

Objects in Human Drag: The Queerness of Object-Oriented Ontologies

by

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the intersections between queer theory and object-oriented ontologies (OOOs) through examining three case studies of objects in human drag: (1) hats, purses and shoes; (2) mannequins; and (3) dildos. I argue that queer theory and OOOs are necessarily connected in that both offer philosophical strategies of resistance to hegemonic structures imposed by binary gender categories, compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory anthropocentrism. By applying Judith Butler's theories of drag to the objects of my case studies, I look at how, similar to the means through which drag performances destabilize a heterosexual claim to originality, these objects undermine the anthropocentric 'claim to originality' that OOOs also aim to subvert. The conclusion of the thesis asserts that drag opens up an unstable and uncanny ontological wake, through which all objects are revealed as radically queer.

Keywords: queer theory, queer, objects, object-oriented ontologies, drag, mannequins, post-human, dildos, psychoanalysis, Judith Butler, Speculative Realism.

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Objects in Human Drag: The Queerness of Object-Oriented Ontologies

Introduction:

You objects that call from diffusion my meanings, and give them shape!
You light that wraps me and all things in delicate equable showers!
You paths worn in the irregular hollows by the roadsides!
I think you are latent with unseen existences—you are so dear to me.

Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road.”¹

This thesis emerged from an interest in what Whitman terms, the “unseen existences” of objects, entities that have been forgotten and suppressed within traditions of Western anthropocentric philosophy. The recent emergence of “object-oriented ontologies” (OOO) has made this critical exclusion of the object its focus, and has presented contemporary critical theory with a radical challenge to the priority of the human subject, which is reified by *correlationism*.² These authors’ critique of correlationism takes to task Immanuel Kant’s hierarchical privileging of the human mind over all other forms of substance and matter. Ian Bogost starkly asserts the implications of Kantian correlationism: “being, this position holds, exists only for subjects.”³ When I first encountered OOOs, I felt a deep resonance between this critique of correlationism and my work as a queer scholar, as one who has been interested specifically in the means through which, within Western philosophy and academic thought, the queer subject has been unseen and unrecognized, subsumed under privileged binary, heterosexual

¹ Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road,” in *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David

² This term *correlationism* was coined by Quentin Meillassoux and has been taken up by OOO scholars as a key point of refutation within their various arguments.

³ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology or What It’s Like To Be A Thing*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012): 3

identity categories. I saw this subsumption and non-recognition of queerness and objects as being in need of a challenge, but was also inspired by the work of Judith Butler in viewing this position of exclusion as giving the queer subject—as well as objects—radical potential to perform, subvert and sometimes dismantle those normative, binary semiotic codes and philosophical discourses that refuse to “see” them.

The subject prioritized in Western philosophical traditions, that figure whose presumed priority OOO’s critique is also arguably an inherently straight, masculine subject who postures as a universal self, imagined through the image of male bodily totality. The result of this, Judith Butler argues, is that within Western philosophy the queer subject has not been considered as “real” — a systematic inconsideration that has produced limiting and normative branches of ontological study.⁴ Similarly, Rosi Braidotti has identified and critiqued an image of male bodily totality that *has* been constructed as the “real,” against which all else is measured: Da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man* who “continues to uphold universal standards and to exercise a fatal attraction.”⁵ Women are constructed as the negative of this “white, European and able bodied” male emblem of “humanist universalism,” which Braidotti argues “is objectionable not only on

⁴ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aine Barale and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993): 312. This lack of realness is a position Butler outlines in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” *Gender Trouble* and, significantly, in the chapter “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy” in *Undoing Gender*. See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 20-39.

⁵ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 29.

epistemological but also on ethical and political grounds.”⁶ The desiring dialectic between this male subject and female subject (his inverse) forms what Butler calls the *heterosexual matrix*, a “grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the namable.”⁷ As a result of this constructed cultural framework, heterosexual subjects have been able to exercise a “claim to originality”⁸ – the same ontological claim that human subjects exercise over objects.

This thesis suggests that the object/human divide and the heterosexual, cisgender divides, with their structural hierarchies, serve the same oppressive apparatus: one that elevates or privileges certain modes of being above others, while asking all entities to conform to singularity rather than multiplicity. Queer theory and OOO are both interested in rethinking these binaries, in order to splinter the hegemonic hierarchies they impose and make room for thinking about previously unimagined ways of being. Objects, we understand, have experienced an “exclusion from ontology” that is similar to the queer subject, invisible in the traditions of Western philosophy – where they are, Butler writes, “not even produced within this discourse as a prohibited object.”⁹ OOOs implore us to recognize the existence of the excluded object, while ultimately allowing objects to recede into their own ontological autonomy. This thesis examines ways in

⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁷ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 310-312.

⁸ Ibid., 314.

⁹ Ibid. Butler’s word choice of “object” to talk about a queer mode of existence is particularly pertinent for the subject of this thesis, as it also attests to the inadequacy of discourse to discuss objects, on account of their similar exclusion from the category of being.

which objects themselves refuse normative categories in order to reveal an ontological autonomy that cannot be named or known and thus is queer.

Central to my argument are Butler's theories of drag, which she develops via the case study of drag queens and kings. For Butler, the drag queen/king's uncanny performance of heterosexual behavior can expose and falsify the supposed "claim to originality" of heterosexuality.¹⁰ I apply Butler's notion of drag to *objects*, exploring certain objects that mimic human bodies — namely, the hats, purses and shoes of Freudian psychoanalysis, the mannequin, and the dildo — to reveal how their performance of the body can expose the constructed nature of the binary ideals dividing the human and the object. I refer to this object-oriented performance as "objects in human drag." Things that appear uncannily like the human body unsettle a "human claim to originality" and thereby *queer* the binary categories imposed by anthropocentrism (and heterocentrism): object/human, animate/inanimate, being/non-being. Since correlationist thought conflates the human body with subjecthood, the objects in human drag discussed in this thesis perform the human body to show that the notion of "humanness" is, like sex and gender, an imagined ideal and not ontologically inherent. Furthermore, the human drag performance enacted by these objects highlights the separation between the self and the body, indicating that the body is an object that the self subsumes.

In addition to my thesis that objects in human drag subvert the

¹⁰ Ibid., 314.

correlationist understanding of objects and humans, I make the argument here that all objects are, in themselves, radically queer. In accordance with a Deleuzian-Guattarian turn in queer theory,¹¹ as well as Butler's definition that the heterosexual matrix is structured on the basis of the subject's identificatory locatability, I define queerness as a multiple, uncontainable and unlocatable mode of being that both eludes and resists the imposition of hegemonic identity categories. Understood thusly, I suggest, objects as considered by OOO theorists are queer, insofar as they operate according to the structure Graham Harman has identified as "allure," by which objects "emerge" and "withdraw" from human use and understanding.¹² For Harman, objects have both "sensual" and "real" qualities.¹³ Despite accessing the sensual qualities of objects — their appearance, signification and how they play into "our theoretical and practical experience"¹⁴ — "real" objects are completely inaccessible and fundamentally unknowable. Though they are bound to always withdraw from "human access,"¹⁵ sometimes objects offer momentary insight into their withdrawn nature by exposing their *thing-being*.¹⁶ As Bogost articulates, this thing-being is "multifarious and

¹¹ See Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 198. See also the entirety of Braidotti, *The Posthuman*; and Chrysanthi Nigianni and Mel Storr, *Deleuze and Guattari and Queer Theory*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009). Similarly, as I will discuss in the remainder of the thesis, Jane Bennett and Levi Bryant take a self-proclaimed Deleuzian approach in their object-oriented philosophies.

¹² Graham Harman, *The Third Table* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 10.

¹³ Graham, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer" *New Literary History* 43, vol. 2 (2012): 187.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 187. Harman's philosophy appropriates this term from Heidegger. For its original etymology, see Martin Heidegger, "Das Ding," in *Poetry, language, thought*, trans.

complex,” instead of “singular” a quality that, I argue, makes objects queer.¹⁷ For Haman, objects specifically reveal this thing-being when they physically break, or break from signification, to expose their ontological otherness.¹⁸

Allure, this process of emerging (becoming-recognizable) and withdrawing (becoming-other), is also the structure utilized by the performance of drag queens and kings to subvert binary identity categories. In their own hyperbolized mimicry of bodily, human-centric ideals, objects in drag both “emerge” *as* the human body and, in an uncanny moment, withdraw from it into their objecthood. What remains in the wake of this withdrawal, I suggest, is the queerness of the object. As is also the case with drag, which calls into question seemingly secure identities, when confronted with these objects, we are also forced to question the wholeness, originality and priority of the human body, potentially acknowledging our own bodies as constructions.

OOO theorists such as Graham Harman, Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, and Timothy Morton, have rarely acknowledged queer models in their challenge to human priority;¹⁹ or their engagement with these models has been stilted, based in

Alfred Hofstadter (New York: Harper Collins Perennial, 1971), 178. Heidegger describes his jug as “the thing’s worlding being.”

¹⁷ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 4.

¹⁸ This notion is formed by Harman in an exegesis of Heidegger’s broken hammer that is crucial to Harman’s object-oriented philosophy and will figure largely into this thesis later on.

¹⁹ Morton has been somewhat more consistent in his engagement with queer theory to discuss OOO as it might pertain to ecology and deconstruction hegemonic notions of “Nature.” See Timothy Morton, “This Biosphere Which is Not One: Towards Weird Essentialism,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 46, no.2 (2015): 141-

refutation to critics of OOO.²⁰ Similarly, queer theorists have largely ignored or repudiated the potential contribution of OOO to their own challenge to binary divisions and hegemonic claims to subjective priority. This thesis aims to make a contribution to both discourses, by bringing them into conversation with each other via my case studies of objects in human drag. The conclusion that objects are radically queer has the potential to shift our thinking not only about objects, but queerness as well.

The first chapter of the thesis, “The Masquerade of Hats, Purses and Shoes” examines the Freudian treatment of these objects as an early example of objects in human drag. Deploying Freud queerly, and against the correlationist and heteronormalizing impulses in early psychoanalytic theory, I suggest that linking hats, purses and shoes to human genitals is an early example of how objects performing humanness can call into question the self-knowing subject (much like the legacy of psychoanalysis itself). In Freud’s work, “things” become the translators of unconscious thoughts, drives and desires. Grounding my analysis in artworks, films and designed objects that illuminate the (human) genital resemblance that Freud sees as projected by hats, shoes and bags, I suggest

155. See also Timothy Morton, “Guest Column: Queer Ecology,” *PMLA* 125, no.2 (2010): 272-282.

I might add here that Levi Bryant has also blogged about queer theory and OOO on *Larval Subjects*, but hasn’t made queerness a major tenant of his object-oriented project.

²⁰ For an exegesis of this engagement with queer theory see Michael O’Rourke, “‘Girls Welcome!!!’: Speculative Realism, Object Oriented Ontology, and Queer Theory,” *Speculations* 2 (2011): 275-312. O’Rourke outlines and analyses the significance of a debate Bryant had with a blogger who called into question the cis-white male dominance of the field.

that the psychoanalytic treatment of these objects indicates a perpetual failure on Freud's part to locate and codify the object. Focusing on the powers of uncanniness and strangeness in facilitating the thing's resistance to singular symbolic interpretation and subsumption into matrices of signification, I propose that the psychoanalytic likening of these objects to genitals might ironically make way for an explicitly object-oriented challenge to the security of the body.

"Objects in Drag: The Mannequin's Queer Objecthood," the second chapter, explicitly untangles notions of originality versus artificiality, which shape the object or the queer subject's status as "derivative." This notion is heightened in the case of the female mannequin, often dismissed as merely a "fake" body, surrogate or a replacement for an absent human. Despite this implied fakeness, however, the mannequin has a queer existence, or thing-being, of its own. In its human drag, the mannequin confronts and undermines the notion that "our [human] existence is special as existence."²¹ By performing bodily totality it subverts the body and illuminates the subject's status as a constructed category, like heteronormativity. I look at the longstanding fantasy of the mannequin coming to life, a fantasy that draws its lineage from Pygmalion to Freud's uncanny and extends to itself from commodity culture to sex dolls, contemporary films and performance art. Drawing links to the work of Michael O'Rourke (one of the few scholars considering OOO and queer theory together), this chapter also significantly considers Hélène Cixous' feminist re-imagining of the uncanny in

²¹ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 8.

Fiction and its Phantoms. I argue that the uncanny calls into question significant power structures related to sex and gender, through an implied uncertainty of being that exists between binary categories. Moreover, I look at how throughout its cultural and material history, the mannequin's human drag as an idealized female body works against notions of essentialism, which are also correlationist in nature, relating back to the correlating interplay between binary sexual difference.

My third and final chapter, "Dildos: The 'Penis' in the Door," looks at the dildo's drag of the human penis. This mimesis is a particularly powerful example of the means through which an object in human drag can work to destabilize not only anthropocentric priority, but phallic priority as well. Summarizing key historical and theoretical frameworks for reading the dildo, I show that within heterosexist and queer theories alike, dildos have been bound to what Harman (via Heidegger) calls "tool-being"²² – the assumption that an object is defined based on what it can do for, or relative to, human beings. I also identify increasingly common contemporary interpretations of the dildo, such as Jeanne Hamming's, that leverage the object as queer or "post-gender"²³ in its ability to refashion the body as a cyborg. Even these readings, while valuable in their movement towards a revisionist understanding of the object, still situate the dildo as a tool that can assist in a subject's bodily transformation. To step away from this emphasis on

²² For the genesis of this term within object-oriented philosophy see Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002). See also, G

²³ Jeanne Hamming. "Dildonics, Dykes and the Detachable Masculine." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 8, no. 3 (August 2001): 330.

the subject and focus on the dildo's human drag independent from an attachment to a body that gives it "meaning," I consider art works and cultural treatments of the dildo that place it on its own, allowing its queerness to stand for itself. I suggest that in these cases, the dildo's drag becomes a way of breaking tool-being, creating a moment in which the dildo can be recognized as both emulating and withdrawing from a referential dependency on the penis, untethering itself (and, arguably, the penis as well) from phallic authority.

Not wanting to eschew the question of sexual pleasure and erotic desire that clearly circulate around the dildo's uncanny presence, at the end of this chapter I propose a flat-ontological erotics – or a "weird sex space" – to accompany Harman's description of object-oriented philosophy as "a *weird* realism in which real individual objects resist all forms of causal or cognitive mastery."²⁴ While looking at radically new examples of dildo design that focus on the transgression of the human/non-human binary as part of their sexual fantasy, I speculate upon how an object-oriented queer sex space refuses to reduce any bodies and involves all actants — human and non-human — literally and figuratively becoming weird.

What emerges across these three chapters is the way in which unknowability and elusivity, emergence and withdrawal, mimesis and otherness are not only object-oriented responses to anthropocentric categories that regulate thing-being, but are queer responses to identity categories that objects in drag

²⁴ Harman, "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer," 188.

produce. Like queer theory, OOs, too, aim to decentralize, dissolve and reconfigure all things towards multiplicity, subversion and ontological magic. In looking at the objects that follow, I am moved by their strangeness and their resistance to subsumption by dominant logics and hierarchies of being. The privilege to meditate on their existences in the writing of this thesis has resulted them also becoming “dear to me”²⁵: not that these objects have become my own, but that I feel a queer affinity with their complex existences.

²⁵ Whitman, “Song of the Open Road,” 140.

I. The Masquerade of Purses, Shoes and Hats

Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* swarms with a variety of strange objects: botanical monographs, kitchen crockery, sticks, umbrellas, daggers and swords, boxes, aircrafts, jewel boxes, neckties and horses.²⁶ In the activity of dream interpretation, the analyst translates these puzzling objects from the unconscious abyss of the analysand's dream, and categorizes this dream material into its "origin," or what it symbolically represents. In this sense objects never stand for themselves but stand in for unconscious thoughts and desires. This symbolic reading is always performed within the context of the analysand's case history, in relation to which Freud can identify these objects as substitutes or stand-ins for the real, desired object: the human body. The comparison is often facilitated by the visual likeness that certain objects have to body parts, particularly genitals. It is all the better, from the point of view of analysis, if the patient owns, wears or personally uses the object – as in the case of purses, shoes and hats.

This is the matter underscored in Freud's case histories, where Freud identifies the obsessional treatment of bags, shoes and hats as originating in a sexual anxiety or desire displaced onto an object. Purses, for instance, figure significantly into Freud's analysis of adolescent Dora, in order to diagnose her hysterical sexual anxiety and repressed desire for her father's adult friend Herr K.

²⁶ In OOO all entities are objects, even animals. See Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 12. Bogost performs an analysis of Levi Bryant's flat ontology underscoring that "the term *object* enjoys a wide berth: corporeal and incorporeal entities count, whether they be material objects, abstractions, objects of intention, or anything else whatsoever."

Of course, Herr K's repeated harassment of Dora, and Freud's inability to explore this as a case of sexual abuse, is a longstanding exemplar of Freud's limitations as an analyst, where an inherent heterosexism and prioritizing of the male subject results in a problematic misreading of a female analysand. In the case of Dora, however, we may separate out the treatment of the purse itself, which stands as a developed analysis of an object in human drag: the purse performs the vagina. This performance often serves as the key element in Freud deciphering his analysand's unconscious desires, anxieties and neurosis. In one session with Dora, Freud remarks that "she wore at her waist—a small reticule of a shape which had just come into fashion; and, as she lay on the sofa and talked, she kept playing with it—opening it, putting a finger in to it, shutting it again, and so on" prompting his conclusion that it is a "substitute for the shell of Venus, for the female genitals."²⁷ This notion of objects as "substitutes" for an original human body, or part of it, is an anthropocentric (and correlationist) logic that exercises itself in symbolic readings of objects. In this thesis, I aim to show how substitutionary logic, such as psychoanalytic readings of objects, always turns on itself. As purses, shoes or hats are subsumed within the body, they assert their otherness from it, potentially revealing their unique thing-being.

Freud's linear association of "purse" to "vagina" to "hysteria," is marked by the correlationist tendency of psychoanalysis, one that is also deeply historicized in a masculinist, pathologizing treatment of female bodies and

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Dora*, trans. Philip Rieff (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 68-69.

sexuality. This being said, the association may, in fact, be crucial for liberating the object from subsumption into Freudian codification. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, by likening Dora's reticule to the vagina, Freud makes the object itself (the reticule or small purse) strange, both to the analysand (Dora) and any reader of his case history. Secondly, while placed in the context of its vaginal drag the purse itself resists this association, asserting that it is not, in fact, a human genital – an insistent gulf emerges between the ontological existence of Dora's vagina and the ontological being of the purse. In this insistent gulf Dora's purse ceases to be “itself” within its normal correlationist framing (both an object of fashion and a tool) and becomes a weird and uncategorizable thing.

My strategy of using psychoanalysis in a project on anti-correlationist queer theory draws from two strangely similar feminist theorists: French feminist essentialist Luce Irigaray and post-human performance feminist Shannon Bell. Bell's “fast feminism” proposes to “critique the world quickly” in order to queer it, encouraging her readers to “do theory from non obvious points of departure”— even traditionally “hypermasculinist” sites.²⁸ My adoption in this thesis of two “hypermasculinist” discourses – Freudian psychoanalysis and OOO – parallels this approach, and likewise Luce Irigaray's critique of phallogocentrism in *This Sex Which is Not One*, which entails “hav[ing] a fling with the philosophers.”²⁹ By way of this fling, Irigaray argues that she can use the “tools” of hegemonic

²⁸ Shannon Bell, *Fast Feminism*, (New York: Automeia, 2010): 12.

²⁹ Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which is Not One” in *The French Feminism Reader*, trans. and ed. Kelly Oliver (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000): 207-208.

philosophy which have marked and subjugated women, in order to pleurably fuck with the coherence of a “discourse whose systematicity is based on her [the queer woman’s] reduction into sameness.”³⁰ Irigaray thus uses mimicry and theoretical appropriation to throw the wrench back into the system from which it came: a form of philosophical writing in drag. In my own “fling” with Freud and Lacan, I bring forth their ideas of the unconscious and their treatment of objects relative to this unknowably queer psychic space, taking what is of value in their thought for the connections between drag and object-oriented ontologies, while leaving behind the phallic priority and correlationist impulses exercised in the Freudian and Lacanian treatments of sex and gender. What emerges is a theory of queerness which is both ontological and performative, and which would liberate objects from their relegated position to symbols and signs of an always-already prior (and prioritized) body.

