”, “vision” and “second sight” remind us of the preoccupation with sight throughout this performance and the word play of “in sight” against “inside” seems to refer to the images of the interior of the body - the body turned inside out - insides in-sight. With the focus still on her mouth (her facial orifice) Bardsley explores more vocal techniques and begins to speak in tongues.<sup>77</sup> Her babbling escalates and the music and lights grow to a climax until Bardsley collapses appearing to have a fit as the pounding music and strobe light manically flash on her convulsing body. Because this occurred in the performance that took place as part of the NRLA in Glasgow but not in the London version for Spill that I had witnessed previously, I had the uncanny feeling, as I was watching Bardsley fall, that perhaps this fit was not a part of the performance - that the strobe lights had provoked an adverse bodily reaction in the performer. Very soon it became apparent that this was not the case, but I had a gut-wrenching moment of seeing Bardsley’s body achieve the ultimate height of grotesquery: the confusion of not knowing whether to laugh or scream, of not knowing whether the body I was witnessing was in control of its movements or not. In this moment with the combination of the convulsing live body and the flickering spasmodic strobe lighting and pounding music, Bardsley’s body and the technology seemed as one. Whether her body was responding to the immersive technological barrage or the sound and light were mimicking her movements was unclear and is irrelevant, however in this moment Bardsley’s body and the technology were connected in a way that emphasised the ambiguity surrounding the relationship between technology and live bodies in performance.

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<sup>77</sup> Christians believe that the gift of tongues is present in the scriptures in the New Testament, providing a further biblical association to *Aftermaths*.

## Plagues

The ambiguity surrounding the amalgamation of live bodies and technological effects is furthered through the entrance of the “plagues” - four hybridised, cyborgian and grotesque bodies. At “End Time” Bardsley shouts “Bring on the plagues!” and the plagues come on one by one.<sup>78</sup> These are executed by female performers adorned in bizarre and extravagant costume and as they enter we realise that they are wearing some of the costumes that had previously featured in the film showing garments of disease and furniture that had appeared on the screens. What is intriguing about these characters is that while they are readable as female bodies, they are mutated and disguised to signify the cyborgian grotesque. Although they are female bodies, they subvert the fetishisation and objectification of the female body image through their parodic revelling in the grotesque.



**Figure 33** Julia Bardsley. *Plagues*, *Aftermaths*, NRLA, Glasgow, (2010), Photo Credit: Andrew Poppy.

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<sup>78</sup> Antonin Artaud discusses theatre as a metaphorical plague in his theatre of cruelty. Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double* Victor Corti, trans. (London: Calder and Boyars Ltd, 1989). In creating this analogy Artaud seems to be appealing for a new way of perceiving the theatre, just as Bardsley appeals for a new vision or a “seeing-anew” in *Aftermaths*.

The first plague wears a dress of silver sequins with black grape-like growths spouting from orifices all over the garment. The costume has a green illuminated rim and there is something alien-like about the creature's overall appearance - almost like an alien from a low budget sci-fi movie. The grape-like growths evoke tumours and are reminiscent of the symptoms of the bubonic plague (the Black Death) but made hyperreal and extravagant. When I saw this performance a second time, Bardsley made a number of improvised references to haemorrhoids, provoking the plague to dance with her rear in the air wiggling the growths. This reference to an inflammation of the glands in the rectum is in keeping with the grotesque's affiliation with the lower stratum of bodily parts and bodily functions such as pregnancy and defecation.<sup>79</sup> In fact, what we refer to as haemorrhoids are actually the swelling and protrusion of the haemorrhoid glands (which everybody has inside their rectum) that makes the glands expand outside the body. This plague epitomises the grotesque through her appearance: the visible protrusions that illustrate the inside coming out, the references to an ailment of the rectum representing the lower bodily stratum, and her visible gender ambiguity and hybridised appearance.

The second plague that ascends onto the catwalk wears a bandage around her head so all that is visible is a mouth with lolling tongue and manic eyes. She is adorned with a pink satin corset with pointed breasts evoking a female negligee, but also has a bright red, vulgar phallus which she gestures with emphatically. Her head bandage is also shaped like a phallus. This plague's dance is lewd and sexual as she drags her bandaged leg behind her and moves to the four points of the cross ensuring that the entire audience is subjected to her leer. The physical disabilities of this plague speak of the abjection of the non-normative body and from underneath the bandages, vivid red fabric suggests wounds; the overall image of this plague is of fleshy gashes, disease, untamed sexuality and abjection. This image of the diseased female body as sexualised suggests venereal disease and perhaps also refers to women as prostitutes: the

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<sup>79</sup> Jeffrey J. Cohen discusses the sexual implications and ideas surrounding foreign invasion of *ficus* or haemorrhoids in relation to King Alfred the Great in the sixteenth century in his text *Medieval Identity Machines*. Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) pxix.

“whores” that are mentioned in the Book of Revelations. Miles argues that historically prostitutes were seen to epitomise the grotesque:

Some women were seen as personifications of the grotesque: prostitutes for example, epitomised the penetrable body, the body shaped by lust, the permeable body that produces juices and smells. The prostitute’s body is opposite to the closed, self-contained controlled male body, and the opposite of that of some virtuous women, especially of virgins, who were “gardens enclosed”.<sup>80</sup>

The prostitute as the penetrable body embodies the grotesque as female sexual organs, sexual activity and behaviour are a central object of grotesque figuration. The female reproductive organs and their functions “were the quintessential terror that must be conquered by laughter.”<sup>81</sup> As I suggested earlier, the figure of the cyborg, while often perceived as androgynous, has been sexualised within cyberpunk fiction. Even in a supposedly “post-gender” world the female cyborg body is susceptible to sexualisation and reducible to hyper-exaggerated sexual organs.

