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Silicone Embodiments: The Breast Implant and the Doll

Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst[1]

In this essay, I argue that silicone supports contemporary fantasies and performances of a body that is intact and sealed. This analysis is developed through a discussion of Amber Hawk Swanson's performance art involving a silicone sex doll replica of the artist (2007) and silicone breast implants that 'ordinary' women receive, situated within the context of the previous doll art of Hans Bellmer (1935-1949). I argue that while the sex doll is structurally a perverse fetish object (psychoanalytically speaking), Hawk Swanson's project sheds light on the neurotic structure of desiring and obtaining a breast augmentation. My analysis is that silicone facilitates new phallic performances of embodiment that are particularly attractive in a consumerist society.

1: Introduction

Silicone is a synthetic material that has transformed embodiment, particularly in the Western world. In her comprehensive history of cosmetic surgery, Elizabeth Haiken calls silicone the "wonder product of American industry" in the 1940s, when the Dow Corning Corporation was founded and began to explore the seemingly endless possibilities for silicones in industry, something chemists had been studying for decades.[2] When used in health and beauty products, silicone coats the hair and skin with a glamorous lustre. Silicone implants are placed inside the body in cosmetic surgery, augmenting its morphology. It is possible to prosthetically acquire new body parts that mobilize a range of gender and sexual possibilities as silicone sex toys are strapped on and manipulated. And indeed,

[1] I would like to acknowledge the generosity of Amber Hawk Swanson, who offered to read my paper and help select appropriate images to support its argument. Thank you! I also wish to acknowledge the valuable feedback I received on drafts of this paper on three different occasions: first, from Laura Eramian, Christina Holmes, Jonathan Langdon, and Michael Newton, members of a writing group at St. Francis Xavier University that I participated in; second, from Genna Duplisea, Michelle Moravec, and Wil Upchurch during the HASTAC Feminist Scholars Digital Workshop in 2013; and finally, from anonymous peer reviewers of the paper. Thank you! All errors, infelicities, and omissions are my own.

[2] Elizabeth Haiken, *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 246.

entire bodies are fashioned from silicone. A fantasy that silicone sustains is of a sealed, intact body that is capable of continuous pleasure use, without concern for the limitations of flesh bodies. Within contemporary representations and euphemisms for cosmetic surgery, there exists a curious and telling tension between the soft plasticity of the body, and the hardness of the descriptor "plastic," which is used to describe bodies that have undergone cosmetic surgery. Gender difference is performatively marked through the over-exaggeration of breasts, as Meredith Jones has argued; that is to say, contemporary ideals of white, middle-class feminine bodies are paradoxically hard and phallic (the slender gym body) with large breasts that exist as a remnant of a soft body.[3] These paradoxes between hardness and softness are also seen in the kinds of identities that are valued in a capitalist consumer society, which privileges the individual who considers their body as infinitely transformable to fit the 'market' for attractiveness, yet also a contained and complete 'product' that is marketed (in employment and relationships in particular).

This paper connects two cultural phenomena fashioned from silicone—sex dolls and breast implants—and theorizes the effects of silicone on human embodiment. Amber Hawk Swanson's photographic and video series "To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll" (2007) documents her performances with Amber Doll, her silicone sex doll doppelgänger. These performances with Amber Doll disrupted heteronormative spaces like wedding receptions, tailgating parties, and amusement parks. They entered these spaces as a couple, dressed identically. Hawk Swanson would frequently leave Amber Doll alone in order to document the audience's reactions to its presence.

Often these reactions alarmingly remind the viewer of the "borrowed quality" of all women's bodies,[4] for once Amber Doll was alone, the audience members shifted its clothing to reveal its genitals and breasts, penetrated it with their fingers, and squeezed its breasts. My analysis compares Hawk Swanson's work with surrealist Hans Bellmer's photographs of his plaster doll fashioned from an interchangeable series of body parts in the 1930s and 1940s titled, *Les Jeux de la Poupée* (*The Games of the Doll*). Comparing Hawk Swanson's Amber Doll to

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[3] Meredith Jones, "Makeover Culture's Dark Side: Breasts, Death, and Lolo Ferrari," *Body & Society* 14 (2008): 89-104.

[4] Virginia Blum, *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 33.

Figure 1 (top): *Tailgate Mouth* (2007); Figure 2 (bottom): *Tailgate Skirt* (2007)
Photos courtesy Amber Hawk Swanson, used with permission

Bellmer's doll demonstrates shifting conceptions of embodiment that are facilitated by silicone, and the development of the fantasy and performance of the hermetic feminine body. This analysis uses a psychoanalytic approach, since these cultural phenomena possess both a conscious and unconscious dimension; that is to say, they are both rational and irrational.

At first blush, silicone sex dolls and silicone breast implants seem to have little in common with each other aside from being constructed from the same types of polymers. This material similarity is quite significant. Surgeons have experimented with the use of silicone in breast augmentation procedures since the 1960s, ranging from the injection of liquid silicone directly into the breast tissue in 1965 to today's innovations in cohesive gel or "gummy bear" implants.[5] Silicone has been an attractive material for breast augmentation because it holds heat, is pliable to the touch, and does not pose the infection risks of other materials like paraffin or fat. Even as debates about the safety of silicone implants persist, many women prefer silicone implants to saline implants because of its tactile properties. While saline implants might *look* the same as silicone implants, they do not *feel* the same. Silicone is held up as a gold standard for breast implants because silicone implants look and feel lifelike, and unlike saline, silicone implants are unaffected by external temperatures so they do not feel cold in the wintertime.

Similarly, Abyss Creations' introduction of the RealDoll—a sex doll with a posable PVC skeleton and silicone flesh—in 1996 signaled a remarkable innovation in the sex doll market. Sex dolls have been crafted from a variety of cheap and low-quality materials, from the iconic vinyl blow-up doll of American frat party movies to stuffed toys and pillows, but the silicone sex doll is superior to its predecessors. Like silicone breast implants, the doll can be made warm by submerging it in a hot bath, its flesh yields to touch, and it is relatively easy to clean. The high cost and the relative customizability of the doll has created an élite tier of a previously ridiculed subculture, which has received some attention in popular culture. For example, Synthetiks advocate Davecat, who is married to a RealDoll, has appeared in multiple television documentaries and the reality show *My Strange Addiction*, and David Gillespie's film about a man's relationship with a silicone sex doll, *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007), was screened in mainstream movie theatres in the United States and Canada. Like silicone breast implants, silicone sex dolls are described and marketed as being remarkably *lifelike*; they perform in ways that closely match their living counterparts.

However, silicone sex dolls and breast implants are far from lifelike, even though their advertising campaigns suggest otherwise. They are fabricated out of a chain of synthetic polymers that bind together, and cannot be classified

[5] Haiken, *Venus Envy*, 237.

within the realm of life and death. Like many synthetic materials created by humans, silicone decomposes very slowly; it is almost immortal. The doll and the implant are inert objects that do not respond to touch, do not feel pain, and experience no pleasure that can be transmitted back to their owners. It is at this nexus that my curiosity lies, because it strikes me as strange that these *lifelike* objects designed for sexual pleasure and use are also paradoxically *deathlike* and without feeling. What can the interplay between these objects tell us about contemporary fantasies and performances of embodiment, sexuality and gender? What desires and positions are addressed by the silicone breast implant and the silicone sex doll? And finally, how does silicone as material mobilize and sustain these fantasies, desires, and positions? To think through these questions, I wish to discuss in detail Hawk Swanson's performance "To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll" (2007) through Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic understandings of perversion and neurosis. I argue that while the silicone sex doll is a perverse fetish object in a structural sense,[6] Hawk Swanson's performance project does not address the pervert but rather the neurotic. While the desire to possess and have sex with a doll fits into a perverse psychical structure, the desire to emulate the doll through breast augmentation falls within a neurotic structure. Before I delve into Hawk Swanson's work, I want to establish a psychoanalytic context for thinking about silicone and embodiment through the structures of neurosis and perversion. I begin by outlining Freudian and Lacanian understandings of neurosis and perversion, and then I demonstrate how these are connected to the breast implant and sex doll.

2: Neurosis, Perversion, and Silicone

I propose that a decision to purchase and undergo breast augmentation surgery can be thought of as a neurotic act, while the decision to purchase and have sex with a silicone sex doll is a perverse act. While the specifics of this argument will be expanded throughout my discussion of Amber Hawk Swanson/Amber Doll and breast augmentation, I want to lay out an understanding of neurosis and perversion as psychical structures and make some preliminary remarks regarding the breast implant and the sex doll in this section. After this section, I use this psychoanalytic framework to think through the position of the doll within art and psychoanalytic histories, Hawk Swanson's "To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll" (2007), and the 'ordinary' decision to undergo a breast augmentation.

[6] From the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis, there are three psychical structures: perversion, neurosis, and psychosis. These structures do not correspond to a sense of a "normal" human; indeed, if a "normal" structure were to be defined, it would be neurosis, but only because neurosis is most common. More on this follows.

Within Freudian psychoanalysis, neurosis can be identified through the presence of symptoms that the patient is aware of, that are not created anatomically, and that the analyst can treat through analysis. Inner conflicts that are caused by the frustration of childhood sexual drives during the Oedipus complex (repression) manifest themselves through neurosis.[7] Freud classifies neurotic symptoms as obsessive, hysterical, or phobic, and these symptoms often cause anxiety.[8] Neurosis is also opposed to psychosis, which is a more severe disturbance of the psyche with anatomical causes, according to Freud.[9] The majority of Freud's patients suffered from a variety of neurotic symptoms that caused somatic disturbances, and neurosis can be thought of as the most common pathology.

Diverging from Freud, Lacan defined neurosis as a structure, rather than a set of symptoms.[10] Freud's understanding of neurosis as a set of symptoms that can be treated and cured leads to the conclusion that a 'normal' and a 'neurotic' subject are not structurally different, but rather that the neurotic subject can become normal through psychoanalytic treatment. However, through Lacan's reframing of neurosis as a structure (one opposed to the other two clinical structures in his theory, psychosis and perversion), he takes an anti-normalizing turn that resists the distinction between 'normal' and 'pathological.' So while neurosis in Lacan may be 'normal' in the sense that it is the clinical structure that the majority of people inhabit, because it is a clinical *structure* (and not a *pathology*), it cannot be 'cured.' Instead, Lacanian psychoanalysis seeks to alter the subject's relation to the neurosis, rather than cure it. Lacan formulates the neurotic position as one of questioning, which varies depending on whether the subject's neurosis is hysterical or obsessional. The hysteric subject questions their sexual position (Am I a man or a woman?), and the obsessional subject questions their existence (To be or not to be?).[11] Often those who are hysterics also occupy the position of 'woman,' and those who are obsessional also occupy the position of 'man.'[12] Lacan's reformulation of neurosis is significant because it challenges the

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[7] Sigmund Freud, "On Repression (1915)," in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Angela Richards, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 149.

[8] Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction (1914)," in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Angela Richards, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 70.

[9] Sigmund Freud, "Psychoanalytic Notes Upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (1911)," in *Three Case Histories: The 'Wolf Man,' The 'Rat Man,' and the Psychotic Doctor Schreber*, ed. P. Rieff (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996), 155-156.

[10] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-1956,* ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 87.

[11] Ibid., 174-175 and 178-180.

[12] Note that these are positions, not genders or sexes. A frequent misinterpretation of Lacan is that he is speaking of the latter.

use of psychoanalytic therapy and theory to support normative social categories and expectations, and the same is true of his reformulation of perversion.

The neurotic subject suffers. This suffering can manifest itself in the somatic symptom, which produces an enjoyment (*jouissance*) for the neurotic subject through that suffering. Conceptualized as a defence against castration, the suffering of neurosis can also demand that an other make up for what the subject feels they are lacking (in the analytic setting, the analysand demands that the analyst perform this function). If we think about neurotic suffering through the example of silicone breast implants, the desire to undergo breast augmentation can be conceived of as a request that the surgeon make up for the lack through the implantation of the silicone object in the body. In the surgical encounter between the potential breast implant patient and surgeon, the patient accomplishes an unconscious displacement of lack onto the body, conceived of (in this instance) as insufficient breasts. The inadequacy of the breasts is a somatic symptom that registers as a complaint, which might be described in the surgeon's consultation room as the source of low self-confidence, unattractiveness, unhappiness, or sexual frustration. In other words, the small breasts are the cause of the neurotic subject's suffering in the case of breast augmentation and the patient demands that the surgeon compensate for their lack by implanting silicone into the breast. Ultimately this action will not successfully satisfy the demand because the implants cannot fill the neurotic's lack. The relation of the patient to the neurosis is unaltered, and thus persists. The relation to lack is quite different in perversion, which I turn to now.

Freud conceptualized perversion as sexual behaviours that do not coincide with the norm of heterosexual intercourse. Like neurosis, Lacan theorized that perversion was a clinical structure, rather than a set of behaviours or symptoms, again resisting the potentially normalizing judgments of Freud. Fetishistic perversion (or fetishism) is an unconscious response to the child's discovery that the mother does not have a penis and is castrated.[13] The child retains the knowledge of the mother's castration simultaneously with the magical belief that the mother has a penis, as a means to manage castration anxiety. This process is called disavowal in Freud[14] and Lacan. The pervert's task is to re-establish the mother's phallus through the fetish object. (In Freud, one possible story is that because the shoe is the last object the child sees before seeing the evidence of the mother's castration, it becomes the most opportune fetish object.[15] Another way of framing perversion as a defence against castration is to say that the subject undergoes castration and yet disavows it, choosing instead to substitute the moth-

[13] Sigmund Freud, "On Fetishism (1927)," in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. Angela Richards and trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 352.
[14] Ibid., 353.
[15] Ibid., 354.

er's penis with an object (the fetish) that sustains this fantasy. So, the pervert unconsciously acknowledges the mother's lack and concurrently disavows it through the use of the fetish object as substitute. The neurotic, on the other hand, defends against castration through complaint: if the complaint comes from the position of a woman, the subject demands that the other make up for her lack, and if from the position of a man, the subject manifests the complaint through castration anxiety.

The silicone sex doll enthusiast's relation to the doll is different from the breast augmentation patient's relation to the implants, since the doll has the possibility of satisfying the fetishist's demand. This is because in fetishism, the pervert is able to make up for lack through the fetish object. In this instance, the doll is not an imperfect answer to a demand or complaint, but is instead a satisfactory solution in its fetish object status as maternal phallus. Unlike the neurotic, the pervert has formulated an unconscious solution that will satisfy because the pervert disavows castration rather than protests against it. The silicone sex doll is like the maternal phallus in its hyperfemininity and in its physical manifestation of a contained body that is not subject to decay, exhaustion, or pain. It can also be thought of as a fetish object that satisfies a perverse scopophilic drive, since the doll can be looked at and visually explored in ways that a living human might resist. Testimonials from online communities of doll enthusiasts attest to the doll as a fetish object that is pleasurable both because it sexually satisfies in a unidirectional fashion and because it is so lifelike that it startles the viewer who perceives it as a living human, and can be photographed in all manner of outfits and positions.[16] Hawk Swanson's project plays with the possibilities for the sex doll to satisfy and perform like the living woman, building on prior work in psychoanalysis and in Eurowestern art that has made the doll central to its analysis.

3: The Doll in Art and Psychoanalysis

As Eva-Maria Simms notes, while the doll is a significant play object in the lives of children, dolls have not received much attention from scholars, especially psychoanalytic scholars. In the infrequent times when the doll is mentioned in psychoanalytic texts, it is most commonly lumped in with other childhood toys.[17] However, this is not to say that the doll has been insignificant to intellectual, psychoanalytic, and art communities since the late 19th century. Simms helpfully articulates three ways the doll is theorized within psychology and psychoanalysis: as one of many toys, as an object within the maternal world, or as penis sub-

[16] See, for example, the testimonials at http://www.realdoll.com/.
[17] Eva-Maria Simms, "Uncanny Dolls: Images of Death in Rilke and Freud," *New Literary History* 27 (1996): 663.

stitute.[18] Each of these understandings of the doll diminishes its power and grip on the imagination, a power that is palpable in the uncanniness and discomfort of Hawk Swanson's project. The doll is unlike other toys, as it most closely approximates the body and can operate as a double. While the doll might operate as an object within the constellation of the maternal world (useful to the child for expressing love or hate toward the mother, or as a transitional object that helps the child separate from the mother), the separateness of the doll renders this understanding limited. And finally, while Freud does suggest that the doll can operate as a penis substitute for the girl child (just as the baby operates as a penis substitute for the mother), this conceptualization of the doll is only partial as well.[19] As a double of the human body, the doll is powerful in its refusal (inability) to engage or respond to the living human. And as Freud notes, the doll is powerful as an uncanny object that approximates death and the corpse.[20]

Amber Hawk Swanson situates her work with Amber Doll as offering a commentary on the everyday and banal objectification of women's bodies in contemporary culture. Hawk Swanson's project is located in a lineage of art that intimately involves the doll as subject/object of the work, particularly the public spectacle of Oskar Kokoschka's doll in 1918 and Hans Bellmer's doll photographs from 1935-1949.[21] It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a history of the doll within Western European art and intellectual communities. However, for the purposes of situating and historicizing the shifting notions of embodiment predicated on silicone that Hawk Swanson experiments with, some comments on the work of Bellmer are useful. Bellmer's work offers an alternative way to read "To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll" (2007) that expands an analysis of women's objectification, and moves it into larger questions about silicone embodiment in contemporary cosmetic surgery culture.

In the mid-1930s, Bellmer constructed two dolls: one was a prototype, and the other a more sophisticated doll that had four legs, four breasts, three pelvises, an abdomen, an upper torso, and a head recycled from the original doll.[22] The second doll's body was significantly more manipulable because the body parts were assembled around ball joints, allowing Bellmer a range of positions. Using these fragmented body parts to construct extraordinary bodily configurations with too many or too few limbs, in the photographic series *Les Jeux de la Poupée*

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[18] Ibid., 633.

[19] Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality (1931)," in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. Angela Richards and trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 384-385.

[20] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (1919), ed. and trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

[21] Some of these can be viewed at http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=452.

[22] Sue Taylor, *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 154.

(*The Games of the Doll*, 1935-1949) Bellmer staged aggressive and violent fantasies that starred the doll as a variably coquettish, submissive, abused, raped, and victimized character. Bellmer was compelled by the doll's image and the ability to render visible the fragmentation and secrets of the female body, a topic on which he wrote extensively.

> *I am going to construct an artificial girl, with anatomical possibilities which are capable of creating the heights of passion,* even of inventing new desires.[23]

> The female body is like an endless sentence that invites us to rearrange it, *so that its real meaning can become clear through a series of endless anagrams.*[24]

> *And didn't the doll, which lived solely through the thoughts projected into it, and which despite its* unlimited pliancy *could be maddeningly stand-offish, didn't the very creation of* its dollishness contain the desire and intensity sought in it by the imagination?[25]

The doll provided Bellmer an opportunity to assemble, disassemble, and reassemble its body repetitively in whatever manner he desired, in a way that might create new desires and offer insights into the female body as infinite anagram or sentence. Bellmer also succinctly highlights one of the most threatening dimensions of the doll's existence, which is that even though we may be able to imagine—or more accurately, project—feelings onto the doll, and manipulate its body in whatever way we want, the doll's total obedience and impassive demeanour is infuriating. Because the doll cannot respond or defend itself, the control exercised over the doll only opens up new terrains of desire rather than satiating it, frustrating the aggressor.[26] Bellmer's doll is dissimilar to Amber Doll, even though both dolls are sexual objects. Like Amber Doll, Bellmer's doll is highly sexualized with round fleshy buttocks (sometimes serving as breast substitutes in certain configurations of the doll's body), round breasts, and long

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[23] Hans Bellmer, *The Doll* (1936), trans. Malcolm Green (London: Atlas Press, 2005), 16 (my emphasis).

[24] Bellmer quoted in Miranda Argyle, "Hans Bellmer and the Games of the Doll," available at: http://www.mirandaargyle.com/Hans%20Bellmer%20and%20The%20Games%20of%20the%20Doll.pdf (my emphasis).

[25] Bellmer, *The Doll*, 40 (my emphasis).

[26] While it is outside of the scope of this paper, which focuses on the ideals and experiences of silicone embodiment, Jessica Benjamin's *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Domination* (1992) could be an excellent resource to further theorize the doll art of Hawk Swanson and Bellmer through a lens that focuses on what these projects tell their viewers about relationships of domination, where both the one who exercises power and the one who submits to it participate in the bond.

human hair, and both exist in the realm of non-normative, non-reproductive sexualities. Both dolls exist as photographic objects for the artist, and Bellmer even imagined being able to project the doll's desires literally into the doll's torso through a film apparatus (this is in contrast to Hawk Swanson's performances, which are focused on the artist's desires). Bellmer's doll is an adult-child hybrid (the doll has voluptuous breasts and a hairless vulva, signifying in its time a child or adolescent sexuality and pedophilic desire), and Amber Doll is a pornographic representation of an adult woman. The most significant difference between Bellmer's doll and Amber Doll though is that Bellmer's doll can be taken apart and put back together, whereas Amber Doll is a seamless intact body of silicone. Some RealDoll body parts can be taken off for repair or replacement (face, eyes, tongue, labia, vaginal and anal "cores"), but they are not meant to be removed; nor does Hawk Swanson do this intentionally in her performances, although Amber Doll's tongue accidentally fell out at their wedding reception.[27] However, as I will discuss shortly, Bellmer anticipates cultural ideals of feminine bodies in 21st century capitalist industries such as cosmetic surgery, even though his doll is not physically capable of approximating them: a surface upon which to project fantasies of wholeness and impermeability, endlessly transformable and responsive to new trends in embodiment.

The inability to assemble and disassemble the dolls is significant to understanding how silicone makes a new intervention into embodiment. Bellmer's doll was constructed primarily from plaster, and was thus a hard and cold object and not particularly suitable for sexual exploration (or penetration); on the other hand, Amber Doll is a pliable and warm object that is designed to be penetrated in all three of its orifices. In its sexual inaccessibility and ability to be rearranged infinitely, Bellmer's doll references the Pygmalion myth, where the artist Pygmalion sculpts the perfect woman (Galatea) from ivory. Pygmalion falls in love with the statue, which is transformed into a living woman of flesh who is ultimately not as pleasing as the statue. While the desires expressed by Bellmer may indeed fall under the perverse structure articulated by Lacan, the photographs of the doll prompt the viewer to consider the questions of the neurotic (just as Amber Doll might be a perverse object that illuminates something about neurosis as well).

Articulated as a jigsaw puzzle of sorts, the photographs of the doll body in Bellmer trigger questions about femininity as a position of victimization. The photographs of the coy, cowering doll vulnerable to abuse elicit a sympathetic

[27] Hawk Swanson continued to work with Amber Doll after the 2007 performance and series of photographs and video. The eventual fate of Amber Doll was a reincarnation into Tilikum, the infamous orca whale responsible for the deaths of three individuals at SeaWorld in California (TILIKUM, 2011), as well as the cataloguing and display of the non-orca parts of Amber Doll (All That Is Left of You/Everything That You Are Now, 2012). For more, see http://www.amberhawkswanson.com/.

response in the viewer. Paradoxically, even though Bellmer's doll is quite unlike a human body in its hard plaster coldness, it arouses the viewer's emotions because it represents the terror and violence of the body-in-pieces (*le corps morcelé*) as articulated by Lacan.[28] The concept of the body-in-pieces refers to the baby's experience of the body as fragmented, unruly, and incoherent, in contrast to the baby's experience of the mirror image of the body, which is an idealized image of the body as whole and intact. This disjuncture between the body-in-pieces and the mirror image of the body is disturbing because the inability to feel wholeness is perceived as a failure or lack of the body. Bellmer's doll disrupts the viewer, provoking identification because of its fragmentation and its unsettling image of the experience of the body. Amber Doll, on the other hand, does not provoke our identifications because it *is* the idealized image in the mirror. David J. Getsy points to the "ambivalent ethics" and "anxious set of choices" that audiences of the performances are confronted with: Amber Doll is the double of Hawk Swanson and its body blurs the lines of consent because it appears to be a voiceless, passive object.[29] Its silicone body is whole and not lacking; indeed, the body of Amber Doll is a three-dimensional representation of idealized and digitally altered femininity that is repeated in fashion and pornographic photographs. This is also the idealized body of the cosmetic surgery industry, against which the unpredictable human body will always fail.