In the seemingly stable identity categories delineating subject and object, sexual difference and gender binaries, psychoanalytic readings might be mobilized to cut into binaries rather than reaffirm their structure. The destabilization of the subject and liberation of the object is precisely the effect of human drag: objects performing the human body expose the fact that the “normal” or “original” body is constructed through performative repetition and discursive signification. In performing the vagina, the purse disrupts the line of ontological

³⁰ Ibid., 209.

causality that connects “having” a human body to the experience of subjecthood.³¹ OOOs also aim to break with the semiotic relegation of objects into symbols and signs, where (like Dora’s purse) objects would only serve as allegory for and accessory to the human ontological experience. Side-stepping the inherent correlationism in his symbolic reading of objects, I suggest that objects in Freud’s writings can be subversively reframed within the context of their human drag.

Drag, Judith Butler argues, illuminates the ways in which sex and gender can be “theatricalized, worn and done,” undermining a constructed heterosexual “claim to originality.”³² Freudian readings of hats, purses and shoes reveal that genitals are formed by inscription, and their dialectic construction (penis/vagina) can be enacted by folds of fabric, metal clasps and leather openings just as they can be performed by fleshy protrusions, dippets and openings on a human body. In conflating clothing with genitals, Freud inadvertently shows that sex, gender and the body are something that is “worn” and not inherently original.³³ In response to Freud revealing that a jewel case that Herr K gifted Dora is vaginal, Dora somewhat sarcastically tells Freud “I knew you would say that.”³⁴ Dora’s humorous observation is right on point: What authority does Freud have to treat

³¹ As Timothy Morton asserts, causality is not only erroneous but an “aesthetic phenomenon.” As a visual mode of performativity, we might say that objects in drag expose the “aesthetic” nature of causality and debunk the subject/object divide as well as binary sex and gender categories. See Timothy Morton *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*. (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013): 19.

³² Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 314.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Freud, *Dora*, 61.

her bodily desires within this correlationist framework?³⁵ Moreover, why does her jewel case or purse need to be subsumed as a vaginal symbol? Yet Freud's genital association identifies that the object is not a "purse" either, something that is exposed by taking it out of its normative use value as apparel, accessory and tool. Within analysis, Freud's dream objects are masquerading in two senses: they are both clothing (or accessory objects) masquerading as genitals, and genitals masquerading as functional goods. This contradictory status allows these objects to elude a categorical "either or," making it challenging to identify what the purse "is."

Identifying this paradox within Freud's objects in drag gives way to an uncertainty in pinpointing what these objects *are*. Dependent on its situated context the purse may appear as an accessory but in a Freudian context might appear as a vagina. In their difficulty to be placed as either genitals or as functional accessories these objects expose "the slippery distinction between 'appearing' and 'being'" that Butler problematizes in relation to sex and gender.³⁶ Indeed, while we often incorrectly assume that a subject's sex or gender is an inherently ontological rather than constructed, we also tend to conflate the object's appearance with its unique existence. In *The Democracy of Objects* Levi Bryant emphasizes that "we should not speak of qualities as something an object

³⁵ Indeed, Freud's emphasis on Herr K in *Dora* goes against Dora's insistence that she does not love Herr K and Freud has misread her neurosis. See Ritchie Robertson, introduction to *A Case of Hysteria: (Dora)*, by Sigmund Freud, trans. Anthea Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xxxiii.

³⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (London: Routledge, 1990), 47.

possesses, has, or is, but rather as acts, verbs, or something that an object does."³⁷

Butler often articulates the same for sex and gender to combat their subsumption into ontology, describing both as a "doing" rather than "being." Revising the Freudian note that the purse is a substitute for a vagina, we might instead follow Bryant's lead moving forward, considering that the purse both "does" the purse and "does" the vagina. This Butlerian strategy of describing sex and gender as a "doing," and applied to objects' sensual qualities by Bryant avoids a correlationist treatment of entities.³⁸

Freud's revealing of the hat, purse or shoe's genital resemblance gives way to a moment of discomfort, not only because the desires of the analysand are revealed but because a once normal and comfortable everyday object becomes strange. The analysand usually feels embarrassment or an estrangement from their bodies after the genital association of their hats, purses, or shoes is revealed to them by Freud's analysis.³⁹ This is the affective predicament caused by the

³⁷ Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 89.

³⁸ Here I find it remarkable that Bryant does not engage with Judith Butler's work on discursivity, especially as he takes up this notion of "doing" to describe the sensual qualities of objects, including a blue mug to which he devotes an extended passage to in the democracy of objects.

³⁹ While Dora walks out of her analysis with Freud, and I think rightfully so, Little Hans is another interesting case here, in which psychoanalysis forces the subject to confront a self-uncertainty through reading a Freudian analysis of themselves. Years after his analysis as a young boy, Freud records a postscript recounting a re-meeting with Little Hans as a young man. Freud notes that "when he read his case history, he told me, the whole of it came to him as something unknown; *he did not recognize himself*" (my own emphasis added). For this case study and particular moment, see Sigmund Freud, "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy," in *Two Case Histories: 'Little Hans' and the 'Rat Man.'* trans. James Strachey (Vintage: London, 2001), 149.

uncanny: an experience with an object that calls one's subjecthood into question, often by way of a non-human "thing" resembling the human body.⁴⁰ In identifying the genital appearance of an object, the analyst exposes something "that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light."⁴¹ This coming to light has more profound implications than Freud could know – what is revealed in this moment, I suggest, is (among other things) the queerly withdrawn ontology of things.

While the Freudian analyst purportedly seeks to *normalize* the function of objects relative to the unknowable unconscious psyche from which they emerge, by likening hats, purses and shoes to genitals, he makes them strange again.

Timothy Morton, along with other object-oriented theorists, has identified "strangeness" as a necessary framework to resist the hegemonic compromising of the thing's ontology at the expense of normative modes of philosophical perception.⁴² In fact, Morton has linked this "strangeness" to the queer core of objects, writing that "to get to queer objects you simply extend strange strangeness to everything."⁴³ Strangeness and uncanniness are particularly crucial for eroding the subject/object binary and highlighting the queerness of the object,

⁴⁰ Freud gives an analysis in "The Uncanny" of *The Tales of Hoffman*, identifying the uncanny can be a fundamental confusion "whether a particular figure... is a human being or an automaton." See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny (1919)," in *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*. trans. James Stachey (Hogarth and The Institute of Psychoanalysis: 1955): 227.

⁴¹ Freud, "The Uncanny," 225.

⁴² Timothy Morton *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*. (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013): 35, 57, 99.

⁴³ Timothy Morton, "Queer Objects," in *Ecology Without Nature*. Tuesday March 15, 2011. <http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.ca/2011/03/queer-objects.html>

as “weirding” the sensual qualities of an object like Dora’s purse can offer us a gateway to the uncertain yet certainly queer territory of “real” objects, withdrawn from sensual properties.

Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology of objects likewise privileges strangeness, writing that, in queer readings of the world, “moments of disorientation are vital,” being characterized by “bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground. Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter one’s sense of confidence in the ground.”⁴⁴ In a sense, while trying to orient his patients towards normalcy, Freud in his treatment of bodies and objects achieves just such a disorientation. As Little Hans meets Freud as an adult, years after his childhood in-treatment, and comments on the experience of reading his own case history, “he did not recognize himself.”⁴⁵ This “shattering” of the stability upon which the subject stands affirms that a disorienting confrontation with the object would be one that calls the subject’s body into question. One of the means through which this queering can continue to occur is through re-reading Freud’s objects as objects in drag, performing the authoritative category of the body in order to challenge the subject’s ability to categorize or control it, deliberately eluding a singular interpretive clarity for a fundamental ambiguity.

⁴⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006): 157.

⁴⁵ Freud, “Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy,” 149.

What Butler calls the “heterosexual matrix,” formed by binary categories of sex and gender, is a system replicated in philosophical discourse – one that, like correlationism, is designed to reduce strangeness.⁴⁶ Supported by Butler’s image of a heterosexual matrix, Ahmed notes that visual and affective spatial organization tends to be designed towards straight vertical lines that visually and physically affirm heterosexuality and heteronormativity.⁴⁷ This space does not just confine human bodies to normative ways of performing, but the ontological autonomy of all entities, including objects. By identifying “queer” to be a “a spatial term” in that “bodies are sexualized through how they inhabit space;”⁴⁸ I would add that this tendency towards spatial straightness is made to suppress the inherent strangeness of objects themselves. Language, as its own symbolic space, serves the same function. Peter Schwenger has noted the hegemony of language in “orienting” objects towards tool-being and singularity (and, I would add, heteronormativity). In a discussion of the inaccessibility of Lacanian objects, whose thing-being is obstructed through the limits of symbolic language, Schwenger suggests that “Adam’s act of naming had about it a strangeness lost to us now, when the word is our instinctive refuge from the thing’s strangeness.”⁴⁹ I would tend to agree: objects, like sex and gender constructs, have been both “normalized” and “gendered” under language, which reifies a correlationist

⁴⁶ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 310.

⁴⁷ In addition to being heteronormative this space also prioritizes cisgendered, white and able-bodied experiences, affects and temporalities.

⁴⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 67

⁴⁹ Peter Schwenger, “Words and the Murder of the Thing,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 102.

treatment of objects, trading ontological multiplicity and elusiveness for singularity and logic.

Seemingly, Freudian psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on symbolic object analysis, narrativization and the restoration of subjects to “normal” (read: heterosexual) sexuality, fits into this correlationist framework that simultaneously privileges both the straight subject and the conscious human mind over the autonomous and multiple existence of objects and queer desires that emerge from the unconscious. Psychoanalytic treatment aims to orient the analysand and the objects of analysis away from disorientation and queerness and towards stability and straightness. While psychoanalysis falls into this correlationist tradition of reading objects, to allegorize the interplay between human desire for human bodies, it also seeks to situate the object relative to a male subject’s—Freud’s—privileged readings of objects. Due to their phallogocentrism and heterosexism, in using Freud and Lacan, we must be strategic, deploying their texts queerly, obscurely and in such a way that does not fall susceptible to psychoanalysis’ “promise of wholeness,”⁵⁰ which suggests that the withdrawn qualities of objects can be demystified and made accessible. Psychoanalytic readings of objects tend to fulfill Levi Bryant’s claim that “in relating to other objects, there’s a way in which our body reduces objects, simplifies them, as a target of its own aims, needs, and desires.”⁵¹ If the goal of a queer OOO is to overthrow normative, binary marks of gender, sexuality and tool-being why then use psychoanalysis in a

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Grosz, *Lacan: a feminist introduction*. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 7.

⁵¹ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 92.

project on queerness and OOOs? Why waste time dwelling on this “coming into being” within identity categories, when it is imperative that these same categories must be overthrown, destabilized and dissolved?

I suggest that it is in the existence of psychoanalysis’ illusionary “promise of wholeness” that this process of gendering and gendering objects is always revealed as a failure.⁵² Wholeness suggests an inherent superiority on the part of the subject – a complete ontological accessibility of both the body and the world of objects. Within analysis, hats, purses and shoes appear to reinscribe and reinforce stable categories of bodily origin and priority as well as binary sex and gender dialectics. Considering them as key examples of objects in drag, however, we can see how these objects’ performance of both gender and the body may serve to destabilize these categories and eschew “wholeness.”

Additionally, it is through a queer, post-human re-situation of psychoanalytic readings that an object-oriented approach to performativity can flourish. Juliet Mitchell notes that psychoanalysis has radical potential, but because it was born at a time in which the reference point for philosophy was “humanism” it reiterates that notion that “man is at the centre of his own history and himself; he is a subject more or less in control of his own actions.”⁵³ It reifies the notion of “a real or true self (identity)” which psychoanalytic treatment aims

⁵² Grosz, *Lacan*, 7.

⁵³ Juliet Mitchell, introduction to *Feminine Sexuality*, by Jacques Lacan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.: 1982): 4.

to “regain.”⁵⁴ Mitchell is interested instead in the ways through which psychoanalysis “should aim to show us that we do not know those things we think we do” and thus might displace centralized notions of “man.”⁵⁵ This, I posit, has much in common with object-oriented claims, leading us to suggest that psychoanalysis – and especially its objects – may be reinterpreted in such a way as to subvert correlationism and its prioritization of the conscious human mind in exhausting an unknowably queer reality. While the legacy of psychoanalysis indeed served the function of destabilizing the notion of rational man, by calling into question his ability to know his own identity, it also destabilized his relationship to a world of objects by suggesting that they go beyond their existence as tools. By polemically and continually blurring the line between body and object, Freud’s genital readings unwittingly transgress the correlationist binary. To some extent, then, his thought participates in the co-extensive project of queer drag and OOOs: to call into question not only normalized conceptions of human identity but, by blurring multiple binaries simultaneously, *identity altogether*.

Purses

The being of purses has been heavily constructed through signification. Signification, Lacan argues, “forces the event into the Word,” or sign.⁵⁶ This is a violent act that exposes that the “Word” cannot contain the object it attempts to

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” in *Écrits* trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), 212.

accurately enclose. Indeed, Lacan can be re-read as humbling semiotic hegemony, revealing language (the Symbolic Order) as an imperfect system, an attempt to squeeze objects into singular signs posturing as a form of ontological expression that is, in fact, constructed. Though referring to the demeaned position of queer women within phallogentric psychoanalytic discourses, we might appropriate Luce Irigaray's following call to arms and apply it to purses (and all objects) within Freudian correlationism: the masculine confines of language render them into "a small, insignificant receptacle, subject to their power alone."⁵⁷ Feminized and emasculating, a tool to hold small items close to a woman's body and ready-to-hand,⁵⁸ the handbag or purse is one of Freud's most well-known dream symbols,⁵⁹ its vaginal resemblance totalized by a gaping opening into which hands are slipped and slipped out of. This reading of handbags is predicated on a performative likeness to penetrative sex – a kind of heteronormative logic that, as we see in the case of Dora, perpetually limits Freud in his reading of sex, desire and the unconscious. Yet if the purse is in drag as a vagina, its toothed zippers and

⁵⁷ Luce Irigaray, "When Our Lips Speak Together," *Signs* 58, no. 1 (1980): 71.

⁵⁸ A Heideggerian term from *Das Ding* that emphasizes the status of object as "tool-being."

⁵⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams, The Pelican Freud Library Vol. 4*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 493. The rationale for the vaginal nature of purses comes from the analysis of the following dream: "the early age at which people make use of symbolic representation, even apart from the dream-life, may be shown by the following uninfluenced memory of a lady who is now twentyseven: *She is in her fourth year. The nursemaid is driving her, with her brother, eleven months younger, and a cousin, who is between the two in age, to the lavatory, so that they can do their little business there before going for their walk. As the oldest, she sits on the seat and the other two on chambers. She asks her (female) cousin: Have you a purse, too? Walter has a little sausage, I have a purse. The cousin answers: Yes, I have a purse, too. The nursemaid listens, laughing, and relates the conversation to the mother, whose reaction is a sharp reprimand.*"

metal clasps mark might also visualize it as a vagina dentata, capable of biting back at the Freudian hand that penetrates it.

Freud suggests that the best way of understanding the function of the unconscious in human desire is through the matter of dreams, where fundamentally strange and uncanny objects and images “translate” – through condensation or displacement – the hidden content of the unconscious. Indeed, the uncanny visual lexicon of dreams might be said to have what Jane Bennett refers to as a vibrant and “vital materiality” – collections of objects that self organize in a strange and wonderful congregation.⁶⁰ The unmappability and vitality of the unconscious (as what Grosz refers to as an “impossible space”) forms a truly object-oriented terrain.⁶¹ Yet for Freud, when objects emerge in dreams, their reading must use the human body as its reference point to be understood, even slightly. This is a reading that, in situating the body as original is always bound to fail because the unconscious *cannot be known* and, because of this, the genital translation is always insecure.⁶² This failure to fully comprehend, decipher, de-alienate and exhaust the meaning of things is the hinge from which a truly queer object-oriented philosophy must open.

It is important to delineate that for Freud, purses, shoes and hats are not

⁶⁰ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

⁶¹ Grosz, *Lacan*, 4.

⁶² There is a connection here to Jack Halberstam’s emphasis on failure as a queer art and a resistant strategy against heteronormative narratives of success. See, Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

necessarily symbols but ciphers, embodying a strange and secret code of the unconscious Freud's largest error, one which Lacan elucidates in theorizing the Imaginary and the Real, is that the unconscious is not a codified space, nor can it be.⁶³ The reaching of the Symbolic towards psychic territories that resist accurate symbolization (the Freudian unconscious and the Lacanian Real) is the continual failure of desire that characterizes human life. To OOO, this should sound familiar. As Harman argues: we are "hunters of objects," though objects can "never be caught."⁶⁴ This alien nature of things is something that the Surrealists — who had their own "fling" with psychoanalysis — understood well, in embracing the unconscious and the uncanny in their treatment of things while rejecting pathologizing tendencies towards conscious normalization. Graham Harman identifies two different attempts to exhaust the object: the overmining or undermining of things. Undermining of objects being assuming they are "too shallow to be real" while overmining assumes that "they are too deep" and "only within human experience."⁶⁵ While Freudian psychoanalysis tends towards overmining objects,⁶⁶ the Surrealists queered psychoanalysis, trying to show that objects exist in their realest form within the unconscious. Indeed, Bréton appropriated dream analysis but rejected its normalizing tendencies, calling the

⁶³ See Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the 'I'" in *Ecrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 1-7.

⁶⁴ Graham Harman, *The Third Table*, 12, 10.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, *The Quadruple Object*, 10-11.

⁶⁶ Lacanian psychoanalysis, in its views on the inaccessible object might get off a little bit easier from accusations of "overmining" or "undermining" — especially since Bryant appropriates Lacan and moves it towards OOO in *The Democracy of Objects*.

“waking state” of consciousness “a phenomenon of interference.”⁶⁷ Yet although dream interpretation of objects poses “interference” into the formless, queer territory of the unconscious, we might read Freud’s attempt towards coherence as working against him, instead rendering the object incoherent.

Before creating those works for which she is best known – couches with tails and contorted plush mannequins – American surrealist Dorothea Tanning’s 1944 painting *Rêve de Luxe (Dream of Luxury)* shows a deep understanding of the strangeness of things. *Rêve de Luxe* directly references *The Interpretation of Dreams* in its title but also demonstrates a visually Freudian treatment of handbags as vaginal. In the center of the painting, a grey mollusk shell—likely a species of clam—stands unsupported and open at the hinge, upon a non-descript desert-like, dust-coloured landscape. Five different handbags, some hanging open and some clasped shut, hang or float within the shell’s interior. The hinge and hinge teeth of the shell represent a highly detailed labial opening and the handbags contribute to this vaginal reference through the hyperbolically obvious and immediate reference to Freud’s assertion that purses are vaginal symbols.⁶⁸

The vaginal likeness of handbags is not hard to identify in Tanning’s work, rather it is hyperbolically present – folds of fabric gather around an opening and atop which clitoral round ball clasps are attached. These vaginal purses are

⁶⁷ André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism.” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 12.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

also enclosed within a clamshell, another vaginal symbol. In this overemphasis of objects made vaginal, Tanning's painting asks viewers to make the Freudian association and acknowledge the means through which the purse, used as a container and tool, both mimics the human body and intersects with strange, undefinable moments of bodily desire that a subject cannot completely control. Yet instead of reinforcing the Freudian reading, Tanning overdoes it with a nearly camp sensibility, one that appropriates Freudian symbolism—and takes it to an extreme—in order to make the object it subsumes weird again. This exaggeration disturbs Freudian symbol-referent causality, revealing the inadequacy of the Freudian reading as an authoritative discourse by way of an exaggerated performance.

While purses assert their genital resemblance, they also point to the inadequacy of such a reading to fully capture their complexity of being. In his sculpture *Desire* (2009), Martin Soto Climent places three leather coin purses of different colours inside-out. In extending the interior of the purse outwards, Climent makes the inside look like a stuck-out tongue, drawing attention to the mouth-like qualities of the bags. The work, like Tanning's painting, provokes discomfort; but instead of representing the object that is “used” (the purse) to produce a moment of Freudian recognition, Climent puts the vaginal purse in the context of a directly physical interaction with a viewer. The confrontation is much more aggressive, and the destabilizing effects of the object's drag performance much more powerful. *Desire*'s immediate association between purse and mouth,

via a simple inversion of the purse's structure is arresting, highlighting the constantly shifting sensual qualities of objects to emphasize that not only is the purse performatively "doing" its drag as a mouth with a tongue but it performatively "does" any form of its purse-being as well. Yet in its performance of the mouth, the purse's "doing" of the vaginal association is not lost – rather the mouth and the vagina are bound in uncanny likeness via the purse's performance. In confronting *Desire*, a three dimensional object in drag literally sticks its tongue out at the viewer, poking fun at their body by inhumanly emulating it. As the human viewer comes into contact with the object in human drag, the viewer's own body becomes uncanny and the structural certainty of their bodily wholeness as a point of originality is momentarily undermined.