The third plague is red and is covered in sores which are illuminated and appear to pulse as Bardsley moves in time to the music. These sores (which are red circular lights integrated into the fabric) are the same ones that Bardsley had revealed to the audience earlier. The plague and Bardsley rub wounds together in a sexual manner as Bardsley leads her along the catwalk-style promenade of the cross.<sup>82</sup> All of the plagues have their own way of moving around the space, and notably all of them are wearing heels, another nod to the female gendering of these creatures, despite whatever androgynous or hermaphroditic characteristics they also might have. Because this is set up as a kind of lurid and sordid catwalk show, the wearing of heels seems appropriately

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<sup>80</sup> Miles, “Carnal Abominations” p92.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p92-3.

<sup>82</sup> This sharing of disease seems to refer to the contemporary fear of infection and contagion as discussed by Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 2002).

feminine and these models of “the garments of dis-ease”, as Bardsley refers to them, seem to be parodying a conventional catwalk show. The female bodies which are visible within a fashion catwalk show are conventionally attractive, tall and thin; these female “models” are abject, diseased and hybridised creatures, faceless and mutated, technologised and animalised. By showing audiences this alternative fashion show of historical feminine associations Bardsley is working against historically dominant narratives as well as narratives that suffuse the contemporary catwalk. Throughout *Aftermaths* Bardsley parodies a number of feminine tropes (we have seen a parody of “the blushing bride”, “the damsel in distress”) and through her catwalk show we see her critiquing how the female body is performed through fashion. It seems that by creating these grotesque parodies of femininity and de-fetishising the female body Bardsley is re-coding the grotesque as enabling in that it destabilises patriarchal conventions surrounding bodily attractiveness. Bardsley is also working within Hutcheon’s definition of parody as “an act of emancipation: irony and parody can act to signal distance and control in the encoding act.”<sup>83</sup> The freedom that irony can provide in performance and the distance it evokes makes it useful as a political strategy.



Figure 34 Julia Bardsley. *Plagues on catwalk*, *Aftermaths*, NRLA, Glasgow, (2010), Photo Credit: Andrew Poppy.

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<sup>83</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* p96.

## Pregnancy/birth as grotesque

The fourth plague is pregnant and there is a tube reaching from the mask (which resembles a deep-sea diving mask) connecting it to the stomach. It should be noted that Bakhtin illustrates the grotesque with an image of old pregnant hags:

In the famous Kerch terracotta collection we find figurines of senile pregnant hags. Moreover, the old hags are laughing. This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth.<sup>84</sup>

While Bakhtin finds the epitome of the grotesque in this image, Russo claims that for the feminist reader this image is more than ambivalent.<sup>85</sup> Certainly the idea of a death that gives birth is grotesque; however by locating the epitome of the grotesque in this image he positions the female body and its functions as grotesque. If, as Miles claims, the female body is intrinsically grotesque due to its historical connection with the lower stratum, and its penetrability, while its bodily functions such as pregnancy and birth provide images of “natural grotesqueness”, this representation speaks volumes about the historical positioning of women’s bodies in terms of social role and function.<sup>86</sup> In the pregnant cyborg of this show, the gold sequins and iridescent fabric used for the costume give the creature a mermaid-like quality.<sup>87</sup> The pregnant female body here is made monstrous; the fact that the tube flows from mouth to stomach implies a feeding of the baby or perhaps a feeding *on* the baby and is a

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<sup>84</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* p25.

<sup>85</sup> Russo, *The Female Grotesque* p63.

<sup>86</sup> Miles, “Carnal Abominations” p93.

<sup>87</sup> Alixe Bovey discusses this: “The siren of antiquity had the head of a woman and the body of a bird during the Middle ages, this creature was merged with a fish-tailed humanoid, the mermaid and her mate, the merman.” Bovey, *Monsters and Grotesques in Medieval Manuscripts* p25.

disturbing image evoking infanticide and motherly violence.<sup>88</sup> As at other points in *Aftermaths*, what should be inside - the placenta - is positioned outside the body boundary and is made visible, and what was internal has become external evoking the grotesque and the abject. The grotesque as connected with devouring, swallowing and consuming seems notable when confronted with the image of Bardsley's final plague. I would argue that through her use of images of hybrid bodies, phalluses, and monstrous pregnant bodies Bardsley is engaging with the historical association of female bodies with the grotesque, while simultaneously showing audiences the newest version of the female hybrid - the figure of the cyborg that has become familiar to us in recent years. By using technology to re-enact the Book of Revelations in a very contemporary manner (the use of electronic music and digital technologies permeate the piece) Bardsley is closing the gap between historical female hybrids and current ones.

All of the plagues' faces are covered by their costumes creating a sense of anonymity and facelessness, but notably these four horsemen of the apocalypse are all female. The show concludes with Bardsley bringing on miniature models of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, one for every plague in its corresponding colour. Bardsley has her own black model which remains centre stage with her and, as the plagues dance off at Bardsley's command, she is once again alone in the space. A final solution to contemporary capitalist society seems to be offered by Bardsley as the screens turn a soothing white after the previous chaotic series of images and the words "Art as Cure, The Revelation" flash on the four screens.<sup>89</sup> The revelation then, according to Bardsley, is to be *our* revelation that art can cure the diseased capitalist culture in which we exist. This somewhat naive and convenient message at the end of the performance seems a little abrupt after the imagery of meat, disease, money

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<sup>88</sup> In *Almost the Same* (2008), Bardsley had originally planned to explore patriarchal violence but ended up focussing on the violence of motherhood, the violence of the birthing act and violent behaviour within mother/child relationships.