We might thus say that while Bellmer's work engages its viewer to consider the body's lack and failings through identificatory practices, Hawk Swanson's work engages its viewer to consider the same lack and failures through an inability to identify with the phallic and impermeable doll. Bellmer's doll addresses the psychical experience of embodiment as vulnerable and fragmented, while Hawk Swanson's doll addresses the *ideals* of embodiment that we can only fail to live up to. In comparing these two doll art projects, it is possible to recognize shifting conceptualizations of embodiment that have occurred in the latter half of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st. Bellmer anticipates the geo-historical space of the present that Hawk Swanson is working within, particularly the phallic ideals of femininity that are espoused in cosmetic surgery culture and critiqued in Hawk Swanson's work.

[28] Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 79.
[29] David J. Getsy, "Queer Exercises: Amber Hawk Swanson's Performances of Self-Realization," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 19, 4 (2013): 470-471.

4: Bully and Prey: The Marriage of Amber Hawk Swanson and Amber Doll

Figure 3: Amber Hawk Swanson, *First Day* (2007)
Photo courtesy Amber Hawk Swanson, used with permission

While Bellmer's *Les Jeux de la Poupée* unfolded in a time of heightened sensitivity to the body's vulnerabilities after the corporeal devastations of World War I, Hawk Swanson's "To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll" (2007) unfolds in a historical moment in the Eurowestern world that privileges invulnerability and actively works to mask the body's vulnerability through diet, exercise, and cosmetic surgery and their performative dimensions. Hawk Swanson is a Brooklyn-based video and performance artist whose work has been exhibited nationally in the United States as well as internationally in Canada and Estonia. While her work has been received with great interest by the popular media and art communities, it has surprisingly not received much critical scholarly intention.[30]

[30] David J. Getsy has written about Hawk Swanson's performances with Amber Doll in relation to her CrossFit performances that queered fitness regimes and emerged out of online comments about her body in relation to the doll in "Queer Exercises," and as exemplar of the resistance of statues, frequently assumed to be passive in "Acts of Stillness: Statues, Performativity, and Passive Resistance." Anna Watkins Fisher has written about the relationship between *The Feminism? Project* and "To Have, To Hold, To Violate:

Figure 4: Amber Hawk Swanson, *Shower Curtain Kiss* (2007)
Photo courtesy Amber Hawk Swanson, used with permission

Her photographic and video series "To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll" (2007) explores themes of (self-) objectification, agency, power, and femininity that are present in her earlier video series, "The Feminism? Project" (2006). "The Feminism? Project" is a series of ten videos scripted from interviews that Hawk Swanson conducted with women (ranging from her mother to her sorority sisters) on the subject of feminism. Hawk Swanson re-enacts edited portions of the interviews about feminism while engaged in various sexual and sexualized activities like being spanked or penetrated, giving a hand job, receiving oral sex, masturbating, and participating in beauty practices like facial hair bleaching and pedicures. Hawk Swanson's commentators on feminism seem indifferent to the sexual and sexualized acts they are engaged in, as they mull over the question of what feminism means in valley girl voice intonations. These videos rehearse many common-sense ideas about feminism: that feminists are angry, psychologically disturbed man-haters; that feminism is the validation of all life choices, including those that might perpetuate one's oppression; and that feminism is over as men and women are now equal. They also reveal how feminist discourse about bodily autonomy and reproductive choice has been seamlessly absorbed into late capitalist discourse about consumer choice. The com-

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Amber and Doll" as meditations on adolescent femininity and sexuality in "Like a Girl's Name."

mentators on feminism that Hawk Swanson embodies in "The Feminism? Project" (2006) willingly participate in acts and discourses that may be understood as contributing to their own subordination through their sexual objectification. However, in a not very subtle way, the videos raise questions about women's sexual agency and self-determination that emerge in feminist debates about sexual practices, pornography, prostitution, and participation in BDSM (to give a few examples). The commentators on feminism are trapped in a paradox: they express feeling empowered and equal (dismissing the claims of feminists as irrational and old-fashioned), and yet in the action of the videos the characters surrender their bodies to others to be used as objects of non-reciprocal pleasure. As Anna Watkins Fisher argues, the video's subjects reveal that their hackneyed perception of feminism as threat—rather than systemic oppression—is a political position, contradicting their refusal of politics.[31]

In "To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll" (2007) Hawk Swanson evacuates this position and instead situates the sex doll named Amber Doll in the position of the commentators on feminism who appear in "The Feminism? Project" (2006). Amber Doll is a RealDoll, a life-size sex doll constructed from a manufacturer's readymade body (Body #8) and a custom-sculpted face in the likeness of Hawk Swanson's digital image. Unlike the characters in "The Feminism? Project" (2006), Amber Doll cannot tell the viewer anything because it is a literal object and thus mute. It bears an uncanny resemblance to Hawk Swanson, and yet their bodies are quite different. Amber Doll is only 5'7" (the tallest model available), where Hawk Swanson appears to be at least 5'10". Amber Doll's body approximates a plastic aesthetic, with high large breasts and an impossibly thin waist; while Hawk Swanson is also thin, her breasts and waist are more proportionate to her frame than the doll's.

Hawk Swanson and Amber Doll wear tattoos on the inside of their left wrists, binding them together visually through language. In an ornamental calligraphy script, their tattoos read "Bully" and "Prey," respectively. These tattoos define their relationship to each other, and the positions of bully and prey are enshrined in their wedding ceremony. In "The Making-Of Amber Doll" video (2007), Hawk Swanson and Amber Doll get married in a Las Vegas wedding chapel and the officiant refers to the pair by the proper names "Bully" and "Prey." During the ceremony only Bully/Hawk Swanson speaks, and Prey/Amber Doll is mute. As observers, we fill in the silence offered to Prey to repeat the wedding vows (which is not nearly long enough for spoken words) or perhaps we are indifferent to the absence of participation by Prey in the ceremony.

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[31] Anna Watkins Fisher, "Like a Girl's Name: The Adolescent Drag of Amber Hawk Swanson, Kate Gilmore, and Ann Liv Young," in *TDR: The Drama Review* 56, 1 (2010): 57.

Figure 5 (top): *Las Vegas: Mirror* (2007); Figure 6 (bottom): *Las Vegas: Rings* (2007)
Photos courtesy Amber Hawk Swanson, used with permission

After the ceremony, the video cuts abruptly to Bully carrying Prey across the threshold of a standard American hotel room, and as the scene shifts, the wedding march music cuts out suddenly. We hear the swish of the wedding dresses as Bully carefully navigates the door's threshold, trying not to catch the body or dress of Prey in the door's hardware. In the final second of the video, the shot shifts to Prey who is lying on its back on the hotel bed. Its wedding dress is pulled up to its waist, and its legs are spread open and feet are at its head level, while its arms are both stretched upwards. The shot moves from the doll's vulva, which is smooth with trimmed pink labia and a small well-groomed patch of pubic hair, to the doll's face and breasts. Prey is completely immobile and vulnerable to attack, unable to defend against Bully's advances. We are left to imagine how Bully and Prey consummate their marriage, although the heterosexist and misogynist narrative leaves very little for us to imagine. Bully will penetrate the silicone vagina, and as the abruptness of the scene suggests, it is Bully who will be active in the scene while Prey will be entirely passive.

Figure 7: Amber Hawk Swanson, *Kitchen Fall* (2007)
Photo courtesy Amber Hawk Swanson, used with permission

The object (Prey) is pathetic, and the viewer oscillates between the position of feeling sympathetic to the doll's defenselessness and exposure and the voyeuristic feeling of watching mainstream heterosexual pornography. The latter feeling is overwhelming, because the video is filmed from the perspective of Bully. This is different from the viewing positions available to us in viewing photographs of

Bellmer's doll, and I suggest that this is because of a shifting relation to embodiment that is induced by silicone embodiments. Amber Doll's silicone embodiment is an idealized image, not the body-in-pieces of Bellmer's doll; the viewer is disinclined to identify with the doll, and through the doubling effect of Bully and Prey the viewer can take up a sadistic position of attacking the ideal image.

Unlike the plaster body of Bellmer's doll, Amber Doll possesses a silicone body. Paradoxically and quite uncannily, Amber Doll's body is incredibly lifelike and yet it is significantly harder to identify with this body or feel sympathy towards it. This seems illogical, as one might reasonably presume that a body that resembles our body more accurately would be even more open to identification than a plaster body. Amber Doll exists in a cultural milieu where there are countless images of airbrushed women's bodies positioned in ways that make them most vulnerable to attack, and many of these bodies are now enhanced by silicone (or its digital counterpart, Photoshop). As a result, I propose that silicone is precisely the material that facilitates aggression towards the body of Amber Doll. The images of idealized passive women's bodies in mainstream heterosexual pornography are approximated by Amber Doll far better than any living woman ever could. This is because the kinds of bodies that are valued in the contemporary West are phallicized bodies. The way that men's and women's bodies are rendered phallic in valorized images is defined by the gender binary: men's bodies convey hardness through skin stretched over hard muscle and women's bodies convey hardness through low body fat and slenderness.[32] This hardness is a performance that is valued and marketable, as it exists as synecdoche for discipline, self-maintenance, and inherent goodness. Silicone is a material that enables the human body to approximate this phallic feminine ideal, previously unavailable except through photographic manipulation.

Thus, while the silicone body of Amber Doll might be a fetish object, or intended as such, to frame this body as a cultural ideal is to argue that it can shed light on the neurotic anxieties about the body in consumer culture. Amber Doll is a disidentificatory object not because it is a fetish object, but because it highlights how mainstream Eurowestern fashion, cosmetic surgery, and pornographic cultures are premised on a feminine ideal that is all surface, invulnerable, yet available for the use of its masculine ideal counterpart. The nonreciprocal relationship between Bully and Prey is both a replication of mainstream heterosexist narratives, but also a reversal of the narrative given about the effects of mainstream media on women's body image. Instead of adopting an attitude of deference to Amber Doll, Amber Hawk Swanson violates and possesses the ideal image for her own purposes, rather than using it as a 'cover-up' or decoy in the way it might be used as a fetish object. The use of the silicone sex doll in this

[32] Jones, "Makeover Culture's Dark Side."

way reveals the limits of the fantasy of impermeability promised by silicone, because the cost of this lack of vulnerability is a deadness of being.

5: Silicone Breast Implants and Phallic Femininity

Meredith Jones' excellent analysis of how breast implants feminize the thin female body is useful to theorize the possibilities of silicone for human embodiment. She notes that while the body usually responds to diet and exercise over time, the breasts are oblivious to this work and cannot be "improved" by these disciplines.[33] Indeed, if exercise and diet have any effect at all on the breasts, it is to eliminate the fat that fills out the breasts. This is a contradictory process: while the body is disciplined into approximating contemporary ideals of femininity that promote thinness and tautness (an achievement), this same discipline expunges the breasts that are a privileged marker of femininity (a failure or detriment). As Jones notes, this is where the cosmetic surgery industry steps in and offers "solutions" to at least two problems created by the discipline of exercise and diet. First, silicone implants offer a solution because they feminize the (disciplined) phallic feminine body through surgery. Cosmetic surgery offers silicone breasts, which are "superior" to any flesh and fat breast because the bearer can continue to diet and exercise to the idealized point of very low body fat, are firm with nipples that project upwards and outwards, and promise to never sag or deteriorate in the way flesh does (this is, of course, a promise and not a reality). Secondly, the silicone breast feminizes the slender ideal body and reassures heterosexual men that the phallic bodies they are attracted to are in fact feminine.

The current ideal cultural performances of phallic femininity are incongruous and contradictory, as Jones highlights: large breasts are most often not firm, but soft, and they sag due to gravity; thin women do not usually possess large breasts; breasts are comprised largely of fat, and dieting eliminates this tissue; and finally, contemporary ideals put together hardness (the diet and gym body) and softness (the large breasts). However, visually approximating large breasts through augmentation is good, but does not go far enough. The breast implant must also feel 'lifelike' and 'realistic.' This condition of 'feeling' is complicated. From the position of the patient, a breast augmentation frequently results in a loss of feeling (at least temporarily) because of nerve damage. Breast implants can also be difficult to assimilate into one's body schema and remain a strange object inside of the body due to painful common side effects like encapsulation (the formation of thick scar tissue around the implant as a response to a foreign object in the body) and implant migration (the shifting of an implant once inside the body, which is impossible to predict or control). So for the patient, while the

[33] Ibid., 91.

implant itself might be malleable and soft like a flesh breast, the response of the body to the implant can feel either deadening (nerve damage) or like a painful rejection (encapsulation or migration). When the implant is exterior to the body it feels very lifelike, but when it is placed in the interior of the body it acquires a deadened or painful form for the patient, feeling not at all lifelike. Thus, what becomes significant for the recipient of a breast augmentation is the performance of the implant, rather than the feeling.

In fact, the 'lifelike' feeling is felt by an other, one who does not have the implant inside of their own body and instead touches and squeezes the silicone breast implant. Explaining to a surgeon that one wants silicone breast implants in order to please a sexual partner is a proscribed reason to undergo breast augmentation. Instead, patients and surgeons are engaged in a script where the patient must profess that the desired surgery is only self-motivated; so it is acceptable to internalize ideals neurotically, yet not acceptable to acknowledge how these are created socially.[34] However, when we examine the layers of 'feeling lifelike' as a key benefit of silicone, we can see that the sexual pleasure of an other might indeed be a significant component in this decision. Further, within a heterosexist cultural economy that values phallic women's bodies, the silicone implant must feel lifelike in order to confirm her sexual difference as real for the man who desires her. The implant is expected to answer to the question of sexual difference and the question of existence, as the patient approximates an idealized femininity that defends against the inevitable decay of the body through non-degradable silicone. The cosmetic surgery industry promises surgical bodies that are whole, alleviating the patient's neurotic suffering through the surgical fix. The dominant trope of cosmetic surgery is that a body part troubles the patient and causes them psychical suffering which prevents them from fully enjoying their life. Cosmetic surgery offers a solution to the patient's suffering, an opportunity to surgically fix the body part so that it is no longer perceived as abhorrent. The body pre-surgery is lacking and fragmented, and the neurotic demands that the surgeon repair their body and make it whole and not lacking. This process is imperfect, because cosmetic surgery does not alter the relation of the patient to the neurosis. Instead cosmetic surgery offers a temporary solution to the lack, which will resurface again in the body through another symptom.

6: Some Conclusions on Silicone Embodiments

Silicone appears to offer almost infinite possibilities for embodiment, sustained by the neurotic fantasy of an intact and sealed body. Alessandra Lemma's articulation of the 'self made phantasy' in her book *Under the Skin: A Psychoanalytic*

[34] Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst, "Negotiating Femininity With and Through Mother-Daughter and Patient-Surgeon Relationships," *Women's Studies International Forum* 35, 6 (2012): 447-457.

Study of Body Modification can build on the fantasies sustained by silicone embodiments. The self-made phantasy is that of a body which has overcome its dependence upon the (m)other and is not subject to the porousness of the mother-child relationship.[35] In her analysis of breast implants, Lemma argues [585] (an analysis developed through her private practice as well as through analyses of breast implant narratives) that breast implants erase the trace of the maternal object through appropriating the envied maternal breast.[36] However, the silicone performance and fantasy of embodiment that are engendered by sex dolls and breast implants are caught in either a neurotic circuit of endless transformation in order to become an idealized, envied other, or the failed demands of an other to fill one's lack.

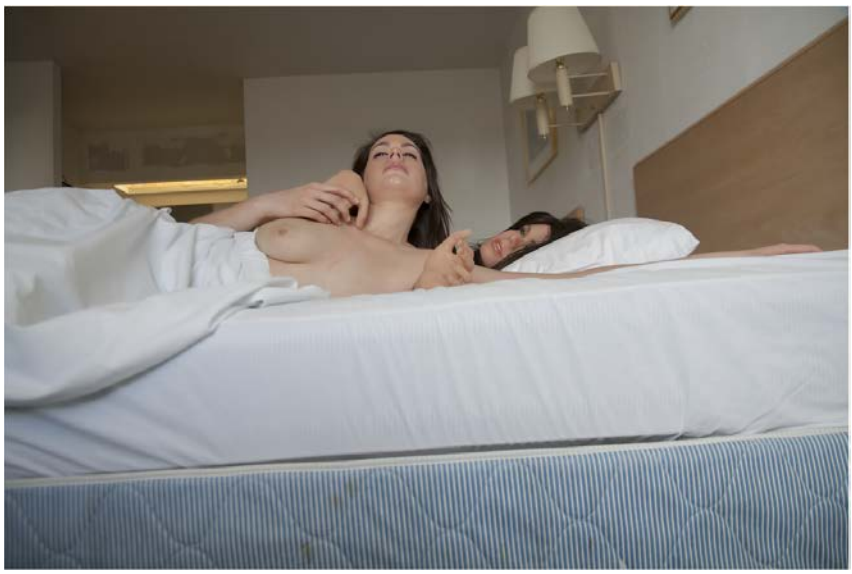

Figure 8: Amber Hawk Swanson, *Albuquerque Hotel* (2007)
Photo courtesy Amber Hawk Swanson, used with permission

The silicone sex doll is an idealized feminine body, like a three dimensional, digitally altered photograph. Because Amber Doll so perfectly accomplishes a femininity that is at once phallic and feminine, it is also the idealized whole image of Hawk Swanson's Bully body viewed in the mirror. It is this wholeness and perfection that makes it Prey to Hawk Swanson's Bully; Prey is capable of a perfect performance of idealized white, middle-class, heterosexual femininity.

[35] Alessandra Lemma, *Under the Skin: A Psychoanalytic Study of Body Modification* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 112-113.
[36] Ibid., 114.

Bully acts out aggression toward Prey as the intact mirror image that engenders lack, and is able to have, hold, and violate that mirror image in response. Bully misuses the fetish object through her recognition of the neurotic ideal embodied by Prey. However, while Prey's body feels lifelike, Prey does not feel. No matter how much aggression Bully doles out to Prey, Prey will never be lacking and Bully will never be whole. Bully uses Prey neurotically, because her acts of aggression and power over Prey can be read as a demand for her lack to be filled by Prey's silicone body (if Bully were to use Prey perversely, Prey would cover over that lack as fetish object, replacing the maternal phallus). If, as Lemma argues, our identities are structured against a milieu of loss, and when the loss cannot be tolerated envy comes to govern the psychic world,[37] then we can interpret Hawk Swanson's work as critiquing a cultural context in which individuals are expected to render themselves whole and independent through endless consumer choice. Hawk Swanson's performances with Amber Doll as an ideal and a consumer object expose the impossibility—and *undesirability*—of attaining wholeness and independence.

Likewise, the silicone breast implant is a better breast than the flesh breast and an object of scopophilic pleasure. The body's responses to the implant (rejection, encapsulation, loss of feeling) are neurotic somatic signals of the implant's failure to fill in the lack supposed to reside within the small breast. The body with breasts that have been augmented through silicone is not whole, and like Bully's relation to Prey, its failures throw the patient into a confrontation with neurotic lack. Hawk Swanson's work with Amber Doll shows us the impossibilities and perils of silicone embodiment, a fantasy of intactness that is exploited by the cosmetic surgery industry in a time of late capitalism. These perils are serious, and highly gendered: feminine bodies become and contain literal objects that do not feel pleasure or pain, can be used for the (non-reciprocal) pleasure of others, and are always available to satisfy scopophilic desire. The silicone body is the corpse body, an object that is deathlike, though 'lifelike' enough to prompt violent sexualized aggression while pleasure is subordinated to surface wholeness. Reading the proliferation of breast augmentation alongside Amber Hawk Swanson's work develops a critique of silicone embodiment that highlights the impossibility of approximating an ideal body, and the violence that is done individually and culturally through the fantasy that one must *become* the ideal, instead of *be like* it.

Note on images: All eight of the images in this essay are of archival pigment prints measuring 21 inches x 14 inches (on 24 inch x 37 inch paper). Each print

[37] Ibid., 114-115.

was issued in an edition of five (5) and two (2) artist's proofs in 2007. The photographs of the images are © 2015 Amber Hawk Swanson and used with her permission.

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VISCOUS PLEASURES AND UNRULY FEMINISMS

Juana María Rodríguez

In their 2013 video, the performance artists Amber Hawk Swanson and Xandra Ibarra (a.k.a. La Chica Boom) capture feminism's ambivalent and decidedly sticky relationship to racialized sexual politics. Their piece, *Untitled Fucking*, consists of the always titillating Xandra, dressed in *cucaracha* pasties, stilettos, and not much else, fucking a bent-over, equally feminine and sultry, Amber, first with a bottle of *Tapatío*, and then with her hand. Even as their long dark hair and feminine appearance serve to unite them visually, the racial difference between them is made clearly evident by the valley-girl cadence of Amber's dialogue, and the "Mexi-sexy" iconography of a hot sauce bottle on a strap-on. Throughout this fifteen-minute video collaboration with Ibarra, Amber repeats, over and over again, the same singular phrase: "Feminism? That's deep. I think I need a minute to think about that, so . . . I don't know." A few times when the litany gets interrupted by moans of ecstasy and the delectable Amber forgets to repeat her lines, Xandra yanks her hair to bring her face—and her repeated refrain—back into focus. Their exchange functions as a peculiar kind of sexualized race play, where the Chicana femme top seems to run the show, even as her polite Midwestern bottom asks for "another finger please."

This video is part of a series by Hawk Swanson, "The Feminism? Project," in which she talks about feminism while engaged in different kinds of sexual activities within variously configured sexual pairings.[2] As a kind of political intervention, Hawk Swanson's project works to register the ongoing difficulty of feminist discourse to reconcile the viscous pleasures implicated in political (and sexual) positions organized around lived sexual practices. Yet so often sex serves as the dirty surface to which all manner of projected images, narratives, stereotypes, and fantasies stubbornly adhere. Politics, and feminism in particular, becomes precisely what we *don't* want to talk about when we are in the throes of sex. However, the political stakes of Swanson's project become transformed and twisted even tighter through their encounter with the erotics of race that are integral to the performance practices of La Chica Boom. On her website Ibarra describes her performance art as "'spictacles,' spectacles of degeneracy and power that are both against and engaged in the colonial gaze.[3] In this character, Ibarra creates a

Figure 3. *Untitled Fucking*. Still 1. Photo courtesy of Xandra Ibarra and Amber Hawk Swanson

performance persona, draped in the caricature of racialized tropes, who seems to delight in fully inhabiting the image of surplus Latina sexuality in order to "call attention to the fixed images/narratives that have reduced Mexicanidad to a list of hollow symbols."[4]

This salacious combination of racialized iconography, feminine dominance and submission, and political discourse gets even stickier in the final moments of the video when Xandra ejaculates her red-hot Latina spiciness all over Amber who is rendered speechless as she tumbles into orgasm. It seems that being forced to talk about feminism, as she is getting pounded from behind with a bottle of Mexican hot sauce, proves too challenging.

In this piece, the eroticization of race, rather than functioning as what a liberal-minded queerness is intended to erase, becomes an opportunity to visually capture what white feminism becomes unable to speak. Echoing contemporary legal discourse, this piece rejects the liberal demands of color blindness in our most intimate encounters and insists on a more color-conscious consideration of sexual relations. Importantly, the interpretive possibilities of this racially embodied erotic performance are not predetermined. A Latina power-top with cockroach-covered nipples? Feminism taking it from behind, and loving it? Cross-racial feminine erotics as condiments for our consumption? Or a riotous convergence of the delicious pleasures and fiery politics that feminism still has trouble ingesting? The

Figure 4. *Untitled Fucking*. Still 2. Photo courtesy of Amber Hawk Swanson and Xandra Ibarra

piece, rather than ignore or minimize the seductive allure of race and racial difference, invites spectators to linger in the erotic and interpretive possibilities that sexualized presentations of race afford.

Feminism, of course, is still about water, war, work, and a host of other material issues. But this piece reminds us that feminism also needs to be about imagining a sexual politics that does not shy away from the stinging realities of racial difference, even as it refuses to interpret every cross-racial hookup through the singularly exhausted script of exploitative racial fetish. It is precisely because the sexual realities of those of us marked as shamelessly excessive or wholly deficit are so often steeped in abjection and violence that insisting on depictions of sex that represent the thick, gooey substances of our lives—without sacrificing possibilities for pleasure—becomes so urgent. When radical politics refuses to take up issues of sexual expression, including its censorship and regulation in the institutional public spaces where sex also lives, we perpetuate a discourse that locates sex within the confines of a private domestic sphere, the differential consequences of which are devastating for marginalized subjects who are rarely afforded the protections of an intimate life free from public scrutiny and judgment. Rather than retreat into silence about the sexual pleasures and practices that haunt variously configured politics of respectability, let's instead stare down the discursive demons that have kept discussions of sex outside radical formulations of public discourse. Let's think about how questions of sex and sexual expression, and their racial implications, might inform political discussions on public education, immigration reform, the prison-industrial complex, technology, urban planning, militarization, art, and yes, pleasure.