Instead of making us see the purse as both vagina and mouth separately, *Desire* conflates the vagina and mouth into a singular image with multiple "lips" – an extensive allegory that informs much of Irigaray's work. The mouth and vaginal lips are inextricably bound for Irigaray, and her linguistic treatment renders them strange and imparts them with queer wonder. In the correlationist and phallogocentric subjugation of the object (or of woman as object), "they [humanists] neither taught us nor allowed us to say our multiplicity."⁶⁹ In Irigaray's understanding, woman is forced into the phallogocentric symbolic order, "an order which is alien" to her – or, I might say, which renders her an "alien."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Irigaray, *Lips*, 73.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Indeed, the sensual qualities of objects are their “doing,” while their essence—as Irigaray expresses—is multiple, ungraspable, alien and queer. Though objects do not have literal “lips,” the performative vaginal/oral lips of Climent’s *Desire* not only queer the normative ways of seeing coin purses but suggest that, in refusing to be only one thing, the object might have something to say, in its own queer language.

Shoes

According to Freud, shoes have an important double purpose. Appearing in dreams they symbolize “the female genital”⁷¹ because of the movement of phallic feet in and out of their opening. But shoes are also a common fetish-object, through which they take on a different gendered signification. In his 1927 essay “Fetishism,” Freud declares shoes in fetishism to be imparted with erotic qualities as a result of castration anxiety: they stand in for the mother’s phallus, which the fetishist refuses to acknowledge as castrated, taking up the shoe instead.⁷² As with Climent’s vaginal purses, when these two Freudian readings are brought together, the shoe becomes a confused sign—both vaginal *and* phallic.

Other works by Climent encompass this blurring of sexual difference evoked by objects gendered by their resemblance to the body – illuminating, as

⁷¹ Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality The Pelican Freud Library Vol. 4*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 67.

⁷² Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism.” *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. vol. 21*, trans. James Strachey, (London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1927), 155.

Bryant argues, that the sensual qualities of objects should be referred to as a “doing.” I want to emphasize here Climent’s objects’ performative fluctuation between the constructed coherence of the human body and the real incoherence of materiality. One of Climent’s more recent sculptures, *Corner* (2012) features a pair of cream-coloured high heels tucked inside the opening of a pair of black leather loafers. This calls to mind the idea of a hole being “filled” — an image that Freud relies on to support both his heterosexist notion of the castrated woman and reaffirm phallogentrism. But since these shoes, absent of a wearer, are not being filled with feet, they force us to meditate on the object beyond its functional use, turning our attention instead to the strange interaction between bodies and clothing, as well as that between clothing and clothing. Filling one shoe with another recalls the feet, and by association the entire body, as an object. Although feet are being referenced here, their presence is spectral making the object haunt the body that might encounter *Corner*, thereby challenging it. Filling one shoe with another, instead of a foot, implores that the viewer consider the act of “wearing” goes beyond clothing – that humans are also forced to “wear” their body and subjecthood.

The unconscious translation once again sparks a resistance to bodily totality. Rather than being necessarily vaginal or anal, the hole in the shoe visualizes the dark and unknowable space into which objects retreat. In reviewing Climent’s 2014 exhibition at Proyectos Monclova gallery in Mexico City, Laura McLean-Ferris writes the following:

Climent not only draws out the polysexual qualities of objects that can doubly read as male or female, but also the way in which many objects might be subconsciously or associatively considered male or female, but then also have the ability to make a confusing switch using a slight twist, revealing the dualities that are always already inscribed within them.⁷³

Though symbolic inscription is always imposed *on* and not “within” objects, the “slight twist” that McLean-Ferris notes describes the means through which drag can play with not only “inscribed dualities” of sex and gender but expose the contradictory queerness of ontological being itself, to challenge any association made between an object and its signified meaning.⁷⁴ The “polysexuality” noted here speaks to the object in drag’s ability to move throughout multiple genital or sexual associations, eluding the binaries to which these objects are bound in Freudian theory. In their multiplicity of dynamic associations, Climent’s works enact a gleeful play on stale psychoanalytic readings of objects, thereby queering them. Rather than indicating a vagina likeness, the holes of shoes allegorize that the reality of objects slips into a dark hole that we cannot follow, into what Harman calls the “perpetually veiled underworld” of ontological realness.⁷⁵ By performing their signification *as* bodily referents, these shoes make explicit the limits/inadequacy of this reading, retreating into their unique ontological status and exposing the emptiness of the signifier when confronted by the object.

⁷³ Laura McLean-Ferris, “Martin Soto Climent,” *ArtReview* Jan/Feb (2014), accessed January 2016: http://artreview.com/features/feature_jan_feb_2014_martin_soto_climent/.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 39.

A less subtle example of this revealing “twist” enacted by drag is a famous pair of stilettos featuring a heel made of transparent Lucite and shaped like a phallic dildo; worn by Lady Gaga—herself no stranger to drag and gender play—and designed by UK manufacturer Void of Course. The shoes demonstrate a deliberate play on the genital readings of objects by accentuating the symbolic genital referent embodied in *any* pair of heels. Like Tanning’s painting, hyperbolic exaggeration of the Freudian reading makes the object weird. These “penis heels,” through their drag, both pay homage to and challenge the authority of Freudian gendering of objects as well as notions of castration anxiety. In wearing these shoes, Gaga performs the phallic sign and literally walks all over it, an appropriation of the weapon that has subjugated her to “lack,” while using the dildo to parody her alleged status as “lack.” Gaga’s shoes also play on a viral Internet rumour that had speculated whether or not she “had” a penis. In this context, the act of wearing the dildo shoes confronts this rumour but eludes satisfying its binary demands to identify whether or not Gaga “is” one or the other gender, by playing on the Lacanian dichotomy between “having” and “being” the phallus that is used to differentiate the categories of “woman” and “man.” For Butler, by contrast, “‘having’ and ‘being’ are [always] comedic failures.”⁷⁶ In this instance, Gaga’s shoes highlight that “having” a penis is always a performative gesture or a phallic drag. Indeed, the Lacanian structure of “having” or “being”

⁷⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 46.

the phallus is a doubly false claim for OOO, which asserts that “having” is an illusory hegemony and “being” is elusive and multiple.⁷⁷

Hats

Of his movie character Indiana Jones’ famous fedora, Harrison Ford has said “there has to be a reason that the hat comes off, some kind of joke involved.”⁷⁸ Indeed, despite the turbulent physical activity that Indiana Jones undergoes in the films, this hat holds an unbelievable amount of staying power. During a love scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*,⁷⁹ Jones lies naked in bed, wearing only this hat. Straddling his waist, Jones’ female lover Marion Ravenwood looks him in the eye, pointedly grabs the hat, and throws it aside. In the franchise of films Indiana Jones’ phallic power is somewhat obviously reiterated through his whip and his hat, which he never manages to lose, always holding onto it whatever the circumstance. Yet for this love scene to carry out within normative expectations for intercourse, the hat must be removed, lest Jones be emasculated as a hat fetishist. This joke goes beyond Indiana Jones’ attachment to his fedora— or rather, the joke *is* Jones’ attachment to his hat, but a many-layered joke that also invokes the Freudian tradition of reading hats – and other accessory items – as coded genitals. As with Gaga’s shoes, Jones’ hyperbolic masculinity, bound up in his ability to hold onto his hat, pays homage to the reformative readings of

⁷⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 45.

⁷⁸ “Indiana Jones: Indy’s Hat and Jacket Featurette,” YouTube video, 3:38, posted by “Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull: 22 May,” April 30, 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOv0qKEWMLc>

⁷⁹ *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, directed by Stephen Spielberg (1981, Los Angeles CA: Paramount Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

these objects as well. In this comedic framework, Jones highlights that the possession of phallic power is as much performative as is the phallic power performed by the objects themselves.

Freud genders the hat masculine, a substitute phallus (or phallic extension), but hats do possess a cavernous hole into which the head disappears. This performative penetration, would, within Freudian discourses normally conclude in vaginal symbolism. Indeed, Freud writes that, “the female genital is symbolically represented by all those objects which share its peculiarity of enclosing a space capable of being filled by something.”⁸⁰ The top of Man Ray’s photograph *Untitled (Man’s hat)* appears as a labial opening or what Rosalind Krauss refers to in her analysis of the image as a “genital smile”⁸¹: a vaginal mouth analogy that might also be applied to Climent’s coin purses. Very recently, hip hop megastar Pharrell has been iconified by the Vivienne Westwood “Boss of the Plains” style hat, that he, like Indiana Jones, is never seen without. Also like Indiana Jones, who is absorbed by his hat, Pharrell highlights that possession of phallic power is always worn. And as it can be worn, it can also be removed and reappropriated by different wearers – that it is, in fact, a drag performance. During a recent interview on American talk-show *Ellen*, host Ellen DeGeneres gifted Pharrell with a grossly exaggerated version of his hat, nearly as tall as Pharrell himself. This is a joke, referring to Pharrell’s small stature as well as the

⁸⁰ Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. G. Stanley Hall. (New York: Horace Liveright, 1920): 128.

⁸¹ Rosalind E. Kraus, *The Optical Unconscious*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996): 162.

hyperbolically large fashion statement of his Westwood chapeau. As Ellen gifted the hat to Pharrell, he placed the hat atop his lap and said, “this might be a lot online. I can tell you right now, online, where this is going.”⁸² The implication here is that Pharrell, Ellen, and her audience all understood the genital significance of the hat; in Krauss’ description, “firmly rounded, aggressive, the crown of the hat rises up toward its viewer like the tip of the male organ, swelling with so much phallic presence.”⁸³ Furthering this implicit understanding, and playing on her own identity as a lesbian, Ellen responded: “I don’t even want to touch it.” This bit fell somewhere between charming and chafing, exposing the ridiculousness of the genital readings of objects while absolutely asserting them at the same time.⁸⁴ The object stands in for an inability to confront the presence of genitals directly, producing a sub-discussion by way of its genital performance.

Indeed, the fluctuating genital readings of objects within psychoanalysis, at times, seems to be a bit of a stretch, a hyperbole that Ellen’s bit underscores. Yet the outrageous nature of conflating hats, purses and shoes with genitals serves the purpose of ridiculing all signifying practices that use the body as a reference point. Just as in Climent’s *Desire* or in Gaga’s penis shoes, the object *does* the ridiculing of the subject, pointing out the limitations of discourse to capture its

⁸² Pharrell Williams and Ellen DeGeneres, “Pharrell William’s Impressive Career.” YouTube Video, 5:37, posted by “TheEllenShow,” April 9, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FHcm2GHW6w>

⁸³ Kraus, *The Optical Unconscious*, 162.

⁸⁴ Interestingly, the penis-hat was gifted to Pharrell right after he addressed the audience about his feminist politics, identifying that he “loved women” and demanded “equality for everyone.” We could read this as another layer of the joke, where Pharrell’s penis-hat swells despite his self-proclaimed feminism – a moment (and a very disappointing one) that conflates feminism with emasculation.

thing-being but also to capture sexuality – that it is a continuous, never satisfied attempt to determine the indeterminable object.

Skewing Signification

According to Morton, objects are “both themselves and not-themselves at one and the same time.”⁸⁵ In OOO, this is because objects are both what we give meaning to and yet, something else entirely. Accepting this means acknowledging that, in the face of overarching discourses of normativity and coherence, *all things* are incoherent. As Elizabeth Grosz comments, Freud’s legacy “posits a subject that is radically *incapable* of knowing itself” via “a rift, an unmastered gap or discontinuity between consciousness and the unconscious.”⁸⁶ Despite binary categories of totality (sex, gender) that implore them to conform, the subject’s ontological experience is never able to fit completely, perpetually somewhere in between. Similarly we might say of objects in human drag, that they perform “the body” to show that they are not “the body.”

Despite Freud’s authoritative attempt to read objects, we might see purses, shoes and hats resisting categorization by asserting this “unmastered gap” and exposing a “discontinuity” that Freud cannot grasp.⁸⁷ Psychoanalysis’s objects (here hats, purses and shoes) emerge from a wild, unknowable space within the unconscious. As these Freudian ciphers perpetually assert their otherness, they break with signification, exposing some of their secret, withdrawn

⁸⁵ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 31.

⁸⁶ Grosz, *Lacan*, 13, 10, 14.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

being. Since, according to Freud, this space is unknowable, psychoanalysis forges crucial links to the OOO. As Morton identifies, since “the deep content of the dream is latent...it’s withdrawn,” and “just can’t be accessed.”⁸⁸ The objects, then, that emerge from this space are caught in the structure that Graham Harman calls *allure*: they emerge but they also withdraw, fluctuating between the two.⁸⁹ The Freudian reading of hats, purses and shoes is always contradictory, suggesting that these objects are ciphers for the unconscious desire but also fail to accurately represent this desire: they are both vaginas and not vaginas, penises and not penises, repositories for desire and ontologically separate. In this way they are always queer, if we define queerness as undefinable and uncontainable or, perhaps better, as what Morton terms “dialetheic...hold[ing] two truths simultaneously.”⁹⁰ Freud’s objects are very much alive in their contradictory status: they are not one and not other, queerly straddling the lines between the body/object binary. The following chapters will identify other, perhaps more uncannily “alive” objects in drag, which momentarily appear as the body and seem to reify its status as original – until a moment in which they turn on the subject and descend into a cavernous withdrawal, after which the subject cannot follow.

⁸⁸ Morton, *Realist Magic*, 92.

⁸⁹ Harman, *The Third Table*, 10.

⁹⁰ Timothy Morton, “Treating Objects Like Women: Feminist Ontology and the Question of Essence,” in *International Perspectives on Ecocriticism*, ed. Greta Gaard, Simon C. Estok and Serpil Oppermann (New York: Routledge, 2013): 62.

II. Objects in Human Drag: The Mannequin's Queer Objecthood

“As a young person, I suffered for a long time, and I suspect many people have, from being told, explicitly or implicitly, that what I ‘am’ is a copy, an imitation, a derivative example, a shadow of the real.”

Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.”⁹¹

“I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp.”

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*.⁹²

My friend has a comedic bit that she performs whenever passing by a group of mannequins in a storefront window. She has become quite good at briefly glancing at the figurines and suddenly striking the exact same pose. The precision of her mimesis and the stillness in which she is able to render her body is both parts impressive and eerie. In witnessing her performances, I am forced to consider the question: who is mimicking whom? Mannequins resemble us: they wear our clothes, mock our movements and present us with confusingly familiar bodies. On a dark night, the rigidity and the plasticity which “fixes” them might be the only characteristic that prevents me from believing that that they *are* in fact human. But they are not, of course. Mannequins are objects. But the object-oriented approach I have adopted in this thesis necessitates recognizing that objects – including mannequins – do have *ways of being*, independent of their relation to human use and understanding.

⁹¹ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 312.

⁹² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 122.

The mannequin's ways of being, like those of objects more broadly, have been shut out from Western philosophical discourse on account of correlationist and human-centric ways of thinking. This mutual exclusion, I suggest, resonates strongly with the position of queer subjects, and supports considering these points of exclusion together, in a form of philosophy that addresses the categorical hegemony of subjecthood suppressing them: a queer object-oriented philosophy. In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" and *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler addresses how, within Western philosophy, the queer subject has not been considered as autonomous or "real" – a systematic elimination that has produced limiting and normative branches of ontological study.⁹³ Lost and alone in the sinister space outside of the "heterosexual matrix," the queer subject looks in all directions to see themselves surrounded by objects, the other refused and ignored mode of being.⁹⁴

The mannequin presents us with another example of an object performing humanness – a performance with longstanding lineage within artistic, literary and cultural imaginations. For Freud, the mannequin is the strongest example of the uncanny in action, since it presents a confusion between what constitutes a living thing (human body) and an object; thus blurring the categorical divide between these constructed binary states. In this chapter, I explore the queer-being of the mannequin, and explore how this blurring of categories might reveal itself as the

⁹³ Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 312.

⁹⁴ Judith Butler, preface to *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), viii.

positive basis for the object's queer resistance. While Butler is interested in dissolving binary gender categories that produce the dominance of "heterosexuality," objects such as the mannequin work against the human-object binary, challenging human supremacy over objects in favour of a categorical dissolution between being and non-being that Ian Bogost problematizes in his book *Alien Phenomenology or What It's Like to Be A Thing*. Hélène Cixous' *Fiction and its Phantoms*, with its feminist reimagining of the Freudian uncanny, will help to frame the mannequin's performance. The mannequin *is* an object in human drag — one whose performance simultaneously destabilizes traditional methods of interpreting "things," as well as human originality and primacy.

Objects that perform humanness (objects in human drag) reveal themselves to be both irreducible to human use and irreducibly queer. The mannequin, like other objects in human drag, performs the human body in order to undermine its "claim to originality."⁹⁵ This appropriation and then subversion of the body's "claim to originality" brings to light that subjecthood is performed by a repeated assertion of human bodily totality, which poses as an ontological pre-given. Just in the moment and place that objects in drag might seem to fortify the correlationist argument by appearing as the human body that excludes their thing-being, they surreptitiously challenge the divide and illuminate that all objects are radically queer, multiple and uncontainable. Butler's idea of gender as

⁹⁵ Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 314.

performance, entailing “the denial of the *priority* of the subject,”⁹⁶ invokes Levi Bryant’s notion of “flat ontologies,” a term he appropriates via Manuel De Landa’s original use of the term. Flat ontologies “grant all objects the same ontological status...the term *object* enjoys a wide berth: corporeal and incorporeal entities count, whether they be material objects, abstractions, objects of intention, or anything else whatsoever,”⁹⁷ recognizing the lives of objects that go beyond what they can do “for us.”⁹⁸

Through the lens of OOOs, we must understand the mannequin to have a life in and of itself, separate from our identification of it as a replica of humanness, an inferior image of the real thing. Instead, as I’ve previously introduced, the mannequin, as an object, *performs ideas of humanness*. This performance of an animate body exposes the qualities, appearances and behaviours generally associated with humanness to be simulated or similarly performed, rather than something essential to being. Considering the mannequin’s drag of human bodily coherence, this is a drag that also exposes the entire privileged notion of “the body” to be a constructed category prioritizing the subject. Nicole Parrot’s *Mannequins*, to date the most extensive cultural and material history of the mannequin, opens with the disclaimer that the mannequin

⁹⁶ Ibid., 313.

⁹⁷ Levi Bryant as quoted in Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology or What It’s Like To Be A Thing*, 12.

⁹⁸ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 4.

must “be read resisting any temptation to anthropomorphic misinterpretation.”⁹⁹ This suggests that the mannequin has an existence separate from its mimicry of human bodies. Parrot’s is a critical and object-oriented point. As with all objects described by OOO theorists, the mannequin exists on many planes outside of human use and understanding. Still, part of the mannequin’s uniqueness as an object *is* obviously the resemblance it bears to the human body, and its ability to be recognized as a body is at the crux of its status as an object in drag. And this human drag is a form of anthropomorphism that, as Jane Bennett identifies, gleans some benefits. These are queer benefits, ones that through “a touch of anthropomorphism...can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of being.”¹⁰⁰ But if we are to consider objects in human drag not as an anthropomorphism imposed by the subject onto things, but (as outlined in the previous chapter) as performing their sensual qualities (qualities as what an object “does,” rather than “is”), then the focus moves to the ways in which these objects —like the mannequin —*autonomously* subvert the diminutive position to which they have been assigned.

The key historical function of the mannequin has been, of course, to display clothing. Parrot writes that, “a dress cut to cling to every curve of the body, falls at its best on the mannequin.”¹⁰¹ Put more bluntly, not only do

⁹⁹ Nicole Parrot, *Mannequins*, trans. Sheila de Vallé. (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1982): 28.

¹⁰⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 99.

¹⁰¹ Parrot, *Mannequins*, 16.

mannequins wear human clothing, they wear our clothing better than we do. We might link this to Butler's ideas regarding drag, which is so convincing in its uncanny performance of heterosexual behavior that it renders a heterosexual origin-point unlocatable, revealing it to be constructed. In drag, "the parodic replication and resignification of heterosexual constructs within non-heterosexual frames... [brings] into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called original."¹⁰² Similarly, I argue, the mannequin's parody of humanness makes fully present the illusory and constructed "claim to originality" that humans embody through anthropocentric and correlationist binaries between animate humans and inanimate objects, bodies and their so-called copies.

In *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, Kenneth Gross claims that the binary distinction between the inanimate and the animate is a cultural "fiction."¹⁰³ Correspondingly, heterosexuality is also a cultural fiction that categorically divides sex and gender. As a thought-experiment, Gross argues that the statue is not stationary but in motion: a longstanding mythological imagining, but one with interesting theoretical implications. Gross suggests that in the form of the statue "images of animation and petrification circulate around each other... they collide and parody each other."¹⁰⁴ The rethinking of the statue as actually in motion "seems in general to convey the idea of a made, constructed image becoming

¹⁰² Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 314.