<sup>89</sup> Artaud states: "Like the plague, theatre is a crisis resolved either by death or cure. The plague is a superior disease because it is an absolute crisis after which there is nothing left except death or drastic putrefication. In the same way, theatre is a disease because it is the final balance that cannot be obtained without destruction. It urges the mind to delirium which intensifies its energy." Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double* p22.

and hell. Bardsley places her horseman model onto a podium and it spins around as she lights it with her torch, illustrating the fetishisation of the object that materialist capitalism provokes. Finally Bardsley grabs the microphone and says “It is end time Ladies and Germs”. By substituting “germs” for “gentleman” Bardsley subtly implies that it is the men in society that are causing our society’s disease (or “dis-ease” as she refers to it). The fleshy image that the show opened with returns to the screen and the words “A Tear in the Meat of Vision” reappear. This time the words are reversed as though we have come through the other side of something; come to the end of the event.

## **Garments/furniture of dis-ease**

At the end of the performance we are invited by Bardsley to look at the “garments and furniture of dis-ease”. Throughout *Aftermaths*, spectators have been shown the “tear” in the dominant vision of women’s bodies as grotesque, excessive, leaky and deviant and the final part of the show asks audiences to peruse a gallery of abject bodies and objects. The collage of filmed images that was shown during the performance involved fragments and details of furniture such as a lamp made out of sutures and what looks like human hair that has been used as thread, a gold and yellow table made of abject looking teats, a standard lamp created from pink bandages similar to those worn by the diseased plague, a vanity case with a lid constructed from hypodermic needles and clear tubular glass reminiscent of test tubes, an elegant commode chair and a lamp made out of black leather gloves. All of these objects appear grotesque due to their associations with the body and also with their explicit celebration of protrusions. The colours and textures of the materials used parody the fabric of the body while the latex, rubber and PVC suggest sexual fetishism. The nicotine yellow, the pale cream, the blancmange pink, the shiny black - all of the colours evoke associations with the body and a sense of inherent abjection.

Bardsley has stated of *Aftermaths*: “Witness a display of secreting surfaces, wounded landscapes, curtains of skin and hair, mutating bodies, fragments of meat, murder and money” and certainly the performance and the installation that follows it do include this (“secreting surfaces” seems particularly fitting). I think that the choice to abjectify domestic objects such as lamps and chairs is an interesting one as fashion and furnishings are traditionally associated with the



feminine.<sup>90</sup> Certainly the materials used all refer to the body - either in their appearance (as in the case of the putrid yellowy plastic material used that has connotations with certain types of skin - the abject skin of the milk or the puckered plastic that looked like teats) or through their association (as in the use of hypodermic needles that signifies the breaking of the body boundary - the mixing of inside and outside and contagion). One of the things that strikes me about Bakhtin's description is his analogy between the grotesque body and landscapes and architecture. He states:

Thus the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths. Mountains and abysses, such is the relief of the grotesque body; or speaking in architectural terms, towers and subterranean passages.<sup>91</sup>

What we are witnessing through the furniture of dis-ease is the grotesque and abject body transposed onto seemingly inert and banal objects such as chairs and lamps. In the same way that Bakhtin employs an architectural analogy for the grotesque body, Bardsley uses furniture and garments to bring the inside outside. Another example of the grotesque, according to Bakhtin "is Panurge's proposal to build walls from genital organs of women" which also seems a fitting comparison to some of Bardsley's highly sexualised and suggestive objects.<sup>92</sup> In Rabelais' *Pantagruel* (1532) it is an attempt to pass comment on the women of Paris that leads Panurge to propose a wall to the city made out of their genital organs.<sup>93</sup> In *Aftermaths* the use of materials that evoke human skin to create a

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<sup>90</sup> 16/01/10, <http://www.juliabardsley.net>.

<sup>91</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* p318.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* p312.

<sup>93</sup> Panurge says: "I have noticed in this town, the thingummybobs of women are cheaper than stone. You should build walls of them arranging them with good architectural symmetry, putting the biggest ones in the front ranks, then sloping them back upwards like the spine of a donkey, making ranks of the medium ones next and finally of the smallest." Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* p81.

series of domestic furnishings epitomises the grotesque and makes these objects seem to be partially human/animal due to the bodily materials used. This juxtaposition of the female associations with the domestic and the grotesque destabilises both of their conventional readings and creates a bizarre and unsettling hybrid display that, I would argue, is key to Bardsley's feminist praxis.



Figure 35 Julia Bardsley. Furniture of “dis-ease” *Aftermaths*, Brussels, (2010), Photo Credit: Pierre Phillippe Hofmann.

## Endings

The cyborg females within *Aftermaths* represent grotesque and abject bodies as well as technologised bodies and engage with a history of hybridity, celebrating these “potent fusions” as well as the “end of meat”. By drawing together the concepts of the grotesque female body and the cyborgian female body Bardsley shows us that the cyborg, for all its technological attributes, is the most recent inception of the hybrid and encourages us to consider alternative hybrid models to think about female identity. By doing this we are reminded of the feminist aims of Haraway's original “Cyborg Manifesto” which were to consider alternative identity models out with the binaries that have existed previously and to create affinities between different modes of feminist thought through the hybrid figure of the cyborg.