The sexual gestures looming behind *Untitled Fucking* might be imagined as alternately too perverse or too trivial to be worthy of political consideration. But the daily work of politics, including cross-racial feminist collaboration, is rarely neat and tidy, and it need not be bland. Politics is messy stuff, intended to cling to our bodies, rub off on those around us, scrape against the grain of the status quo. Feminism should be mouth-burning stuff, full of smoldering flavors that are not easily forgotten. To not speak about the racial contours of sexual politics, to imbibe our perverse pleasures and secret fantasies on the down-low, is to allow a politics of respectability to define what might constitute a feminist agenda. If those of us invested in imagining our own racialized sexual futures refuse to make space for conversations about the sexual and political sparks that are ignited when race, gender, bodies, and power rub together, we vacate the space of civic discourse on sex to others who will not hesitate to assign meaning to our psychic and corporeal practices.

QUEER EXERCISES

Amber Hawk Swanson's Performances of Self-Realization

David J. Getsy

Exercise requires a dual commitment to self-improvement and self-punishment. For its capacities to be transformed, the body is pushed to its limits and overworked. It becomes an object defined through its potentials and its deficiencies, with any positive, self-affirming account of exercise realized only through self-imposed objectification and penance.

When one's body is simultaneously seen as worthy of cultivation yet disdained for its inadequacies, one becomes both victim and victimizer, hero and villain. Such polarities are generally kept safely apart, but it has been the aim of the performance and social media artist Amber Hawk Swanson to collapse them dramatically. Indeed, a recurring theme of her practice has been to investigate the unstable boundaries between the roles of victimizer and victim, inhabiting their uneasy interdependencies. She has done this, literally, by making her body into her own object.

Hawk Swanson's recent works allegorize both the positive and the negative sides of exercise. She has undertaken a series of performances for video and social media that use her own family traditions of practical fitness and its popular commercial legacy in the CrossFit group exercise program. In these works, Hawk Swanson punishes herself through impossible tasks and serial workouts while playing out the potentials and dangers of self-realization. The empowering masochism of her exercise performances, as I discuss, derives directly from her earlier work in which she engaged in a romantic and artistic relationship with a life-size sex doll made in her own image. In her collaboration with this sculptural self-portrait, Hawk Swanson concurrently made herself the object of care and of harm. In what follows, I examine the ways in which an analogous dynamic of self-objectification and self-realization informs her subsequent exercise performances and their concerns.

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Any one of Hawk Swanson's works is difficult to extricate from her ongoing practice in which each new work is spawned by public reactions to the last. From the beginning of her career, she has engaged with social media, broadcasting her performances through YouTube, Vimeo, and other video platforms in order to generate comments and reactions that, in turn, become the foundations for new projects. In the present article, I limit my account of Hawk Swanson's prefitness works to a short discussion of one (albeit major) project, for it was the reactions to it that spurred Hawk Swanson to undertake exercise as performance.

In 2006 Hawk Swanson commissioned a life-size RealDoll in her own image. RealDolls are hyperrealistic, poseable, life-size sculptures made of silicone flesh over a PVC skeleton. They were initially designed as sexual surrogates, and they contain penetrable ribbed orifices for this purpose. Expensive and intricately created, RealDolls frequently become for their owners far more than sex objects. They serve as companions in whom their owners become emotionally invested. Such an attachment has proved to be a recurring response by doll owners, and an extensive but barely public community has emerged. (This community was publicized on a larger scale in response to the release of the 2007 Oscar-nominated movie *Lars and the Real Girl*, which explored the social complexities incited by the protagonist's love for a RealDoll.)

In 2005 Hawk Swanson had found herself drawn to the online community of "doll husbands" during the years in which she was struggling to establish her own relationship to same-sex love and desire. Hawk Swanson is articulate about her personal and political reasons for pursuing projects, explaining that she often uses moments of unexpected identification to challenge herself.[1] Such was the realization of the affinities with the doll husbands. After a series of failed attempts at finding female companionship herself, she saw in the doll husband community avenues of unlikely identification. While her initial impulse was to be critical of the entire production and use of RealDolls, she increasingly found sympathy in these men's stories of their difficulties with interpersonal relationships with women, feelings of inadequacy, and a longing for companionship. She came to admire the satisfaction they found for themselves in caring for and living with their RealDolls and became committed to getting one for herself. In Hawk Swanson's autobiographical narrative of her practice, the decision to undertake the *Amber Doll Project* was underwritten by this desire to achieve an ideal of same-sex love that eluded her, and this queer context informs the project's objectives. However, Hawk Swanson then raised the stakes and complicated the issues by envisioning a RealDoll made in her own image.[2]

Figure 1. Amber Hawk Swanson, *To Hold, In Bed (from the Amber Doll Project)*, 2007, Archival Pigment Print, 21 inches × 14 inches (on 24 inch × 17 inch Paper), Edition of Five (5) and Two (2) Artist's Proof. Copyright Amber Hawk Swanson, 2013

After a complex series of negotiations, Hawk Swanson convinced Abyss Creations, the only American company that made RealDolls, to collaborate with her. She funded the project herself, and the company agreed to make a custom doll with her features. The project formally began with the digital scanning of Hawk Swanson's face on August 14, 2006 (her birthday, so she and Amber Doll could share the same date). Such portraiture was extremely rare for Abyss Creations. In general, most doll purchasers could only make customizations to one of the company's standard templates. The technical and production demands of creating RealDolls necessitated such standardization, as it would have been prohibitively expensive for the company to develop, each time, an entirely new model body and face. Furthermore, most purchasers of RealDolls desired the stereotypically perfect, athleticized bodies on which the models were based, so there were relatively minor derivations from normative bodily ideals across the company's eight templates. The company agreed to replicate Hawk Swanson only from the neck up and required her to rely on one of the model bodies used for other RealDolls. The digital scan of Hawk Swanson's face was three-dimensionally printed as a base form. This was then used to custom-sculpt her precise features in silicone. While Amber Doll was made in Hawk Swanson's image, the resemblance

Figure 2. Amber Hawk Swanson, *To Hold, Kitchen (from the Amber Doll Project)*, 2007, Archival Pigment Print, 21 inches × 14 inches (on 24 inch × 17 inch Paper), Edition of Five (5) and Two (2) Artist's Proof. Copyright Amber Hawk Swanson, 2013

extended only to her face. From the neck down, Amber Doll remained a standard template—body number 8, to be precise.

The *Amber Doll Project* lasted two years and involved multiple series of performance events documented in video and photography, the full range of which are beyond the scope of the present discussion.[3] *The Making of Amber Doll* (2007) tells the story of Amber Doll's creation in January 2007 through video and photographs. *Las Vegas Wedding Ceremony* (2007) immediately followed and involved Hawk Swanson's marriage to Amber Doll in Las Vegas (during the 2007 Miss America contest). The ensuing performance, photography, and video series *To Have, to Hold, and to Violate: Amber and Doll* (2008) documented the public and participatory performances by Hawk Swanson and Amber Doll. This extended collaboration between the two also involved the staging of a series of scenes from domestic life and from popular cinema. Hawk Swanson considered Amber Doll her partner in these endeavors, and she developed honest feelings of love and affection during their year together. As with the doll husbands about whom she had been conducting research, the life-size surrogate became woven into her life as a daily companion.[4]

Hawk Swanson's identifications and feelings toward Amber Doll were made more complex than those of other doll owners for the obvious reason that

Amber Doll was made in Hawk Swanson's own image. In this, the creation of the *Amber Doll Project* was an extreme act of self-objectification on Hawk Swanson's part — an attempt to cast herself as her own object of love and aggression. While this project was sometimes read as narcissism by viewers, it exceeded and resisted that category and the ways it has been used to pathologize homosexuality.[5] More pointedly, Hawk Swanson's identicalness with Amber Doll both triggered and disrupted clichéd (heterosexual) fantasies of lesbian desire and of twin sexuality, both of which repeatedly surface as erotic ideals in popular culture as well as mainstream pornography. Hawk Swanson's act of self-portraiture was a bold and unmistakable assertion of artistic intentionality that critically framed the *Amber Doll Project*'s allusions to pornographic fantasies of identical sex. That is, Hawk Swanson's conception and realization of the *Amber Doll Project* put her at its center as its authoring subject just as it literalized her own transformation into an object.

In (literally) making herself as her own object, Hawk Swanson accessed and critiqued not just mainstream pornographic fantasies but also deep-seated cultural proscriptions regulating how we regard ourselves. Hawk Swanson's mash-up of self-love and same-sex love (played out in spectacular fashion) allegorized how homoerotic potential is, more fundamentally, an ineluctable outcome of the ways in which we objectify ourselves to become another's object of desire.[6] That is, when one regards or cultivates oneself as a sexual object (for another, for oneself), one necessarily engages in an extended process of self-assessment. By definition, that self-regard encodes a degree of (however disavowed) homoeroticism.[7] Self-assessment is based on sameness, identicalness, and congruity. One must look at one's own (self-same) gendered embodiment as a potential object of desire to consider how one would be attractive or appealing to another (regardless of that other's gender). Thus the objectification required by self-cultivation inexorably establishes recursive pathways of same-gender desire as one attempts to estimate oneself as desirable. Hawk Swanson exaggerated this inescapable elision between self-regard and its homoerotic valence, embodying it for all to see.

Beyond the experience of her life with Amber Doll as a kind of durational artwork with these aims, Hawk Swanson also amplified larger questions around the power dynamics of objectification and identification through her performances that exposed the pair's artistic and romantic relationship to audiences in both nonart and art contexts. As mentioned above, the *Amber Doll Project* has many subsets of work, each of which is documented separately. One such series focuses on the pair's domestic life with photographs of their mundane and ordinary-looking existence in a small apartment, while others move into public spaces. Their collabora-

Figure 3. Amber Hawk Swanson, *Shower Curtain Kiss (from the Amber Doll Project)*, 2007, Archival Pigment Print, 21 inches × 14 inches (on 24 inch × 17 inch Paper), Edition of Five (5) and Two (2) Artist's Proof. Copyright Amber Hawk Swanson, 2013

tion extended to participatory and public performances the two undertook in which Hawk Swanson would abandon Amber Doll in social settings: a football tailgate party, a roller rink, the "Girls Gone Wild" booth at a pornography convention, and so on. This practice, characterized as collaboration by Hawk Swanson, amplified the discrepant power dynamics central to her self-objectification in the form of Amber Doll. She submitted her self-image and her collaborator to uncontrolled audiences in order to document the actions taken by passersby on Amber Doll's passive and unmoving body. Fraught with the emotional complexities of seeing her own image being violated and assuming responsibility for relinquishing her protection of Amber Doll in the name of art, Hawk Swanson repeatedly dramatized the unstable boundaries of victimizer and victim that were the work's main theme.

With their exaggerations and ambivalent ethics, her abandonment performances presented viewers with an anxious set of choices about how they would interact (or not) with this immotile body double.[8] Not just anonymous strangers, but also colleagues and friends often reacted to this situation of power by taking physical liberties with Amber Doll as Hawk Swanson was compelled to watch. A telling instance was one of the first—the wedding reception to which Hawk Swanson invited friends to provide a background crowd for staged photos of her and Amber Doll. She recalled,

> It was her first public event, and that's when I felt like I had accomplished embodying victim and victimizer more successfully because I had put her in this situation and failed to protect her. . . . The real take-away from that night was the video of people exploring her so aggressively, compared to what I thought would happen. Folks were pulling her tongue out, pulling her skirt up. People who knew me in a professional capacity were really going wild on her. . . . I was so surprised.[9]

Amber Doll seemed to provide viewers with an unwitting consent because of her passivity, and Hawk Swanson was not prepared at first for the ease with which her friends and acquaintances could objectify her. By the end of the *Amber Doll Project* and its expansion of this tactic of abandonment, such dynamics were no longer a surprise.

Hawk Swanson's work does not give the viewer assurances of a comfortable critical distance. Her practice calls into question such distance as both impossible and smug, and she deliberately collapses distinctions between complicity and critique. She recognizes that any denunciation is a speech act that makes the object of that denunciation into a victim (even if it is denouncing that object's own victimization of another). One may decry Hawk Swanson for her treatment of Amber Doll, but this has the countereffect of positing Amber Doll as a sympathetic subject to be defended. That is, Amber Doll's ersatz personhood becomes a positive performative effect of her exploitation just as any critique of Hawk Swanson makes the artist, as well, into a victim whose agency over her own self-image has been impeached. The *Amber Doll Project* keeps ethics partial and in flux as we find ourselves projecting personhood or declaring inhumanity on both collaborators. To enact such two-way interdependencies and contradictory effects is precisely the point of Hawk Swanson's artistic project.

Hers is an uncomfortable proposal, since it leaves no stable moral ground from which to judge. Instead, the positions of judge and offender, champion and villain spiral into each other. Hawk Swanson's deliberately messy exaggerations and conflations of sensitive and contentious issues expose the ways in which power and victimization are not cleanly demarcated. Her work often incites anger because of this Foucauldian message in which all positions are implicated and guilty and in which all viewers are suspended between being defenders and exploiters.

The reactions to her works are pronounced and polarized, with viewers rushing to claim Hawk Swanson as many, often contradictory, things—as self-

serving, as self-sacrificing, as artist, as pornographer, as lowbrow panderer, or as sophisticated cultural critic. This range is played out in the online comments that Hawk Swanson's work generates. During and after the project, Hawk Swanson posted videos and stills to social media and video distribution websites in order to attract and to cull such responses. Her YouTube page received millions of unique views (at the time of writing the number topped 17 million). Hawk Swanson recorded the many comments (both admiring and disdaining) from her YouTube page as well as those made on other online presences for the project (such as those made in response to a high-profile online version of an article in the weekly newspaper the *Chicago Reader*).[10] While there are many comments defending the work as art, the balance was weighted to negative comments that castigated Hawk Swanson for the project. (Such a balance might be expected in the murky world of anonymous posts and invectives.) A few examples from Hawk Swanson's archive of the comments (which runs over forty pages and twenty thousand words) include the following:

> Rob at 12:13 PM on 8/4/2007
> *Interesting project. Who can say its not art, or just some fantasy she's playing out? Hat off to her, i'd bone them both if she wants to fly me out there :-)*
>
> Kitwilly at 2:30 PM on 8/4/2007
> *I would so hit it. I mean them. Both of them. At the same time. You know what I mean, dammit.*
>
> bing at 4:12 PM on 8/4/2007
> *matilda: it sucks because it's didactic, heavy-handed, gimmicky, preachy, derivative, sensationalistic, and utterly predictable. her claims to be making some sort of important feminist statement are belied by the fact that her whole stock-in-trade is prurience and sexual commodification.*
>
> Matilda at 4:28 PM on 8/4/2007
> *bing: She's taking control of her own sexuality, and that is what feminism is all about. Just because you may not like the work, or agree with it, doesn't mean she's not doing a good job.*
>
> aaahhhhh at 7:45 PM on 8/4/2007
> *Fascinating. Her "identical" doll is so much better looking than her. And I imagine more interesting as well.*

Rich at 9:07 PM on 8/4/2007
Reverse the roles. Amber is Adam, a macho gay guy. People would say it's disgusting narcissistic porn. There is something sublimely appealing about girl-on-girl even if it is girl-on-her sicko submissive alter-ego sex doll.

arnold r. lane at 12:45 AM on 8/5/2007
as a performance artist..i must say she displays a certain amount self love and conceit . . . insest has nothing on this..doing "yourself"? this bird is cooo-cooo crazy and willing to do anything for . . . ehem.. exposure. when she's finally famous..she can simply go into rehab to get publicity.

cneg at 12:51 AM on 8/5/2007
if a male did this, it would not only be stupid, it'd be gay and that person would be out $12k. Yay double standard. That said, I'd love to see her f herself.*

JujuBee at 2:19 AM on 8/5/2007
She's not fat people. She's morbidly obese AND ugly. Ugly is just like wearing black clothes in that it's slimming.

spoolington at 7:38 PM on 8/5/2007
the doll is no where near identical- it is so much more attractive. this girl is delusional.

Anonymous at 1:44 PM on 8/7/2007
lol women artists

ken nava at 10:59 AM on 10/5/2007
I would question the motives of ANY artist who uses sex in art. Sex is an easy way to get attention. It does not mean the artist is not good, just that they need to prove more. Robert Mapplethorpe was brilliant; this women is not.

There are too many problematic attitudes to critique in even this tiny sliver of the comments. It is clear, however, that issues of gender and sexuality took center stage in Hawk Swanson's detractors' attempts to attack her and the project. In many ways, the generation of such ruthless and negative comments was the desired reaction. Hawk Swanson pushed to the limits cultural expectations as a way to generate statements by viewers that were frank and clear in their prejudices.

Not only did commentators decry such expected topics as the project's les-

bianism, its autoeroticism, and its feminism, many focused on Hawk Swanson's divergence from the ideal female body. (Hawk Swanson remarked that there were "hundreds and hundreds of comments about my body weight" in response to the *Chicago Reader* article.)[11] Others rushed in to defend Hawk Swanson as an artist, as a person, and as a desirable sex object. Debates about art, ethics, and body image erupted in the pages and pages of comments sparked by the story. In my view, it is the generation of the comments that is the main payoff of Hawk Swanson's work, for they demonstrate how crushingly swift and crude the attempts to enforce normativity really are. In short, she put herself forward in her work as both agent and object in order to expose herself both to these verbal insults and to the attempts at defense or admiration. Just as she had created Amber Doll as a way to be both victimizing owner and victimized image, Hawk Swanson sacrificed herself to these online comments in order to let the war rage over her ethically confrontational practice.

Hawk Swanson's work would have a very different meaning if it did not operate within the realm of social media, and she uses that platform as a central component of her practice. That is, the work is really about participation and response, and its disruptions perform best when they are played out in public arenas. Many artists deploy social media as a way to distribute their work, but Hawk Swanson develops her projects with the generation of social media response in mind. She uses the commentary as text for later performances, seeing it as raw material to be worked. As I discuss presently, such was the case with her CrossFit performances in which she disrupted the efficiency of her workouts by reading those online comments to the *Amber Doll Project*.

A recurring insult laced throughout the online comments to the Amber Doll videos was that Hawk Swanson's body failed in comparison with Amber Doll's. One commentator snidely wrote, "Guess they don't have plus sizes in real dolls." Another pushed it far beyond this, saying, "She's just another chick on the street who needs to hit the gym. The doll is a hottie and her wannabe." Even though the actual bodily discrepancies were relatively minor, many commentators chose to attack Hawk Swanson by denying her sexual availability and attractiveness. Of course, such comments were nothing other than attempts to denigrate Hawk Swanson's art by casting her as desperate and unlovable. This, they implied, explained her choice to engage with the doll (which they saw as a retreat from the "real" world) and, by extension, her same-sex desire.

Even as her attachment to Amber Doll as collaborator and companion grew daily in response to their performance work and cohabitation, the ever-increasing online comments highlighted the pair's differences. (Another example: "Wow. It

would be like dating twins. One is shy and quiet, but has an awesome body. The other is a little beefier, and is the funny one.") As time went on, there emerged wider discrepancies between Hawk Swanson's body and Amber Doll's unchanging and idealized one. They grew apart despite their identical faces and tightening emotional entanglements. The comments mounted, and Hawk Swanson admits developing a degree of resentment toward her companion's unchanging and idealized body.[12] In many ways, this brought the project full circle, for now she felt herself victimized by Amber Doll despite her pursuit of ever-more ambitious abandonment performances. Such slippery lines between subject and object, agent and target, and enabled and acquiescent were, after all, what Hawk Swanson's project sought to address with its embodied self-objectification. Upon realizing this situation, she engaged more aggressively with exercise—both to address her own body and to develop from the *Amber Doll Project* a related set of performances that turned its self-objectification back inward. The series of exercise works cumulatively titled *Fit* (2008–present) resulted from her reaction.

In keeping with her methodology of hyperbole, Hawk Swanson sought out extreme exercise. Much as she had previously immersed herself in the doll community, she now moved into the almost cultlike community of CrossFit, which centers on "military-style" practical exercise routines. CrossFit's members are devoted, and a nationwide community has emerged with its own vocabulary, online and local social networks, and material culture.[13] In CrossFit Hawk Swanson saw an extension of one of the key issues that had initially inspired her to pursue the *Amber Doll Project*: the anxious interdependence of self-objectification and self-realization. CrossFit members come together to perform workouts of the day (WODs) in which they relentlessly push themselves to their personal limits. Personal goals are externalized and compared, as statistics allow participants to gauge their own and others' fitness in relation to each other. In short, CrossFit itself takes the thematics of exercise to the extreme, creating personal potential out of submission to a peer group and achieving bodily ideals through self-objectification, competition, and punishment.

This is not to deny the effectiveness, the appeal, or the value of such group activities as CrossFit (as with, indeed, the emotional satisfaction achieved by the doll husbands). CrossFit has proved catalytic and important to many people's lives, and Hawk Swanson participated in the community as a committed and sincere member. The overall *Fit* project began with her immersion in this community starting in 2008 and has been distilled in the past few years into a range of fitness-related works.

For her performances involving CrossFit, Hawk Swanson undertook back-

Figure 4. Amber Hawk Swanson, *Online Comments (August 2007—February 2012) (from the Fit Project)*, 2012, Still from Digital Video (3 hours) Edition of Ten.

to-back workouts far in excess of what would be normal practice. CrossFit uses precise, focused, and timed workouts, but Hawk Swanson chose to stack these one after the other. One performance of *Online Comments* for the 2012 exhibition *She Got Game* at the Arlington Arts Center in Virginia lasted over three hours.[14] In keeping with her social media practice, this was performed in the galleries while being streamed live as an online real-time performance. She was supervised by a coach who monitored her physical safety while also scolding when mistakes were made, serving as an off-camera collaborator. While doing these exhausting routines, Hawk Swanson read the online comments from the earlier *Amber Doll Project* out loud—including those comments that rate her body as inferior to Amber Doll's. (The above-mentioned examples were all taken from her performance script for *Online Comments*.) Beyond the physical exhaustion that was apparent, Hawk Swanson interfered with her own ability to breathe by speaking the constant stream of others' opinions, thus making the workouts all the more physically and psychologically challenging for her as she narrated the debates about her body, her art, her sexuality, and her sincerity.

Online Comments offered another instance of Hawk Swanson's self-sacrifice coupled with her own self-aggrandizement. In these performances, she now ruthlessly treated her own body as she did Amber Doll's—as an object to be worked and as a person to be loved. CrossFit became for Hawk Swanson the

raw material for interrogating how self-realization and self-punishment are often indistinguishable in exercise. Hawk Swanson's work involves drawing out underlying social issues by taking to extreme lengths already extreme activities such as CrossFit and RealDolls. Both of these activities evince ethical and personal contradictions, and Hawk Swanson works in the uneasy space between their narratives of, on the one hand, self-determination and fulfillment and, on the other, self-objectification and inadequacy.

In the performances, Hawk Swanson endangered herself by excessively performing workout routines one after the other, all the while voicing others' comments both negative and positive about her as an artist, as a person, and as a sexual object. While watching the videos of these performances, one's attention wavers between listening to the comments (be they articulate or appallingly crude), observing the exercise routines, and—ultimately—staring at Hawk Swanson's body. These works fold in and expose all of this, providing the raw material that forces us to acknowledge our own complicity in objectification as well as to identify with Hawk Swanson's efforts at self-realization. In this, she becomes alternately both defiant and pathetic in the viewers' eyes, as her activities (be they art or exercise) seem earnest and futile, strong and weak.