¹⁰³ Kenneth Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992): 55.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

autonomous but also alien.”¹⁰⁵ The statue-mannequin’s dual status as “autonomous” from and “alien” to human understanding rings pleasantly with Ian Bogost’s presentation of an “alien phenomenology” but, I suggest, with queer alienation as well. Unlike Gross, I do not want to render the mannequin as a legitimately animate object; rather, along the lines of Bogost and Butler, I would like to do away with the binary distinctions between “animate” and “inanimate” or “valid” and “invalid” body, which, as we delve further into the world of the mannequin, will see that its performance effectively queers, subverts, and dissolves.

In our analysis of the mannequin’s human drag, we cannot skirt around the topic of its genitals, which reference the human genitals but are also decidedly not. When unclothed, the slight rise in between the mannequin’s legs does not point to an absence but the presence of something else. Parrot refers to the genitals of the mannequin as “mounds.”¹⁰⁶ I like this term, as it is synonymously linked with the word “assemblage” which in its many Deleuzian-Guattarian connotations promises a more rhizomatic model for both objects and gender.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Parrot, *Mannequins*, 22. As an interesting historical note to the mannequin’s genital interchangeability, Parrot writes of Pierre Imans, arguably the most prominent manufacturer of mannequins in the 1920s who developed a particularly popular model to display dance costumes, called “The Splits,” and between whose horizontally spread legs there existed a flat stretch of plastic rather than replica female genitals. Parrot explains that Imans’ model was interchangeable and “could be adjusted to fit onto a torso,” perhaps ones already owned by the shopkeeper.

¹⁰⁷ A mound is a descriptor of the elevated pelvic area on a storefront mannequin, but a mound is also interchangeable with: pile, accumulation and *assemblage*. Speculatively: what if all genitals are considered “mounds” or *assemblages*. This is what I mean by a

Parrot writes that for the mannequin, “the function of clothing stretches upwards from the pubis. The mannequin with its eroded mound or member is ironical; it defies the body for which it is a substitute. Dolls, androids and statues are imitations; a mannequin is a fake.”¹⁰⁸ I would like to take up Parrot’s distinction between “substitute” and “fake.” The idea of the “substitute” implies that the only purpose of the mannequin is to stand in for humans. Though I am acknowledging that part of the mannequin’s queer performance is to imitate human bodies, this characterization of a “fakeness” aligns the mannequin with Butler’s discussion of lesbian experience as a “shadow of the real,”¹⁰⁹ with the lesbian a “bad copy [that] can be occupied and reworked to call into question...claims of heterosexual priority.”¹¹⁰ Or, I might add, human priority as well. Thus “fakeness” occupies a subversive quality, one that ultimately characterizes the object in drag’s subversive project. Toward the end of this chapter, I identify transgender performance artist Nina Arsenault as precisely questioning this notion of the “bad copy,” something that she allegorizes through an empowering becoming-mannequin. Mannequins are realistic material “substitutes” for humans except for

more rhizomatic approach to sex and gender: linguistically deterritorialized. For example, Deleuze and Guattari write in “Year Zero: Faciality”: “the face is part of a surface holes, holey surface system” rather than being its humanizing system, the face is “the inhuman in human beings.” Here, “vagina” or “penis” could be substituted for for “face” and the means through which they define both gender and humanness. Confronting the “mound” of the mannequin assists in this turn away from gender and towards reconceptualizing the body. See Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “Year Zero: Faciality” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): 170.

¹⁰⁸ Parrot, *Mannequins*, 21.

¹⁰⁹ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 312.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 310.

one important thing: for Parrot, what “suddenly reveal[s] the inhuman condition of the mannequin, whether it is truncated or not, [is] its sexual organs.”¹¹¹ The flat or molded, plastic expanse that occupies the space in between the legs of the mannequin exists as a visual allegory for the flat ontology, implying that the sexuality of the mannequin can exist on many planes simultaneously. It is a refusal of the Freudian reading of the woman as lack. The mannequin appears gendered, but its sex is ambiguous, existing outside of human categories of sex. In place of a dialectic of phallic presence or vaginal absence, we have something else: the queer sex of objects.

The female mannequin’s biological strangeness lies in its ability to act as a woman’s “impassive double.”¹¹² Moreover, the mannequin *appears*, like the drag queen, to be exactly representative of the female body — but (again like the drag queen) also, as a material object, will perpetually frustrate this comparison. Yet the exaggerated bodily essentialism and idealism performed by the mannequin deconstructs the very gendered notion of womanhood by contextualizing it within the non-human body:

In the fifties, the mannequin idealized plump women with generous curves, excluding those who, fifteen years later, by the sheer accident of their morphology, would probably be wearing Twiggy’s miniskirts...At every period in history, women of all ages have searched the mannequin’s body in vain for the stigma of the thousand flaws and scars etched on their own bodies by heredity and time. Not only does a mannequin not wear

¹¹¹ Ibid., 21, 20.

¹¹² Ibid., 21.

panties; she also has no varicose veins.¹¹³

Here, the drag of the mannequin is made apparent. Humanness, like essentialist femininity, is framed as a perpetually inaccessible ideal. It is a powerful drag, enacted by an object, one that muddles the ‘correlationism’ between gender and biology. Queerly straddling the existence of the human and the existence of the material, the mannequin’s drag reveals cultural norms of womanhood to be “fake” and the idea of an “original” woman to be inherently plastic.¹¹⁴ Fakeness in its connoted meanings of copying, mocking and “putting-on” a certain body, implies a certain agency and autonomy on the part of the faker. If sex is revealed to be “fake” or manufactured, then there exists the implicit suggestion that it can be manufactured differently. In its materiality and lack of mobility, the mannequin renders singular, essential visions of natural womanhood to be unattainable, an accomplishment similar to that of the drag queen’s hyperbolic performance of femininity. If normative womanhood is a repetitive forgery of a non-existent original, then the performance of this normative womanhood within the plasticized body of the mannequin exposes sex and gender, alongside humanness, as a sham.

If the mannequin closely represents these normative ideals, its strangeness is somewhat of a surprise. The mannequin’s drag of the human body is so convincing, that its status as an object produces a zone of “discontinuity between

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 20.

sex, gender and desire” by performatively taking part in this seemingly stable triangle of idealized gender identities and desire amongst heterosexual subjects yet also, as an object, resisting complete subsumption into this framework.¹¹⁵ This, I think, makes the mannequin directly related to Harman’s call for a turn away from correlationist anthropocentrism as “a perpetual ratification of the status quo” and Butler’s critique of the heterosexual matrix.¹¹⁶ As an object in drag, the mannequin disrupts both, interjecting dissonant notes into the “human-world duet.”¹¹⁷ Additionally, those who would scan mannequins for biological markers of time, critiquing their failure to conform to “real” women’s aging bodies, are effectively (and ironically) considering the mannequin on the same plane as themselves, a willful misrecognition that leads us gracefully, via drag, to a flat ontology. In such moments of imagined, illusory sameness, “object” and “human” are revealed to be as categorically arbitrary as “woman” and “man.” In the mannequin, Parrot writes, “we have an object that surpasses its status and its meaning, and is the dangerous rival of its ancestors to the point of sublimating them, as if the body needed the mannequin to accede to the full flowering of its powers of evocation and force of persuasion.”¹¹⁸ The idea that humans *require* objects to authenticate themselves is a radical reversal of the normal priority of being. Returning to the mannequin’s genitals, Parrot relates an old law prohibiting

¹¹⁵ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 317.

¹¹⁶ Graham Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer,” 194.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹¹⁸ Parrot, *Mannequins*, 22.

the display of nude mannequins.¹¹⁹ What is so unsettling about the nudity of the mannequin? Perhaps it is the exposed mound that provides the context here: not the presentation of exposed genitals, but their opposite, a reaction that calls into question not only the conditions in which we consider ourselves sexed beings, but the conditions with which we consider ourselves human at all.

While the mannequin is able to highlight the materiality of sex via its *lack* of genitalia, sex dolls are contrastingly mannequins *with* genitals, and whose genitals are arguably their *raison d'être*. Manufacturers of silicon sex dolls such as RealDoll pride themselves on the quality of their mannequin's human performance through quality of construction, material and a service that accommodates customizable orders.¹²⁰ The company's name presents a play on this dichotomy of the "real" human body and "object" doll's body – a dichotomy that RealDoll's mannequins also trouble and confuse through their human drag. The FAQ section of RealDoll's website includes a mammoth list of questions, most of which demand specifics on how closely the doll might be manipulated to mimic the human body including: "Can the doll's hair be styled normally?" "Can a RealDoll's fingers close and grip?" "Can my doll sit, stand and hold poses?"¹²¹ The answers to nearly all of these questions is yes, though some limitations apply – mainly that the doll cannot be treated too violently or forcefully and retain its

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 32.

¹²⁰ Abyss Creations, "RealDoll FAQ," *RealDoll*, last modified 2015, <https://secure.realdoll.com/realdoll-faq/>.

¹²¹ Ibid.

form. Many of the answers direct customers towards the means through which they can emulate a “real” and “human” erotic experience with their dolls. For instance, the company writes that the stainless steel “skeleton used in our dolls moves in nearly all of the ways a real human being does” or that “silicone rubber can withstand over 400 degrees of heat. You can soak your RealDoll in a hot bath, or put her under an electric blanket to give it lifelike body heat.” Of the genitals, “the inside of the vaginal and anal entries are molded as part of the dolls and have texture and shape which make them feel very much like a real person. A RealDoll’s vaginal lips can be stretched apart very realistically.”¹²² The vocabulary of this FAQ section altogether speaks to the means through which dolls are able to most effectively mimic the human body in order to provide erotic company for their human partners. The interest here is that normative, idealized desire might always be based on an objectophilia and othering.

While the discussion in RealDoll’s FAQ reiterates the doll’s role as an object to be “used” by their (presumed male) owners,¹²³ a number of recent films about such dolls—such as *Air Doll* (dir. Hirokazu Kore-eda, 2009)¹²⁴ and *Lars and The Real Girl* (dir. Craig Gillespie, 2007)¹²⁵—trouble this perspective: by imagining the doll coming to life, they speak to her withdrawn thing-being and

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid. I’m sure there are some queer women who buy female dolls and RealDoll also has a line of male dolls called Male RealDoll2.

¹²⁴ *Air Doll*, directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda (2009; Hong Kong: Edko Films, 2010), DVD.

¹²⁵ *Lars and the Real Girl*, directed by Craig Gillespie (2007; Montréal: Equinoxe Films, 2007), DVD.

unique inner life, rather than her exquisite emulation of idealized womanhood. Kore-eda's *Air Doll* is an oddly structured and complex film that confronts the uncanny presence of the mannequin-sex doll, the sexism that submits her to tool-being and the vital materiality of her existence. In *Air Doll*, inflatable sex-doll Nozomi (played by Korean actress Doona Bae) comes alive when her "owner," who uses her as an outlet both for his sexual desire and as an unresponsive conversation companion over dinner, leaves the house. The sex scenes in *Air Doll* are highly uncomfortable, reading as assault or rape in a moment that draws on the violent demotion of both the woman *and* the object at the expense of masculinist priority. After sex, Nozomi must reach between her legs and extract her removable vagina so that she can clean it. In these moments, in which the vagina and object are uncannily conflated, the materiality of sex is highlighted – and an emotional response invoked, regarding the phallogentric, penetrative treatment of objects.

Against these sinister thematics, in her moments of life Nozomi effusively engages with every entity she encounters, from trash to people on park benches.¹²⁶ Eventually she finds work at a video store and falls in love with a young clerk there named Junichi (Arata Iura). One day when she gets cut at work and begins to deflate, Junichi puts his lips over the cut and re-inflates her in an erotic moment

¹²⁶ I would say that Nozomi's engagement with the world falls into what Ian Bogost refers to as "wonder" – an approach to things that engages towards the flat ontology and appreciates "things" in their fullness, poetry and inaccessibility. See Bogost, "Wonder" in *Alien Phenomenology*, 113.

that, via tropes such as slow motion cinematography, forehead sweat, soft gasping and moaning, performs typical cinematic lovemaking scenes. In Nozomi and Junichi's second erotic encounter, he asks to cut and reinflate her, in a replicated encounter of the accident at the store. Though Nozomi finds this pleasurable, the moment forces an uncanny reaction in her. When Junichi falls asleep, Nozomi searches her lover's body for signs that it is like hers. When she cannot find a valve for inflation, she cuts Junichi and desperately tries to re-inflate him using her mouth. Unfortunately, Junichi bleeds to death. Still replicating the treatment of air doll bodies like her own, Nozomi stuffs him in a plastic bag and puts him out with the trash. Although somewhat heartbreaking in nature—minutes before his death, Junichi tells Nozomi that, in contrast to her conditioned experience as a human substitute, she “isn't a substitute for anyone”—this is also a powerfully violent scene, one that is both a radically feminist reclamation of the hegemonically abused body and an object-oriented critique of the means through which this abuse replicates itself in our treatment of things.

The uncanny, hovering atmosphere produced by Nozomi's human drag, gives way to a number of object-oriented considerations within *Air Doll*. Though Nozomi becomes animate, she is not human: she cannot taste or smell, she remains inflated, her body retains its detachable vagina, etc. Thus, despite her ability to effectively perform humanness, her ability to sense the world around her remains withdrawn. When Junichi takes her to a beach, he expresses that being near salt water—its smell, taste and feel—evokes a nostalgic recollection of his

childhood. Nozomi becomes frustrated in her inability to experience the same affective bodily reaction. Indeed, Nozomi is both the body without memory¹²⁷ and the body traumatized by the memory of being physically manipulated, used and relegated to “tool being.” In a poignant scene in the film, Nozomi visits the factory where she was made and walks through spectral production lines of disassembled mannequin body parts. During this return, she meets the creator of mannequins who also receives unwanted and discarded mannequin bodies that have been returned to their manufacturer. Once a year, the maker tells her, he throws out the bodies because – unlike human beings – they are not “burnable garbage.”

Nozomi herself experiences a queer kinship with trash. She collects empty, discarded bottles of ramune—a type of Japanese soda in a glass bottle that is opened by pushing a marble through the neck of the bottle—and dances around while listening to the mystical sound of the marble clinking in its interior. When Junichi dies, Nozomi’s automatic reaction is to place him out with the trash, in a replication of the means through which her body has been used and discarded. Heartbroken, however, she deflates herself and lies out in the heap of garbage

¹²⁷ Deleuzian-Guattarian term relating to the body without organs. Also something that Donna Haraway identifies as a key feature of the cyborg, whose status is close to the object in that it withdraws from grand narratives and signifying hegemonies. See Donna Haraway, “A cyborg manifesto. Science, technology and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century.” in *The Cybercultures Reader*. Ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy. (New York: Routledge, 2000): 292. See Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): 149.

bags and discarded ramune bottles.¹²⁸ This moment, while sad in its suggestion that Nozomi cannot maintain her inclusion within normative discourses of human life, is a moment of what Jane Bennett refers to as “vital materiality” in which random congregations of objects induce a moment of pause, wonder and reflection.¹²⁹

The narrative structure of *Air Doll* is complicated and often confusing to follow as it illogically jumps from scene to scene, moments of animated life to inanimate being. Jane Bennett might describe this process as one conducive to recognizing vital materiality: exchanging linear cohesion and “demystification” which “screens from view the vitality for matter” for forms of mystification and elusiveness.¹³⁰ The final image of the film is that of a deflated Nozomi in a trash heap, similar to that of the human she has just “killed.” Ramune bottles and fruit in her final moments of animation have been organized in a pretty geometric formation around the trash heap, one that speaks to the powerful, meaningful and

¹²⁸ *Air Doll* in its death sequences and trash motif is reminiscent of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* about the human/non-human binary allegorized through clones that are harvested for their organs so that human health and life is extended. The novel is narrated by a clone who is constantly noting an uncanny resemblance between her life and trash objects or those excluded “secondary” members of society such as sex workers. *Air Doll* also speaks to the means in which these discursively excluded members of society become “objects.” Nozomi’s search for a “heart” is a similar philosophical question of the clones *Never Let Me Go* who are both always searching for their “original” after which they were modeled and out to prove that they have souls to save them from their inevitable harvesting. See Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

¹²⁹ We might consider Bennett’s analysis of Kafka’s Odradek from “Cares of a Family Man” as relevant to the drag of the mannequin which powerfully queers the delineation between “real” and “non-real” that creates a binary of ontological validity. See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 8.

¹³⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xv.

beautiful life of trash, and the flat-ontological reading that eventually humans and objects alike are all equally trash. Bennett identifies these formations as *lively* as they “shimm[y] back and forth between debris and thing” producing a moment of “excess of their associations with human meanings, habits, or projects.”¹³¹

Nozomi’s drag produces the uncanny space that allow for these “otherwise utterly banal” objects to “appear as things,”¹³² as beings other than what they can do “*for us*.”¹³³ While refusing to assume material agency is humanly knowable, *Air Doll*’s assemblages of trash correctly reproduce its elusiveness, strangeness and unknowability.¹³⁴

In a more uplifting filmic treatment of the mannequin sex doll, and one that does not rely on the animation of the sex doll, *Lars and the Real Girl*, set in a rural town in Wisconsin, imagines the arrested psychological development following a lifetime of parental loss experienced by Lars (Ryan Gosling). Lars, who lives next door to his estranged brother Gus (Paul Schneider) and sister-in-law Karin (Emily Mortimer), is silent, depressive and reclusive in comparison with the normative partnership between the happy and pregnant Karin and Gus. Gus experiences some machismo shame and embarrassment over his brother’s shyness, casting it off as “weird,” in a refusal to confront the family trauma to

¹³¹ Ibid., 4-5.

¹³² Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 4-5.

¹³³ Ibid., 4

¹³⁴ See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 1. Jane Bennett would, I think, appreciate this production of “powerful, material assemblages with *resistant force*.”

which Lars is reacting—their mother died during Lars’ childbirth, deeply affecting their father, and with the consequence that Gus spent a long period away from home in his youth. Karin, on the other hand, overcompensates for Gus’ inadequacies and is overwhelming in her effusive attempts to have Lars as a guest at their house for meals. After being shown a sex-doll website at work—coincidentally an early version of RealDoll’s online store—Lars orders a brunette doll whom he names Bianca and introduces her to his family as his girlfriend. With Bianca, Lars is lively, chatty and interactive. Deeply concerned about this object as substitute for what should be a human companion, Gus and Karin tell Lars that Bianca has travelled a long way and that she must see the town doctor/psychologist, Dr. Dagmar (Patricia Clarkson). Dr. Dagmar recommends that the best thing for Lars’ betterment involves everyone going along with his “delusion” that Bianca is real.

Though Lars eventually relinquishes his love for Bianca—she “dies” so that he can date his human female co-worker and reintegrate himself into normative society—what is incredibly moving about the film is the means through which an entire town treats Bianca as they would Lars’ real girlfriend – they give her appropriate clothes for the Wisconsin winter, take her for haircuts, to parties and to volunteer in the community. In a particularly object-oriented comment, one townspeople says to Lars, who becomes jealous that everyone is demanding to spend time with Bianca, thus taking her away from him: “she’s a woman with a life of her own, you know!” Bianca perpetually asserts that she is an object with a

life of her own, too. Unlike *Air Doll*, in which the statue comes to life via mobility, Bianca remains a stationary, silent object making her a visually assertive and resistant presence. Lars is able to imagine her as real, despite her inability to autonomously move, by convincing himself that she requires a wheelchair. Within the film's heavy use of expressive close ups in the film to capture the emotional struggle of its characters, Bianca's features are resolutely plastic and immobile.

While Bianca's performance of humanness is not as visually convincing as in *Air Doll*, where a human actress embodies the coming-to-life to call into question the body/object dichotomy, in *Lars*, a sex doll is welcomed into a human community, so much so that she comes "alive" in their affective topography. During her funeral the town performs a collective mourning that is incredibly sincere. *Lars* brings to light what Butler calls the "psychic mimesis" necessary in producing not only gender categories but the stability of the human category, that "the psyche calls to be rethought precisely as a compulsive repetition, as that which conditions and disables the repetitive performance of identity."¹³⁵ As drag undermines the repetitive performance of binary gender and heterosexuality, which is built upon deeply engrained psychological repetition – Gus and Karin's panic at confronting Bianca indicates the threat that exposes the illusion of both their heteronormative and their human life—perpetually emphasized through Karin's pregnancy—in the act of Lars convincingly performing their "normal" relationship with an object. Contrastingly, Bianca's acceptance into the

¹³⁵ Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 317.

framework of the community and the affective power of her loss illuminates Bennett's claim that "the locus of agency is always a human non-human working group,"¹³⁶ with Bianca then being "an actant not an object."¹³⁷ Whereas *Air Doll* exposes the mannequin coming to life via a physical transformation and visually convincing human drag, *Lars* focuses on the psychological performance of sex, gender and humanness that both shapes binary categories and also can subvert them.