By amalgamating the grotesque female and the cyborg female Bardsley is drawing on a history of female hybridity, while also creating her own hybrid of old and new conceptions of femininity. Bardsley has effectively further hybridised an already hybrid body, creating an ambiguous body in between genders/species/history. In *Aftermaths*, audiences witness a hellish catwalk of

deformed and hybridised bodies, the four horse (wo)men of the apocalypse dragging their mutated bodies along to the sound of a pounding electro beat. Also, in *Aftermaths*, despite the projected images of meat - of what was inside coming out - we do not ever witness female flesh on display. Although five female performers dominate the stage the female body is never fetishised or objectified: the anti-capitalist sentiments of *Aftermaths* avoids the commodification of women's "meat" - herein lies Bardsley's political strategy. This non-objectification of the female body is a tactical choice, for although we have five female bodies on the stage and are aware that these are female bodies, they are not objectified. Instead the performance is more ambiguous, the bodily representations more messy; just as the body is messy.

I would argue that the hybrid/cyborg/grotesque bodies that I have been discussing, though they have been historically linked with women in a negative way, can, if approached from an alternative angle, provide a political impetus. Haraway's "ironic political myth" aimed to open up avenues of discussion and compromise between disparate modes of thought through the symbol of her hybridised boundary creature. As Wolff argues:

Body politics need not depend on an uncritical, ahistorical notion of the (female) body. Beginning from the lived experience of women in their currently constituted bodily identities - identities which are real at the same time as being socially inscribed and discursively produced - feminist artists and cultural workers can engage in the challenging and exhilarating task of simultaneously affirming those identities, questioning their origins and ideological functions, and working towards a nonpatriarchal expression of gender and the body.<sup>94</sup>

This idea of reassessing the bodily tropes assigned to the female body, investigating the origins of these identities and exploring the positive aspects of hybridisation (such as destabilising gender tropes and categories and encouraging identification with multiple subject positions) for feminist theories of the body is a refreshing look at how these different hybridities associated

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<sup>94</sup> Janet Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics", Jane C. Desmond, ed. *Meaning in Motion* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997) p97.

with the female can be appropriated for future feminisms. While Wolff was writing in 1997, I would argue that there is still a need to explore existing cultural representations of the female body - dissect them, challenge them, subvert them. By altering their bodies through technology in performance, Bardsley is asserting agency over her own cyborg bodies and re-coding critical thought surrounding the gendering of technology.

By trying to look afresh at concepts such as the grotesque and how they have come to be inscribed on the female body, we can analyse and critically theorise more contemporary hybrids such as the cyborg. In doing this and attempting a critique of such concepts and models, I believe that a feminist technologised practice can be developed through contemporary performance. I agree with Parker-Starbuck who argues that the alliances forged between human and machine through the theoretical idea of the cyborg might provide some basis to reconceive what it means to be human in relation to animals. Parker-Starbuck discusses the “lingering alterations to seemingly fixed categories” and I feel that this is where representations of feminine hybridised bodies can provide alternative ways of conceiving identity.<sup>95</sup> While the figure of the cyborg as outlined in Haraway’s manifesto has been criticised for not achieving a paradigm shift in the theorising of identity, I feel optimistic that through performative explorations into representations of hybridised female bodies we can think critically about categories of representation and identity and forge a path for a new feminist practice incorporating technology.

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<sup>95</sup> Parker-Starbuck, “Becoming-Animate” p660.

## Conclusion

I began this thesis with Kathy Davis' three problematics of difference, domination and subversion. This thesis has argued that these are common to the feminist performance texts I am analysing and that each of them acknowledges a difference in how men and women might use or interact with technology, recognise the domination through the cultural and social gendering of technologies which maintains patriarchal power structures over women, and most importantly, practice a subversion of existing uses in the feminist action of working within these structures to challenge and re-code them. As I outlined in the introduction, I have applied a feminist reading to these performance texts due to their recognition of patriarchal structures and attempts to challenge or destabilise these. I want briefly to mention another aspect of Elizabeth Grosz's argument surrounding feminist texts:

A feminist text must not only be critical of or a challenge to the patriarchal norms governing it; it must also help, in whatever way, to facilitate the production of new and perhaps unknown, unthought discursive spaces - new styles, modes of analysis and argument, new genres and forms - that contest the limits and constraints currently at work in the regulation of textual production and reception.<sup>1</sup>

The idea that feminist texts are not only critical of existing patriarchal structures, but also offer a new discursive space and modes of analysis is very promising, and, I would argue that the performances I have been looking at often do this. This is evident in the varied forms that are being used and the range of types of performance that are being created. While all fall under the rubric of "postmodern performance", the variation in styles from immersive, online and hybrid forms suggest an innovation in style and form.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York; London: Routledge, 1994) p23.