With its empowering masochism, *Online Comments* builds on the collapsing of victimizer and victim that was at the heart of the *Amber Doll Project*'s same-sex relationship and collaboration. Like the earlier project, *Online Comments* also activates questions of gender and sexuality as central concerns. The stream of opinions Hawk Swanson read aloud ensured that debates about body image, feminism, sexuality, art, and gender remained the explicit themes of the work. That is, her extreme serial exercises were performed against the backdrop of her history with Amber Doll—from her daily loving companionship to the public exposure of their collaboration and the ensuing debate about her body. In this way, the performances dramatically illustrate how practices and rhetorics of fitness are, themselves, fundamentally concerned with gender and its normative embodiments.[15] Hawk Swanson was, after all, working her body while ventriloquizing others' comments about her divergences from normative cultural ideals—literalized in Abyss Creations' body template number 8.

In other words, Hawk Swanson's undertaking reminds us that any measure of success or failure in physical culture has been customarily based on a comparative evaluation with others of the same sex. The vast majority of physical sports are still sex-segregated for this very reason, and any qualification of someone as an athlete is based on measurements against others of the same sex. (The par-

Figure 5. Amber Hawk Swanson, *Online Comments (August 2007—February 2012) (from the Fit Project)*, 2012, Still from Digital Video (3 hours) Edition of Ten.

ticipation of trans folk in athletic competition raises high anxieties for just this reason.) As the Danish sociologist Henning Bech acutely observed, fitness is a crucial arena in which people work out their relationship to their own genders and sexed bodies, evaluating themselves along such axes of sameness and identification. Writing of men working out at a gym, he asked,

> What makes these men toil away at the [fitness] machines? Surely not just any desire to keep their bodies operative and avoid muscle aches and other such ailments; nor the mere wish to keep age and death at bay. If so, they would surely jog, do calisthenics or take classes in modern dance. What is at stake is a *decision to be a man* (more of a man than one thinks one is); more precisely, it is about *modeling* oneself as a man.[16]

At base, the same-sex comparative relation on which many ideals of physical fitness rely is akin to the ineluctable homoeroticism that shadows self-regard. Hawk Swanson's trajectory from her body double to bodybuilding reminds us that pursuits of fitness are not just acts of self-objectification and self-realization—they are also inescapably potential homoerotic acts in which one posits oneself as one's own gendered object of desire. *Online Comments*' self-recursive exertions elaborate how exercise is a distilled site of the slippery relations between self-admiration and same-sex desire—relations pertinent to us all, fit or not.

Figure 6. Amber Hawk Swanson, *Dig A Hole You Can Stand In: Dig Seven (from the Fit Project)*, 2010, Still from Digital Video (7 minutes, 30 seconds), Edition of Ten. Copyright Amber Hawk Swanson, 2013

Hawk Swanson's CrossFit performances replay the negative determinations of self-objectification, creating her as the defiant self-imposed target of others' gazes and opinions (even those of defenders). In contrast to this mode, Hawk Swanson has developed an alternative set of fitness performances within the *Fit* series that, in their simplicity and humility, offer a positive and reparative alternative for her activation of gender as a site of self-realization.[17]

Since 2010 Hawk Swanson has been digging holes for time in a subseries of performances titled *Dig a Hole You Can Stand In*. In doing this, she has been repeatedly enacting one of the many practical fitness exercises her grandfather assigned to her father when he turned eight years old. These exercises, such as the "dig a chest-deep hole for yourself," were intended to make Hawk Swanson's father "fit" as a man, and Hawk Swanson performs this training on herself, adopting these man-making activities and earnestly improving her ability to do them. These are often performed for the camera as she tackles various types of sites, from a sandy beach to a park green to a forest to a city alley.

Unlike the above-mentioned CrossFit performances, Hawk Swanson remains largely silent in the series. Whereas the CrossFit performances intentionally interweave the text of the comments with the viewer's fascination and fatigue at the spectacle of endurance exercise, the digging videos are boring to watch. Indeed, they require endurance. They have no real climax or conclusion. Hawk

Swanson digs the hole until something in the world stops her: striking water near the shoreline or hitting hard shale. Endings are abrupt and decidedly unremarkable. These works in *Fit* must be seen as the counterpart to the spectacular display of gendered self-objectification and self-punishment of the CrossFit performances, and the digging of holes becomes a far more internalized experience for Hawk Swanson. As viewers, we are blocked out.

The key to these performances is their family lineage. In each of their repetitions, Hawk Swanson performs an identification with her father. Her grandfather gave him these tasks to prepare him for adulthood and make him strong and capable. The "man" they create has nothing to do with sex or even masculinity so much as the more abstract and important traits such as readiness, responsibility, and capability. That digging a hole would be a "practical" fitness activity speaks directly to the life-saving importance of such holes during wartime, where the foxhole provided the only cover from gunfire.

Hawk Swanson's adoption of these activities seizes on the fact that these "man-making" tasks can be performed by anyone and that their effect will not be the aesthetic goals of most exercise but the practical goals of fitness and readiness. She unhinges these aims from gender and turns them into practices of self-realization. That is, she does not just identify with her father's coming-into-manhood. She also identifies with his state of malleability and potentiality that these activities seek to nurture. Whereas the CrossFit performances (and the *Amber Doll Project*) both opened up the messy realities of what one is for others and for oneself, the digging performances are rituals of self-determination. The former were about axes of same-sex and same-gender comparison and identification, whereas the dig performances are willfully cross-gender exercises.

Each performance requires nothing (but a shovel). They are removal pieces, and as such hark back to early moments of conceptual art and institutional critique in which removal or erasure were ways to address larger contexts and refuse the emphasis on the commodifiable object.[18] A removal piece can be done anywhere there is something, and Hawk Swanson displays this variability in the different landscapes she tirelessly penetrates. Every repeated instance of her timed hole-digging brings her closer to her fitness goal. It is not as simple as Hawk Swanson wanting to become a man and performing these exercises. Instead, she enacts these performances to identify with the will to become, to transform. Ironically, she achieves this "becoming a man" through creating a hole, a gap, a lack — inverting the easy equation of the male subject with plenitude. To be frank, her performances of becoming her grandfather's ideals for her father revolve

Figure 7. Amber Hawk Swanson, *Dig A Hole You Can Stand In: Dig Eight (from the Fit Project)*, 2010, Still from Digital Video (24 minutes, 26 seconds), Edition of Ten. Copyright Amber Hawk Swanson, 2013

Figure 8. Amber Hawk Swanson, *Dig A Hole You Can Stand In: Hole*, 2010, Archival Pigment Print 21 inches × 14 inches (on 24 inch × 17 inch Paper), Edition of Ten (10) and Two (2) Artist's Proof. Copyright Amber Hawk Swanson, 2013

around the empty space she puts at the center of her performances. The holes bring her closer to her inherited, familial masculine ideal.

These repetitions — like the work of exercise — are intentionally futile. After she has finished, she refills the hole (off camera) and leaves the landscape marked but not fundamentally altered. The acts of doing are what is important, along with the ways in which they each individually accrue to transform her body and her self. In this regard, the digging performances mark a significant departure from both *Online Comments* and the *Amber Doll Project*. Those series involved the presentation of Hawk Swanson's body as objectified image or commented-on text. While Hawk Swanson is present in the video documentation of the digging performances, there is a resistance to the kinds of voyeuristic spectacle central to the other performances' navigations of objectification. By contrast, the removals of *Dig a Hole You Can Stand In* offer the body not as commodified object but as process of self-determination. It is grueling work in which she is engaged, but she has chosen to do it for herself.

Exercise can turn bad, become an addiction, or fuel self-denigration just as easily as it can exhilarate, spur self-confidence, and improve quality of life. These two sides are often indistinguishable and mutually reinforcing. Hawk Swanson turned to exercise performances as a way to exaggerate and to explore such complexities in which the self becomes both the object of punishment and the agent of self-realization. The works themselves play out these contradictions as she ventriloquizes her antagonists and defies them with her self-determination. The *Fit* subseries of hole-digging performances step to one side of this paradox by enacting Hawk Swanson's queer identification, in which she steps into her father's shoes as the potentiality her grandfather saw in him. Such a step is the outgrowth of her identification with and love for Amber Doll in which same-sex desire became both alienating and empowering as a way to understand herself as both agent and object.

Most broadly, Hawk Swanson's work dramatizes the persistent cultural narratives that treat women and their bodies as objects of desire and consumption. From her own literal self-objectification in the form of a self-portrait bodily surrogate to her self-reflexive pursuit of extreme exercise, Hawk Swanson's work plays out questions of inescapable same-sex desire, self-objectification, and gender identification. She positions homoeroticism and autoeroticism as foundations from which normative assumptions about women's desire in relation to their bodies can be resisted, and she dramatizes exercise as a spectacle of self-love and self-punishment. Her work troubles the ways in which exercise is held up both as an

obligation for women in order to achieve desirable bodies and, at the same time, as a potential site of admonishment for women who perform it too well or for reasons other than reproducing those normative ideals.

What is useful about Hawk Swanson's exercise performances is the way that they address queer themes that disrupt expectations about what is appropriate and proper in relation to our own bodies, for ourselves and for others. She practices fitness incorrectly, willfully, as a way to call attention to how it condenses an entire spectrum of attitudes about gender, self-love, normative bodies, and objectification. This queer fitness aims not to achieve a normative ideal but to confront the ways in which it is exercised.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Nicole Pasulka, "An Interview with Amber Hawk Swanson," *Diet Newsletter* (Miami: Diet Gallery, June 2008); Daria Brit Shapiro, "Pleased to Meet Me," *Map Magazine* 5 (June 2008): 70–71; and an unpublished 2008 interview with Lori Waxman, all available at www.amberhawkswanson.com.
2. For a discussion of Hawk Swanson's earlier work and its relation to aspects of the *Amber Doll Project*, see Anna Watkins Fisher, "Like a Girl's Name: The Adolescent Drag of Amber Hawk Swanson, Kate Gilmore, and Ann Liv Young," *TDR: The Drama Review* 56, no. 1 (2012): 48–76.
3. The *Amber Doll Project* is immense, with many distinct subseries of work, and in this article I examine only a small part of it to explain its generation of online comments that are the basis of Hawk Swanson's subsequent exercise performances. I do not discuss the second half of Amber Doll's history or its generation of Hawk Swanson's complex response in the subsequent *Amber Doll > TILIKUM* (2011). This thirty-six-hour video work was recently broadcast by Souvenirs from Earth, the European video-art cable television station, in both France and Germany on April 26 and 27, 2012, in addition to being shown at the Palais de Tokyo, in Paris.
4. A useful comparison to the duration of Hawk Swanson's projects would be such yearlong or multiyearlong performances of Tehching Hsieh and of Linda Montano. See, for instance, Linda Montano, *Art in Everyday Life* (Los Angeles: Station Hill, 1981); and Adrian Heathfield, *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).
5. The relationship of narcissism to homosexuality was, of course, a recurring topic in the history of sexological and psychoanalytic literatures. A compelling historical and theoretical assessment of this issue can be found in Whitney Davis, *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 187–241.

6. My thinking about self-objectification has been informed by Jennifer Doyle, "The Effect of Intimacy: Tracey Emin's Bad Sex," in *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 97–120.
7. Such inevitable same-sex attachments and their frequent denial have been understood by many to be constitutive elements of selfhood, more broadly. Judith Butler has similarly discussed how heteronormative gender identities can result from a disavowal of the possibility of same-sex attachments. The refusal to acknowledge the loss (or even the existence) of this now-denied homosexuality becomes incorporated as a sort of "heterosexual melancholy, the melancholy by which a masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love." She continues, "What is most apparently performed as gender is the sign and symptom of a pervasive disavowal" (Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification," in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997], 146–47).
8. I examine the larger question of statues' immotility and further discuss Hawk Swanson's abandonment performances in David Getsy, "Acts of Stillness: Statues, Performativity, and Passive Resistance," *Criticism* 56, no.1 (forthcoming).
9. Amber Hawk Swanson, interview by author, Chicago, IL, April 10, 2012.
10. Kelly McClure, "When Amber Met Amber: An Artist's Complicated Relationship with Her Look-Alike Sex Doll," *Chicago Reader*, August 3, 2007. Even though it has been frequently cited, Hawk Swanson does not consider this article to be an adequate account of her work. The article and its comments were taken down from the *Reader* website (some time after Hawk Swanson had archived the comments) and has recently been reposted without the earlier comment threads.
11. Hawk Swanson, interview by author.
12. Hawk Swanson, interview by author.
13. See, for instance, Stephanie Cooperman, "Getting Fit Even If It Kills You," *New York Times*, December 22, 2005; and Roy M. Wallack, "A Workout That's Fast, Furious, and Not for the Faint of Heart," *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 2006.
14. Curated by Jeffry Cudlin. See www.arlingtonartscenter.org/aac-exhibition-she-got-game. The same performance has sometimes been titled *CF+Online Comments*.
15. A crucial precedent is Eleanor Antin's iconic feminist work, *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972). More recently, the durational and body-transforming work of Heather Cassils is also directly relevant to Hawk Swanson's engagement with self-realization. For discussion of Cassils's 2012 *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (which takes Antin's work as source), see Megan Hoetger, "Re-performance: History as an Experience to Be Had," *X-TRA* 15, no. 1 (2012); and Heather Cassils, "A Traditional Sculpture," *Huffington Post* blog, October 4, 2011, www.huffingtonpost.com/heather/a-traditional-sculpture_b_983384.html.

16. Henning Bech, *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity*, trans. T. Mesquit and T. Davies, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 50.
17. On reparative practices, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51.
18. Here I am thinking of the works not just of such artists as Lawrence Weiner and Michael Asher but also of Ana Mendieta, all of whom offer ironic intertexts to Hawk Swanson's *Dig a Hole You Can Stand In*.

ACTS OF STILLNESS: STATUES, PERFORMATIVITY, AND PASSIVE RESISTANCE

David J. Getsy

The idea for this essay was sparked by reading Barbara Johnson's "Muteness Envy" (1998), in which she interrogated the canon of Western poetry and its persistent idealization of female silence.[1] Muteness, she argued, became a "repository of aesthetic value" in poems such as John Keats's "Ode On a Grecian Urn" (1819) because of the ways that the inability to speak served to facilitate patriarchal power.[2] In the tradition she critiques, a lack of access to speech is upheld as a precursor to the judgment of beauty. When reading through Johnson's many cases of the ways in which muteness incited the desire to control, to ravish, or to protect, I was struck by an analogous feature in the history of sculpture. If, in Johnson's formulation, muteness becomes the condition that both sparks and authorizes rape, paternalism, and objectification, then how does muteness operate in relation to surrogates for human beings that stand before us and do not speak? *Muteness* is a special feature of poetry and prose because of those media's direct relation to language, and I began to question how, for sculpture, the related and more fundamental term is *stillness*.

What follows is a proposition for reassessing the history of sculpture with a view toward characterizing a wider range of viewers' reactions to statues. In this, I consider the sculptural encounter as a theater of power relations between active viewers and passive statues. This dynamic is fueled by the bodily and spatial engagements of the viewer or artist with the three-dimensional representation of the human body, most pointedly at a one-to-one scale, that stands before them. My emphasis will be on statues in the post-Enlightenment tradition of European and American art, with an emphasis on the history of modern sculpture, but one could ask analogous, if differently inflected, questions of other times and places. I have pitched my argument toward recurring patterns in the history of sculpture, and I have avoided in-depth case studies in preference for a more wide-ranging and general assessment of the effects of statues acting

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on us by standing there, motionless. The performativity of statues' passive resistance has underwritten the aesthetics of sculpture, and a focus on stillness can illuminate the ethical contours and recurring historical themes of the sculptural encounter.

* * *

A three-dimensional figurative image—that is, a statue—both depicts a body in space and is a body-in-space. I can look at a statue of an athlete, of Apollo, of a fieldworker, of a politician, of a heroine, or of a fawn and see it in its representational distance. I am confronted by an image of something not actually present, perhaps never seen in everyday life, or maybe recognized as a character from books, poems, dreams, or the televised news. At the same time that it functions in this way as a three-dimensional image, the statue is also present for me as a physical object displacing space with its volume. It stands, sits, or lies in front of me. I can touch it. I do touch it. I walk around it. I move up to it. I walk away from it.

Sculpture differs fundamentally from the vast majority of two-dimensional, pictorial media in its coextensiveness as depicted image and depicting object. A statue can be equivalent in volume to the represented body, sharing its proportions and construction. Jean-Paul Sartre saw this as the paradox of the statue: "I have *real* relations with an illusion; or, if you prefer, my true distance from the block of marble has been confused with my imaginary distance from [the image it represents]."[3] Because of this paradox, the address of a statue is necessarily corporeal, spatial, and relational. Sartre saw the statue as "depend[ing] on the relativity of the angles from which it is viewed. As for the spectator, he takes the imaginary for the real and the real for the imaginary."[4] The situation the statue presents is more akin to an encounter with another person than any two-dimensional representation could offer. In the present essay, I will be speaking mainly about life-size, freestanding statues out of efficiency, but analogous spatial-representational activations are varyingly present in different scales from the handheld to the gigantic. That is, even if the statue is monumental or miniscule, the bodily sense of scale becomes a corporeal link between the viewer and the actual presence of the three-dimensional image made from such materials as marble, bronze, or wood.

Space is shared with statues, and there is rarely a background to a statue other than the room in which we encounter it and the ground on which we stand with it. There is no visible and physical boundary as there is with a two-dimensional image. The pictorial involves a translation of the

three-dimensional world to a new world untouchable behind the picture plane. By contrast, the condition of sculptural representation is boundaryless in its physical proximity and real tactility. Despite this activation of the sculptural body and its corporeal relationality, the statue nevertheless refuses to act like, move like, or respond to us as though it actually were the human body it represents.[5] The statue stands before us, confronting us with its immotility, its muteness, and its obdurate copresence. As the poet Frank O'Hara once wrote in reference to the work of the sculptor David Smith, "It is the nature of sculpture to be there. If you don't like it, you wish it would get out of the way, because it occupies space which your body could occupy."[6]

This quality of statues to be in bodies in space with us is always balanced by their stillness and silence. Perhaps the central theme in the history and theory of sculpture has been the struggle with animation and movement. Of course, there have been examples of poseable, motile, and animatronic sculptures for centuries, but these represent a very small proportion of the history of sculpture. In general, the history of writing about sculpture has focused on static, immotile objects. This history registers the presumption of stillness in its literature with such organizing tropes as the dream of the moving statue or the recurring metaphor of the cold statue haunted by deathliness. In other words, even though statues take on the shape and, often, size of humans, they are seen as false and inferior in the incompleteness of their approximation. Their stillness is taken as a lack of life.

One could point to an abundance of examples of this in the aesthetic and critical writing about sculpture in the Western tradition. Perhaps one of the most forthright of such statements is also one of the earliest. The second-century Christian polemicist Clement of Alexandria railed against the worship of statues, and in so doing he concluded that their stillness was proof of their deathliness and their duplicity:

> There is not a single living creature that is not more worthy of honour than these statues; and how it comes to pass that senseless things have been deified I am at a loss to know, and I deeply pity for their lack of understanding the men who are thus miserably wandering in error. For even though there are some living creatures which do not possess all the senses, as worms and caterpillars, and all those that appear to be imperfect from the first through the conditions of their birth, such as moles and the field-mouse, which Nicander calls "blind and terrible"; yet these

> are better than those images and statues which are entirely dumb. For they have at any rate some one sense, that of hearing, let us say, or of touch, or something corresponding to smell or taste; but these statues do not even partake of one sense. There are also many kinds of living creatures, such as the oyster family, which possess neither sight nor hearing nor yet speech; nevertheless they live and grow and are even affected by the moon. But the statues are motionless things incapable of action or sensation; they are bound and nailed and fastened, melted, filed, sawn, polished, carved. The dumb earth is dishonoured when sculptors pervert its peculiar nature and by their art entice men to worship it; while the god-makers, if there is any sense in me, worship not gods and daemons, but earth and art, which is all the statues are. For a statue is really lifeless matter shaped by a craftsman's hand.[7]

This early assessment of sculpture's deficiency and its effects is carried through many accounts of statues, up through the Enlightenment tradition when the myth of Pygmalion's animation of his cold and unresponsive statue becomes perhaps the structuring trope of the aesthetics of sculpture. The fear that statues were merely "motionless things incapable of action" and "lifeless matter" motivated both the creators of statues and those who would write about them. As Sartre would observe a millennium and three-quarters later, "The truth is that for three thousand years sculptors have been carving only cadavers."[8]

Such anxieties of animation determine the history of the statue. The statue's supposed lifelessness (already decried by Clement) served as the tradition's foil. Indeed, figurative sculptors developed an arsenal of methods directed at imbuing their static bodies with the impression of life. They spent a great deal of energy trying to convey actual movement and the capacity for motility in their sculpted bodies in an attempt to convince viewers to look past the obdurate stillness of their works. Contrapposto, facial expressions, gestures, and other implied movements were all used to simulate motion and its capacities in unmoving anthropomorphic masses. Consequently, the most biting criticism of sculpture was to call it cold and lifeless. This was most articulately written about by the Victorian Aestheticist critic Walter Pater, who argued in 1893, "The limitation of sculpture results from the material, and other necessary conditions of all sculptured work, and consists in the tendency of such work to a hard realism, a one-sided presentment of mere form, that solid material frame

which only motion can relieve." He concluded that "each great system of sculpture resist[s] . . . its stiffness, its heaviness, and death."[9]

One could look to Pater's exact contemporary Edward Onslow Ford and his *Shelley Memorial* at Oxford, completed in 1892, in light of this attitude toward sculpture's struggle (figure 1). Ford attempted to push the boundaries of realism in sculpture by depicting the corpse—the lifeless body that has lost its capacity to move. Though not wholly unprecedented, Ford made this a bolder move than tomb sculptures or effigies of the sleeping departed that preceded his work. He did this in order to activate the materiality of the white marble and fuse it with the pale flesh he was representing, thus finding in his thanatic realism a way out of the limitation of sculpture's stillness.

The corpse has proven to be an important subject matter for sculptors attempting to deal with their art's supposed lifelessness. We need only look to another important example, Alberto Giacometti's *Woman with Her Throat Cut* of 1932, for the way in which Giacometti both justified and amplified his move off the pedestal to the floor through the subject

Figure 1. Edward Onslow Ford, Shelley Memorial *(1892, detail), marble and bronze, life size. University College, Oxford University, Oxford. Photograph: Photographic Survey, Courtauld Institute of Art, London.*

matter of the corpse (figure 2). We approach the sculpture as we would an actual dead body encountered on the street. Its spatial confrontation with the viewer and its groundbreaking removal of the pedestal or plinth to activate that confrontation are both predicated on obviating the nagging issue of sculpture's immotility. Only in the subject matter of death can the human body be like the statue in its ceaseless stillness. I regard both Ford and Giacometti's works as key moments of commentary in the history of three-dimensional representation, for both found a means to trump our evaluation of the sculptural body in terms of its lack of movement.[10] They made the bold move of embracing the lack of life in the statue, giving us the dead body as the answer.

Most sculptures, however, are not of corpses. Rather, the central justification for the figurative statue historically has been to keep the dead alive, to memorialize them, to embody their characters, or to project the ideals they supposedly upheld in their lives. The corpse and its loss of animation, however, haunt the history of sculpture, becoming the allegory for its struggle with inert materiality. There are plenty of dreams of animated paintings and, of course, there are moving pictures, but one could argue that the history of the statue is nothing less than a history of compensations for sculpture's stillness. Consequently, the dream of animation looms large whenever the statue is written about. Ovid's tale of Pygmalion is the foundational story of this tradition, and it is replayed and referenced

Figure 2. Alberto Giacometti, Woman with Her Throat Cut *(1932), bronze. National Galleries of Scotland (Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh).*

whenever the statue is in play. The Pygmalion myth has been well studied by Kenneth Gross, Essaka Joshua, Mary Sheriff, George Hersey, and Victor Stoichita, among others, revealing it to be a fundamental literary trope that takes the statue, quite literally, as its animating figure.[11] For artists, art critics, and art historians, furthermore, the unmoving sculpture has been more than a metaphor or literary image. It has been a driving concern, and the problem of the statue's confrontational inertness has preoccupied those who would praise, criticize, create, narrate, or analyze sculptural objects.