For Parrot, the mannequin participates in a performance that occurs in storefront windows. This particular performance conflates "the theatre" and "the city" populated by human shoppers.¹³⁸ In *The System of Objects*, Jean Baudrillard makes a comparison between the "magical...yet frustrating" nature of the store window and the "theatre of objects" it contains.¹³⁹ What Baudrillard fails to note about this "theatre of objects" is what productions exactly are being staged. Certainly Baudrillard is onto something, but we might interpret his theatrical analogy as a drag show of objects for which shoppers are the mesmerized audience. According to Gross, the mannequin "present[s] a body or a pose arrested in time, arresting time itself."¹⁴⁰ This power to "arrest time itself" is not dissimilar to the experience of watching actors in a theatrical production and

¹³⁶ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 10.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Parrot, *Mannequins*, 31.

¹³⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (New York: Verso, 2006): 42, 25.

¹⁴⁰ Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, 15.

Gross does compare the statue to a “tableau vivant.”¹⁴¹ In an OOO reading, all arrangements of objects are a “tableau vivant,” giving us an image of their sensual qualities while withdrawing into the unique realness of their lives as things. The link between Baudrillard’s “theatre of objects” and drag is also a powerful one.¹⁴² Drag has a power to reverse the conventions of homosexuality as “copy” of heterosexuality, to open up a possibility for “homosexuality [as] origin, and heterosexuality the copy.”¹⁴³ The mannequin’s power to freeze time, and present the terms of being human within the context of the immobile object invites the question: could the object be origin and human be the copy, the drag? Just as Butler’s queer performance disturbs the authority of the “heterosexual matrix,” the mannequin’s performance disturbs the “anthropocentric matrix.”¹⁴⁴

I want to relate the “anxiety” and “discomfort” created by the human drag performance of the storefront mannequin to the experience of the uncanny.¹⁴⁵ In *Fiction and Its Phantoms*, Hélène Cixous enacts a feminist re-reading of Freud’s essay on the uncanny (“Das Unheimliche,” 1919) that focuses on mannequins and automatons as the most immediate exemplars of the *unheimlich* or uncanny, particularly those in the *Tales of Hoffman*. Freud’s uncanny is a “disquieting strangeness” contingent on a kind of encounter with ones “double” or “hesitating

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 25.

¹⁴³ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 313.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 310.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 311.

shadow.”¹⁴⁶ Surely, the uncanny is also an experience produced in heterosexual subjects who watch drag queens emulate and “parody” their behavior.¹⁴⁷ In its ties to Butler’s drag queens, the mannequin likewise finds its queer power in being both “disquieting” and “strange.”¹⁴⁸ The mannequin’s appearance as object *and* human (or as a not-quite human) is fundamentally uncanny, a brushing up of “real life” with “the fantastic” that is also essentially queer. Ian Bogost’s description of OOO as confronting “the weird, murky mists of the really real”¹⁴⁹ – a phrasing that would characterize reality itself as queer – might be pertinent to the mannequin, who emulates those “fleshy beings that are our kindred” while clearly being other than these.¹⁵⁰ Though this may seem like a contradiction, it is not, as within both queer theory and OOOs “things can *be* many and various, specific and concrete, while their *being* remains identical.”¹⁵¹ This is, of course, a flat ontology, an appropriately queer solution that allows for a radical equality amongst all objects while simultaneously acknowledging their unique and individual autonomies. Bryant explains the flat ontology as “first and foremost the refusal to treat one strata of reality as the really real over and against all others.”¹⁵² The prioritizing of normative sex and gender categories emerges as a link here, too. In Bryant’s work, flat ontologies refuse to “reduce” objects, and

¹⁴⁶ Hélène Cixous, “Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud’s *Das Unheimlich* (The ‘uncanny’),” *New Literary History* 7 vol. 3 (1976): 525.

¹⁴⁷ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 314.

¹⁴⁸ Cixous, “Fiction and Its Phantoms,” 525.

¹⁴⁹ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 8.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵² Bryant, Levi. “Flat Ontology,” in *Larval Subjects*. February 24, 2010. <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/02/24/flat-ontology-2/>

this includes sex and gender, opening up infinite possibilities for both. The queer subject is queer because they occupy multiple planes of being simultaneously, much like the object in a flat ontology. Butler can be read as considering gender and sex on the flat ontology, opening up these categories to a multiplicity of being that is also autonomous.

Of the mannequin's appearance as both human and object, Parrot writes: "such a contradictory contrivance was able to create an illusion. And it is perpetuated daily by the magic of the shop window that separates millions of eyes from a handful of symbols which, exceptionally, have a human gaze."¹⁵³ I will return to the "human gaze" of the mannequin below, but what is important here is the "illusion" — or, better, "allusion" — created by the mannequin. Allure, as explained in the introduction, expresses the means through which objects, perpetually withdrawn, are only accessible to us when they emerge within recognizable contexts (as tools within semiotic apparatuses or physical use) or when these tools break and they expose their otherness. Thus, Harman argues, we only get to know objects *indirectly*,¹⁵⁴ a process of what Bogost names "metaphorism"¹⁵⁵ or Bryant calls "translation."¹⁵⁶ While we get some of the object, we never access the entire thing. The mannequin presents us with a recognizable, seemingly accessible body that looks uncannily "like us." Just like

¹⁵³ Parrot, *Mannequins*, 31.

¹⁵⁴ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 69-81.

¹⁵⁵ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 62.

¹⁵⁶ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 18.

Harman's *allure*, however, the mannequin's complex performance breaks with the human body, drawing it in and then suddenly snapping away from it. As we near the familiar body in the shop window, the image of idealized femininity, the mannequin's drag also "breaks" the gendered body, illuminating it to be, alongside the thing-being of the object, an inadequate subsumption of the complexity of being. Harman's "allure" is thus revealed to be wonderfully queer.

We can successfully relate Freud and Cixous' analyses of the uncanny in fiction to the uncanny production staged by mannequins in storefront windows.

Cixous writes:

What unfolds without fail before the reader's eyes is a kind of puppet theatre in which real dolls or fake dolls, real and simulated life, are manipulated by a sovereign but capricious stage-setter. The net is tightly stretched, bowed, and tangled; the scenes are centered and dispersed; narratives are begun and left in suspension.¹⁵⁷

This "net" is a similar image to Butler's "heterosexual matrix," with both being "tangled" and queered by the mannequin. Through its muddling of binaries, the mannequin successfully queers conventional ways of considering the object, and suggests that we might consider gender and sexuality in a flat ontology as well. Let me expand upon this. OOOs and queer theory, like the uncanny, are "guided by ambivalence," eschewing the divisive authority of categories and emphasizing the ways in which objects are not only for us, but also withdraw into

¹⁵⁷ Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms," 525.

themselves just as they emerge into perception.¹⁵⁸ Bogost's claim that "objects recede interminably into themselves...human perception becomes just one among many ways that objects relate,"¹⁵⁹ is paralleled in Gross's suggestion that the statue or mannequin, enacting a mimesis of the human, at the same time withdraws from this mimesis, "tend[ing] to retreat into stone."¹⁶⁰ Similarly, for Harman, objects are constantly "emerging" and "withdrawing" from us;¹⁶¹ though we are "hunters of objects," objects can "never be caught."¹⁶² All these ambivalent modes of being alongside the sense of an essential hiddenness, hidden reserves within the object that exceed or are inaccessible to their "for-us"-ness, describe, I argue, a queer way of existing in the world, allowing uncertainty and multiplicity to rule over the ontological comfort of binaries, whether they apply to anthropocentrism or to gender. The mannequin, like the uncanny text, "is approached by the reader with a sense of distrust and fascination" and "always emerges as a step ahead."¹⁶³ To think of this object as "ahead," I think, is an object-oriented acknowledgement that reverses the human supremacy over things. Recent developments in storefront mannequin design such as Almax's EyeSee and United Arrows MarionetteBot, highlight mannequins are cognitively a step ahead as well. The EyeSee is fitted with cameras "in one eye [which] feeds data into demographic-profiling software to determine the age, gender, and race of

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 526.

¹⁵⁹ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 9.

¹⁶⁰ Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, 134.

¹⁶¹ Graham Harman, *The Third Table*, 10.

¹⁶² Ibid., 12, 10.

¹⁶³ Cixous, "Fiction and Its Phantoms," 526.

passersbys.”¹⁶⁴ Similarly the MarionetteBot, is kinetically designed to “mimic the movements of the person in front of it” by being internally fitted with “a Kinect to capture and help analyze the movements of a person.”¹⁶⁵ In these modern, computerized instances, the mannequin reveals more layers of existence to its objecthood. The active emulation of human motion by an object amplifies the uncanniness of the mannequin’s performance and the resulting uncertainty with which humans categorize our bodies.

Part of the mannequin’s particular ability to provoke an experience of the uncanny is its associations with the corpse. This is a parallel that the “murder scene” in *Air Doll* and Bianca’s “death” in *Lars* highlights: the performative nature of her “death” evokes a challenge to the conflated object/human body, life/death binary. The mannequin introduces the inanimate object into the animate body, and in this uncanny confrontation makes humans confront their own bodies as objects and assemblages of objects. I have already construed this blurring of body and object as an effect of the mannequins’ human drag. The performance enacted by the mannequin, however, necessitates reading this performance as not only of a living human but a cadaver as well. Parrot characterizes the process of designing the mannequin as “morbid care.”¹⁶⁶ And yet dead bodies—unproductive, co-mingling with earth, cremated, buried yet marked, present yet

¹⁶⁴ Andrew Roberts, “In Some Stores, Mannequins Are Watching You,” *Bloomberg Business*, December 6, 2012. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-12-06/in-some-stores-the-mannequins-are-watching-you>

¹⁶⁵ Lambert Varias, “Robot Mannequin Mimics Passersby: Mirror v0.5,” *Technabob* (blog), February 18, 2013. <http://technabob.com/blog/2013/02/18/robot-mannequin/>

¹⁶⁶ Parrot, *Mannequins*, 27.

elsewhere—might also be queerly read as a part of Jane Bennett’s “thing power”¹⁶⁷ – the “swarming activity” of human and non-human actants alike which, when we acknowledge within flat ontological terms, exposes that “not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the shared materiality of all things is elevated.”¹⁶⁸

According to Kenneth Gross, the mannequin (and in fact all statues) “take[s] on the look of a *boîte noire*, a black box concealing not a soul, not a god or a demon, but a corpse.”¹⁶⁹ The mannequin or statue-as-corpse might also, however, point toward a more fundamentally queer challenge to the human-object binary, namely the desire of humans to attain to the level or status of objects. As queer critic Maggie Nelson writes in *The Art of Cruelty*:

If, at the very least, we are human, we must concede that humans evidence an ongoing interest in becoming, at certain times and in certain contexts, things, as much as in turning other people into things. The spectre of our eventual “becoming object”—of our (live) flesh one day turning into (dead) meat—is a shadow that accompanies us throughout our lives.¹⁷⁰

The mannequin, in what Butler might call a subversive bodily act,¹⁷¹ forces us to confront this spectral fantasy, its imaginary animation inversely invoking our own uncanny desire to “become object,” or die — what Gross terms

¹⁶⁷ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 2.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 10-13.

¹⁶⁹ Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, 21. From an object-oriented stance, relevant to Gross’ analysis of the statue as embodying a corpse, is also Timothy Morton’s analysis of the demonic qualities of objects as established within Platonic and Socratic philosophies. See Timothy Morton *Realist Magic*, 21.

¹⁷⁰ Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2011): 275.

¹⁷¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 79.

“our being’s entanglement with alien, apparently inhuman processes or substances, our bondage to a lifelessness.”¹⁷² The image of the corpse as “the dead body” is, for Gross, “the form in which we first confront our troubled awareness of things outside us” — and which might bring us closer to an understanding of ourselves as things, within a flat ontology of objects.¹⁷³

The mannequin embodies many paradoxes, including that of “the outside brought inside”¹⁷⁴ — an idea that might resonate with theories of the uncanny and the abject, but goes beyond the corpse and also connects with Butler’s characterization that the queer subject exists outside of “the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable.”¹⁷⁵ Objects have been discursively ostracized as well. Gross characterizes the statue’s “presence”¹⁷⁶ as, for humans, our “see[ing]...a once-living thing whose life has been interrupted.”¹⁷⁷ If the statue is “a life interrupted” it also has the uncanny power to exist as an *interruption* of normative, linear conceptions of life. This quality echoes Butler’s understanding of the queer subject as “disruption, error, confusion.”¹⁷⁸ From such a position, she suggests that this subject can gather “the rallying points for a certain resistance to

¹⁷² Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, 21.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, 35.

¹⁷⁵ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 312.

¹⁷⁶ Parrot, *Mannequins*, 27.

¹⁷⁷ Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue*, 15.

¹⁷⁸ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 310

classification.”¹⁷⁹ We might then see the mannequin’s stillness as a “gathering of potential energy”¹⁸⁰ towards this resistance, rather than a death:

The dead body, the realm of the inanimate, is thus not simply concealed but reappropriated, even repatriated in the statue. If that statue is a corpse, it is also a corpus of knowledge; the idol gives birth to our ideas, our words, our very breath, even as it reminds us of their catastrophic origin.¹⁸¹

This is another instance in which the object performing as human calls into question the anthropocentric nature of origins. The mannequin, like the statue, is “the corpse come back to life; but is also the living body clothed, painted, bejewelled, masked, caught in an attitude, whether by design or surprise; it is the living body absorbing bits of inanimate matter in the form of artificial limbs, metallic pins, or false teeth.”¹⁸² This fear of “the other,” so often produced by the mannequin is congruent, I argue, with the fear of the queer subject. Although the mannequin is “lifeless,” the fear issuing from its convincing “lifelike performance” is that it will somehow mobilize and “undo the living...destroy their rituals.”¹⁸³ Does this not echo with the systematic fear of the queer subject; that they threateningly encroach on the comfort of heterosexuality? The mannequin’s embodiment of death is, I suggest, part of its queer performance, which “puts on trial the world in which it is made.”¹⁸⁴ The mannequin’s convincing performance as human closes “the gap between the

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue* 16.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 22.

¹⁸² Ibid., 23.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 116.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 121.

human world of the sign and the world of inanimate objects...it brings the dead signifier to life.”¹⁸⁵ This dead signifier, brought to life, is a note marking the queer, non-human withdrawal of objects.

The mannequin’s cultural history, as we have seen, promotes female essentialism by making visible a collective fantasy of the image of woman. At the same time, the mannequin might yet subvert this heterosexist ideal. The “theatre” of the storefront window has facilitated a gaze on a female body that is immediately objectified because she is an object.¹⁸⁶ Playing with this ideal seemingly reified by mannequins has been an integral part of transgender performance artist Nina Arsenault’s queer project, one that embodies the ideal of the mannequin in order to challenge it. While the mannequin may seem to project and symbolize an impossible body, this body may not be impossible at all. Though Arsenault is not herself a mannequin, she gets as close to being a mannequin as a mannequin gets to being human; in embodying this “not quite,” Arsenault shows how both mannequins and human mannequins can queerly eschew categorical locatability. Arsenault has had over sixty surgeries costing some \$200, 000 that have enabled her — as a trans artist — to embody, even “become,” the mannequin.¹⁸⁷ In her performances, Arsenault illuminates the bodily ideals perpetuated by the mannequin but also deliberately challenges their

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 127.

¹⁸⁶ Michael O’Rourke has begun to gather research on OOF or “object-oriented feminism” but this field requires much more material. See Michael O’Rourke “Girls Welcome! Speculative Realism, Object Oriented Ontology and Queer Theory,” 298.

¹⁸⁷ Judith Radakoff, “Introduction” in *Trans(per)forming Nina Arsenault: An Unreasonable Body of Work* (Chicago: Intellect, 2012): 3.

normativity through exposing her penis on the idealized female body, as well as being able to pass as an animate “human” body despite identifying ontologically as a cyborg. Shannon Bell has identified Arsenault as embodying Lacan’s impossible *petit objet a*, an unachievable yet desired Other towards which the desiring subject strives but never attains, (*objet a* having been lost in the Real). Bell also discusses how mannequins and particularly Arsenault as mannequin, underscore the materiality of the body by performing its ideals (in Arsenault’s case, by way of a deeply intimate confrontation with silicon injection). Bell’s reading of Arsenault’s practice begins with Lacan’s anecdote about Picasso’s parakeet, in which Lacan claims “clothes” are “what is essential to a man.”¹⁸⁸ If clothes – and the drag they facilitate – are the essence of human “being,” then Lacan is much closer to an object-oriented Butler than has been noted elsewhere. We can consider “clothes” in terms of object-oriented drag as well, a wearing of sensual qualities on the “body” of the object. Yet Bell takes this one step further to suggest that Arsenault *is* Lacan’s inaccessible and impossible body of *objet a*, identifying that “the brilliance of Arsenault’s construction and disclosure of self is that it produces an anamorphic gaze that strengthens her position as *objet a* in the very process of exposing its construction.”¹⁸⁹ Arsenault is the MariennetteBot or

¹⁸⁸ Bell takes this from Jacques Lacan, “On jouissance” in *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques Allain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998): 6.

¹⁸⁹ Shannon Bell. “Nina Arsenault: Fast Feminist *objet a*” in *Trans(per)forming Nina Arsenault: An Unreasonable Body of Work* (Chicago: Intellect, 2012): 96.

the EyeSee, the mannequin able to look back.¹⁹⁰ Bell also notes that a childhood encounter with a mannequin influenced Arsenault's entire artistic project of becoming, born of a sustained desire to render the mannequin "real":

Yes, she is real; she is the Lacanian real, she is that which eludes, she is impossible and she is designed and materialized as a live self-portraiture by Nina Arsenault...when the mannequin comes to life through technological enhancement of the flesh body and produces a mannequin cyborg, one enters the territory of posthuman *objet a*.¹⁹¹

In her becoming object through surgery and queer confessional theatre,¹⁹² Arsenault experiences a sublime suffering and also a further Othering, which can be complex and painful at the expense of having "designed and constructed the perfect female body structure and then exposed and deconstructed this very construction from within it."¹⁹³ Yet the sublimity of Arsenault's queer, object-oriented becoming-mannequin is identified by Bell as expressly feminist, despite its mimicry of heterosexist ideals. This is because becoming-object, as I will explore in the conclusion of this thesis, always entails a kind of pain that is also synonymous with becoming-queer: a relinquishing of a bodily passing within the comfort of normative frameworks and a movement towards unlocatability, in-betweenedness and withdrawal.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 98. As Bell notes Arsenault is "mannequin cyborg" which has its "foundation [in] the queer values of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, before queers became heteronormative." While the radical theoretical framework of Arsenault's work might have been subsumed into the normal, its 1990/early 2000s framework proffered by Bell, would definitely include Butler. OOO can give this positionality new life.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 100.

¹⁹² Arsenault considers her social media to be part of her art project as well as her two plays: *The Silicone Diaries* and *I Was Barbie*. *The Silicone Diaries* are republished in *Trans(per)forming*.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 104.

I end this chapter with a variant on what Bogost describes as the “Žižekian daydream” of his object-filled life in New Mexico.¹⁹⁴ Mannequins are made of plastic, a substance that will outlive human beings for many, many eons. Objects, in this case, conquer and transcend all human social constructs, including time. What a queer image: all the plastic mannequins in the world, roaming its surface without us. Performing our distant memory, but also having relationships of interaction that supersede human existence. Here, at least speculatively, is an example in which we can strive to connect two queer systems of thought. The mannequin has been historically considered within the realm of the “grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable.”¹⁹⁵ I have begun to consider it, on the contrary, within the approach of object-oriented ontologies, which seek to get outside the singular and “nameable” for a theory of entities that withdraws into the plurality of being queer.¹⁹⁶ In the next chapter, I attempt to explore a queer object that challenges not the idealized and constructed “female” body but an object in drag of the idealized organ on the male body: the dildo that mimics, but also departs from, the penis.

¹⁹⁴ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 2.

¹⁹⁵ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 312.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 312.