I would also argue that the shifting role of the audience in technologised performance and the performance-maker's demand for input, interactivity, or some sort of direct political engagement with the work, also denotes that these are feminist texts in line with Grosz's definition. The "new" is not only being employed here through the integration of a "new" medium (i.e. technologies) but is being explored through form and style while attempting to engage audiences with the important politics that lie beneath the relationships between women's bodies and technologies. In fact, according to Elaine Aston and Gerry Harris, the rhetoric surrounding the "new" can have a debilitating effect on how these types of performances are critically analysed. Aston and Harris claim:

Repeatedly, for instance, we have heard Haraway's manifesto appropriated in ways that ignore or underplay its commitment to feminism, and reduce its dual perspective to a single vision that declares a cyborgian utopia NOW. In performance studies, at its most extreme this produces a techno-romantic formalism that assumes that if a work is produced through, or employs "new" technologies, it is somehow automatically and inherently politically "radical". There is little recognition of Haraway's materialist critique of the role of technology in the "Informatics of domination" and of the conditions of its production by a new global underclass. Nor is there recognition that, as Haraway's discourse makes clear, robbed of its oppositional politics, the "cyborg" exactly fits the requirements of aggressive global, militaristic capitalism.<sup>2</sup>

Aston and Harris argue that the feminist aspects of Haraway's manifesto are often neglected and that the "newness" of the technologies integrated into performance practice often suggest a radical politics without a critical analysis of their usage or how they are disseminated. Without realising the feminist meaning of Haraway's text, as Aston and Harris contend, the figure of the cyborg can be read in a different way and can be made to stand for the militaristic,

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<sup>2</sup> Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, "Feminist Futures and the Possibilities of 'We'", Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, eds. *Performance, Practice and Process: Contemporary [Women] Practitioners* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) p10.

capitalist techno-body that Haraway's cyborg warns against. To avoid reading all technologised work as "new" and therefore radical is essential, as is to thoroughly analyse how technologies and bodies are interrelating in performance and how this can be interpreted in relation to wider social and cultural anxieties surrounding cyborg bodies. I have argued throughout this thesis that this is particularly pertinent when considering *female* bodies, as the cultural inscription of both female bodies and the gendering of technologies has already been established and must be reassessed as part of the much needed political work that Haraway calls for in her manifesto. I argue that performance, and specifically the body in performance, can act as a site for these debates. As Susan Broadhurst states in *Digital Practices*: "The digital does what all avant-garde art does; it is an experimental extension of the socio-political and cultural of an epoch."<sup>3</sup>

I began this thesis with a number of initial enquires and would like to revisit some of these at this stage. By taking a selection of work by various female artists I have tried to represent experimentations within a range of different types of technologised performance. One of the remits of this thesis was to explore how women artists are representing the female body via technology in performance, and in order to analyse this over a range of types of technologies, my performance examples had to be few. Also, to explore the examples in any depth the number had to be limited, hence my decision to use between one and three performance pieces per chapter. Within each performance example I have tried to evaluate to what extent the artist is working within the gendered connotations of the specific technology and have found that, for the most part, the artists I am analysing are working against the culturally inscribed gendering of the technologies and are challenging and subverting these norms. I would also argue that the artists frequently use the technology to alter perceptions and representations of the female body and that often this is an explicitly feminist choice.

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Broadhurst, *Digital Practices: Aesthetic and Neurosynthetic Approaches to Performance and Technology* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p185.

I will now return briefly to the content of each chapter to summarise my findings. In my initial chapter I took immersive experiments during the 1990s as the starting point for my study. I discussed the embodied experience of the female body to explore ideas of gendering of technology and spatiality. In this chapter the spectator is also the performer as they are “immersed” in a virtual environment and move through virtual worlds. In my analysis of the work of Char Davies and Brenda Laurel I aim to provide an alternative reading of these seminal performances through the critical theory of Iris Marion Young on female motility and spatiality. By returning to this specific performance “moment” in experimentations with VR technology, I suggest that a rewriting of the existing conventions surrounding VR are attempted by Laurel and Davies and that new, more embodied ways of interfacing with VR are explored. What this discussion has enabled me to do is assess how an embodied experience can be read in terms of gender, not as an essential, biological factor, but as a culturally inscribed way of perceiving space and of culturally coded technologies. In this chapter I contend that the gendering of technologies can be re-coded by creative and subversive applications. Because of the decline of immersive technologies due to economic factors and participation numbers, this very promising field for female performance artists has become almost obsolete.

In Chapter Two my discussion of the interplay between live bodies and virtual bodies employed theories of doubling and the uncanny to examine how performance artists Anita Ponton and Caroline Smith work against existing narratives surrounding female bodies. For Ponton this is visualised through the diffracted multiple images of herself which, she claims, illustrate the multifaceted and split subjectivity that everyone has as opposed to the unified, stable image of “woman” that second-wave feminists constructed. The postmodern deconstruction of the “self” in Ponton’s work tries to uproot this identity of “woman”. While attempting to draw attention to how women are represented through film, Ponton represents herself via film and raises a situation that recurs throughout the work of many artists that I have investigated in this thesis: in using the medium they are attempting to critique, they are also working within its conventions and therefore risk their images and messages being reassimilated in collusion with the medium.



This can also be seen in the work of Smith who doubles her own image and plays her bouncy, active, live body off her static and deadpan virtual double to explore issues surrounding the female body as anorexic. Through her choice of subject matter and her historical analogy between Harriet Staunton and Smith's own sister, the female body is represented almost entirely through narratives surrounding anorexia, a disorder that affects mainly women. The analogy between woman and the body is either intentionally or unintentionally reasserted and woman is conceived of as both subject and object: as a body hyperaware of other people's perceptions of their image. I return to the debates that I acknowledged in my introduction; how can female artists work with their own bodies in a critical and self-reflexive way without seeming to be in alliance with patriarchal structures of representation? While I agree that all feminist performance art is in some way political, I have aimed to provide a more nuanced reading of this throughout this thesis and to dissect the intersecting systems of representation and gendering surrounding female bodies and technologies. While representing their own bodies creates challenges for female performance artists, I would like to suggest that with the appropriate re-assimilation of materials and often with the use of strategic performance techniques such as irony or parody, a re-coding of bodies and technologies is possible.