In all of these traditions of discussing statues, stillness is defined negatively as an absence of movement and responsiveness. As with Johnson's "muteness envy," there is an idealization and aestheticization of a position constituted as a lack to be filled. In other words, this supposed inadequacy is postulated as the statue's undeniable burden, and consequently the statue is cast in a passive and subordinate role to the viewer, the critic, and the sculptor. Nevertheless, this lack of life does not mean that statues are overlooked as mere objects. Quite the contrary, a belief in statues' need drives many narratives about their effects on the living. In poems and stories, we read of loving caresses bringing statues to life, hear tales of men locking themselves in temples to make love to statues of Aphrodite, and learn cautionary justifications for iconoclasm.[12] Psychiatric and sexological literatures warn against agalmatophilia or Pygmalionism—the sexual attraction to the stillness of statues.[13] Across this range of responses, the frozen lifelessness of the statue induces extreme affect and reaction in viewers, justifying a range of actions not permissible with the living body. Indeed, seeing the lack of movement of the statue as a taunt can help us to understand just why so many statues on college campuses become the victims of pranks or dress-up. As well, this idealized passivity of the sculptural body underwrites the failure of animation that is the primary example of Sigmund Freud's uncanny.

The history of sculpture evinces the recurring desire to assert the statue's lack of action, and the nomination of this trait as something to be corrected or overcome often rings disingenuous. Technologies of animatronics have been around for centuries, yet sculptors and critics still expect, look for, and admire immotile statues. The organizing myths of the history of sculpture and the themes of its aesthetics all serve to install stillness as the statue's guiding principle—even as it is recurringly derided. There is a compulsion to performatively reiterate the claim of the statue's inability to act, and those claims often take the form of a paternalistic wish for the statue's life or a disingenuous fear of its deathliness. This pattern in the history of sculpture effectively idealizes motility and activity, which become comfortably located

in the circumambulating viewer or the adept artist. In short, a product of the discourse of the statue is the valorization of the superior position of the mobile viewer or artist.[14] The continued and repeated arguments about the statue's lack of animation serve as a means of aggrandizing beholders' capacity to move, to act, to control. In short, the stillness of statues may be lamented, but it is nevertheless enjoyed for its reinforcing of the motile viewer or artist's power over that statue.

But what if we dispense with such stories of lack and inadequacy and perform an inversion of their terms to make this negative account positive? This won't wash away the problematic assumptions of the gendered lineage of Pygmalion (nor the idealized need and receptivity of Galatea), but it will help reveal some of its key terms. Rather than see a lack of motility, I want to uphold the statue's refusal to move. Its immobility is an act—a performative act—that affects those who would approach it. The statue's acts of stillness are unnerving, disconcerting, and defiant, let's not forget. It is this refusal that catalyzes what I see as a central issue for sculptural aesthetics: that is, how the physical copresence of the statue initiates a cascade of effects on the viewer in which she or he attempts to manage the incursion into their space by a material object that is equivalent to the image that it depicts three-dimensionally.[15] The management of that incursion on the part of the viewer often takes the form of a desire to control, and the responses to statues' acts of stillness can manifest themselves in pleas, in probing caresses, in desires, in fantasies of rape, in violence, in paternalism, in destruction, in mocking indifference, and in violation. Aggressive responses or negative affects often fall out of accounts of sculptural aesthetics in which such positive terms as beauty, interest, eroticism, or pleasure are emphasized, but they are nevertheless part of the larger history of sculpture and its receptions. When collated with the negative reactions and reprisals, these positive responses are revealed, too, to rely on the unequal power dynamics of active/passive that are endlessly replicated when the statue's stillness is idealized for what it supposedly misses. I propose that acknowledging statues' performativity and viewers' consequent desires to control it offers a means of better articulating a theory of the sculptural encounter in all of its variety. Our encounter with statues is always an encounter with other bodies that share our space, wait for us, and defiantly remain unresponsive. Consequently, a different way of characterizing the discourse of the statue is to see it as a history of its acts of passive resistance to the motile viewer or artist's attempts to assert control.

Figurative sculpture makes this relation manifest and visible, but this dynamic also haunts other sculptures that take on a minimal set of the

most basic traits of human bodies. In his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood," Michael Fried's infamous denunciation of Minimalism rested on his perceptive claims about anthropomorphism in literalist sculpture. Whereas the sculptors associated with Minimalism claimed to avoid reference and achieve literality, Fried argued that the sculpture was there waiting for viewers and was fundamentally anthropomorphic. Of Minimalist sculpture, Fried wrote,

> [T]he beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended—and unexacting—relation *as subject* to the impassive object on the wall or floor. In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another *person*.[16]

Fried then proceeded to call out Minimalism for its anthropomorphism, using Tony Smith's human-scale *Die* (1962) as his example (figure 3). Fried concluded, "One way of describing what Smith was making might be something like a surrogate person—that is, a kind of *statue*." Fried continued to invoke the image of the figurative statue in all its stillness and muteness as the key to understanding the exaggerated bodily confrontations and relations at which Minimalist sculpture had aimed with its banishing of representation. He returned to this tactic, saying in one of the most famous lines of the essay,

> An inasmuch as literalist work *depends* on the beholder, is *incomplete* without him, it *has* been. And once he is in the room the work refuses, obstinately, to let him alone—which is to say, it refuses to stop confronting him, distancing him, isolating him.[17]

In making his case, Fried effectively characterized the encounter with the literalist sculpture as two things: as intercorporeal (due to the sculpture's nascent anthropomorphism) and as reactive (i.e., a response to the sculpture's performing of copresence). I am not interested in adjudicating Fried versus Tony Smith or Robert Morris in this case. His terms, however, are useful in that they point out how human-scale bodily relations—even with a cube—usher in affects in the viewer that are determined by experiences of previous social, bodily, interpersonal, and intersubjective relations.[18] Fried activated these specific interpersonal experiences when he claimed that the objects "waited"[19] for him and compared this to the

Figure 3. Tony Smith, Die *(1962)/fabricated (1968), steel with oiled finish, 182.9 × 182.9 × 182.9 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; gift of the Collectors Committee 2003.77.1. © 2013 Estate of Tony Smith/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.*

"disquieting" effect of unexpectedly coming upon such a silent presence in "somewhat darkened rooms."[20] No less than Giacometti, Fried used the intercorporeal and spatial confrontation of the shared space of sculpture and viewer to intimate scenes of danger, control, and excitement.

The affects Fried enumerated are created because the sculpture is understood to be a statue acting on the viewer. His limit case helps to show that sculpture's stillness is nothing short of a performative act. The steel cube, the marble, or bronze statue confronts the viewer not just as a hunk of material and not just as a three-dimensional image but as a body in our space acting by not moving.

The discipline of performance studies has taught us to attend to the history of acts. Accordingly, nothing is ever merely acted upon without, too, performing—even if that performance is of passivity or, in this case, mute stillness. Similarly, such perspectives as speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, posthuman studies, actor-network theory, and thing

theory have all called for a greater recognition of objects' agency within a matrix of acts, of which human participation is just an element.[21] One of the implications of these perspectives is to decenter the human into a network of material relations, only some of which involve human agents. Statues are, without a doubt, some of the most privileged of objects, anthropomorphic in a literal rather than tropological sense. What they perform is their bodily relationality to the humans that they resemble, and their acts are still and motionless.

Beyond inverting the negative aspersions of stillness as subservience, it is productive to see that performance of motionlessness as a kind of critical passivity—that is, as an enactment of passive resistance. In other words, the statue's act of stillness compels the viewer to negotiate the contours of power established between their moving body and the defiant, unmoving one presented by the sculpture. As we have learned from the history of nonviolent resistance as a tactic of civil disobedience, the refusal to move or to respond can be a powerful act that exposes the dispensation of power and the ethics of those who wield it.[22]

Confronted by its refusal to move, people take liberties with sculpture all the time. They have been performatively cast as stillness's target, reactant, and addressee. They respond; they want to touch it, to feel it, to kick it. Under the guise of exploration or appreciation, they probe and caress the sculptural body. They walk around it and examine its details and forms. They sometimes play at hurting it, giving it a slap or a poke. As we have all seen from sculptures placed in public places or, indeed, anywhere other than a museum, sculptures bear the evidence of people's desires to touch, to feel, and to vandalize, and to objectify. The nude held sway in the history of sculpture far longer than it did in other media, I think, precisely because its spatial and tactile passivity authorizes an attitude toward the art object that masks a desire to objectify the bodily image. Again, both the aesthetics of sculpture and the history of the sculptural encounter are characterized by these *reactions* on the part of the viewer to the statue's acts of stillness. That is, the fascination, disdain, boredom, excitement, mocking judgment, longing, hatred, and laughter statues inspire can productively be understood as responses to the statues' performances of mute motionlessness.

The performativity of the act of stillness makes the statue—despite its monochromy, its immotility, its heaviness, its unresponsiveness—into something like a defiant agent. One should be clear, however, that the statue is not a subject in the full sense of the term. As Whitney Davis has noted, "Artworks are never subjects, but always objects; only subjects are subjects."[23] The mutual recognition between subjects that defines

intersubjectivity is a powerful and infrequent episode amongst a lifetime of interpersonal encounters and negotiations.[24] Intersubjectivity can be vertiginous, thrilling, comforting, or agonistic, but its transformative potential is underwritten by a logic of sameness and mutuality. Two-way recognition requires as much, and both the joy of rapport or the despair of discord that intersubjective encounters can usher in are made possible by confronting categorical likeness. For this reason, agents of an entirely different category (an object, a statue, or even a person characterized with prejudice as inferior or inhuman) do not operate as subjects despite their efficacy, resistance, or power.[25]

Individually or collectively, fantasies of or wishes for the intersubjective are often projected onto objects or events (as with the case of some reactions to statues). Such beliefs can be enabling, powerful, catalyzing, or structuring. However, the one-sided nature of the exchange with the object means that—however much it acts in the world as agent due to these mediations and uses—it cannot offer intersubjectivity in the full sense. The object (as well as the object-as-agent) remains reflective of the individual or collective projections onto it. This distinction is useful because it allows one to examine how fantasmatic, projective (false) "intersubjectivity" often reveals a great deal about the subject(s) who so deploy the object. Statues—because of their figurative valence—are exemplary of this. They are not subjects, but they are sometimes treated like them. They act as agents because of viewers' projections onto their material rendering or evocation of the human form—re-created as copresent in three dimensions with the viewer. They function as ersatz persons (not subjects) that, in their defiant stillness, expose the ways in which living viewers respond to that inertness. Indeed, it is precisely because the statue is an acting agent but not a recognizing subject that its encounter stages power dynamics that evoke social, interpersonal, and corporeal interactions. How do viewers choose to use the power that their capacity to move seems to give them over the defiantly unmoving bodies of sculpture? It is here where the ethical contours of the sculptural encounter manifest themselves, as motile viewers confront the resistant passivity of the statue's copresence. I contend that the viewer's response to the statue's stillness most often takes the form of an assertion of control—whether that assertion takes the form of a nonconsensual caress, of vandalism, or merely of the viewer's insistent urge to show off the ability to move by circumambulating and examining.

I think it is important to see the networked and two-directional relations between the statue and the viewer's projections as a means to reclaim statues' resulting performativity.[26] The power dynamics of the sculptural

encounter are made more visible once the terms are inverted by upholding the statue's stillness as an act of passive resistance. Indeed, the trope of the statue's lack of life that so determines the history of sculpture is endlessly repeated precisely because it, *pace* Johnson, idealizes that lack for the ways in which it seems to authorize acts of mastery. That caress, that kick, that sneer, that giggle that are so frequent when viewers encounter statues (in a museum or outside of one) are acts of mastery that the rhetoric of lifelessness in the statuary tradition seeks to mask and justify. By shifting perspective to the statue's positive performance of stillness, one can characterize the full range of physical engagements with the statue as reactions to its passive resistance.

One result of tracking such patterns of response is the greater visibility of gender's role in the statuary tradition. Again to invoke Johnson's claims about the idealization of muteness, the passivity of the statue is upheld as an organizing ideal and used as justification for acts of power in these accounts that so often associate this passivity stereotypically with women. Pygmalion's glad Galatea is the most prominent, but we could also look to E. T. A. Hoffman's Olympia or Fritz Lang's robot Maria from *Metropolis* (1927) (or, for a cautionary inversion, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* [1818]). It is beyond the scope of this essay to delve into the long list of historical examples that bears out this claim about the ways in which the sculptural encounter becomes a site for the replaying of gender difference and power, but suffice it to recall that the myths of the animate statue are almost all about statues of women.

But, of course, there are also statues of men, and these, too, fall prey to the same exercises of reactive control as do statues of women. A statue of a man—especially, but not just, an unclothed man—is marked as an object, despite the statue's best attempts to convey a representation of a subject. As an object, the statue of the man, too, is the recipient of reactions of control, and the predominance of gender violence in the history of vandalism of statues bears this out. I am reminded of Jules Dalou's statue of *Victor Noir* (1891), which has had its crotch rubbed shiny by generations of Parisian women (and random passersby in Père Lachaise Cemetery) who consider his ample dressing to the left to be a fertility charm (figure 4).[27] Liberties and violations are still exercises of power, and what is important here is not the named gender of the viewer but, rather, positions of active and passive that have historically taken sexual difference as their primary metaphors.

In this essay, I have largely restricted myself to conventional statues, life-size and freestanding, but I need to reemphasize that implications of this could be extended into the many other three-dimensional bodily images that surround us. Rainer Maria Rilke, writing on dolls, for instance, came

Figure 4. Aimé-Jules Dalou, Victor Noir *(1889–1891), bronze, 190 × 97 × 28 cm. Père-Lachaise Cemetery, Paris.*

to a similar conclusion about the performance of stillness: "With the doll we were forced to assert ourselves, for, had we surrendered ourselves to it, there would then have been no one there at all."[28] For Rilke, the doll forces us to react—to assert ourselves—in response to its passivity.

I will conclude with a brief mention of a doll sculpture that brings the gendered implications of the performance of stillness and the reactive assertion of control to the surface. Amber Hawk Swanson's 2006–8 *Amber Doll Project* involved the creation of a life-size RealDoll sex doll in her own image. After Amber Doll was brought into the world, Hawk Swanson commenced a romantic relationship and a collaborative artistic partnership with her (figure 5). Hawk Swanson's aim in this and related work was to investigate the slipperiness between being victim and victimizer, exploring both her self-portrayal as passive object and her role as controlling agent. She pursued this paradoxical dynamic by staging a series of events in which she would subject Amber Doll (and, since it was a self-portrait, herself by implication) to uncontrolled nonart social situations. She watched her own life-size sculptural image endure as she

purposefully abandoned Amber Doll in such places as a skating rink, a wedding reception, and a tailgate party (figure 6). As expected, Amber Doll became the target of sexual violence, but she was also the victim of the violence of curiosity as liberties were taken with her passive body by both male and female participants. In an interview with me, Hawk Swanson remarked that she came to realize that in any such situation there was—in addition to the bald exercises of sexualized power—always someone else who would pass by and stop the violation.[29] For instance, while some college-age men were tauntingly exposing Amber Doll's genitals, an older man walked by and scolded them for their actions. His act of protecting paternalism, however, was also an attempt to control the situation of Amber Doll's stillness. According to Hawk Swanson, this Good Samaritan was also fulfilling a desire for mastery over the passive body and its capacities, just as much as the boys were violating it.

I bring in Hawk Swanson's complex and multistaged project here because of the ways it hyperbolically plays out the power dynamics of statues' passive resistance. Hawk Swanson intentionally produces morally ambivalent and emotionally charged situations, and her works enmesh viewers in the power dynamics of victimization, whether they are compelled to protect, curious to examine, or enabled to violate.[30] In these public performances, it is the confrontation with the unmoving body that

Figure 5. Amber Hawk Swanson, To Hold, In Bed (from the Amber Doll Project) *(2007), archival pigment print, 53 × 35.5 cm. © Amber Hawk Swanson, 2014.*

Figure 6. Amber Hawk Swanson, To Violate, Tailgate (from the Amber Doll Project) *(2007), archival pigment print, 76.2 × 101.6 cm. © Amber Hawk Swanson, 2014.*

catalyzes the dynamics of power and control.[31] Hawk Swanson does this by realizing—and sacrificing—her own self-image to the real world of bodily and social contact, prompting beholders to decide on the ethics and emotions of their reactions to the critical passivity of Amber Doll.[32]

Hawk Swanson invested her life-size self-portrait sculpture with an ersatz personhood, and she achieved for herself a receptivity closer than any would-be Pygmalion. She exaggerated the myths of animation and of passivity that characterize the history of sculpture, pushing them to their limits in order to expose the exercise of control that so easily rises to the surface of any sculptural encounter. Furthermore, Hawk Swanson's work shows how quickly gender and sex become central to the content of these acts of control, as viewers repeatedly chose to focus on Amber Doll's body as gendered and sexualized. Hawk Swanson's example (however extreme) uses sex and gender to distill the scene of confrontation posed to the viewer by an unmoving, physically present three-dimensional image of the body. Her work illustrates how the passive resistance of the sculptural body poses an immediate opportunity for the confronted viewers to use their ability to move, to touch, and to control. They are postulated

as the addressees of an ethical predicament about how to dispense (or to withhold) power in the face of the passive body.

Recasting the statue's stillness as a resistant act enables one to see more clearly that the space of the sculptural encounter is a theater of power dynamics and corporeal relations. In that theater, viewers (and, to an extent, artists) are faced by passively resistant sculptural bodies, and they engage in a range of relations and reactions to them as both corporeal images and physical copresences. These three-dimensional figures are nonhuman players in this scene, but they nevertheless initiate and make visible the principles that the viewer calls on when confronted with passivity. The sculptural encounter, then, has never been just about the disinterested aesthetic judgments of beauty but also about the ethics of interpersonal relations. The passive resistance of the immotile statue stands up to the motile viewer, leaving them in the position of choosing how to act. In order to undertake a more comprehensive, extensive account of the history of art and aesthetics, we must attend to the ethics that underwrite viewers' finding of themselves in a position to wield or withhold degrees of power. Sculpture's particular interlacing of physicality and representation in three dimensions animates this theater of power relations and its potential for actual bodily contact.

It is incumbent to examine the patterns in the history of sculpture and its literature of justification in order to challenge the ways in which the statue's acts make visible larger cultural forces. Many sculptural encounters may be neutral or uninteresting in this regard, but it is imperative to have an account of the limit cases (of vandalism, of the sexual caress, of the antagonistic kick) that are normally seen as beyond the bounds of the aesthetics of sculpture. They are merely the more extreme manifestations of the ethical predicaments that arise when viewers are confronted with a statue's acts of stillness.

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NOTES

1. Barbara Johnson, "Muteness Envy," in *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 128–53.

2. See also the later expansion of some of these issues in Barbara Johnson's *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), which explores animation and the inanimate in a wide range of cultural texts. Most pertinent to the present analysis is Johnson's discussion of the role of the Pygmalion myth and of the image of the Classical statue in the work of nineteenth-century Parnassian poets and their contemporaries (109–30).

3. Sartre saw this as a limitation to be overcome and argued that Alberto Giacometti's postwar works did this by attempting to render the sculptor's acts of looking at the model across a distance. He saw this "leap into the realm of the unreal" as successful because it made the relation to the material, sculptural object secondary. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the viewer still must confront the material and physically present sculptural body despite the distancing embedded in its image by Giacometti (Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Quest for the Absolute" [1948], in *Jean-Paul Sartre: Essays in Existentialism*, ed. Wade Baskin [New York: Citadel Press, 1965], 388–401, quotation on 395).

4. Ibid.

5. This dynamic of the representational statue offers a heightened experience of what Alex Potts has argued to be a central feature of modern sculptural aesthetics: the sculpture's incitement of fantasies of rapport with objects and its concurrent resistance to be other than an obdurate external thing. He notes,

> The sculptural object within modern bourgeois aesthetics at one level suggests the possibility of an object in the external world that is entirely amenable to the spectator's projective gaze. . . . At another level, the sculptural object is so literally separate and alien, an obdurate thing rather than an amenable image or representation, that it cannot help but present the flip-side of the phantasy of oneness with the external world—the experience of the latter as radically unassimilable to the self's desires, as hostile threat or barrier to these. (Alex Potts, "Male Phantasy and Modern Sculpture," *Oxford Art Journal* 15, no. 2 [1992]: 38–47 quotation on 46–47)

6. Voice-over script for Frank O'Hara's "Sculpting Master of Bolton Landing," 1964, Frank O'Hara Papers, Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

7. Clement of Alexandria, *The Exhortation to the Greeks*, trans. G. W. Butterworth, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 92 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 115–17.

8. Sartre, "Quest for the Absolute," 390.

9. Walter Pater, "Luca della Robbia" (1893), in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 41–46, quotations on 42.

10. For further explication of Onslow Ford and Giacometti's works in this context, see David Getsy, *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877–1905* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 119–41; and David Getsy, "Fallen Women: The Gender of Horizontality and the Abandonment of the Pedestal by Giacometti and Epstein," in *Display and Displacement: Sculpture and the Pedestal from Renaissance to Post-modern*, ed. Alexandra Gerstein (London: Courtauld Institute of Art Research Forum and Paul Holberton, 2007), 114–29.

11. Kenneth Gross, *The Dream of the Moving Statue* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Essaka Joshua, *Pygmalion and Galatea: The History of a Narrative in English Literature*, Nineteenth Century Series (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2001); Mary D. Sheriff, *Moved by Love: Inspired Artists and Deviant Women in Eighteenth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); George L. Hersey, *Falling in Love with Statues: Artificial Humans from Pygmalion to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Victor I. Stoichita, *The Pygmalion Effect: From Ovid to Hitchcock*, Bross

Lecture Series (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Johnson, *Persons and Things*. Similarly, the passive receptivity of the statue is key to the Pandora myth and its translation into sculpture (see Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985], 213–40).

12. For discussion, see Miguel Tamen, *Friends of Interpretable Objects* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

13. For an overview, see A. Scobie and J. Taylor, "Perversions Ancient and Modern: I. Agalmatophilia, the Statue Syndrome," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 11, no. 1 (1975): 49–54. See also Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. 1, part 3: *Sexual Selection in Man* (1905; repr., New York: Random House, 1942), 1:188; and Murray J. White, "The Statue Syndrome: Perversion? Fantasy? Anecdote?" *Journal of Sex Research* 14, no. 4 (1978): 246–49.

14. Such valorizations of domination often go unquestioned in the writing about sculpture. For instance, a recent article by Martin Kayman proposes the "statuesque" as an analogue to the "statute" in legal theory and uses the mobility of the viewer as a paradigm for the civil subject's capacity for dissent and evaluation of new laws ("The Law and the Statuesque," *Law Critique* 24, no. 1 [2013]: 1–22). To summarize his complex argument, a new law is erected (like a statue) and the motile subject must test the law from different perspectives in order to create a new account of justice from it and its changes to previous laws. Kayman analogizes this to the history of sculptural aesthetics and the problem of animation in which an inanimate statue spurs the viewer's invention of "fictions of life." He concludes, "As the experience of the statuesque moves from inert material to an illusion of animation to material again, we are left, in the end, with the narrative of how we found life in the thing" (19). While there is much value in Kayman's sophisticated argument, his position nevertheless inherits from the history of sculptural aesthetics its heroization of the motile viewer's domination of the immotile statue.

15. Alex Potts has seen in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Pygmalion* (1762) a seminal formulation of this issue. He draws out Rousseau's foregrounding of narcissism and its projection onto Galatea:

> Perhaps inadvertently, Rousseau makes an important point here about the narcissism inherent in one's seeing a figurative sculpture as alive in some way. Insomuch as a sculpture succeeds in evoking something living, this happens by way of an enhanced sense of one's own physical presence facing the sculpture. Its momentary resonance is partly an effect of an internalized feeling of being there provoked by its intrusion on one's space. There is simultaneously a narcissistic identification with the imagined figure and a separation and distancing, not the least because it is fixed and inert. This ambiguity can be pleasurable, but it can also be frustratingly elusive and dissatisfying. (*The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000], 35)

16. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (1967): 12–23, quotation on 16.

17. Ibid., 21.

18. For discussion, see Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 188–95.

19. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 21.

20. Ibid., 16.

21. The literature on these object-oriented perspectives is growing rapidly. For useful entries, see Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*, Posthumanities Series

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); and Bill Brown, ed., *Things,* Critical Inquiry Book (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

22. See, for instance, Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographies of Protest," *Theatre Journal* 55 (2003): 395–412.

23. Whitney Davis, "The Subject in the Scene of Representation," *Art Bulletin* 76, no. 4 (1994): 570–75, quotation on 571.