III. Dildos: The “Penis” in the Door

In a recent television episode of *Broad City*, a feminist comedy series about two young women living in New York, the main character—Abbi—finally finds herself in the apartment of her neighbor Jeremy, with whom she has long been infatuated.¹⁹⁷ To Abbi’s elated surprise, Jeremy kisses her, and the two enact a clichéd heteronormative sex scene (man on top, woman on bottom), until Abbi suggests that the two “switch it up.” Preparing to get on top, she instead watches with surprise as Jeremy reaches over into the drawer of his bedside table and passes her a bright green, opaque dildo and strap-on harness. Much deliberation later, Abbi successfully pegs Jeremy,¹⁹⁸ and spends the night. In the morning, with Jeremy gone, Abbi, attempting to be collegial, puts the dildo from the night before into the dishwasher. Unfortunately Jeremy’s dildo is of obscure artisanal make, and heat-sensitive material. Its once phallic shape melts in the dishwasher into a deformed, deflated lump of plastic. Abbi is mortified and buys what she thinks is an exact replica at her local sex shop. She returns to Jeremy’s apartment that night and with newly acquired, hyperbolic confidence, emerges from the bathroom wearing the strap-on. Of course, Jeremy immediately realizes the

¹⁹⁷ *Broad City*, “Knockoffs,” Comedy Central. Television. 4 Feb. 2015.

¹⁹⁸ Pegging is a term that was both coined and popularized in 2001 by Dan Savage readers and refers generally to a heterosexual sex act where a female wears a strap-on dildo and anally penetrates her male partner. Though pegging has historically been deployed to describe a hetero-sex act, it could equally refer to two female, trans or genderqueer sexual partners. See Dan Savage, “Savage Love: We Have a Winner!,” *The Stranger*, last modified June 21, 2001, <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/SavageLove?oid=7730>

“cheap” simulacra of his custom-made dildo and the two begin a heated argument. As she leaves Jeremy’s apartment in her bra and underwear, Abbi attempts to furiously slam the door in his face, but – still wearing the strap-on – closes it on the dildo instead, which stops the door from slamming properly and spoils the narrative cohesion of the fight. Later on, back in her own apartment, Abbi is asked by a friend what she’ll use the dildo for. By way of response, the camera pans upwards to the bedroom wall above their heads, where Abbi has hung the dildo to hold her necklaces.

The title of this episode, “Knockoffs” highlights its thematic thread: the dildo as a substitute for an “original,” penis. This is a concept with a rich lineage of cultural representation that spans from Aristophanes’ *Lysistrada* to HBO’s *Sex and the City*. By privileging the penis, this longstanding view of dildos reaffirms the notion of heterosexual sex and vaginal penetration as a “natural” or “original” iteration of desire. While female dildo use has a historical lineage that is well recorded,¹⁹⁹ the result is that the dildo becomes a highly gendered object and is iterated as a tool for female masturbation. In antiquity, for instance, dildos were given to “women whose husbands had to spend an extended period away from home to prevent or cure hysteria.”²⁰⁰ Much more recently, in *Sex and the City*, Carrie and Charlotte buy Vibretex’s dildonic Rabbit vibrator during a sexual dry

¹⁹⁹ See Mels Van Driel and Paul Vincent. *With the Hand: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012). See also, Rachel P. Maines. *The Technology of the Orgasm: “Hysteria,” the Vibrator, and Women’s Sexual Satisfaction*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999).

²⁰⁰ Van Driel, *With the Hand*, 62.

spell – of course, as soon as men re-enter their life, the dildo is forgotten and not represented again. By comparison, men using dildos have been strikingly underrepresented, the fundamental idea behind this being that because they “have” the penis, men have no need for its so-called substitute. The function of humour in *Broad City*, however, provides a much more complex treatment of the dildo as an object, one that demonstrates how this object, by *performing* the penis, might productively undermine the normative vision of heterosexual sex. Beyond this subversion, however, I argue that the dildo also challenges images of bodily originality. Its detachability and wearability underscores the performative, constructed nature of human bodies and the violence of gendered symbolic inscription onto them that gets recycled as ontological truth.

Within the longstanding heterosexual framework of viewing the dildo, where a male body possessing a penis penetrating a female body possessing a vagina is viewed as the natural form of erotic coupling, sex acts that do not conform to this structure are seen as secondary, derivative and lacking. In referencing the penis, however, the dildo presents a challenge to the body in “possession” of gender by way of their genitals. In *Broad City*, since Jeremy “has” a penis (“the real thing”) his need for its substitute seems, within this heterosexual logic, moot and his avid desire to be penetrated presents a subversive, “perverse” reversal of the penetrative heterosexual ideal. As Abbi pegs Jeremy, who very much enjoys it, the scene highlights that heterosexual penetrative sex is both a performative act and that its “claim to originality”

produces an inadequate, limiting erotics, one that doesn't even begin to encompass a diverse world of sexual desire. More significantly, the enjoyment of this particular coupling hinges on an object, one that performs the body but is not a just something to be used as its substitute; it is an autonomous actant in its own right.

Of course, the episode's title, "Knockoffs" speaks to the substitution theme on various levels: Jeremy's immense upset that Abbi has bought a cheap replica of his "original" dildo, invokes the image of a substitute for a substitute, a replica for a replica: one that illuminates that the penis is always an imitation of an ideal, an "imitation for which there is no original."²⁰¹ The dildo here, rather than being simply a substitute penis, might instead highlight that there is no original object, nor an original body, but only the mechanisms of signification that we attach to these forms in support of an illusory origin. In its drag of the penis, the dildo queers and confuses the authority of the penis, persistently refusing its own status as substitute.

Graham Harman argues that objects withdraw from access – retreating from signification and use into a uniquely ontological and unknowable elsewhere of real qualities.²⁰² When objects such as dildos are so powerfully codified in relation to the penis—and thus, the phallus—it can be difficult to comprehend the ways through which a dildo might ever escape this association. Levi Bryant attempts to revise notions of the phallic ideal by reading Lacan's graphs of

²⁰¹ Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 313.

²⁰² Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 35.

sexuation from an OOO standpoint, redefining the Lacanian phallic symbol Φ —that governs all things and produces sexual difference—as the symbol for “withdrawal.”²⁰³ This is an importantly queer revision of Lacan, where all beings are no longer “subordinated to the phallic function” but given liberty within the formerly oppressive, gendered Lacanian system to withdraw from any signification.²⁰⁴ Yet this reading all too easily renames the phallic symbol, presuming that this abstract mechanism will set in motion a radical shift in how we interact, visually, with deeply codified objects. I argue that it is better to confront the objects themselves in order to trouble the phallic governance that formulates the dildo as a substitute penis body. In expansion of his theory of withdrawal, Harman also suggests that objects are “accessible only through oblique allusion.”²⁰⁵ While objects are never accessible in their entirety, allusion and referencing allow us to understand that objects extend past their normative positions as both symbolic and physical tools. Over the course of this chapter, I will reveal how the dildo’s drag highlights that the penis, and by extension all bodies, are constructed entities too.

Broad City’s dildo asserts its own narrative life as it moves from pelvis, to anus, to dishwasher, to shop, to doorframe and finally to wall. In its constantly changing context and position, viewers repeatedly come up against an object that asserts itself within the space it occupies by miming the penis, yet in this mimicry

²⁰³ Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 262.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 254.

²⁰⁵ Graham Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer,” 188.

asserts that it is something else entirely. In “Knockoffs” we see the dildo as an object both worn on the body, harnessed to the pubic mound (albeit with a gendered reversal) *and* we see it apart from the body. This decontextualization of the dildo and deterritorialization of the referenced penis queers and confuses ideas regarding both its “proper placement” and its use. The result is a once normative space and the privileged bodies occupying it are destabilized, giving the object the last laugh.

“Knockoffs” comically plays with the security of the symbolic association between dildo, penis, and phallic power. When Abbi melts Jeremy’s dildo into an incoherently shaped mound of plastic, her panic goes beyond embarrassment at ruining her crush’s possession and indicates a reaction to confronting the object as something beyond “ready to hand.”²⁰⁶ The dildo’s transformation from recognizably phallic form to unrecognizable formlessness might be taken as an allegorical image of the withdrawal of all objects from their sensual qualities. The image of the dildo transformed into a shapeless mound reminds us that it isn’t a penis, despite its sharing in certain qualities of the same, just as Abbi’s replacement dildo is – despite a surface resemblance – immediately rejected by Jeremy. Similarly, whenever we conceptualize the dildo as a “stand-in” penis, we should be reminded, as Graham Harman writes, that “an object is not a bundle of qualities, and for this reason a thing cannot be reproduced simply by duplicating

²⁰⁶ In fact, this is a moment that perfectly analyzes Heidegger’s tool analysis, which I will discuss extensively in the next section of this chapter.

all of its qualities and bundling them together.”²⁰⁷ In being melted, the dildo becomes something else, physically resisting its representation as a penis; in the substitution (and rejection) of the knock-off replica for the original dildo, the autonomous value of the dildo in itself (and not simply as a generic substitute for a penis) is highlighted. In both cases, what comes to the fore is the way in which the dildo resists subsumption into the logic of the copy or substitute, and highlights its queer otherness.

As we have seen, while for Abbi the cheap knock-off will do, materiality is very important to Jeremy. Throughout its history, the dildo has been made from a multitude of bizarre substances: resin coated dung, leather, jade, pork crackling.²⁰⁸ While silicon, PVC or glass serve as the contemporary standards, this diversity of materials emphasizes that while the dildo has been seen as a temporary replacement for the penis, such as in ancient Greece, it has not always been important that the dildo convincingly *emulate* the penis.²⁰⁹ While it is true that the dildo has been mostly “oblong”²¹⁰ in its form – and thus seems to emulate the penis in that it permits the dildo to “comfortably” penetrate a subject, this variety of materials speaks instead to a desire that extends itself past the phallic and into the weird substances that can comprise dildos.

Commercially available dildos are often categorized in terms of the “real” or the “artificial.” Not coincidentally, these same categories are used to describe

²⁰⁷ Haman, Graham. *The Quadruple Object*, 72.

²⁰⁸ Van Driel, *With the Hand*, 73.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 60

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60

and delimit straightness (real) and queerness (artificial), humanness (real) and objecthood (artificial), prioritizing the first term while delegitimizing the second. Sex toy distributor PinkCherry.ca²¹¹ sells thousands of sex toys and hundreds of dildos on their website, organized by a myriad of sub-categories: silicone dildos, vibrating dildos, dildos compatible with strap-on harnesses, and so on. Among these, I want to highlight two categories: “Non-Phallic Dildos” and “Realistic Dildos.” The former, while (ironically) still oblong, are often curved, ribbed pieces of silicone or glass that more accurately resemble Brancusi’s modernist sculpture *Bird in Space* than they do a penis. These non-phallic options do not deploy any recognizably human flesh tone, instead opting most commonly for purple, bright pink or blue. While Harman’s *real objects* are empowered in the sense that they resist not only signification but “all forms of causal or cognitive mastery,”²¹² realistic dildos on the other hand are measured by how successfully they can “pass” as penises. This reveals a striking paradox: the “realness” of the dildo here is actually a descriptor of its *drag*. “Realistic” dildos, which are revealed to be modeled after “real” penises—come in various flesh tones, feature human-like veins and are often referred to as “cocks” in their description. Frequently these dildos are also given names such as “Adam” or “Average Joe.” We should recall at this point Peter Schwenger’s point that naming things functions as a hegemonic tactic to reduce objects’ strangeness, and, I would add,

²¹¹ PinkCherry.ca, “PinkCherry Sex Toys Canada,” accessed January 1 2016, <https://www.pinkcherry.ca/?gclid=CKilloXC4csCFQmQaQodl88CSQ> .

²¹² Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer,” 188

their ability to undermine the authority of the subject's body. It is also in this naming where the gendering of the body and categorization of the object reveal themselves as part of the same apparatus.²¹³ What is exposed in this very naming of dildos is a desperate attempt to normalize the dildo as much as possible by recalling ideas of both normality (“average”) and heterosexual originality (“Adam”) thus appropriating the object to reaffirm the dildo as a substitute penis. Yet the very existence of the dildo which so accurately performs the penis presents a visible threat to this “claim to originality,”²¹⁴ showing its otherness from the gendered body it is likened to, revealing the “Average Joe” to be a sham. Moreover it asserts that, like *Broad City's* Jeremy, the so-called Average Joe (in all his symbolized cis-heterosexuality) might prefer to play with a cock that doesn't belong to him.

One positive customer review on the PinkCherry site for a beige “realistic” dildo called *The Pipedream King Cock 8*” reads: “the PVC is so realistic feeling, I don't think you can get anything closer to the real thing.”²¹⁵ If the “real thing” is a penis, PinkCherry's categorization suggests that in order to be realistic, a dildo must mimetically resemble one. The penis becomes, once again, the standard against which all dildos must be measured, always calling to mind the penis as origin point—that which divides and legitimizes the “real” from the illegitimate “not-real.” But the contradictory presence of the “Non-Phallic” categories also

²¹³ Schwenger, “Words and the Murder of the Thing,” 102. See also Chapter 1 (above).

²¹⁴ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 314.

²¹⁵ “Pipedream King Cock 8” in *Flesh*.” PinkCherry.ca, accessed Dec. 24 2015, <http://www.pinkcherry.ca/king-cock-8-dildo-in-flesh>

suggests that there can be non-phallic dildos. All this raises a number of subsequent questions. What makes one dildo “real” or any more “real” than any other? By conflating realness and the drag of the object a dissonance emerges as the “real” dildo asserts it is not a penis, but strikes a confusion in what constitutes the “real,” hinting that it might be unknowable and inaccessible.

In her introduction to *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler notes that within phallogocentric discourses of essentialism, “one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender.”²¹⁶ Humanness and objecthood are divided by a similar line of reasoning, where one “is” human to the extent that one “is not” an object. This binary divide is something that drag undermines, and the dildo as an object in human drag serves to blur. Yet as a distinctly gendered object (historically made to emulate the man and satisfy the woman) the dildo is a powerful example in which both gender constructs and the human/object divide can be simultaneously troubled through the process of drag. It is impossible to identify oneself as a human by only suggesting that one is not an object – only that the subject prioritizes themselves through qualities of animacy and appearance. When confronted by objects that convincingly perform these qualities, however, this rationale for human bodily priority does not hold up.

Within the traditions of Western philosophy and psychoanalysis, the phallus has quite literally produced and drawn this line that divides the sexes into binary categories that construct desire based on heterosexual difference. The dildo

²¹⁶ Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble*, 22.

and its appropriation by queer wearers, in emulating having the penis and miming the penis itself, has largely been used to reveal that “gender” and humanness “*is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself.”²¹⁷ Somebody who dons a dildo can perform and subvert the notion that having a penis produces a masculine or male body, while the dildo itself performs and subverts the constructed notion of the human in any sort of originality. Despite this subversive power of the object itself, both heteronormative and queer theoretical readings of the dildo bind this object to the status of a tool. Most of these fall into what queer scholar Heather Findlay terms “the lesbian dildo debates” which attempt to identify whether the dildo is an oppressive object or not, reifying phallic priority by its mimicry of the penis.²¹⁸ Yet on either side, these debates, (and more recent post-human conversations) miss the opportunity to consider the dildo as a queer object, and instead enact a correlationist impulse to situate it relative to what it does or signifies for a queer subject.

I propose a departure from these considerations of the dildo relative to the body of a subject and would like to focus on the drag enacted by the object itself. Although I acknowledge that the dildo *has* been *used* to fashion phallogentric and cisgendered assumptions about the body, and has also been used in interesting

²¹⁷ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 313

²¹⁸ Heather Findlay, “Freud’s ‘Fetishism’ and the Lesbian Dildo Debates,” *Feminist Studies* 18 no.3 (1992): 563-579.

queer performance pieces that challenge phallogentrism and seek to liberate queer subjects from normalizing discourses, I am far more interested in interrogating this idea of “use” and the limits it has placed on the queer essence of thing-being, via examples from art and media that challenge the status of the dildo as a tool and begin to treat it as a thing.

The dildo is not a penis or a copy of a penis but an object with an autonomously withdrawn life of its own, a withdrawal that is indicated by the “allure” of its drag: its emergence as a body part, and simultaneous withdrawal from a total conflation with this body part. For all of the comparisons based on visual similarity that are made between the dildo and the penis—and thus the imaginary, symbolic authority of the phallus—the dildo—made of PVC, silicon or cyberskin, painlessly detachable from the body—perpetually asserts that it is and is not a penis. In this sense, the dildo occupies two contradictory modes of signification, as both penis and not penis, a doubling that I argue is produced by its human drag and subsequent assertion of its uncategorizable thing-being. As in the previous chapter on mannequins, I am interested here in various looking at the uncanny affects and effects of the dildo’s human drag. Unlike the mannequin, however, the dildo’s imitation of the penis can act more immediately to destabilize the focus on a symbolic penis (the phallus) that is engrained into discourse, producing discursively sexed and gendered bodies. This phallogentric tradition limits our reading of the unknowable object while subsuming it under the masculinist and anthropocentric hegemony of binary categories that OOOs seek to

undo. My queer object-oriented reading attempts to liberate the dildo from debates over its status as “stand in penis,” a reading which attempts to exhaust this inexhaustible object, not only by negotiating its signification within a phallogocentric framework, but by *making it signify*.

Dildos Beyond Use: Breaking Tool-Being

Within object-oriented philosophy, Harman identifies the object as demoted to the status of a tool. Thus, legitimizing the unique ontology of things—thing-being—is contingent in fracturing tool-being. At the crux of Harman’s philosophy is an exegesis of Heidegger’s tool analysis, in which a hammer that breaks during use forces the subject “using it” to truly consider its existence as no longer an operative tool-for-us but instead as a thing. As Harman’s interpretation of Heidegger’s tool analysis suggests, breaking doesn’t have to be literal, but could be a necessary moment in considering objects that would “[allude] to the inscrutable reality of [thing]-being lying behind the accessible theoretical, practical, or perceptual qualities of the hammer.”²¹⁹ How, then, might we get to the queer core of the dildo beyond its “practical” (sexual pleasure) and “perceptual” (penis referentiality) qualities?

If sexuality has been appropriated as a tool by a dominant phallogocentric ideology, and the dildo has been subsumed within this matrix of binary signification, the act of drag is a breaking. Considering the dildo as an object in

²¹⁹ Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer,” 187.

drag, I suggest, productively breaks the tool-being of the dildo.²²⁰ Just as drag queens resist categorization and singular signification, one of the means through which this tool-being is broken, is through the moment that an object becomes uncanny and in our failure to categorize it, reveals itself to be essentially strange. Within this “weird” framework, the production of Harman’s “weird realism in which real individual objects resist all forms of causal or cognitive mastery,” is brought to the surface.²²¹ Weird realism might be a description of both a physical and temporal space that refuses to reduce objects by normalizing them, instead recognizing them as endlessly complex. In this perpetual state of weirdness, we constantly meet and re-meet objects which, like queerness, are always blurring binaries and eluding familiarity.

Since the late 1990s, the insertion of queer theory into debates surrounding the dildo as phallic object mostly liberated it from a second-wave feminist position that had eschewed vaginal penetration and dildo-use as reifying heterosexual sex acts.²²² Despite this shift, the phallic reading of the dildo still persists, with many recent queer theorists grappling with the penile resemblance of dildos and the (seemingly unavoidable) phallic reading of this object.²²³ At the same time, the majority of queer theoretical analyses consider the phallic reading

²²⁰ Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer,” 187.

²²¹ Ibid, 188.

²²² See Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs* 5 no. 4 (1980): 631-660.

²²³ See Arpita Das. “The dildo as transformative tool: feminist and queer perspectives,” *Sexuality and Culture* 18 no.3 (2013): 688-703. See also Jeanine Minge and Amber Lynn Zimmerman, “Power, Pleasure and Play: Screwing the Dildo and Rescripting Sexual Violence” *Qualitative Inquiry* 15 no.2 (2009): 329-349.

to be reductive, instead seeing potential in a queer appropriation of the dildo to challenge biological determinism or stand as an emblem of subversive erotic pleasure: pegging, lesbian sex, S+M, masturbation, gender play etc. While I find value in these queer positions, my argument is that to bracket the phallic quality of the dildo is equally reductive, as it ignores the inherent structure through which drag uses mimicry and referentiality to destabilize the (illusory) authority of the “original” it performs. The dildo’s object-oriented drag is contingent upon the allure produced by the intra-actions²²⁴ between its sensual, surface qualities (phallic, anthropomorphic and gendered) and its retreating “real qualities” (not-phallic, indefinable and queer). If Butler suggests that drag illuminates the means through which gender is “theatricalized, worn and done,”²²⁵ we must consider not only the human “wearer” of the dildo to be in drag, but the dildo itself to be “wearing” its sensual qualities.