In the work of SUKA OFF the issues surrounding representation become more slippery as the images of male and female bodies morph into one another. The live-feed mixing of digital and analogue images (Polaroid photographs of audience members) creates doubles between the audience and their image. There is also the doubling of the female performer and her image, and the creation of visually uncanny moments through the morphing technique. This reiterates Freud's observation that the uncanny is evoked by what was inanimate being rendered animate as the still Polaroid images appear to be moving with the face of the live body melding and merging into them. While in this chapter I explicate the historical links between the female body and the uncanny, in the work of SUKA OFF it is the liminal zones between images and identities that create the most uncanny performance moments. The uncomfortable nature of this performance created by the manipulation of the often inert female bodies and the ambiance of sexual violence and death is accentuated through the blood-letting and piercing as the company literally

work with the body's fluids. While the work of SUKA OFF evokes the uncanny and explores representations of bodies and genders via technology, *transSfera* lingers in my mind as ambiguous and complex. I find it difficult to position its work within any structure of identity politics; I struggle to read its work as feminist, although SUKA OFF does aim to destabilise existing structures of gender and create a fluidity between genders (what they refer to as a "third gender"). This analysis of the work of SUKA OFF is the least conclusive within this thesis in that the alternative tensions between bodies, technology, sex and gender defy a clear-cut reading of the performance.

The research undertaken for Chapter Three explores how live bodies can be combined with Internet performance to create a dual performance for a proximal and online audience. As in previous chapters it is evident that the integration of technology to performance practice provokes a reassignment of the role of audience members. While there is a double audience, a number of the online audience members are also participating and contributing to the cyberperformance of Avatar Body Collision making the audience role more interactive whilst also sacrificing control over to them to some extent. I argue that by relinquishing this level of responsibility to audiences, ABC risks interactions that are not in keeping with its own politics and have no control over what the interjections might be. My findings show that in performances where avatars are used by online participants, the critical reassimilation of images that ABC attempts to integrate into its work is lacking and by using the Internet in both its online and live events, ABC's feminist reappropriations of gendered images and texts are often lost. My analysis leads me to believe that this is partially due to the nature of the Internet itself and its own complicity in the practices that ABC speaks out against (such as trafficking, pornography etc.) Trying to recontextualise materials for feminist aims on the Internet has proven difficult, as my discussion of cyberfeminist tactics illustrates, and I would argue that the work of ABC falls slightly short of re-coding female bodies in cyberspace because of its chosen performance mode. Another aspect that I discuss at length is the role of the live body in its work and I argue that the costumed, animated and comical character that Ptacek plays in *Screen Save Her* offers a more interesting interplay between the live and the virtual than the still, unmoving figure of Ptacek in *Belonging* where she seems rendered inert by the machine she is controlling. I would contend that it is the interplay and visual dialogue

between the live body and the technology that holds potential for the development of a creative feminist praxis.

The discussion in Chapter Four of the relationship between female bodies and biotechnologies and the politics that encompass women's bodies as commodities, the economic market in eggs and the ethical and moral implications of recent biotechnological developments enables me to read the work of subRosa and Kira O'Reilly as representative of a newfound interest in integrating art practices and laboratory practices. In attempting to destabilise existing bodies of knowledge as "scientific" and encouraging public interest and access to biotechnological practices, both of the examples I examine in this chapter strive to provoke discussion around the politics of these technologies and how they are being used in relation to bodies. My research indicates that subRosa's strategical use of irony and different truth registers in its spoof "trade-show" expo events does literally demand a response from spectators through their inclusion in the performance. Audiences are offered a range of comical (fictitious) products and services to make baby-making easier, less messy and sex-free. The removal of the body from these procedures is notable, but I argue in this chapter that the members of subRosa distance themselves from the bodies they are referring to and could be accused of portraying women considering ART as easily preyed on by the repro-tech companies. This discrepancy between their very visible and authoritative bodies and the bodies they "speak for" is notable; however, subRosa suggests that its work is intended to generate debate and discussion around the technologies rather than providing a comprehensive view. subRosa also indicates that its performances are not critiquing these technologies, merely discussing them. But I would argue that there is a level of demonization of ART in the way the information is conveyed. The work of O'Reilly, by contrast is much more ambiguous. In my analysis of O'Reilly's performance *inthewrongplaceness* I discuss how a chance encounter became the work itself as the substitution of a pig's body for O'Reilly's took place. O'Reilly explores the links and similarities between the "human and non-human animal" (herself and the pig) through her performance. The meditative and lamentative performance with the carcass of a pig that had been killed for use in a laboratory acts as a memorial to the pig and others like it. O'Reilly's urge to explore and explicate the "ethical ambivalences" she encountered during her period of research and development at SymbioticA is performatively

played out for an audience of one. In this chapter I argue that O'Reilly and subRosa both question the role of the female body as a "birthing" body and attempt subversive representations of this through their work. Both subRosa and O'Reilly also highlight the ethical implications of biotechnological practices.

The final chapter of this thesis focused on the cyborg body. Haraway's figure of the cyborg has permeated this entire thesis and is explored in more depth in the final segment of this project. By drawing an analogy between the cyborg body and historical depictions of the grotesque body, I argue that the female body has been situated as a hybrid being, often animalised, conveyed as excessive, leaky and deviant. The duality of "The Body" and the body recurs in concepts of "The Cyborg" and the cyborg as the cultural construction is played against the lived experience. My in-depth reading of Bardsley's performance *Aftermaths* in relation to theories of the cyborg and the grotesque enables me to suggest that unconventional cultural critique can offer alternative readings of female bodies and can re-code existing narratives. The integration of technology into performance opens up a multitude of opportunities to reassess the relationship between women's bodies and their cultural constructions.