24. My usage of intersubjectivity draws on the legacies of object relations in psychoanalysis. For a useful entry into this literature, see Jessica Benjamin's *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), and *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

25. With this more delineated definition of intersubjectivity, one can still see how unequal and unlike interpersonal confrontations can emerge as transformative. In the case of prejudice against other persons, for instance, it has been a staple of the literature about the overcoming of bias that a moment of intersubjectivity can erupt into and destabilize power-determined interpersonal relations. At this moment, a radical potential for overcoming (or, sadly, redoubling) prejudice is made possible precisely because a recognition of sameness has afforded the mutuality of the intersubjective.

26. For a different account of performativity in the history and aesthetics of sculpture (in which the statuary tradition's construction of bodily ideality is argued to be a performative effect), see Catherine M. Soussloff, "Like a Performance: Performativity and the Historicized Body, from Bellori to Mapplethorpe," in *Acting on the Past: Historical Performance Across the Disciplines*, eds. Mark Franko and Annette Richards (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 69–98.

27. See Caterina Y. Pierre, "The Pleasure and Piety of Touch in Aimé-Jules Dalou's *Tomb of Victor Noir*," *Sculpture Journal* 19, no. 2 (2010): 173–85.

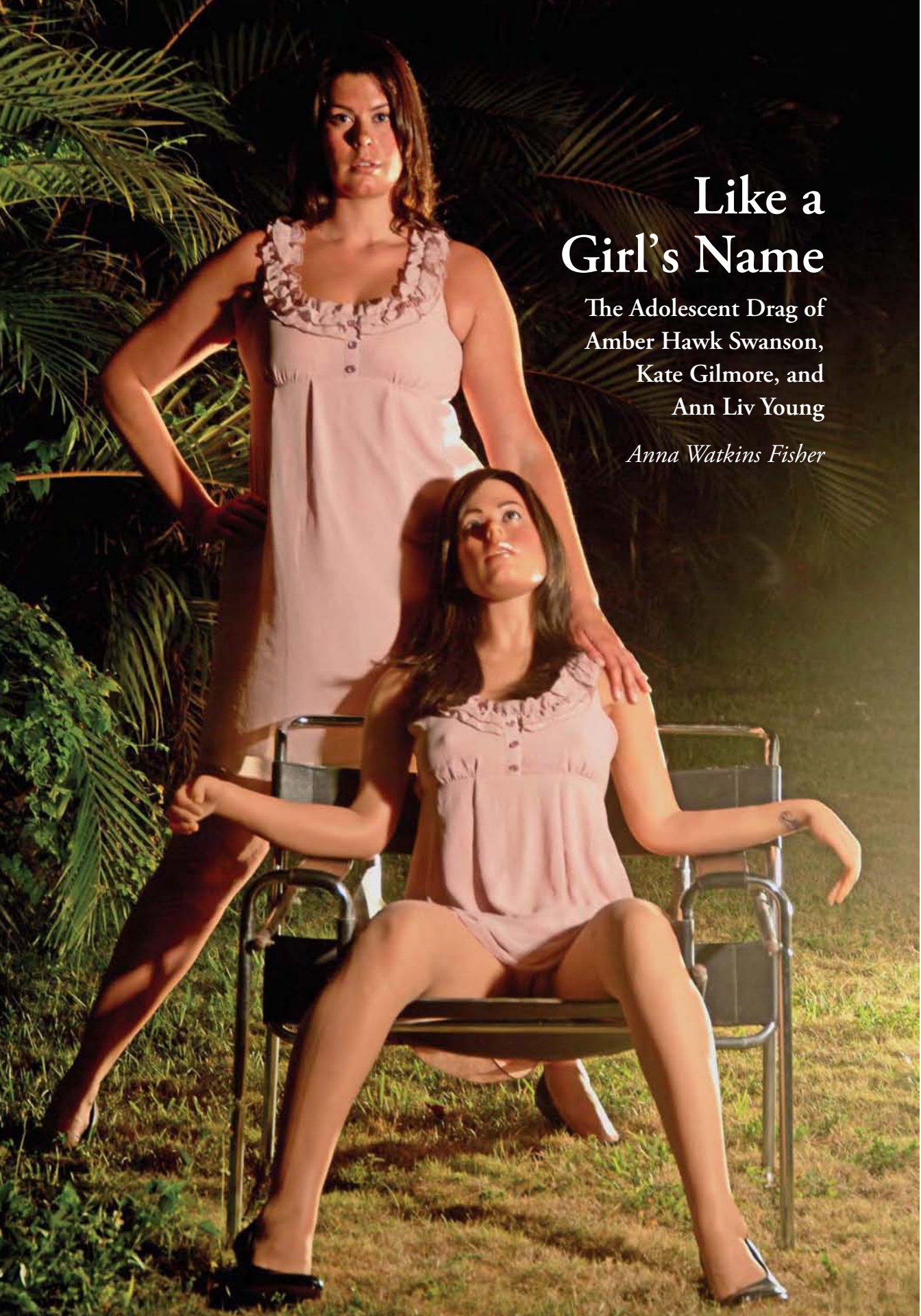
28. Rainer Maria Rilke, "Some Reflections on Dolls" (1914), in *Where Silence Reigns: Selected Prose by Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. D. Levertov, trans. G. Craig Houston (New York: New Directions, 1978), 43–50, quotation on 45.

29. Amber Hawk Swanson, interview by the author, 10 April 2012.

30. More broadly, Amber Hawk Swanson's work extends to social media, where commentators on videos of the *Amber Doll Project* perform analogous acts of criticism, control, insult, and protection on Hawk Swanson herself as its author and artist. For a more extensive discussion of these aspects of Hawk Swanson's work, see David Getsy, "Queer Exercises: Amber Hawk Swanson's Performances of Self-Realization," *GLQ* 19, no. 4 (2013): 465–85.

31. Consequently, the art-historical context for this aspect of Hawk Swanson's practice would be the work of earlier performance artists who adopted passivity and posed moral predicaments to viewers by making their bodies into unmoving objects—like statues. I am thinking, in particular, of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (orig. 1964), Scott Burton's *Self-work: Dream* (1969), Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (orig. 1974), and Chris Burden's *Back to You* (1974).

32. In this regard, Hawk Swanson aims to produce difficulty—in the sense of the term lucidly examined in Jennifer Doyle's *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).



Like a Girl's Name

The Adolescent Drag of Amber Hawk Swanson, Kate Gilmore, and Ann Liv Young

Anna Watkins Fisher

Vulgarity and Unicorns

Any day of the week, you might happen upon choreographer-cum-performance artist Ann Liv Young's labyrinthine personal website to encounter something like the following, which appeared in the Spring of 2009: "march 12th / 7PM / bring your girls along and let's do a girls night. It's a girl's night out. tickets are $15 per person. we'll do facials, nails, a little cooking and some masterbation techniques! (of course we do not discriminate against men or trans.)" Careless spelling errors, cursing, unicorns, dogs, and raw, naked exhibitionism greet you when you land in Young's kitschified fairytale universe, along with the voice of what sounds like a demented witch screaming through your speakers, "Mwahahahaaa!! Welcome to my website. I am Ann Liv Young, demon master!!!" Her homepage features collaged scrapbook cutout images of evil trees, a fairy princess castle, and Young in a bikini staring down the camera with her young child playing beside her (fig. 2). Further in, you find a selection of buttons on a background of ornamental doilies, lavender doodles, and amateur drawings done in Microsoft Windows Paint, inviting you to click on: "DVDs," "Dance company," "Copyright," "Performances," "Animals," "Raps," and "Contact Us" (fig. 3). Animals? Raps? Almost none of the links work (AnnLivYoung.com 2009).[1]

Young's appeal to all her "girls" satirizes third-wave feminism's slogan of "girl power" with the same humor as her ironic juvenilizing misspellings. Young's feigned fervor for "girl stuff" (facials, nails, cooking, masturbation) lampoons the commercial production and exploitation of a privileged representation of femininity ("$15 per person") in her own comically DIY attempt to do so herself. Young hyperbolizes and degrades the adolescent figure that Western culture mandates as a permanent performance for all women, while it figures the girl as unattainable ideal: as endlessly reproducible desire and infinitely viable commercial subject, as that which is constantly renewed and yet entirely replaceable.

In the self-conscious performance of adolescence, the once paternalistic and demeaning appellation "girl" has increasingly become a recognizable queer resignification of compulsory constructions of "womanliness" presented in the mainstream media and certain strands of feminism. Young is one of a number of female contemporary artists in their 20s and 30s whose intermedial performance practices propose the aesthetic of adolescence as a coded response to the question of feminism's continued relevance for the "daughters" of the second wave.[2] This survey of three such artists—Amber Hawk Swanson, Kate Gilmore, and Ann Liv

1. During my interview with the artist, Young claimed her website's inaccessibility to be an aesthetic choice: "People actually say 'I can't find where the button is' but it would be really easy for me to make a little button that says 'Click here'" (Young 2010).

2. Earlier contemporary art progenitors of this move toward the performance of adolescence might include artists such as Tracey Emin, Elke Krystufek, and Chris Kraus, as well as male artists like Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, who have been associated with boyish adolescent aesthetic practices. Over the past decade, female artists who take adolescence as the subject of their portraiture have become extremely visible in the field of contemporary art: see for example, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Rineke Dijkstra, Miwa Yanagi, Tomoko Sawada, Julia Fullerton-Batten, Nikki S. Lee, Sue de Beer, Anna Gaskell, Justine Kurland, Katy Grannan, Sarah Jones, and Laurel Nakadate.

Figure 1. Amber Hawk Swanson poses with Amber Doll in To Have and To Hold and To Violate *(2006–2008). (Courtesy of Amber Hawk Swanson)*

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Figure 2. "Mwahahahaaa!!" the homepage of Ann Liv Young's website beckons. annlivyoung.com, 2011. (Courtesy of Ann Liv Young)

Young—advances a hermeneutic for reading the improvisational aesthetic of *adolescent drag*, a parasitical operation that redirects notions of kitsch and regression to critique the limited identificatory positions available to a generation of young women said to be the heirs of Western feminism: either that of the sanctimonious convert or the rebellious postfeminist, the good or the bad daughter. Their performance of adolescence is decidedly *not* a further proliferation of postfeminism, a form of antifeminism that has itself co-opted adolescent tropes these artists seek actively to reclaim.[3] Adolescent drag is rather a younger generation of women artists' tactical negotiation with their cultural inheritance from 1960s and '70s feminist art and from second-wave feminism more broadly. Feminism—that is a particular conception of Western feminist theory—is regarded here as a radically contingent project of often diverse and contradictory efforts made to improve the social conditions of gendered subjects.[4] It is nevertheless a project that has been mired in a certain set of normative conventions and stereotypes that have claimed to represent it in both mainstream and scholarly arenas. Theorists such as Elisabeth Badinter and Janet Halley have offered polemics arguing Western feminism's exhaustion, while Saba Mahmood, Linda M.G. Zerilli, and Gayatri Spivak have critiqued the exclusions produced by its Western tradition.[5]

Few, however, have asked if an earnest and transparent identification with feminism is necessary, or even desirable, for the overall health of feminism as a political project. How does the very concept of performance serve to mediate historically positivistic strands within feminist theory that have proved challenging for a younger generation of would-be feminists? The aes-

3. Adolescent drag is a performance of "pre-feminism" offered in response to the threat of "postfeminism." Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra have described postfeminism as a popular idiom "generated and primarily deployed outside the academy, [and therefore] lack[ing] the rigor we expect of scholarly work" (Genz and Brabon 2009:18). Adolescent drag trafficks in irony to neutralize the anticriticality of postfeminism.

4. While "Western feminism" is an admittedly inadequate designation, it provides the basis for this essay; I don't profess to account for anything like global feminism or non-Western feminisms. While the deficiency of vocabularies for critically engaging "Western feminism" is a central concern of this essay, this is not a problem that adolescent drag resolves.

5. See Badinter (2006), Halley (2008), Spivak (1988), Zerilli (2005), and Saba Mahmood (2005), who offer diverse critiques of Western feminism, simply stated, as a majoritarian project.

Figure 3. The online menu served up on Ann Liv Young's doily-covered webpage. annlivyoung.com, 2011. (Courtesy of Ann Liv Young)

thetic of girlishness dragged by the artists has become a recognizable cultural distillation of womanhood. There is a current interest in this aesthetic across disciplines in contemporary art, as several recent exhibitions demonstrate: *Girl's Night Out* at the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach, California, 14 September 2003 to 25 January 2004; *Heartbreaker* at the Mary Boone Gallery in New York from 2 November to 16 December 2006; and *Girlish Ways: The Next Generation of Female Artists* exhibit from 28 June to 6 July 2008 at the Bobby Fisher Memorial Building in Washington, DC. It appears ever more urgent to interrogate the relevance to feminist debates of the insistent reverberation of adolescence as a theme within the visual fields of contemporary art and performance. Swanson, Gilmore, and Young model the performance of adolescence as a prism through which they refract and redefine the project of contemporary feminism.

Notably all New York City–based, relatively commercially successful white artists, Swanson, Gilmore, and Young simultaneously luxuriate in and lampoon the aura of Western privilege and whiteness as they attend to the aesthetic of adolescent femininity and the perception of feminism at large. The adolescent figure is inextricable from the white, Western privilege that affords the time and space to be a child, the luxury that laboring or forgotten children are not afforded, the "development" withheld from racialized or colonialized subjects.[6] These artists seek to pervert such privilege, visualizing its excess and rendering its myopia comic. They "act out" an adolescent confrontation. Rather than *actually* being or behaving like adolescent girls, these artists appropriate and *stage* the adolescent as a serviceable figure for articulating a more loosely ordered and multifarious contemporary feminism, organized by tactical disidentifications with both the mother (and the previous generation of women performance artists), figured by second-wave feminism, and the daughter, figured by third-wave feminism. The strategic reappropriation of the adolescent exploits a double prejudice in the genre of feminist performance art, as the figure of the adolescent indexes failure within both the spheres of feminist

6. The kind of adolescent nostalgia I am describing here at the same time props up and critiques white supremacy and bourgeois privilege in the Western cultural imaginary. See Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011) for further reading on the construction of girlhood as a racial formation.

theory and performance art.[7] The adolescent has represented a slippery, at times exasperating, subject for a critical feminist project historically oriented toward the fully mature political subject "woman," as evidenced by bitter dividing lines cited in the "mother-daughter" conflict between second and third-wave feminism. The characteristic ambivalence and protean nature of the adolescent challenges historical political inclinations within feminism toward a certain unequivocality, transparency, and frontalism thought to be necessary for a communicable politics. These tendencies have at times manifested themselves in a dangerous universalism that has been rigorously critiqued by scholars of critical race, postcolonial, and queer studies, tendencies that have nonetheless often yielded a priggish and exclusionary image of feminism. These critiques of a prescriptive feminism have been further, if ironically, marshaled to accuse feminism of appearing like too much of a reified type, and especially, too much like a mother figure. Likewise, figuring performance art as adolescent has long been a critique used to disparage it as a nontraditional or experimental genre, adolescent as epithet for the kind of art perceived to be too crude, petulant, or awkward for inclusion in the museum.[8] The adolescent refigures the internalization of this disparagement, this shame, as potential, an affect the artist Chris Kraus has explored extensively, writing of her own adolescent feelings of feminist and artistic inadequacy well beyond her teenage years: "Cause shame was what we always felt, me and all my girlfriends, for expecting sex to breed complicity. ('Complicity is like a girl's name')" (1997:171).

The portrait of the adolescent developed here is one drawn rebelliously *between* the mother and the child, typified by the anachronistic bricolage that offers a hodgepodge of signifiers plucked from both children's cultural and aesthetic references (fairytales, dress-up games) and mature associations (explicit nudity, pornography, cursing). In these artworks, the mature/immature developmental binary gets mapped onto the highbrow/lowbrow taste divide, as amateur aesthetics emerge as the condition of possibility for a queering of the adolescent figure that transverses and troubles such normative binaries. Adolescent drag is an appropriated form of primitivist mimicry that, in its manipulation of these binaries, borrows from a tradition of artists of color who have engaged the aesthetics of amateurism as a form of antiracist or postcolonial critique. As the identificatory possibilities of drag have become ever more elastic within performance discourse over the last decade,[9] the adolescent is mobilized as a site of performance exemplary of what Elizabeth Freeman has called "temporal drag" (2000). While not explored at length in this essay, Brooklyn-based performance artist Neal Medlyn's ardent dragging of Britney Spears and Miley Cyrus for his two-part performances *...Her's a Queen* (2009) and *Brave*

7. *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter wrote in 2002, "Of the liberation movements for which the late 20th century will be remembered, few have been as disparaged as feminism, and that scorn extends to the women's art movement. Even presumably well-intentioned art-worldlings seem incapable of talking about it without condescension, as if it were some indiscreet adolescent episode best forgotten" (Cotter 2002).

8. The equation of performance art to adolescence is one that continues to reveal itself in the public consciousness. During an episode of Bravo's popular reality TV show *Work of Art* entitled "A Shock to the System" (season 1, episode 4), which premiered 30 June 2010, contestants were asked to create a shocking work of art. Upon judging a performance piece created by the performance artist Nao Bustamante, art critic Jerry Saltz declares with disgust: "This comes across as adolescent mixed with 'shock your grandmother' performance art."

9. "Drag" has been a key term wielded within the broader campaign of lesbian and gay studies, and subsequently queer theory and increasingly performance studies, to unhinge identification from what some have perceived as its psychoanalytic orthodoxies and to understand it as a more fluid and transitive performative site for social contestation in staging and improvisation. See José Esteban Muñoz's discussion of "terrorist drag" in *Disidentifications* (1999) and, more recently, punk's utopian "stages" in Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009), David Román's "archival drag" (2005), Elizabeth Freeman's "temporal drag" (2000), and Rebecca Schneider's recent writing on the cross-temporal "drag" of reenactment art in *Performing Remains* (2011) as attempts to move questions of identity into wider fields of cultural figuration that have been associated with post-identity politics. Here, opportunities for identity play have become increasingly marked by greater transitive ease and mobility of identificatory signifiers, from which the adolescent emerges as but one example among many.

New Girl (2010) is a manifestation of the contemporary zeitgeist of adolescent drag (fig. 4).[10] Dysfunction, self-fascination, experimentation, humiliation, and vulgarity are all marshaled in adolescent drag as costuming for bittersweet play-worlds that serve as the stage for trying on new relationships to one's gendered identity and for trying out new models of feminism that remain always *in rehearsal*.[11] The characteristic liminality of both adolescence and performance are conjoined in a single critical register. They allow the feminist project, and the generational "waves" that have represented it within popular and critical discourse, a generative free play. These works, and my analysis of them, strive not to recapitulate tired generational models, heteronormative family metaphors, and other modalities of reading that seek to pit women against each other, but instead are interested in how performed and ironic *activations of such models* might open up impasses within feminist theory.

Figure 4. Neal Medlyn poses in a publicity photo for his September 2010 debut of Brave New Girl *at The Chocolate Factory, New York City. (Courtesy of Neal Medlyn)*

These performance works exist both as live performance and in their afterlife as media documentation on the artists' personal websites, in the popular and art press, and as photographs and videos of live performances available in museums and online.[12] Swanson, Gilmore, and Young's performance practices are perhaps best described as intermedial, engaging as they do various forms of media simultaneously—video and photography, digital media, sculpture, painting, and installation—and in so doing, recalling intermedia and adolescence's shared status as *intermediate forms* organized by a logic of "between-ness."[13] The artists' relationships to media are not

10. Part One of his performance, presented by the Dance Theater Workshop in October 2009, entailed the transition of Britney Spears from "destroyed icon to purity through a candy-drug induced forgetfulness" (Stonebraker 2010). Part Two, *Brave New Girl*, opened at the Chocolate Factory in October 2010.

11. In *Becoming*, Carol Mavor writes of the thrall to the adolescent as the lure of the open: "The fantasy of the child, pure tabula rasa, is ripe and ready for our own predetermined inscriptions: pink, blue, pants, skirt, dress-up, play [...] naughty or nice" (Mavor 1999:xxxii).

12. For further reading on the question of live performance's afterlife in media, see Rebecca Schneider's essay "Intermediality, Infelicity, and Scholarship on the Slip." Schneider describes intermediality as the "problem" of the slippage intrinsic to performance studies—of "slipping between and across media, playing with terminology that might belong, properly, to one medium more than another" (2006:253). This slip is useful for explicating Swanson, Gilmore, and Young's adolescent exploitation of the temporal slipperiness between media. Adolescent drag performs an undoing of the medial and temporal logics that say, as Schneider does in *Performing Remains*: "The then is *then,* the now is *now,* the dead are dead, lost: we cannot go back" (2011:49). Schneider refuses divisions that have long pitted performance against the archive and the live against mediation within performance studies (see for example Schechner 1985:50; and Phelan 1993:146).

13. Intermedia is a concept usually attributed to Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, who used it to describe the ineffable, often confusing, interdisciplinary activities between genres that became prevalent in the 1960s, during the same period that performance theory emerged as a discipline.

"unformed" (like the child's) as Rosalind Krauss argued of intermediality[14] but rather reflect a vigorous proliferation of forms that contribute to the aesthetic of adolescence as being one of overaccumulation produced from an interdisciplinary play across genres. The "kitsch effect" of their intermedial approach is amateur and baroque, as no one form is isolated, no one medium mastered to the point of anything approaching virtuosity.

Media functions in these works in much the same way that allegory does: as a stalling of movement. Allegory for Walter Benjamin is a mode of figuration that supposes discontinuity as opposed to the fallacious continuity offered by romantic symbolism (2003:160–63). If the value of allegory lies in its failure to express the idea it aims at, adolescence can be seen as an allegorical deferral of "succeeding" into womanhood and the endlessly looped mediation of performance ensures its failed progression. Adolescence here appears less as a developmental line of flight and more an awkward arrest, like an embarrassing snapshot or the shock of being caught unprepared—a queer hovering in (and out of) time that understands the adolescent in terms deeply informed by recent work in queer theory on queer temporality.[15] These performance artists engage media that arrest or freeze the temporality of their adolescent performance in order to underscore their use of adolescence as queer, rather than capitulate to progressive developmental trajectories or otherwise heteronormative ways of being in relation to time. To be sure, my engagement with these performances extends from my understanding of the adolescent as an allegorical figure for a state of becoming that is profoundly queer.[16] The adolescent plays with the potential to be found in performances of failure and uncertainty, operations that challenge the progressive narratives by which concepts of affirmation and liberation have historically been trafficked within identity politics, as a number of queer theorists have recently described.[17] Indeed, awkwardness binds all of the sins of adolescence in its propensity for illu-

14. In her influential essay "Reinventing the Medium" (1999) Rosalind Krauss posits intermediality as a state in which art essentially becomes complicit with capital by an undoing or unforming of the autonomy of the medium (understood as a subtractive or disintegrative process). I, however, would contrast this rather dour view of intermediality (as an un-forming) with intermediality as a productive accumulation.

15. Adolescent drag builds on recent work in queer theory on rethinking normative standards for being in relation to temporal progression by asking how the adolescent might be mobilized as a form of feminist drag. This work invests in temporality as an identificatory category, along with race, sexuality, and gender (see for example Dinshaw [1999]; Halberstam [2005] and [2011]; Love [2007]; Freeman [2000]). Both Judith Halberstam's and Elizabeth Freeman's interventions ask how queering time might be used, not to leave feminism or other so-called "anachronisms" behind, but rather (as Freeman's terminology of "temporal drag" suggests) to demand that feminism be picked up and pulled into a queer futurity.

16. The child has represented a divisive figure for theorists who have sought to frame a queer critical agenda. Both Lee Edelman and Kathryn Bond Stockton have argued that the child is a particularly charged figure for queer theory for the way that it has been activated as a political figure to deprive gays and lesbians of rights: to compare queers to the child stalled out of time or cast as developmentally stalled or to deny them other rights, such as the right to adopt children because they choose not to reproduce as heterosexuals. For Edelman, the child figure has represented the anti-queer figure *par excellence*, symbolizing in his book *No Future* the "'self-evident' one sidedness" of reproductive futurism and absolute privilege of heteronormativity (2004:2). The potential queer use-value of the child is reconsidered by Stockton, who argues that the always already queer child provides a model for deflating or delaying the "vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up," alternative mappings of becoming that register more broadly experimental, disturbing, and disruptive vernaculars of self-knowing (2009:11). José Esteban Muñoz has argued, counter to Edelman, that the queer's so-called developmental stall offers in adolescent aesthetics its own utopian glimmers: "The celebration of an aesthetics of amateurism are reminiscent of punk rock's aesthetics. The performances of amateurism [...] signal a refusal of mastery and an insistence on process and becoming" (2009:106).