Beyond an overemphasis on the phallic nature of the dildo, or a bracketing of the phallus in seeing the dildo as a liberatory appropriation, recent queer theories have been largely disappointing in their understandings of the dildo as object. Though these have largely rejected the anti-penetration, Adrienne Rich-

²²⁴ Here I use Barad’s intra-actions to describe the queering effects of drag, instead of “interactions” as Barad notes that “the notion of *intra-action* (in contrast to the usual “interaction”, which presumes the prior existence of independent entities/relata) marks an important shift, reopening and refiguring foundational notions of classical ontology such as causality, agency, space, time, matter, discourse, responsibility, and accountability. A specific intra-action enacts an *agential cut* (in contrast to the *Cartesian cut* – an inherent distinction – between subject and object) effecting a separation between ‘subject’ and ‘object.’” See Karen Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” *Women, Gender and Research (Kvinder, Køn og forskning)* 1 no.2 (2012): 32.

²²⁵ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 313.

inspired readings of the dildo, they have still limited this object by only considering the dildo as a tool. In order to get beyond the matrices of compulsory heterosexuality that have suppressed queerness, we must see these as the same as those that suppress the multiplicity of the object. Cathy Grigger's 1992 manifesto "Lesbian Bodies in the Age of (Post)Mechanical Reproduction" argues that lesbian appropriation of the dildo "exposes the cultural organ of the phallus as a simulacrum" due to the "counter-hegemonic identities" of the queer women reappropriating the "artificial penis...appropriated phallus, and...material signifier of the imaginary ground for an historically manifest phallic regime of power."²²⁶ While Griggers' work marks a transition point for considering the dildo as a queer object with manifold properties, it ultimately affirms human originality by describing the dildo as an "artificial penis," drawing on the heterosexist tradition of the dildo as a stand in man.²²⁷ At the same time, however, by situating the dildo within "counter-hegemonic" sex and gender constructs, Griggers' reading entirely rejects the suggestion that dildos simply reproduce hegemonic bodies, and thus paves the way for thinking about the dildo as a queer object.²²⁸ Drawing on Griggers, Jeanne Hamming's essay "Dildonics, Dykes and the Detachable Masculine" (2001) marked another radical departure in "the lesbian dildo debates."²²⁹ Hamming's essay argued for a way out of these debates,

²²⁶ Cathy Griggers, "Lesbian Bodies in the Age of (Post)Mechanical Reproduction." *Postmodern Culture* 2, no. 1 (May 1992).

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Heather Findlay. "Freud's Fetishism and the Lesbian Dildo Debates," 563.

by considering the dildo as cyborg appendage within the post-human frameworks of Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles, suggesting that the dildo's attachability and detachability to any part of the body—other than the stereotypical pubic mound—renders the object into a “mutation rather than castration.”²³⁰ Hamming provides a compelling case for the dildo as a categorically rogue object:

The dildo scandalizes identity categories of gender and sexuality because it reveals that the penis is always separate from the body, that the dildo is separate from the penis, and that sexual pleasure can be disconnected from sexual identity as well as from essentialist ideas of the self.²³¹

Unfortunately, while Hamming aims to move away from “essentialist ideas of the self,” the *self* remains absolutely essential to Hamming's reading of the dildo, in the form of a queer subject who re-codifies the penis “a post-gender, non-phallic signifier.”²³² This focus on a non-essentialist idea of the self reiterates a subject as the ultimate focus and reiterates a human-centered view of object use. Even though Hamming's queer wearer might become a cyborg, this is still an instance in which the object exists “for us.”²³³ The subject, in their use and displacement of the dildo—the example of the thigh harness supports Hamming's argument here—is in charge of the dildo's deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Pronged/double-ended dildos and chin straps called “The Accomodator” have been two further recent developments in dildo design that

²³⁰ Jeanne Hamming, “Dildonics, Dykes and the Detachable Masculine.” *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 8 no. 3 (August 2001): 330.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Hamming, “Dildonics, Dykes and the Detachable Masculine,” 330.

²³³ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 4

facilitate and assist in dislocating and decentralizing the situation of the phallus on the body. Yet, as Timothy Morton notes, if the essence of objects is queer and multiple, then it is a return to – and not a departure from – ideas of essentialism that allow for the most queerly liberating treatment of the object.²³⁴ For Hamming, the dildo is a means to an end of redefining queerness as cyborgian, within which the subject’s performance, rather than the object itself, remains the focus. I would like to suggest that the dildo does not need a subject to recodify it, but that through its drag as human it autonomously eschews any singular categorization or codification.

N. Katherine Hayles’ theory of *flickering signification*, which Hamming deploys in her discussion of the dildo, is of use here in considering the means through which the dildo moves rapidly between its sensual drag as a penis *and* non-phallic being as real object, simultaneously occupying both modes of being. Flickering signification is quite similar to allure, in that it (like Harman’s “emerging” and “withdrawing” objects) theorizes a transparently unstable system of signification, rather than sets of universal, binary signs for unknowable, queer objects. Hayles challenges binaries of presence/absence in favour of a system in which objects and bodies are codified according to pattern, and difference is redefined as randomness. In Hayles’ pattern/randomness, identity categories become virtual and simulated, codified by patterns that can be easily destabilized

²³⁴ Timothy Morton. “Treating Objects Like Women: Feminist Ontology and the Question of Essence,” in *International Perspectives on Ecocriticism*, ed. Greta Gaard, Simon C. Estok and Serpil Oppermann (New York: Routledge, 2013): 56-70.

via randomness or mutation which are read as the interjection of “noise”²³⁵ into a system. Flickering signifiers, Hayles writes, are “characterized by their tendency toward unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations and dispersions”²³⁶ rather than a presence which stands in polarity to absence. If the heterosexual matrix is, within Butler’s philosophy, understood as a complex of binary behavioral patterns which disguise themselves as ontological truths, drag, in its demonstration of queerness is the ultimate randomness. Yet, despite Hamming’s assertion, objects in drag are not only mutated signs or mutations, but they themselves *mutate* signification, producing flickering signs that in their uncanny contradictions speaks to the asymmetric “intra-actions”²³⁷ between objects. While Hamming reads the dildo as a mutation that produces the queerness of its wearer, the dildo doesn’t actually need to be *worn* in order to queer signification and render it flickering.

In his provocatively-titled essay “Treating Objects Like Women: Feminist Ontology and the Question of Existence” Timothy Morton argues for a *dialetheic*²³⁸ and internally contradictory structure of objects and their relations, drawing from feminist essentialists such as Luce Irigaray and Adrienne Rich, to argue that objects have an essence that is contradictory and weird: a *weird essentialism*. To Morton, recognizing objects as queer is contingent upon recognizing that objects are not dialectic but “dialetheic,” a term that draws from

²³⁵ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999): 25.

²³⁶ Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 30.

²³⁷ Karen Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” 32.

²³⁸ Morton, “Treating Objects Like Women,” 62.

Karen Barad's "intra-action" and implies that in their relations with themselves and with other objects, objects are able to "hold two truths simultaneously."²³⁹ The dildo's sensual qualities, I think, function within this dialectic framework, too: as both penis and not penis.²⁴⁰ These simultaneous yet paradoxical identifications are crucial for defining how this object in drag refuses categorization and in turn exposes it's. To be queer and uncategorizable means to be in perpetual contradiction with singular notions of the self. Queerness is a nomadic form of desire towards other entities that constantly changes and morphs against itself. Morton's work on weird essentialism draws lines of flight to queer theory in its use of theories of difference to establish that objects are all uniquely withdrawn into their individual, contradictory multiple Realness and thus resist binary categorization. The need for OOO to synthesize its project with the inherent queerness of entities, then, is imperative.

Though all dildos do this though their human drag, the weird atmosphere of Lady Gaga's music videos and constantly shifting appearance presents a good example of the means through which the dildo acts as a dialectic, flickering signifier. We might, of course, recall Void of Course's dildo stilettos from the first chapter of this thesis, which play on the Freudian reading of shoes by constructing a stiletto heel out of transparent dildos. Though drag, post-human

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid. In establishing his notion of the *dialectic* and contradictory nature of all things, Morton brilliantly states that Aristotelian "non-contradiction is the dominant face of patriarchal ideology: a master signifier establishes all the others, and holds all values captive."

identity and dildos are nothing surprising for Gaga, “Applause”²⁴¹ is a somewhat more muted music video compared to previous spectacular epics, drawing on the visual lexicon of Dada and Surrealism. In the video, Gaga descends from the sky in *Metropolis*-inspired machinery and shifts between fantastical bodies such as centaur-like appearances and duck bodies attached to a distorted version of her human head. As with previous videos like *Telephone* or *You and I*, Gaga’s flickering identity transcends gender play and delves into the world of the non-human, producing a space in which infinite bodily configurations are imaginable.

Amongst the many costumes in the video for “Applause,” Gaga wears a black leather bra, made of two gloves cupping her breasts and underpants, onto the groin of which there is a glove attached (yet she is standing too far away from the camera for this to be immediately noticeable). This section of the video, shot in black and white, leads to a moment in which spotlights on Gaga’s body flicker very quickly and she writhes on the ground. In this epileptic moment, the finger of the glove at Gaga’s crotch appears as if it might be a dildo that she is wearing. This moment is a nice metaphor for flickering signification: the flickering of the lights and the fluctuating between whether or not Gaga is wearing a dildo or glove inserts the “noise” of uncertainty into patterns which give way to expected notions of not only gender, but what an object “is.”

In “The Uncanny” Freud’s definition of *heimlich* (counter to the

²⁴¹ Lady Gaga, “Applause,” YouTube video, 3:34, posted by “LadyGagaVEVO,” August 19, 2013. <http://libguides.csuchico.edu/c.php?g=414275&p=2823092>

“unheimlich,” or uncanny) is likewise formed via a somewhat contradictory combination of two definitions. After considering multilinguistic translations of “heimlich,” Freud determines that “on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight.”²⁴² Gaga deliberately plays on this Freudian contradiction, exposing that queerness is always concealed within binary frameworks. Though Freud never mentions dildos, the dildo *is* both familiar (in its phallic, bodily referentiality) and a *thing*, which is nearly always kept out of sight, thought of in terms of maximum concealment. Manufacturers and distributors frequently advertise discrete package or product design—one example is the *I Scream* dildo which looks like a large pink popsicle²⁴³—or feature long FAQ sections describing the discretion of their shipping packages. Also significantly, the dildo has produced the notion of a sex toy drawer in one’s bedside table, in which dildos can stay hidden. Opposing this familiar yet hidden notion of *heimlich*, Freud defines the uncanny—*unheimlich*—as, “everything...that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light.”²⁴⁴ In the previous chapter, I analyzed the mannequin against Freud’s discussion of the uncanny’s predication on doubts surrounding bodily animacy or inanimacy. Somewhat differently, the dildo’s human drag raises important questions regarding the uncanny relationship between concealment and exposure that features into Freud’s analysis. Not only do we want to conceal the dildo in a

²⁴² Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny (1919),” 224-225.

²⁴³ Good Vibrations, “iScream Silicone Dildo,” *Good Vibrations*, accessed January 10, 2016. http://www.goodvibes.com/display_product.jhtml?id=1-3-BA-1205#fulldescription

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

non-identifying package, tucked away in a sex toy drawer or regulated by obscenity laws,²⁴⁵ it is also a cultural trope to anxiously conceal our own identifying marks when interacting with one in a shop. *Broad City*, for instance, plays on this as Abbi wanders into a sex shop to buy Jeremy's replacement dildo, wearing massive sunglasses and holding her purse²⁴⁶ close to her body dressed and behaving as if she is a spy going undercover. What becomes especially notable about Gaga's performance in *Applause*, on the other hand, is that despite the heterosexual norm of concealing our dildos, we are deeply interested in identifying whether or not she is publically wearing one.

In *The Third Table*, Graham Harman praises artists for continuing their exploration of things with a nearly spiritual or weird reverence that goes beyond the exhaustive or normative understandings of objects that science and philosophy have constructed into binary categories.²⁴⁷ Certainly, the uncanny is one framework through which artists explore objects in this way. This is a relationship that various artists such as Lynda Benglis²⁴⁸, Lady Gaga and Beatriz Preciado²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ For a history of legal regulation of the dildo use by way of obscenity laws see Danielle J. Lindemann, "Pathology Full Circle: A History of Anti-Vibrator Legislation in the United States," *Columbia Journal of Gender & Law* 15 no.1 (2006): 326.

²⁴⁶ Indeed, as in *Dora*, there's a Freudian reading in here, about Abbi's sexual anxiety and clutching her purse so tightly.

²⁴⁷ Harman, *The Third Table*, (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012): 7.

²⁴⁸ See Ana Cecilia Alvarez, "Bend it Like Benglis," *The New Inquiry*, October 20 2014, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/bend-it-like-benglis/>. Possibly the most famous example of a dildo in contemporary art history, Lynda Benglis' 1974 ArtForum ad challenged both gender double standards pervading the art world and pushed the boundary of what was considered "obscene" when she bought ad space to pose naked with a double ended dildo.

²⁴⁹ Preciado, Beatriz. "Contrasexual Manifesto." *Total Art* 1, no.1 (2011), <http://totalartjournal.com/archives/1402/the-contra-sexual-manifesto/>. Preciado's

have played with in dildo-based performance art. Yet while their work does an admirable job of bringing an “obscene” object out of hiding to play with constructed notions of obscenity, it also still involves the attachment of the dildo to a human body, with the result that the subject still appears “in control” of determining its signification.

Yet there is value retained in the notion that the dildo’s obscenity might not wholly result from its resemblance to the penis but from its status as an uncanny object in drag, against which humans must confront the autonomy of the object. Just as Abbi is appalled to observe Jeremy’s dildo melting into an incoherent lump and has to consider its unique existence within the same revelatory framework as Heidegger’s broken hammer, artworks that most successfully emphasize dildo’s own drag are those that separate it from a human body and place it within more surprising contexts. Detached from the body, the dildo also becomes detached from associations of bodily use and distanced from its reading as a tool, heightening the uncanny effects of its human drag and the extent of its ability to destabilize the body’s priority. Paris-based “collective artist” Claire Fontaine produces works within Duchamp’s tradition of the readymade – an art act or intervention rooted in parody and play that break objects from normative

Contrasexual Manifesto (originally in Spanish, excerpts infrequently published in English) is an interactive hybrid performance art-philosophy that practices what Preciado calls “dildo tectonics,” which shifts the penis-dildo away from its normative placement of the groin and recontextualizes the object by drawing it on arms, faces or by playing it like a violin: “the aim of this contra-sexual practice is to modify the ordinary uses of the sexual body, subverting their biopolitical reactions. This exercise is based on the practice of grafting new meanings onto certain body parts.”

codes of assigned meaning by re-contextualizing the object or rendering it absurd. Claire Fontaine's sculptural assemblage *Dildo Washer* (2009) is a small silver dishwasher that stands in a gallery with its door open and drawers pulled out, which are full of latex dildos in varying sizes, shapes and tones. The artist(s) acknowledge the dildo as "the symbol of the deepest promiscuity between the object and the human flesh."²⁵⁰ Rather than reinforcing old ideas about the dildo, the suggestion of this promiscuity lies in the dildo's ability to challenge the priority of human flesh in both its drag performance and also its desire-based, sexual interaction with human beings. *Dildo Washer* makes playful reference to the concept of the homely qualities of "heimlich" by using a domestic dishwasher, yet the dishwasher in being occupied by so many dildos is rendered "unheimlich," as these objects in drag which "ought to have remained hidden" are flagrantly exposed.²⁵¹ Claire Fontaine defamiliarizes the dishwasher by filling it with seemingly obscene objects, and defamiliarizes the dildo by contextualizing it within a space separate from the human body. Indeed, this separation of the dildo from the body plays with the castration anxiety which Freud views as a significant framework of the uncanny. Yet there is something else to be said about this gathering of "realistic" dildos whose most significant interaction in this piece is with the interior of the dishwasher and not with any subject. Because of their context, they emerge as neither penises nor phalluses, but rather as a gathering of

²⁵⁰ Claire Fontaine, "Sorry We're Closed," *Galerie Sebastien Janssen*. Date accessed February 26, 2016, <http://www.sorrywreclosed.com/en/expositions/presentation/28/claire-fontaine>.

²⁵¹ Freud, "The Uncanny," 224-25.

strange objects, withdrawn from immediate access and resisting singular signification. The art piece also speaks to the Heideggarian dilemma of what to *do* with a dildo after its use has expired and it is rendered strange again. Minge and Zimmermann reflect on picking a dildo up and examining it after sex, describing that, “it’s so lifeless without her, without me, without our bodies.”²⁵² This lifelessness, however, is precisely what makes the dildo’s drag so effective and makes powerful its ability to call priority into question. The dildo does not require human use to “animate” its power.

Weird Realism, Weird Sex

I wanted to push the boundaries of people's comfort levels, make them question their own erections and wet panties, and let them know their fantasies do not have to go unrealized.

LoneWolf, Founder of Primal Hardware, designer of “The Ovipositor.”²⁵³

When Freud wrote his 1919 essay on “Fetishism,” Freud dismissed both the fetishist and the homosexual (from whom, in his schema, the fetishist is always one step away) as abnormal.²⁵⁴ Since Freudian fetishism is rooted in an arrested desire for the maternal penis, and fetishism exchanges a body part with an object to compensate for this “special penis,” the dildo is the ultimate fetish because it so closely resembles one.²⁵⁵ Since Freud’s essay, fetishism has been

²⁵² Minge and Zimmerman, “Power Pleasure and Play,” 345.

²⁵³ Lone Wolf, interviewed by Toby McCasker, *VICE Online*. “The Emerging Fetish of Laying Alien Eggs Inside of You.” August 13, 2015, http://www.vice.com/en_ca/read/the-emerging-fetish-of-laying-alien-eggs-inside-yourself.

²⁵⁴ Freud, *Fetishism*, 154

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

deployed to discuss objects in a way that polices their erotic use through the same normative categories that have exorcised queer desire as “unthinkable.”²⁵⁶ Yet the persistence of queer desire and the diversity of existent “fetishes” press up against hegemonic categories of sex, gender and sexuality, suggesting that there is more complexity to desire than psychoanalysis can point out.

Just as Butler views “exclusion from ontology” experienced by the queer subject as a “rallying grounds for resistance,”²⁵⁷ I fear that the normalization of the dildo in popular culture has meant the loss of some of its subversive potential. What needs recuperation, then, is a sense of both the dildo’s queer potential and its potential to promote a rethinking of desire from a flat ontological erotics, in which every being—human and object—is an equal yet autonomous, uncannily withdrawn partner of desire. Desire in these circumstances, is not a desire to own to use, but a kind of meditative wonderment at the sublimity of objects and bodies as they are contradictory, weird and ontologically multiple. Rather than fetishism, this is a queer erotics of things. This would also be a sexual model in which sublimity and queerness replace the heterosexually performative frameworks of pornographic, phallogentric sex that are reified within the dominant culture.

In this section, I suggest that the desire that meets the dildo should not be understood based on its position as a sex toy or tool to increase pleasure amongst partners, but perhaps an objectophilic object of desire in its own right, whose uncanny presence illuminates a desire to dissolve the boundaries of sexual and

²⁵⁶ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 312.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

erotic acts to facilitate sex as an “intraactive”²⁵⁸ rather than an interactive space, one that *includes objects*. This would necessitate a reconfiguring of the human supremacy over objects to a human-object relationship modelled after an erotics free from the pathologization of fetishism. As queer philosopher and performance artist Beatriz Preciado has noted:

We fuck badly, and we deserve it. Our sexuality works as a language that has been restricted to a single closed code –penis-vagina–, in a way that almost any other possibility of articulation –penis-anus, vulva-vulva, hand-vulva-anus, object-mouth-clitoris, penis-object, etc.– is considered a deviation, pathology, a nonsense phrase. Our ways of fucking are limited by cultural marks of age, race, species, place, etc.²⁵⁹

Preciado’s “etc.” might include the anthropocentric and correlationist tradition. But Preciado prefaces this blunt critique by explaining that normative configurations explain, “why fucking per se –not the fantasizing about fucking– is nearly always so boring.”²⁶⁰ OOO threatens to burst open the “closed code” of normative sex, exchanging this instead for a wild form of sex without any signification: an unnamable and strange erotic act, which emerges in a different configuration each time.²⁶¹ The dildo suggests that while we fuck normatively, according to the linear regulatory regimes constructed by heterosexist anthropocentrism, our fantasies might be interesting, entertaining uncanny relationships such as those between body and object.

²⁵⁸ Karen Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” 32.