As I have suggested at numerous points during this study the role of the audience has been a factor that has interested me throughout this period of study and I want to succinctly explicate what my research suggests about spectatorship in technologised performance. In "It's All About the Audience" (2006), Diane Paulus claims that performance art does not challenge or upset audiences in the way that political work could and, as Paulus suggests, should.<sup>4</sup> In the first chapter the immersive VR examples explore an embodied sensory bodily experience for participants and the spectators also become the performer in these pieces. In Chapter Two on live and virtual bodies, the inclusion of audience images into the performance alters the spectator's relationship to the work while the visceral response to the bloodletting is also notable. Chapter Three analyses the dual audience in the work of ABC as an online audience and a live proximal audience share a simultaneously live and online event. In this type of cyberformance also audience interaction and contributions add a further

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<sup>4</sup> Diane Paulus, "It's All About the Audience", *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Volume 16.3, 2006, pp.334-347.

element to the experience of the spectator. In the performances that I discuss in Chapter Four, audiences are confronted by ethical and political choices in the work of subRosa. Spectators are “in on” the irony of this type of work and the performance style and delivery ensure this. Alternatively, in the work of Kira O’Reilly the audience is positioned almost as voyeur to the tender melancholic dance with a pig’s carcass and invited to touch with ethanolled hands the human and non-human animal in the space. Bardsley’s work in Chapter Five encourages audiences to have a face-to-face exchange; this happens literally as Bardsley moves amongst the audience. In *Aftermaths* the audience is positioned as the “low” carnival audience as Bardsley revels in the grotesquery of bodies and appeals to spectators to touch her “disease”. This wide range of audience roles and responses seems very disparate; however I contend that this type of technologised work frequently demands more of an engagement or requires action from its audiences and in this way, as Lucy Lippard suggests, political action may be instigated. As mentioned at the outset of this thesis Lippard says: “Performance art, because it is a form of acting offers a model for action. The audience can identify with those who are doing something in front of them and may be tempted to act, too, or rethink how they are acting.”<sup>5</sup> The ability of performance to provoke thought and action is integral to its political potential.

There are many other recurring themes and threads throughout this thesis, some of which are representative of current feminist concerns. For example, Chapters Two and Four discuss global trafficking of bodies and organs and it is notable that technology (in this case specifically the Internet) has assisted these industries that perpetuate the degradation of women’s bodies to grow and develop. I have tried to explore some of the contradictions that seem to recur in discussions of technologies and the female body, the duality of being embodied, while also experiencing disembodiment through technology as well as notions of disconnection and connection. It appears that in attempting to move away from existing binaries and dichotomous positions, technologised performance seems to straddle many others. There seems to be an intrinsic liminality to technologised performance as the relationship between the live

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<sup>5</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Get the Message? A Decade of Art For Social Change* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984) p323.

performing body and technology is explored on stage. This metaphoric “space” between technology and bodies provides a new site for creative exploration and one in which feminist artists can adapt, (re)code and explore as part of a technologised feminist praxis. As Peggy Phelan contends: “Performance art usually occurs in the suspension between the ‘real’ physical matter of ‘the performing body’ and the psychic experience of what it is to be embodied.”<sup>6</sup> This duality of experience is echoed in the suspension between the live and the virtual, subject and object, and the performing body as it is perceived and experienced.

Moving on from this idea, it should be noted that all of these performances could be read in light of the power relations between the live body and the virtual. We see in the work of Ponton and Smith the battle between the live and the virtual: in Smith’s performance the live body “wins out” over her technologised double, while in Ponton’s the live body disappears into a pile of celluloid. In the work of SUKA OFF, technology permeates and manipulates every bodily image, blurring the “real” with the virtual until the difference is indistinguishable. The immersive examples show technology acting as a facilitator to enable an embodied virtual experience. In the work of ABC the live performing body is rendered almost completely inert, debilitated by the need to control the computer and therefore susceptible to “waist-up acting”. The technological feat of the globally dispersed performance that is going on behind the body is the real star of the show. However, unfortunately for ABC, a lack of comprehension of the mechanics of the performance has often led to audience confusion and a misreading of the work. Chapter Four analyses the use of biotechnologies by female artists, and here the technologies themselves do not feature in the final performance work, instead feeding into the research and development stages of the process. However, the politics behind the relationship between female bodies and biotechnologies provide the content and enquiries that shape the work. My analysis of the work of Julia Bardsley in Chapter Five returns to the idea of cyborg performance that has permeated this investigation and explores her work closely creating an analogy between the cyborg body and

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<sup>6</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993) p167.

the grotesque body. The huge screens projecting images of Bardsley (amongst others) loom over her live body as she performs on her cross. Here I am interested in showing how the technologised figure of the cyborg is the latest incarnation of the female body as hybridised and I illustrate my argument using the visually arresting and hyper-technologised performance *Aftermaths*. What is key throughout all of these chapters is the realisation that the artists are integrating technologies into their practices specifically to draw attention to the politics surrounding the technologies.