17. Heather Love argues that the association of homosexual love with loss proposes a queer "turn backward" that refuses "frontal" logics of normative progress or success (Love 2007). Judith Halberstam proposes failure as an

minating the difficult, inappropriate, clumsy, and self-conscious political subject. The adolescent here embraces, lingers in, and insists on an awkward stance for feminism, as awkwardness[18] is activated as the thing that disrupts teleological time, as that which "causes difficulty or inconvenience, is not smooth or graceful."[19]

The stakes of "becoming a woman," as Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote in *The Second Sex* (1949), are called into question by the figure of the adolescent. The progression toward womanhood is contested, as is emancipation as the guiding principle of feminist politics. In this critical-historical moment, concepts such as "liberation" and "revolution" appear increasingly inadequate for accounting for the fractured, intersectional, and relational experience of gender in postmodernity, especially as one's ability to fully visualize, conceptualize, and somehow escape the field of social violence in global late capitalism is, at this point, pretty unthinkable.[20] Not yet recognized as tactics, these performances appear as excess that exceeds current expressions of second and third-wave feminism. Swanson, Gilmore, and Young embrace adolescence, as both a conceptual and aesthetic modality, to argue for a representation of a conception of feminism that can assimilate irony, awkwardness, and equivocality—indeed performance—for feminism's own tactical gain.

The Artists

Amber Hawk Swanson

For Amber Hawk Swanson's *The Feminism? Project* (2006), made while she was an MFA student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the artist asked women from her home state of Iowa—from fellow sorority sisters to her own mother—about their relationship to feminism. In a series of short videos, Swanson performs these responses as monologues, while engaged in highly charged sexual scenarios: giving a handjob to her boyfriend, being spanked by him, being penetrated by him, having her toenails painted by her father, being fondled by a woman, and finally penetrated by another woman.[21] In the scene with her father, the "Lolita scene" *par*

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oppositional tool of refusing to acquiesce to the capitalistic narratives of power and discipline: "As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities" (2011:88).

18. Performance theory certainly has its own adolescent awkwardness. In *Professing Performance*, Shannon Jackson playfully dramatizes the unavoidable "dinner table conversation" dreaded by all Performance Studies scholars, the conversation that stages the intellectual affect of *feeling just not quite understood*: "Per-form-a-tiv-ity...what does... that mean?" "At dinners, in deans' offices, in department meetings, at academic conferences, in office hours, in rehearsals, such interactions testify to an awkward and emergent period in the study and practice of theatre and performance," writes Jackson, "I happen to believe that it is necessary both to analyze the dispositions that produce that awkwardness as well as to embrace awkwardness as a condition of emergence" (Jackson 2004:1–2).

19. See "awkward" in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

20. Whether it be Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation ([1971] 2001), Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony (2000), or Michel Foucault's theory of discipline (1995), theorists concerned with questions of dominance have consistently articulated the very impossibility of isolating the mechanisms of power within the constantly shifting ideological grid of postmodern space and time. Fredric Jameson described this as a problem of "cognitive mapping," or our inability to grasp our position within a global system of enormous complexity and what he describes as necessary for us to "regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as social confusion" (1991:54). If cognitive mapping proves impossible in the present world system, then Jameson's intervention reveals the very stakes of *feminist* strategy in a moment when being a strategist (if a "strategist" is a leader capable of perceiving the whole field of action at once) is no longer possible.

21. Given the postulate that performance art typically engages "real bodies" as its medium, and typically the artist's own body, the spectator of Swanson's work may assume that the "boyfriend" and "father" in these videos to be Swanson's own boyfriend and father. These could just be assumptions.

Figure 5. Still from Amber Hawk Swanson's video "Not a Feminist Way of Thinking, Daddy's Little Girl" from her The Feminism? Project *series (2006). (Courtesy of Amber Hawk Swanson)*

excellence,[22] the artist props herself up on a ruffled bedspread in what appears to be a young girl's lavender bedroom (fig. 5). Wearing a matching pink sweatshirt and shorts, the artist poses in the foreground with a teddy bear perched behind her. In another, Swanson performs the perpetually pubescent ritual of applying depilatory cream on her eyebrows and upper lip in the bathroom mirror as she delivers a particularly naïve script with deadpan Valley-girl intonation:

> I don't really spend a lot of time thinking about feminism because I view women and men as *equals* and *that's the definition*, *so*... I do think it is represented in me. I don't ever think of myself as *inferior* to a *man*. In fact, most of the time I find myself smarter or more well-rounded. But I don't know, I mean, men and women are equal and whether the guy next to me thinks so or *not*, this is *my life*, *so*... I mean I know a lot of women, and not necessarily *lesbians*, or people who are really *political*, spend a lot of their life fighting for it. I guess I just have *other things to do*... (Swanson 2006)

The confused content of Swanson's monologue underscores the narcissism of a fundamental lack of logic at work in one young woman's refusal of feminism. Feminism here is given as the very definition of its own cultural outmodedness, a claim that is nevertheless undone by its own tautology ("because men and women are equals and *that's the definition*"). Feminism is further cited as a project reducible to "lesbians" or "people who are really *political*," and thus one ancillary to the young woman for whom feminism constitutes more of a threat than "the guy next to [her]." In her Valley-girl delivery, Swanson capitalizes on the girl's failure to produce logical connectors, theatricalizing the adolescent quality of her discourse's suspended inarticulation ("I mean..." "I guess..." "*so*..."), a rhetoric that is stuck reproducing the same ideas over and

22. This image restages the scene from the opening credits of Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation of Vladimir Nabakov's *Lolita,* in which the viewer discovers Lolita (played by Sue Lyon) lying down while Humbert Humbert (James Mason) paints her toenails.

over. The disruptive hiccup "this is *my life*" interrupts the young woman's discussion of feminism, as if feminism, as opposed to the injustices it attends to, threatened the speaker's ability to live without the intrusion of politics. Swanson brilliantly exposes this solipsistic fantasy ("I guess I just have *other things to do*") *as political* in her own ironic restaging of it as art.

Swanson's performance of over-processed, plastic-tiara femininity satirizes oversexed sorority girls and suburban princesses by juxtaposing their predictability with graphic sex acts. Swanson's send-up of sorority-girl femininity is shocking not so much for its exaggerated quality as a parody, but rather for its status as a highly recognizable cultural type that far exceeds the confines of the sorority house and instead has come to pervade every level of commercial culture. As definitions of feminism get rehearsed, the scenes get more and more gay, "climaxing" finally in an interruption of the given "feminist script" as Swanson reaches orgasm with her female partner in the final scene. As the scenes progress, Swanson, the former sorority girl, outs herself as the lesbian that the young woman had phobically coded as feminist. Swanson's project brilliantly ironizes the disjuncture between the typification of femininity in mass culture and its more illusory lived experience to imply that such irony might have something to tell us about the "open question" of contemporary feminism, as posed in her title (*The Feminism? Project*).

In 2006, Swanson also began *To Have and To Hold and To Violate* (2006–2008), a work that brings new meaning to the old adage "a labor of love." Part coming-out project and part experiment in public sadomasochism, Swanson's project explores themes related to her latent lesbian desire alongside her performance of a sorority-girl brand of hyperfemininity, a thematic juxtaposition that has become Swanson's trademark. In this latest work, Swanson orders a Realdoll (the Hollywood special effects version of a blow-up sex doll) in her own likeness (fig. 1) and makes the doll into her own personal voodoo doll and lover. The artist (who has the word "Bully" tattooed on her wrist) and her doll (for whom the word "Prey" was painted on its wrist) are married in a backyard ceremony.[23] Swanson's work appears to call the bluff on feminism's claimed incorporation of lesbianism and sadomasochism, as she explores the aesthetic impact of the seeming ideological incongruities that arise from her double embodiment of femininity as that which would seek both to *have* and to *hold* itself. Swanson images diverse tonalities of femininity simultaneously, enacting femininity's ability to stand as both object of *desire* (its to-be-hadness) and object of *oppression* (its to-be-heldness or to-be-violatedness). In so doing, Swanson's projects dramatize femininity as its own "threat" to feminism—as not merely a site of political agency as many third-wave feminists have argued—but also as a site of complicity, cruelty, and sadomasochistic pleasure.

Swanson creates and manipulates the doll as synecdoche for childhood, which as a Realdoll comes to be associated in her project with extremely sexualized femininity. Swanson produces a disquieting image of femininity by conflating the cultural currents that index and shape it but nevertheless are given to contradict each other. The doll here convenes, rather disturbingly, these two usually partitioned sites of rigorous commodification of femininity: the child and pornography. In the figure of the doll, the same signifier that sends one to the realm of pure innocence *and* to the realm of pure perversion gets collapsed into one. As a site of the conflation of two supposedly separate realms, the doll becomes the instrument by which Swanson can explore the darker impulses in women's supposed sexual emancipation. Of her decision to acquire "Amber Doll," Swanson has said, "I was looking for a receptacle for the onslaught of attention and negative feedback—a stand-in for myself. It was just the right amount of crazy to order a $12,000 doll" (McClure 2009). Swanson continues, "The total time from the beginning of my discussions with them to eventually picking her up to be mine was nine months.

23. Swanson's marriage to Amber Doll was documented in an 11-minute video of the performance event during which guests were invited to interact with Amber Doll for the cutting of the cake, the first dance, the tossing of the garter, and the bouquet toss. Attendees of the reception could also pose with Amber Doll in portraits later exhibited as part of the project.

Which of course cracks me up, thinking about her as my twin, my wife, and a baby of sorts." The artist creates the doll less as an oppositional object to distinguish herself from and more to materialize a sexual milieu that the artist herself inhabits. The doll is a parody, but a parody of herself, in her own likeness. By making the doll symbolize women's objectification—by making herself into an object for her own self-objectification—Swanson produces herself as an objective correlative of femininity through which she can exorcise her own ambivalent feelings toward "herself."

Kate Gilmore

With a background in sculpture, the performance artist Kate Gilmore is best known for methodically constructing physical obstacles and claustrophobic environments—propelled objects, plaster walls, piles of rocks—that she must either withstand or demolish in the short durational performances that she documents as videos. Gilmore kicks, hacks, claws, and hurls her weight through her physically demanding performances. Her targeted actions are reminiscent of conventions established by Fluxus artists, as if she were following a simple "score" or set of instructions for performing the work: keep smiling while things are thrown at you, break through a wall, stuff your head through a wooden cutout of a star (fig. 6). In her performance *Walk This Way* (2008), Gilmore performs for a still camera. Wearing a color-coordinated dress and high heels, the artist begins to knock down an exposed wall, hurling the weight of her body and the applied force of her high-heeled shoe (fig. 7). The vaginal rupture reveals that the interior side of the wall is a glossy magenta, matching the silk flower in her hair. This earlier work seems to anticipate its three-dimensional version, the performance piece *Standing Here* (2010), featured in the 2010 Whitney Biennial, which has garnered Gilmore more mainstream recognition. In the work, Gilmore, adorned in polka-dotted dress and ponytail, uses the full force of her body to puncture holes, find footing, and ultimately scale the inside of a column—an uncanny structure akin to a vertical tunnel or upstanding birth canal—which she herself has designed. In both of these works, Gilmore dramatizes the "labor" of femininity, playing the part of Sisyphus in pink to expose femininity's absurd complicity in often destroying the thing that it has itself built. Gilmore's work visualizes the frustrating impossibility of final closure, as the motif of ceaseless repetition in her performed tasks conveys the narrative of femininity—and perhaps, by extension, of feminism—as one without the promise of easy resolution. While Gilmore has said, "The core of my work is about obsessively and determinedly trying to achieve something" (RocklandArtClasses.com 2010), the artist's performances nevertheless "thwart victorious resolution" (Kilston 2009).

Figure 6. Kate Gilmore strains to push her face through a star cutout in a piece of plywood in Star Bright, Star Might *(2007). Still from performance video. (Courtesy of Kate Gilmore)*

In May 2010 the artist changed gears, directing and choreographing a work funded by the Public Art Fund called *Walk the Walk* (2010) in New York City's Bryant Park (fig. 8). Seven young women hired by Gilmore, dressed in identical, brightly colored yellow dresses (and when it was colder, matching bright-pink cardigans), walk across an eight-foot-high, enclosed, yellow platform. They look like 1950s-inspired paper dolls come to life atop a minimalist Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade float. Purposefully, collectively, constantly, they walk together and into one another, with only 100 square feet of surface area available to them. Various critics have observed the work as homage to the urban pedestrian or a performance about Manhattan working girls. "Is it a psychology experiment? A catwalk gone horribly wrong? A reality show? An ad for organic bananas?" asks one *New York Times* critic (Kennedy 2010). At times the young women's walking styles appear spirited or focused, but more often than not they just looked bored, tired, or cold. Spectators might just as easily have regarded the piece as a fairly explicit metaphor for the limited political positions available to young women in the Western contemporary context. The image is striking; it resembles that of seven young women trapped in an elevated playpen or crib, as if to caricature the tendency for bourgeois femininity to be at the same time put on a pedestal, infantilized, and circumscribed by a limited number of options.

Figure 7. Gilmore uses her high heel to break through drywall in this still from her video Walk This Way *(2008) made on-site for her show at New York City's Smith-Stewart Gallery. Still from video performance. (Courtesy of Kate Gilmore)*

Art critic Lyra Kilston has written of Gilmore in the magazine *Modern Painters* (referencing Carolee Schneemann's groundbreaking 1975 performance *Interior Scroll*): "The bluntness of her acts seems appropriate for the female stereotypes Gilmore parodies, yet this is *not your mother's* feminist video art: lipstick, color-coordinated hair ribbons, and an eager-to-please smile usurp 1970s scraggly underarm hair and vaginal scrolls" (2009). To be sure, Gilmore indexes femininity as a stand-in for frustrations of and with feminism, her choices appearing to be symbolically important for their flattened-out, preordained quality—her "matchy matchy," monochromatic color schemes, her minimalist sculptural forms. Gilmore's carefully chosen imagery appears as if reduced to the pure conceptualization produced out of the high contrast between tropes of femininity and the comparatively unadorned surface of their armature. The overthought quality of her passive aggressive symbolism—one that insistently *gestures* toward feminism but never dares speak its name—suggests that there is something necessarily opaque about young women's present-day relationship to making explicitly feminist representations, an assertion that gets mediated, as Kilston suggests, in the adolescent transmission of Gilmore's nonetheless feminist art.

Figure 8. Sponsored by the Public Art Fund, Kate Gilmore's Walk the Walk *was staged during office hours in New York's Bryant Park throughout the work week of 10 to 14 May 2010. Performers included Sae Hae Chung, Amanda Gale, Lindsey Graham, Michelle Kane, Aiyana Knauer, Kirby Mages, Seyhan Musaoglu, Habby Osk, Kenya Robinson, Becky Sellinger, Geneva Sills, Sophia Stoll, Jessica Whittam, Rachel Wieking. (Courtesy of Kate Gilmore)*

Ann Liv Young

Ann Liv Young's "anything goes" performance style seems to be serving her well. Performing camp adolescence as a deranged fairytale, her performances have been puzzled over in the pages of *Artforum* and, recurrently, in the *New York Times*, rewarding her with an intrigued, if befuddled, cult following. Recently, Young has appeared to seal her professional transition from choreographer to performance artist, adjusting to her ill-fitting costuming as "Sherry"—her trash-talking, Southern alter ego, who incidentally has also made Young more than a few enemies over the past few years.[24]

In early November 2010, Young opened *Cinderella* (2010) at Brooklyn's ISSUE Project Room. After three "false starts," the performance began when Young-as-Sherry-as-Cinderella glided out on a pair of roller skates through a field of iridescent balloons (fig. 9). Young's self-conscious aesthetic of failure has been consistently misread as such. In a review of *Cinderella*, filed as a dance review, *New York Times* critic Alastair Macaulay makes clear that he came to the

24. In February 2010, during Brooklyn Is Burning at the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center (now MoMA PS1), Young was abruptly shut down when PS1's Director Klaus Biesenbach ordered the power cut in a windowless room. Young, performing as Sherry, had confronted the performer who went on just before her, Georgia Sagri, and had, according to the account in the *New York Times*, "embarked on a blunt, profane monologue accompanied by masturbation, urination and an attack on Ms. Sagri's work" (La Rocco 2010). Sagri and friends responded by threatening Young in return and, according to witnesses, had to be physically restrained. More recently, Young is said to have incensed veteran performers and activists at a January 2011 Delancey Lounge performance as part of the American Realness Festival (DiGiacomo 2011).

show expecting to see a particular brand of avantgarde virtuosity (pegging Young, at the beginning of the review, as "belong[ing] to the movement in the arts that was labeled Sensation in the 1990s" [2010]) and left very disappointed.[25] He writes: "there are three things for which I was unprepared on Friday night [...:] the startling ineptitude of Ms. Young's performance; the campy, cliquey way she assumed that everyone present already knew all about this show and her previous ones; and the silly consensus whereby most of her audience, giggling coyly now and then, encouraged her" (2010). Macaulay scolds Young for her general ineptitude, boring performance style, and weak diction: "[the show's] first 95 minutes demonstrated many layers of failure. Principally, Ms. Young lacks technique. In addition to the problems already cited, she had to consult notes, repeat passages to get them right and tell her audio technician to change things" (2010). The extraordinary pretension of this review proves a thinly veiled attempt to account for all the things that Macaulay—and many others—simply don't *get* about what Young is doing as an artist: principally, her shrewdness as an artist who cannot possibly fail because failing is exactly what she sets out to do in the first place. Macaulay proves unable to recognize her as an artist for whom failure is the condition of possibility for creating something unpredictable and surreal, indeed for her own kind of success. Poorly fitting prom dress, campy animal balloons, terrible wigs, false starts, cheesy pop music—calling Young's performances "bad" is like calling Santa chubby. As an adolescent might say: "Duh."

Figure 9. Ann Liv Young debuts her Cinderella *with a stage made for a (13-year-old) princess at Brooklyn's ISSUE Project Room on 4 September 2010. (Photo by Davide Trentini)*

Macaulay critiques the artist, and her audience, using the very same aesthetic and ideological frameworks that her performance practice works to expose as self-righteous and shortsighted—frameworks that disallow new possibilities by postulating, for instance, that art must aim toward ideals of mastery, beauty, coherence, professionalism, and resolution. In so doing, Macaulay and likeminded critics unwittingly validate the very relevance of her method, more grist for the mill of an artist who has said of her process: "I want to regurgitate what people think of me onstage" (in Conlan and Beckman 2009:31). Young has a gift for exposing institutional orthodoxies by overidentifying with them so as to perform back for her audience their very own taboos.[26] Many, many weird and interesting things were, in fact, happening during her performance of *Cinderella*, a performance that really began in the lobby when a female usher

25. By comparing Young to one of the Young British Artists, such as Tracey Emin or Damien Hirst, and then chastising her for failing to measure up, Macaulay insists Young be bad in a good way: that she be, in spite of all, commercially appealing.

26. A similar sentiment appeared in the pages of *Artforum*. In September 2010, David Velasco wrote: "Sherry is, after all, not as mad as she appears: she dramatizes the capriciousness of power, but when confronted with authority, she seizes the occasion to expose its 'twisted' logic, making authority reflexive, getting it to turn in on itself" (2010).

bullied waiting audience members into buying candy from her for five cents. Inside the theatre, Young's male collaborator and real-life romantic partner, whom in one interview she comically describes as playing the role of "stunt double" in the show, is adorned in an even cheaper version of Young's own spectacular costume: worse-fitting wig and cerulean Lycra leotard with what appears to be a menstrual stain down the back (Kourlas 2010). As the show begins, he fidgets over the technical aspects of the show under Young's hostile glare. Before long, we hear Suzanne Vega's 1984 a cappella song "Tom's Diner" playing over the speakers, while one of Young's two male backup dancers, sweating and exhausted as the song continues on, keeps the rhythm by violently cracking a whip against the floor. The innocent and nostalgic quality of the folk-inspired song is disrupted in juxtaposition with a young man of color forced to overexert himself in time with the tune of Suzanne Vega. He stops when she stops, starts when she starts, corrupting a particularly earnest portrait of whiteness in a scene decorated like a little girl's cracked-out birthday party. In what follows, Young-as-Sherry-as-Cinderella performs her trademark hardcore karaoke, singing Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" and rapper T.I.'s "Whatever You Like" as if her life depended on it. She sings: "Stacks on deck / Patrón on ice / And we can pop bottles all night / Baby you can have whatever you like (you like) [...] / Late night sex so wet and so tight [...] / Baby you can go wherever you like (you like)." The soberness of Young's vigorously performed hip-hop minstrelsy refuses the conniving wink at the audience that might defuse the cringe effect of her aesthetic choices and awkward-seeming lack of politically correct awareness. Rather than rushing through particularly graphic lyrics of a song, she enunciates them as one might declaim romantic poetry. But instead of reproducing or valorizing the seeming misogyny of T.I.'s song, which positions women as easily attained and discarded materialists (a reading that the song's music video makes particularly pronounced), Young's caricatural re-performance cartoons it as just another commodity to be mined for her not altogether accessible, if undeniably ironic, creative universe. By performing an overidentification with the song's supposed misogyny, Young discloses an ironical, rather than straightforwardly critical, affiliation with the song. This effects a certain opening up of ironic affinities that demonstrate the adolescent performed by Young as a political subjectivity endowed with more complexity than she is often granted by either capitalism or feminism.

Young's girlish aesthetic is informed by her longtime preference for popular culture (and in particular, pop music) over art, fabrics and textures over fashion *per se*, social dynamics over the history of choreography and theatre:

> I wasn't interested in any sort of choreographers at all. I wasn't influenced by that. I never even took a dance history class... I was really inspired by pop culture. The same thing all 29-year-olds were inspired by. Like I love Michael Jackson. I loved... I don't know. I think a big inspiration for me was what I was surrounded by [...] I think I'm more influenced by like social dynamics and the way people interact and the way women interact and the way men interact and the way men and women interact then I am like, "Oh I love this visual artist." You know what I mean? (Young 2010)

Young made *Melissa Is a Bitch* (2005) when she moved to New York after graduating from the dance program at Hollins University. The performance begins with a young bikini-clad woman doing an extended dance to Lionel Ritchie's '80s hit "Running with the Night." The audience becomes her bedroom mirror as she dances energetically from one position onstage for the entirety of the song. In the next scene, two new girls come onstage, eating ice cream. The entire cast's costumes seem to have been dyed green in the same batch. Throughout the performance, as she does in others, Young shouts orders at her performers. From offstage Young's drill-sergeant-like voice screams a command and the two dump their ice creams on the ground simultaneously. A second command prompts them to take off their clothes at warp speed, again perfectly in sync. Two swings drop from the sky and the girls mount them on a third command. The completely unclothed girls hang upside down and begin to shout in unison: "I wish I were dead / I want to fuck everybody I see. / If the world were fair P. Diddy

wouldn't get / the prettiest woman in the world, J-Lo." The bawdiness of Young's play with graphic if utterly de-eroticized nudity, foul language, and erratic behavior takes a surreal form under her militaristic direction and disciplined choreographic methods. Young is a perfectionist reigning over a total mess.

Young explains that *Melissa is a Bitch* was influenced by *Peter Pan*, with the performers resembling the Lost Boys, drawing comparisons with her staging of *Snow White* (2007) and *Cinderella*. Young defiles her fairytale princesses, staging deconstructed versions in which her protagonists appear lost, their gowns dirty and tattered, and their heterosexual romances perverted. In *Snow White*, "Prince Charming" is played by a young actress who dons a ridiculous nude strap-on to the tune of Aaliyah's "Are You That Somebody?" *Cinderella* concludes not with a "happily ever after" but with Young attempting to defecate on command (fig. 10). In a closing monologue, Young-Sherry-Cinderella reads from her Apple laptop: "I am dirty. By dirty, I don't mean skanky or fresh. I mean filthy [...] I am overwhelmed with the idea of myself, who I am, who I may never become and all I see is me [...] I'm sick of regurgitating myself, if there were interesting things around me, I guess I wouldn't have to."[27] In her adolescent drag, Young borrows the camp fairytale back from drag performers. Esther Newton explains the typical drag scenario: "Almost every joke the camp makes elaborates [...] the stories of Snow White or Cinderella" and the drag queen, explains Newton, says, "'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairyest of them all?' and the mirror [responds] (sarcastically), 'you are, girl.' [...] But usually the mirror brutally replies, 'Snow White, you ugly bitch!" Newton notes that in the gay male drag subculture of female impersonators in the late 1960s, "the camp is always the evil stepmother, the jealous ugly sisters, or the wicked queen" (1979:56). Young's camp fairytales borrow more from drag subcultures than Disney to effect a reflexive disruption of the narrative. The adolescent protagonist is the pure and unqualified ideal, who in Young's hands is camped, debased, and worn down.