²⁵⁹ Beatriz Preciado, interviewed by Vincent Ferrer. “Beatriz Preciado, some kind of queer oracle.” *Buffalo Zine*. Date Accessed February 23, 2016
<http://buffalozine.com/words/beatriz-preciado-some-kind-queer-oracle>

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

Various examples in post-human dildo design establish that these weird fantasies are becoming realized in forms that free the dildo from a replication and substitution of the human penis. These dildos produce not only a “weird realism,”²⁶² but a *weird sexual realism*, in objects that pose radical challenges to both the “realistic” and “non-phallic” dildos most immediately located in shops and on the internet. The influence of H.P. Lovecraft on OOO theorists (especially, Graham Harman’s weird realism and Ian Bogost’s alien phenomenology)²⁶³ is paralleled by in weird dildo design, where Lovecraft’s speculative fiction has directly inspired certain expressions/objects. We might consider, for example, the Ovipositor, an “alien” dildo based from an extraterrestrial and entomological imaginary (even more explicitly “alien” than all other dildos, which like any other object are, after all, also “alien”). The Ovipositor illuminates the phallic-not phallic status of the dildo, while also moving into a radically queer imaginary that goes beyond the constructed human body as a pre-given participant within a sexual space. The Ovipositor, an actual appendage that some insects have to lay their eggs, is here a veined and oblong dildo in blue, pink, purple or green which looks somewhat like a penis. Its “head” separates to accommodate gelatin eggs that are slid into the interior of the dildo and can be pushed out (into a user’s vagina, anus, or mouth) during penetration. In this case, the dildo is imagined as a penis that also gives birth and permits a second birth, in which the eggs are pushed out by the subject’s body: a feature that queers and confuses the phallic

²⁶² Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer,” 188.

²⁶³ Ibid., 184.

reading of the dildo. Of these fantasies, Lone Wolf, founder of *Primal Hardware* and the inventor of these toys, says “for some people just talking about it gets them wet.”²⁶⁴ The desire in question, then, would not be for a body, but rather for an object – something that is at work in all dildo-play, but which is typically subsumed under the logic of the stand-in or tool.

Similarly, Necronomicox, a small Canadian manufacturer of specialty dildos, includes among its products tentacled buttplugs and zombified corpse dildos, as well as a silicone dildo called “Mythos” that resembles H.P. Lovecraft’s tentacled “Cthulu.”²⁶⁵ Bad Dragon is a company that falls within a similarly weird framework of sex-toy design, producing fantastic designs simulating dragon, shark, werewolf and chimera penises amongst many others.²⁶⁶ These objects promise something more for the dildo: an explicit elevation of the strange object to erotic actant, and the framing of sex as uncanny, an indirect intraaction between alien entities that only occurs through allure. If, as Butler has established in *Gender Trouble*, all gendering is a drag and sex itself is material, perhaps such sex toys, in their drag, allow for the weird materiality of sex and sexual interactions to emerge, in a paradigm in which thing-being would be an acknowledged and equal part of the erotic topography.

Harman and Bogost repeatedly describe OOO as a “weird realism.” It is due time that queer theory progresses to reveal sex as equally weird through its

²⁶⁴ Lone Wolf, interviewed by Toby McCasker, *VICE Online*.

²⁶⁵ “Necronomicox Toys,” *Necronomicox*, accessed February 23, 2016. <https://www.etsy.com/shop/necronomicox>

²⁶⁶ “Toys,” *Bad Dragon*, accessed February 23, 2016. <http://bad-dragon.com/products>

relation to objects, as opposed to a correlationist reading of sex that sees it as an interaction between gendered human body parts. As Harman notes, “the problem is that objects cannot be touched “in part,” because there is a sense in which objects have no parts.”²⁶⁷ The same might be said about the body: the mind assumes its totality and divides its forms in order to enact a correlationist hegemony over them. The move towards objects, however, promises to remove such an apparatus of signification. In discussing the “asymmetrical contact” between objects, Harman unknowingly makes the case for a queer mode of interaction that stands in direct confrontation to notions of “difference.”²⁶⁸ Judith Butler, for her part, notes that the compulsory heterosexuality engrained in psychoanalysis repetitively produces difference in a manifestation of what Luce Irigaray terms “the old dream of symmetry”: an original and a copy perfectly mapped onto one another, absence and presence fitting together.²⁶⁹ Since the dildo imperfectly maps the penis, it frustrates the “dream of symmetry” that emphasizes the penis as original. Through Graham Harman’s articulation of object interaction as “asymmetrical” we can begin to look at sex, gender and desire as points of asymmetrical contact as well. Drag has not only been about performance but also about the asymmetry between normative forms of desire and eroticism. As the drag queen or king reveals the heterosexual object of desire to be a performative state of being and the binary structure of desire to be constructed, they give way

²⁶⁷ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 73.

²⁶⁸ Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 75-78.

²⁶⁹ Irigaray qtd. in Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 22.

to a moment in which desire is queer. The “heterosexual” subject, confused or panicked by this queering, may embrace or reject this binary dissolution. We can read the dildo within the same framework. As an object in drag, which destabilizes the priority of the subject, we can either put the dildo away in a drawer (both physically and philosophically) or we might move towards the OOO (flat ontology) and confront desire as confusion—flickering signification, expressible only via allusion, dialetheic.

Yet perhaps Harman is aware of the queer nature of object-oriented philosophy. In *The Third Table*, Harman calls for artists to continue their exploration of things as nearly spiritual or weird and suggests that “in some ways this erotic model is the basic aspiration of object-oriented philosophy.”²⁷⁰ Yet the erotic structure of allure through which Harman explains object-oriented interaction is not a normative erotics but instead, a queer one, uncanny and unsettling. Harman calls for a ‘return to Eros’²⁷¹ to enter into our consideration of things. But erotics need not be normalized: instead, a queer erotics is composed of dildos as well as other dialetheic signs and their flickering signifiers, a sphere in which arousal is contingent on the means through which bodies and things flicker with strangeness. In this space, after all, it is the dildo’s *strangeness*, rather than its potential mimicry, that produces desire. We should take this weird understanding and throw it back onto more cannily recognizable objects, as the conclusion to this thesis will outline.

²⁷⁰ Harman, *The Third Table*, 15.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Conclusion: Towards Incoherence

One of the largest limitations of queer theory has been its inability to push past the boundary line of the subject. In this project, I have identified that the signifying systems of anthropocentrism and heterosexism both prioritize the subject and serve the same oppressive hierarchy of the real over the not-real, the cis-heterosexual “normal” over the queer, the human over the non-human. While the objects in drag of this thesis present a subversion and temporary destabilization of this system, if we are truly to extract ourselves from the compulsory impositions of binary structures, a radical re-acquaintance between humans and objects is required. While post-human theories have popularly conjoined with queer speculations,²⁷² object-oriented ontologies have not been taken up to the same degree.

Although Timothy Morton and Levi Bryant have written about queer theory as it might relate to OOO, Michael O’Rourke points out that there has been a level of reluctance on the part of queer theorists to delve into the OOO, particularly owing to the frequently noted white cis-male character of OOO writers.²⁷³ Yet there may be another reason for queer theory’s avoidance of

²⁷² See Donna Haraway, “A cyborg manifesto. Science, technology and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century.” in *The Cybercultures Reader*. Ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy. (New York: Routledge, 2000): 292. See also J. Jack Halberstam, *Posthuman Bodies (Unnatural Acts: Theorizing the Performative)*, ed. J. Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). See also Karen Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” *Women, Gender and Research (Kvinder, Køn og forskning)* 1 no.2 (2012): 32. See also José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

²⁷³ Michael O’Rourke “Girls Welcome! Speculative Realism, Object Oriented Ontology and Queer Theory,” 288.

object-oriented philosophies. As Claire Fontaine note in their artistic statement for *Dildo Washer*, transgression of the human object binary is indicative of “the deepest promiscuity.”²⁷⁴ Indeed, correlationist philosophy reifies crossing this particular boundary between human body and object body as the site of transgression and taboo. And yet it resonates strongly with the binaries dividing sex and gender that have been the subject of much queer critique. Rosi Braidotti observes that “the gender system captures the complexity of human sexuality in a binary machine that privileges heterosexual family formations and literally steals all other bodies from us.”²⁷⁵ It is imperative for queer theory to recognize that these stolen and non-conforming bodies also include objects.

In this project I have also shown that objects in human drag such as Freudian purses, shoes and hats, as well as mannequins and dildos might allow us to re-envision desire outside of heteronormative narratives and discourses, seeing them instead as uncanny, disorienting and strange. Indeed, if we are to posit object-oriented strategies of rethinking anthropocentric and heterosexist hegemonies, it is necessary to seriously examine how notions such as Harman’s weird realism, Bogost’s alien phenomenology, Morton’s realist magic and Bryant’s flat ontology might effect the re-imaginings of temporal and physical experiences of intimacy, sex, gender and sexuality. If, as OOO suggests, theory must legitimize the unique inner lives of objects, this newfound legitimization of the object’s ontology and “body” implies a radical revision of ways in which

²⁷⁴ Claire Fontaine, “Sorry We’re Closed.”

²⁷⁵ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 99.

erotic bodily relationships are envisioned as between humans. The ramifications are queer ones, opening up desiring spaces to usher in the non-human. As I suggested in the previous chapter, this might mean considering the object itself as desired separate from its *tool-being*²⁷⁶ and situation relative to the body of a human subject, instead recognizing *things* as autonomous erotic actants within sex spaces.

While the relationship between the human and the mannequin/sex doll, like that of the dildo, has a lengthy cultural history (as traced in the second chapter of this thesis), other iterations of the human/object relationship have not been so readily explored. While those subjects who have relationships with – or fantasies about – objects in drag (the mannequin, the sex doll) may be ostracized, and those who use dildos are compelled to hide them due to their “obscenity,” there still exists a sense of comfort in the fact that these objects are recognizable because of their resemblance to the human body. Because these objects in drag might “pass” to a certain extent as human, the human-nonhuman relationships that emerge are more permissible because objects that participate in “culturally intelligible”²⁷⁷ notions of humanness can be subsumed into narratives of substitution and heterosexuality. While these erotic relationships between humans and objects are uncanny and subversive, they may fall prey to being normalized as they recall recognizable discursive histories and cultural mythologies about objects that appear as the body.

²⁷⁶ Harman, “The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer,” 187.

²⁷⁷ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 160.

On the other hand, objectophiles such as Erika Eiffel, who attained a degree of notoriety as the woman who married the Eiffel Tower and is currently in a relationship with the Berlin Wall, might help us understand the implications of a flat ontology in rethinking sexuality. Eiffel is an organizational figurehead for those who identify as objectum sexual (OS). OS have existed as a marginalized group within the cultural imaginary, frequently delegitimized as fetishists because of their desire for and relationships with objects.²⁷⁸ Because of the taboo nature OS, Eiffel has been widely interviewed by various popular media such as VICE, *The Tyra Banks Show*, and in a documentary about OS called *The Woman Who Married The Eiffel Tower*.²⁷⁹ In one interview, Eiffel explains the moment of realizing her sexuality in relation to desire she felt for a bridge located in the town where she spent her adolescence. Describing the heartbreak that she endured when the bridge was torn down, Eiffel encapsulates her relationship to objects as understanding “the life of the object as valuable as that of a person.”²⁸⁰ Here, Eiffel’s description of her sexual awakening strikingly echoes the notion of Bryant’s flat ontology.

Sexologist Amy Marsh has produced the sole academic study to date on the OS community and its forum-based internet presence, noting that, “with the

²⁷⁸ Amy Marsh “Love Among the Objectum Sexuals” *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*, 13. March 1, 2010.

²⁷⁹ It is important to note here that this documentary was read as a misrepresentation of Eiffel’s identity and she felt somewhat manipulated by the documentarian’s attention. As Amy Marsh notes in her study: “(OS) currently serves as a kind of ready made sexual sideshow, isolated from the ‘big top’ of mainstream human sexual behavior.”

²⁸⁰ Erika Eiffel, interviewed by Nick Hayden for ABC’s *The Hungry Beast*. “Erika Eiffel.” YouTube video, 7:25, posted by “Gunicus,” November 11, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3suP2ARzIVM>.

exception of the author, ‘experts’ who are approached by journalists for comments on objectum sexuality have generally assume a pathology or history of sexual trauma and/or categorize OS as a paraphilia or fetish.”²⁸¹ Yet Marsh counters this popular claim by noting that OS is a longstanding sexual desire that “may indicate a desire for a more complete relationship than a fetishist would require.”²⁸² I argue that for queer OOO to progress, we must discard theories such as Freudian fetishism for a non-heterosexist and correlationist treatment of the object.

It is clear in Marsh’s study that the object partners of OS-identified subjects are generally not in human drag: bridges, monuments, soundboards and aircrafts amongst many others.²⁸³ While there exist cultural representations of the human bond with objects in drag, thereby legitimizing the existence of people such as Lars (the titular character of *Lars and the Real Girl*), OS-identified subjects experience the same hegemonic exclusion as Butler’s queer subjects whom, “are fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find [them] to be an impossibility)” because “it is the inhuman, the beyond the human, the less than human, the border that secures the human in its ostensible reality.”²⁸⁴ In this thesis I have expanded on this notion of Butler’s through my analysis of objects in drag: not only have we always needed the non-human (or the possibility of queerness) to construct the human (or heterosexual)

²⁸¹ Marsh, *ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ Marsh, *Ibid.*

²⁸⁴ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 30

“claim to originality”²⁸⁵ but also the non-human can act to expose this constructed divide via human drag performance. The implications for queer OOO, however, go beyond this to challenge the human/non-human divide and offer a fresh take on the multiple and variant forms of our relationships with – and desires for – objects.

A queer OOO would work in the interest of multiplicity and fluidity. It would legitimize notions of sex and sexuality that the human/non-human binary precludes; and it would explore the complexity of desire *beyond the subject*. This means considering other iterations of sex, gender and desire that cannot be contained within normative, cis-hetero and anthropocentric discourses. Erika Eiffel has highlighted the inadequacies of these discourses in responding to a frequent critique of OS, that objects cannot “return feelings” in the same way that humans can, and that thus the relationship is not a legitimate one:

You’re implying that what I need out of a relationship is the same as what everyone else needs. You’re implying that I need my object to talk to me, that I need my object to show emotion, that I need my object to wrap his arms around me, that kind of thing but actually that’s not what I look for in a relationship... What I get out of my relationship is much more to me.²⁸⁶

Refusing to be pathologized, Eiffel attests here to the autonomy of her *queerness*, that is unique to her own ontological experience and which she—not normative discourse—determines the boundaries of. Perhaps what is of greatest significance here is how her statement gives attention to the withdrawn nature of

²⁸⁵ Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 314.

²⁸⁶ Erika Eiffel, interviewed by Nick Hayden for ABC’s *The Hungry Beast*. “Erika Eiffel.”

things, refusing to subsume the object of her love to tool-being. OS, then, indicates an object-oriented form of queer-being that resists being subsumed into normative frameworks of sexuality and gender by asserting that the relationship status of an OS identified person is as “withdrawn” as the objects taking part in it. What we have here, is a desire that refuses correlationism – if OS people fuck, they do not ‘fuck boring.’²⁸⁷

The objects in drag of this thesis perform discursive legibility in order to queer it, emphasizing their identificatory indeterminacy, internal multiplicity and profound unknowability. These objects illustrate a perpetual failure of language, signification and legible discourse in capturing the queer withdrawnness of the thing. While I have argued that acknowledging the queerness of the object can challenge its subjugated position, my concern in ending this thesis is for the objects *not* in human drag, which (like all objects) are radically queer and withdrawn but do not possess the same uncanny sensual qualities that grant the objects of this thesis a certain power.

If Peter Schwenger’s thing-theory argues, in Lacanian fashion, that the symbol has “killed the thing” by normalizing it, poetic language might bring back its strangeness.²⁸⁸ If the symbol has killed the thing, so too has it killed queerness by constructing delineating identity categories that act as ontologically inherent, exhaustive of the subjects and objects they subsume. If “legibility” implies a

²⁸⁷ Beatriz Preciado, interviewed by Vincent Ferrer. “Beatriz Preciado, some kind of queer oracle.” *Buffalo Zine*.

²⁸⁸ Peter Schwenger, “Words and the Murder of the Thing,” 102.

constructed subject that can be “read” based not only on their cisgendered heterosexuality but by the visible possession of a human body, then within both heteronormative and queer theories the thing is always illegible. Yet the territory of the illegible, as seen through Butler, also allows for the multiplicity, contradiction and queerness that OOO and queer theory value. Both queer theory and object-oriented ontology must find ways of bringing this forth, through a major shift in how theory is produced.

OOO theorists such as Bogost and Harman have grappled with their positions as writers conforming to normative academic structure (humanist traditions) while expressing the weird and radical ideas of object-oriented ontologies.²⁸⁹ While Bogost mounts a critique of written philosophy, he (along with Morton, Harman and Bryant) sheepishly produces a book that conforms to academic standards of “quality, validity, and the relevance of academic work.”²⁹⁰ Running counter to this normativity, Bogost speculates upon “carpentry” as a solution – a hybrid making-writing practice that allows us to “approach the [queerness of the] nonsemiotic world.”²⁹¹ What must occur then, is a radical turn in the way that queer theory and OOO is *written*. Particularly popular within the OOO is the production of “Latourian litanies.”²⁹² random lists of disparate terms

²⁸⁹ Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 88.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 38-39. As Bogost mentions, The Latourian litany takes its name from Bruno Latour whose theories of “actors” and “actants” have been tremendously important for Graham Harman’s object-oriented philosophy. Bogost writes that “lists...appear regularly in Latour’s works. They function primarily as provocations, as litanies of surprisingly

strung together that “do not rebuff the connecting powers *of* language but the connecting powers of *being itself*.”²⁹³ If these lists cut into normative patterns of a linguistic system which privileges normativity and exorcises strangeness, queer theory works in the same interest. Yet written queer and OOO theory has not been good enough, ultimately playing it safe by producing radical ideas within conventional academic writing.

I suggest that if the queer subject and the object have been relegated to the margins, marginalia must then become theory in all its scribbled speed,²⁹⁴ its incompleteness and failure to facilitate rational sense. Countering narrative completeness and success, which Jack Halberstam associates with heterosexuality,²⁹⁵ this theory would be allowed to err and fail, to fluctuate in its coherence. We might call this puzzling yet electrifying theory a form of poetry.

I am not alone in this claim – queer theoreticians and OOO scholars see great potential in the poetic. Peter Schwenger, for example, explores the strangeness of Gertrude Stein’s (queer) cubist poetry in *Tender Buttons*, showing the means through which linguistic strangeness opens up infinite interpretive possibilities that never exhaust Stein’s words or the objects to which they refer.²⁹⁶ Likewise Timothy Morton has produced “An Object-Oriented Defense of

contrasted curiosities.” An example Bogost gives is: “lighthouse, dragonfly, lawnmower and barley.”

²⁹³ Ibid., 40.

²⁹⁴ Bell, *Fast Feminism*, 12.

²⁹⁵ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2-3.

²⁹⁶ Schwenger, *Words and the Murder of the Thing*, 104.

Poetry,”²⁹⁷ as it “forces us to acknowledge that we coexist in a groundless yet vivid reality.”²⁹⁸ From a queer angle, in their essay “We Are All Works in Progress” trans writer Leslie Feinberg suggests that “gender is the poetry each of us makes out of the language we are taught...when I walk through the anthology of the world, I see individuals express their gender in exquisitely complex and ever-changing ways, despite the laws of pentameter.”²⁹⁹ Mapping the complexity of entities through poetry and marginalia rather than categorically condensing them is a queer practice, as it “disturb[s] the order of things.”³⁰⁰ It is due time that theory conjure up the courage to adopt this fluctuating, poetic structure which provides new avenues for the subject and object to resist hegemonic frameworks.

This thesis has taken up one aspect of the object’s existence/performance—drag—to show how objects in their thing-being present us with an ontological queerness, one that resists the attempt of normative categories and discourses to contain them. Luce Irigaray has written of the queerness of women: “you are moving, you never stay still. You never stay. You never ‘are.’”³⁰¹ Objects, too, are queer in this way, moving past categories, asserting ontological strangeness and a multiplicity of being that eludes phallogocentric symbolic discourse and all anthropocentric attempts to capture them. Queer theory must continue to speak with OOO, so that all bodies – human and

²⁹⁷ Timothy Morton. “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry.” *New Literary History*. 43 vol.2 (2012): 205.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

²⁹⁹ Leslie Feinberg. “We Are All Works in Progress” in *Trans Libertaion: Beyond Pink and Blue*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998): 1-13.

³⁰⁰ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 161.

³⁰¹ Irigaray, *Lips*, 76.

otherwise – are not caught within a binary system and rendered stationary, but
may instead be allowed to roam,
in all of their
unknowable
weirdness.

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