By using the technologies and then either highlighting dominant usage, challenging existing applications or subverting them, the artists I am investigating are simultaneously re-coding their usage and re-writing these masculinist conventions. I opened this thesis with two seminal pieces that adapted the masculinist mode of VR technology to explore alternative ways of interfacing that avoided using a joystick or gun and that did not require gaming skills that other VR systems demand. Brenda Laurel's *Placeholder* attempted to create a more holistic experience within filmed natural environments, while Char Davies' *Osmose* achieved an alternative interface through the breath creating a more embodied sensory experience. There is a tradition of women experimenting with video (as discussed by Catherine Elwes) but, the artists that I discuss in Chapter Two use digital and analogue technologies to create a virtual double and use the uncanniness this double evokes to explore tropes of femininity (amongst other things).<sup>7</sup> Although arguably not subverting the *use* of the technology in this case, Ponton and Smith do use the feminine association with the uncanny to challenge dominant stereotypes and the technology plays an active part in the deconstruction of these ideas. SUKA OFF blurs the boundary between digital and analogue images and raises a number of questions about the gendering of bodies in the liminal space between the live body and its mediated (virtual) image. It subverts existing usage in that it creates a new aesthetic with the visual morphing of gendered bodies.

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<sup>7</sup> Catherine Elwes, *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005).

While ABC makes a valiant attempt at subverting representations of gender online and has adapted its practice to avoid “flashers” contributing pornographic material to their events, there are still issues surrounding the representation of the female body and the reassimilation of images and texts when participants are allowed to contribute. I would argue that the cyberfeminist intent of their work and their attempt to utilise the Internet as a site and space for feminist performance is a disruption to normative uses of the technology. The Internet as an infrastructure complicit in many anti-feminist practices creates numerous problems for cyberfeminist who wish to use it as a space for performance, but ABC aim to provoke discussion around the female body and the Internet. While ABC challenges the images of female bodies online, there is still a lot of work to be done before the masculinist, sexualised space of cyberspace is an unproblematic site for feminist work.

The artists I analyse in Chapter Four attempt to break down the barriers between artists, the public and scientific knowledge and I would contend that by integrating biotechnological practices and the politics surrounding them into art practices, normative uses of these technologies are being questioned and challenged. By entering the laboratory and experimenting with biotechnological practices, both subRosa and Kira O’Reilly appeal for a deep questioning of the relationship between biotechnological practices and female bodies. The reproductive role of women and the implications that advancements in IVF have on this is interrogated by subRosa, as is the economic and social side to the “flesh market”. O’Reilly’s meditative response to the “ethical ambivalences” she encountered communicates the reality of a troubled and troubling relationship between human and animal bodies. Both artists call for a questioning of the ethics surrounding biotechnologies and challenge dominant modes of thought surrounding scientific knowledge in their bid to open it up to wider debate and dissection. In my final chapter, Bardsley further schisms the already hybrid figures of the cyborg and the grotesque body to create a technologised performance that I have read in light of Bakhtin’s grotesque. By using the technology to create a cave-like grotto and creating intricate video work involving her own body and others Bardsley creates a “meaty” technologised piece. Her challenge to historical depictions of femininity and the contemporary catwalk and her refusal to commodify the female bodies on stage, I read as a feminist act. Bardsley’s amalgamation of abject leaky bodies and



cyborg women create a performance that hybridises the old and new, inside and outside and male and female.

Gerry Harris claims: “On the simplest level, feminism has always been a continuing enquiry into the problematic of what it means to ‘be a woman’ in both theory and practice” and I would argue that feminist performance plays out these enquiries using the body.<sup>8</sup> A technologised feminist praxis explores what it means to “be a woman” in relation to technology. Bodily experience is altering due to technological advancement. Susan Broadhurst asserts: “Rather, than being separate from the body, technology becomes part of that body and alters and recreates our experience in the world.”<sup>9</sup> As the body becomes cyborgian we must constantly reassess what it means to be a body in the world and how our experiences are shaped by technology. By constantly questioning what it means to be a body, and to be a female body, in relation to technological advancements, feminism remains a significant aspect of discussions surrounding technologised bodies. I have argued in this thesis that performance can play a prominent role in instigating debate around cyborgian bodies and promoting enquiry around the politics of the gendering of technologies and how technologies are used by women and also to control women.

I want to end this project with a citation from feminist performance group Curious’s Leslie Hill and Helen Paris. They assert: “We have said that we imagine the future of feminism in theatre and performance may lie in these hybrid, layered works.”<sup>10</sup> Hill and Paris’s recognition that there is a future for feminist performance in works that are hybrid and layered aligns with my own assertion that it is in the adoption of a “cyborg consciousness” and a willingness to create affinities, collaborations and multiplicitous works that a technologised feminist praxis can be developed. By embracing the hybrid and its historical associations with the feminine and realising Haraway’s vision for a feminist cyborg politics, performance and technology can become a form reinforced by

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<sup>8</sup> Geraldine Harris, *Staging Femininities* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) p17.

<sup>9</sup> Broadhurst, *Digital Practices* p187.

<sup>10</sup> Leslie Hill and Helen Paris, “Curious Feminists”, Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, eds. *Performance, Practice and Process: Contemporary [Women] Practitioners* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) p69.

its hybrid nature and become a site for a feminist re-coding of bodies. As Haraway summarises: “So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as part of much needed political work.”<sup>11</sup> The much-needed political work that Haraway referred to in 1985 still needs addressed. However I would argue that through the work of the artists I have explored in this thesis, the transgressed boundaries of the female body and the potent fusions between bodies and technology provide hope for a future of technologised feminist performance praxis.

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<sup>11</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (London: Free Association Books, 1991) p154.

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