Figure 10. Cigarettes and coffee at hand, Young as Cinderella attempts to defecate onstage. ISSUE Room Project, Brooklyn, 4 September 2010. (Photo by Davide Trentini)

Adolescent Autogenesis

The critical reception of all three artists has been marked by a certain political confusion: How might such work—performances so clearly indexing issues of contemporary femininity—be read in relationship to feminism? How has what signifies as feminist art changed over the past 40 years? Whereas celebrated women performance artists of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s—Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, Marina Abramović, Adrian Piper, Yayoi Kusama, Karen Finley,

27. This is from Young's unpublished script for the fourth monologue of her September 2010 performances of *Cinderella* at the ISSUE Project Room.

and Ana Mendieta, to name a few—engaged in arguably more explicit and overtly politicized body art practices, this younger generation of artists exhibits work that visualizes a certain amount of ambivalence about what it means to inherit a feminist position, something that I want to distinguish from ambivalence about, in fact, *being* a feminist. When asked this question directly in a 2007 interview about *Snow White* with the magazine *Time Out New York* ("Is this a feminist piece?"), Young responds:

> I don't know. I don't know what the fuck it is. I mean, some people would say it is. We're actually doing two shows in Italy this year, and one is a women's-gender yadda yadda. These people are really into the piece, which I find very interesting. It makes sense that they would be, but I don't know. I feel like this piece is so open-ended. I guess I don't really see it as a feminist piece. I see it more as a solo. (*Time Out New York* 2007)

In my own interview with the artist, Young responded to this same question with an altogether different answer:

> Definitely. 100% for sure. I think [the works] are feminist because I'm a female and I made it. The word feminist is so funny to me because it's become such a broad term, and I think that in some ways that's good and in some ways it's sort of confusing. I think they are feminist, but I am not trying to make feminist work. [...] Whatever I am thinking about at that time, whatever I'm trying to do at that time is... I'm not like women should be free. You know what I mean? For Sherry, it is like women should be free. But that's not my goal. My goal is to portray this character. But yeah I think they are definitely feminist. I don't see how they couldn't be. [...] It's like yes and no mean the same thing to me. I could say maybe. (Young 2010)

Young reserves for Sherry the position that "women should be free." By rendering a liberationist position caricatural, its revolutionary politics are deferred to the land of make-believe. Reserving the positivistic outlook for her alter ego, Young offers a sly critique of a feminist position that would imagine such a thing as "freedom" to be within the realm of possibility and offers instead forms of tactical irony that make use of maneuvers such as obfuscation and multiplication: *no*, *yes*, *maybe*. Sherry might be likened to Swanson's sorority girl or Gilmore's anonymous walking girls, as caricatural embodiments of the overdetermined positions offered by a conception a feminism that, ironically not unlike misogynist discourse, puts pressure on women to take a position and stick to it. Performance provides the artists masks that grant the feminist project access to greater political latitude, a wider field of what might count as feminist, and, however paradoxically, one possible way out of caricature. Swanson, Gilmore, and Young's performance art suggests that it is through caricature that feminists might, in fact, escape the problem of their own caricature. Young, a self-described "escape artist" when it comes to having to explain her practice to people,[28] plays the politics of performed ideological inconsistency and historical ignorance to avoid being made to maintain a single political pose that would too easily risk becoming dogmatic or fossilized over time. In our interview she told me that she "[doesn't] really know what feminist art is," that she "to be perfectly honest" had never heard of Marina Abramović until "the other day," has "never seen anything by" Karen Finley despite constant comparisons, having poured chocolate all over herself in her aptly titled piece *Solo* (2006),[29] and knows "a little bit about" Annie Sprinkle. Claims Young:

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28. Young explained her response when asked what her profession is: "I'm always like, 'I'm sorry I don't really know what I do.' [...] If it is somebody who I don't want to understand what I do and for instance, if it is somebody who doesn't know what a choreographer is, I usually use the word choreographer... And if it is someone who would know what a choreographer is, I usually say performance artist. It's evasion. I am an escape artist" (Young 2010).

29. Young said that she was recently approached by someone about doing a double bill with Karen Finley, an offer that she says Finley subsequently declined. Says Young: "I feel like she is offended or something because she is

> What is so funny is that I am really not influenced by anybody else and I think for some people that is frustrating because I don't go see performance and I don't support my community, whatever that is supposed to mean. I think that is so silly because what is supporting community? Is there only one way to do that? By making work I am supporting my community. Yes it's feminist art. (Young 2010)

"Karen Finley has been doing basically the same thing for 30 years, only better," writes Andy Horwitz, a dance and theatre blogger (in La Rocco 2010).[30] Claudia La Rocco and Gia Kourlas, for the *New York Times*, write of Young's show, *The Bagwell in Me* (2008):

> [T]here was nothing in this half-baked mess that many an artist hasn't done before, and better. Ms. Young has trumpeted her willed artistic ignorance and disdain for her peers. Let's hope for her sake that's the truth, as, just 27, she still has time to look around and learn her history. Either of these actions would enrich her compellingly raw but one-note stage presence. If only she would show less of herself and more of the world. (La Rocco and Kourlas 2008)

Swanson, Gilmore, and Young all respond with a shrug of ironic indifference to those who have come before them, a reaction that is actually more attuned to aesthetic and political projects of their predecessors than the reverence called for by La Rocco and Kourlas. These expectations betray the critics' own misunderstanding of artists such as Schneemann and Finley, whose body art critiqued masculinist formal preoccupations with patriarchal concepts such as originality and genius. Swanson, Gilmore, and Young lay no claim to novelty and insist instead on employing hackneyed signifiers toward an aesthetic of amateurism. Sidestepping the logic of art historical progression may just be their way of refusing the anxiety that comes with acknowledging the influence of the "mother," which would, if ironically, put them deeper into conversation with the "mother" artists of which they are said to be heirs. This claim nevertheless becomes more tenuous when their work is considered in its conceptual frame.[31] In their play with adolescence, they call for a reconsideration of cumulative history and progress as aesthetic and political ideals. They challenge the very desirability of a developmental model as a yardstick of political agency. La Rocco and Kourlas may chastise Young for her "willed artistic ignorance," but such a judgment does not account for the possibility that the artist's purported historical ignorance is, rather than a sincere insight into Young's admitted egotism or laziness, instead part and parcel of her adolescent spectacle. Rather than wag a finger at Young and her peers for failing to fall in line within a larger historical scheme of feminist art, what would it mean to read Young's claimed ignorance instead as a tactical performance of political forgetting, one Judith Halberstam has described as effecting a willful interruption of generational modes of transmission that allow for a different conception of history to become possible (2011:161)?

Swanson, Gilmore, and Young's performance art inhabits a structure of feminism that no longer necessarily bares its name openly and obviously. In picking up and dragging with them the remnants of feminist art, these artists necessarily maintain some vested interest in feminism,

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like 'she is trying to replace me,' but I don't know anything about her. I would think that might be insulting to her. I was thinking like, should I approach her and try to get her to do this double bill with me and act as if I am a huge fan? Or should I tell her, 'I don't know anything about your work?'" (Young 2010).

30. Blogger Andy Horwitz wrote in 2008 on *Culturebot*, a contemporary dance and theatre blog, in a post that has since been removed: "For that matter Penny Arcade, Diamanda Galás and countless other women performers have explored these ideas—and presentations of the human body—in more intelligent, capable, insightful and artful ways" (in La Rocco 2010).

31. Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* proposes that poets are hindered in their creative process by an ambiguous relationship to the poets who came before them (1973). Bloom argues that "the poet in a poet" is inspired by reading another poet's work and will then tend to produce poetry that is derivative therefore weaker because it is not original.

even if only in salvaging its conceptual form. The impossible position of being both inside and outside of feminism speaks to the adolescent awkwardness of the feminist inheritance that can never be given back, *even if it is refused*. "Clearly, this ain't your grandmother's storybook heroine," La Rocco and Kourlas write of Young, echoing Kilston's "not your mother's feminist video art" proclamation about Gilmore. I know somehow it's feminist art, critics seem to say, but it no longer looks like it. Young's claim to "see it more as a solo" indicates a preference in certain moments to maintain her independence by refusing to claim her inheritance and, in others, claiming it only up to a point. By saying "I think [the works] are feminist, but I am not trying to make feminist work," Young argues that feminism always exceeds that which has the pretension to represent it, suggesting her provocative methods as attempts to disallow an all-too-easy consolidation of feminism with a particular set of visual and rhetorical practices. In this way, Swanson, Gilmore, and Young's performative activations of the adolescent as allegory-cum-caricature make a lot of sense, given allegory's work to "designat[e] primarily a distance or relation to its own origin" (de Man 1983:207), here a distancing "of relation" to a particular set of assumptions about feminist art.

The critical reception of these works has been laced with certain preconceptions about so-called antiquated "feminist content"—the "women's-gender yadda yadda" represented by the "ickiness" of Schneemann's "1970s scraggly underarm hair and vaginal scrolls" that critics claim these works index. These works suggest a nostalgia for a lost origin and yet pay homage to the simulacrum through the artist's aesthetic accumulation of borrowed signs, bad copies, and passing fads culled from childhood: fairytales, sentimental pop, baby-doll dresses. Susan Stewart has written of nostalgia as a longing for the purity of home and origin that inevitably proves unreachable. Stewart writes, "Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears [...] a face that turns toward a future-past" (1983:23). The depropriative quality of this work—its quality of a certain political homelessness—might be a way of coming to terms with the sense one has that, for these artists, everything is borrowed. The unintelligibility of irony makes it a fitting mantle for the strand of feminism represented by these artists. Given such refracted accumulation around the concept of feminism, these artists engage irony as a tactic for re-producing images of themselves by reworking borrowed images of "themselves."

Elizabeth Freeman has been especially attentive to the political multiplicity of "the girl." She develops her concept of "temporal drag" through her own set of questions about the "commitment to the 'girl' icon [in the] contemporary political context."[32] Freeman writes, "But the 'girl' revolution also refuses to locate the 'girl' as the beginning of either identity or politics; instead, she represents what Elspeth Probyn calls 'a political tactic [...] used to turn identity inside out'" (2000:741). Like temporal drag, adolescent drag is a tactical model for "turning inside out" the soiled garment of a politics that feminists want to wear again, but differently this time. Deploying the girl figure to different ends, Freeman writes: "'girl' embraces an embarrassing past as the crucial augur of a critical, yet also contingent future [...] The girl-sign acknowledges [...] the uncontrollability of the past, its inability to explain the present—and the promising distortions effected when the past suddenly, unpredictably erupts into the present forms of sexual and gendered personhood" (740–41). Like the lesbian for Freeman's "temporal drag," these artists drag 1960s and '70s feminist art like one would something regarded as a "big drag"—that which appears outdated in its over-earnest politics, symbolized by "scraggly

32. Freeman writes, "The deployment of the girl in recent queer/feminist videos, 'zines, song lyrics, and so on, implicitly critiques radical feminists' repudiation of their own 1950s girlhoods as false consciousness, allowing the politicized adult a more empathetic and even erotic relationship to her former vulnerabilities and pleasures" (2000:740). Freeman's argument engages an extended reading of Elizabeth Subrin's independent film *Shulie* (1997), a shot-for-shot remake of an unreleased 1967 documentary film by the same name by the feminist Shulasmith Firestone. Both the film and Freeman's essay explore regression as a strategy for feminist redress.

underarm hair," not unlike the nagging mother who just won't leave you alone. "Let us call this 'temporal drag,'" writes Freeman, "with all of the associations that the word 'drag' has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present" (728).

In their *performed* ignoring, forgetting, and denying of the figure of the foremother (the feminist theoretical foremother, the art historical foremother) and in their reluctance to accept their position within a generational cultural model as daughters, these artists visualize an uncanny wish *to give birth to themselves*. Swanson literally undertakes to produce herself as her own child, "giving birth" to Amber Doll. Gilmore's work obsessively reenacts a birthing of the self through her own physical materials, pushing her face through holes, breaching barriers with the full force of her being. Young sees it all "more as a solo." What is intriguing about this desire to "re-produce" the self is that, much like their predecessors before them, these artists utilize their diverse media as a means to produce an image of themselves through which they can emerge as political subjects produced in their own likeness (here one need only think of the significance of genres of autobiography and self-portraiture to feminism). Carol Mavor uses the phrase "reading girlishly" to describe the creation of one's own subjective playground, finding "my own place to revel [...] a place to play 'out' those girl-things disavowed by the culture that I call home: from dress-up, to a love for girls, to motherhood itself" (2007:28).

Mavor continues, "The Greek root of the word nostalgia, *nostos* means 'the return home.' But anyone who has been there knows that the return home can be painful" (38). Such has been one lesson of queer theory. Freeman writes, drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's suggestion in her essay "How To Bring Your Kids Up Gay," that "a genuinely queer politics must refuse to abject even the most stigmatized child-figure from formulations of adult political subjectivity" (2000:741). As queer theory has actively intervened on behalf of those subjectivities rendered homeless or orphaned by compulsory logics of normative development and social maturation, some homes must be made in the time and space of the in-between. Swanson, Gilmore, and Young appear to represent a generation of women who are actively in the throes of a certain disidentification with "themselves": those commercialized stereotypes that claim to mirror them in mainstream culture and with the overdetermined political positions on offer to them in supposed contradistinction. Nothing would seem to support this reading more than a recent project of Young's: during an early 2011 artist-in-residency in the choreography department of the Amsterdam Theaterschool (School voor Nieuwe Dansontwikkeling [SNDO]), Young produced a performance with 36 students, based on her character Sherry, called *37 Sherrys* (2011). The show effectively literalizes my reading of Young's work as a performance of adolescent self-refraction and ideological multiplication. Some of the 36 Sherrys eventually turned on Sherry, in what Young claims was an ambush in which four students attempted to force her onto a table and to tape her down (Young 2011).[33]

These three artists "drag" themselves, soberly and irreverently, adorning themselves in the cultural costuming and staging of the white girl fairy princess in late capital. Only this time, the gown is worn too tight or too baggy, stained and dirty, lopsided and terribly unflattering, much like Young's perfectly disturbed Snow White (fig. 11), who literally pulls herself across the floor or Gilmore's surrogates who are all dressed up with nowhere to go. In their performances of autogenesis, the artists present allegories, caricatures, and parodies in their own image. Adolescent drag thus emerges as a mode for staging tactical refusals of compulsory constructions of feminine identity and feminist politics that some women refuse to recognize as representative. And while they may give birth to images of themselves, these images are far from idealized or aspirational—rather, they model a feminist politics that does not aspire to redemption.

33. In a post on the artist's Facebook account, Young (as Sherry?) writes: "I think they were saying that Sherry forces people to do things so they were gonna force me onto a table and tape me down but they didn't get that far" (Young 2011).

Adolescent Interference

"If we refuse to become women [...] what happens to feminism?" Judith Halberstam asks in *The Queer Art of Failure*, a book that proposes a queer feminist approach that she terms "shadow feminism" (2011:123–25). Her project, which follows the anti-social turn in queer theory to ask what's in it for feminism, is one "grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, silence" that "offers spaces and modes of unknowing, failing, and forgetting as part of an alternative feminist project" (124). Halberstam writes, "This shadow feminism speaks in the language of self-destruction, masochism, an anti-social femininity and a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter that ensures that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in doing so, reproduces her relationship to patriarchal forms of power" (124). Halberstam argues that feminism should "lose the mother," citing Saidiya Hartman to advocate for a dismantling of conventional feminist politics by refusing to become the woman defined by Western philosophy, and particularly Western feminism. She engages Gayatri Spivak and Saba Mahmood to critique Western feminism's prescriptiveness regarding notions of freedom and resistance that have, as Mahmood has suggested, "impose[d] a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power" (in Halberstam 2011:127) and further reproduced this model by "passing down" knowledge from mother to daughter. This prescriptiveness has, according to Halberstam, benefited white heteronormativity in the process. Halberstam proposes that feminists refuse the choices on offer to seek escape routes in incoherence, unbecoming, disorganization, and passivity that make up what she calls "a shadow archive of resistance" (129).

Figure 11: Ann Liv Young is Snow White (right) with Emily Wexler as the Evil Queen in her 20 November 2006 premiere performance at Théâtre de la Bastille, Paris. (Photo by Nicholas Strini)

Halberstam's position appears to pin the burden of humanism, colonialism, and universalism on a particularly unsympathetic image of the white feminist "mother," which she prefers to forget by identifying instead with postcolonial and critical race feminism. Her argument met with resistance in an article by Susan Faludi which argues that the "mother-daughter" divide within feminism has become a significant impasse for the contemporary feminist movement, "[a] generational breakdown [which] underlies so many of the pathologies that have long disturbed American feminism" (Faludi 2010:29). Faludi describes the faultlines said to sepa-

Figure 12. 37 Sherrys *(2011), Ann Liv Young's collaboration with students from the School of New Dance Development at Amsterdam's School of the Arts. Something Raw Festival, 18 February 2011. (Photo by Michael A. Guerrero)*

rate the feminist "mother figure" of second-wave feminism and the "daughter figure" of third-wave feminism. Despite her claim not to take sides in the fight, Faludi appears to identify with the "mother," an affiliation betrayed by the article's ultimate declamation against Halberstam's scholarship (implied as too adolescent) juxtaposed with a sentimental portrait of an older feminist, disputing Halberstam's desire to take down "just the mother part of the equation" (Faludi 2010:41). Rather than addressing Halberstam's written work, Faludi takes issue with a conference presentation the scholar made at the "No Longer in Exile" symposium at the New School in the Spring of 2010 where she argued that Lady Gaga's music video *Telephone* proposed a "brave new world of Gaga girliness" that represented "something like the future of feminism" (in Faludi 2010:42).[34] Faludi's critique of "theoretical and consumer-saturated academic feminism" suspiciously conflates Halberstam's theoretical approach with her investment in the tactical possibilities suggested by Lady Gaga's queering of pop culture. Faludi argues that such an approach derails the feminist project from what she proposes to be its ultimate objective: "revolutionary change."

34. According to Faludi, Halberstam describes the "brave new world of Gaga girliness": "What one wants to inspire is new work that one barely recognizes as feminism, and that's what I'm going to call Gaga feminism" (in Faludi 2010:42). In response to Faludi's article, Halberstam writes on the blog: "While Faludi characterizes me as a glib twit who proposed Lady Gaga as the answer to what ails feminism, I actually had tried to show that Lady Gaga's duet with Beyoncé in *Telephone* provides an exciting and infectious model of Sapphic sisterhood that moves beyond sentimental models of romantic friendship and references a different kind of feminism [...] The Gaga piece of my talk was just a humorous ending to a lecture that covered changing notions of gender, evolving models of institutional relevance and argued for an improvisational feminism that kept up with the winds of political change" (2010).

Faludi and Halberstam at the same time debate and *perform* the so-called "mother-daughter conflict," Faludi assuming the stereotypical role of conservative mother and Halberstam that of provocateur daughter, even as they work to expose it as inadequate to the complexities of feminism's present situation.[35] Restaging long-held debates between second- and third-wave feminism about feminism's (in)attention to other forms of difference and the pleasures and dangers of commercial culture, their disagreement evidences a symptomatic elision within similar feminist discourse as both Faludi and Halberstam forget the possibility of the intermediate figure: the adolescent who might avoid having to take sides in the conflict between mother and daughter. Adolescence exploits the poverty of both options, asserting childishness as an excuse and adulthood as too conditioned by tradition. The adolescent figure usefully intervenes in this debate as both and neither mother and daughter, both and neither second- and third-wave feminism. Adolescent drag, significantly, does not purport to be a performance of radical refusal, as proposed by Halberstam for shadow feminism. Rather than claiming to occupy a neutral territory, Swanson, Gilmore, and Young stage both mother and daughter as they image their own autogenesis in the adolescent, as the figure of their own self-birth. The artists embody adolescent drag not as a performance of pure refusal—a way of fleeing the ruins of an objectionable political past that they inherit, whether acknowledged or not—but rather as an enactment of messiness and contestation. Halberstam presents feminism as the white mother who bears all of the blame for its own failure, a failure that is not bequeathed with any tactical potential. Within the wide landscape of her book's broader inquiry into the queering of failure, it is notable that the white mother proves an exemplary site for failure that is in no way redeemable. The ironic quality of Halberstam's playful call to abjure the force of the maternal, however, is highly generative for my own analysis and a move that I would be remiss to read too earnestly. Nevertheless, it bears troubling that the protagonist of "shadow feminism" emerges as the default queer daughter/child figure in order to (re)claim the innocence and purity of childhood offered in the tabula rasa of orphanhood. Halberstam's sincere identification with critical race and postcolonial feminism is, thus, nevertheless problematic. The condition of possibility for her claim to purity in performances of refusal (passivity, absence, silence) threatens to position scholars such as Spivak and Mahmood as the healers or surrogate mothers of Western feminism. Halberstam seeks relief from the failures associated with the white mother and, as such, appears to attempt to quarantine a certain set of conventions within second-wave feminism, as if a form of contagion.[36] Her turn to feminist negativity, however, seeks to effect a problematic erasure that would sterilize troubling histories that might instead be contested directly through methods of appropriative reversal.

Adolescent drag is instructive for this debate as a tactic that aspires to impurity over purity, an operation that models an alternative to Halberstam's shadow feminism. Swanson, Gilmore, and Young's adolescence engages irony instead of negativity or shadow play, which prove too purely consequential, risking too little by removing itself from the causal linkages of inheritance and contamination in which these artists instead choose to immerse themselves. Halberstam's

35. Writes Halberstam on her blog: "Faludi, though she may sound like your grandmother, is actually my age, so I guess this is sibling rivalry if one must stick to familiar metaphors" (2010). That Halberstam and Faludi are around the same age is only further evidence that the mother-daughter conflict posits a false binary. See also Astrid Henry's insightful study, *Not My Mother's Sister*, which describes the increasing tendency to articulate feminism by drawing generational lines to argue that an overemphasis on metaphors of generational rebellion has come at the expense of political action (2004).

36. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz critiques theorists for whom the anti-relational turn sanctions an escape from relationality that gets equated as a distancing from the contamination of race, gender, and other particularities that "taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference." "In other words," Muñoz writes, "antirelational approaches to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference" (Muñoz 2009:11). Halberstam's shadow feminism is a romanticization of difference that nevertheless reproduces the thrall to feminist purity that she wants to work against.

shadow feminism risks, in its radicality, an unsavory purity reversed in the performance of the adolescent for whom the accumulative potential of irony, rather than refusal, mediates an inheritance that cannot be refused.

Caricaturing Girl Power

Adolescent drag enacts a double disidentification: challenging both second-wave feminism and third-wave feminism in its performance of autogenesis. The self-engendering described by autogenesis is, significantly, an *ironic* representation of the self that is neither pure reproduction nor pure refusal. Instead it bespeaks a process that José Esteban Muñoz has characterized as neither a straightforward identification nor a counter-identification but rather a "working on, with, and against a form at a simultaneous moment" (2000:70). Muñoz's description of disidentification helps to explicate the important difference between refusal and irony in adolescent drag. While Swanson, Gilmore, and Young may at first glance appear to perform disidentification as a dissociation with second- and third-wave feminism, closer inspection reveals their adolescent drag instead to be a form of dissimulation effecting in its use of irony not a closure but an accumulation of possibilities or interpretations, recalling Young's successive responses of "no," "yes," and "maybe" to the question of her feminism.

Swanson, Gilmore, and Young engage irony not merely by saying one thing and meaning another but as a form of circumnavigation that, rather than being cynical or malicious, is the creative and ethical pose assumed in adolescent drag.[37] The turn to irony critiques the limited spectrum of representational models available to young women who do not accept the paucity of positions on offer by the mass media and by feminism and who instead undertake to contradict themselves through performance. In this sense, irony indexes a means of saying or doing something with the understanding that it does not necessarily correspond with one's consciousness. While the cynic speaks from a position of power or mastery, irony responds as an "adolescent" maneuver for renegotiating models imposed from outside, a performance that attempts to thwart the problem of totalization. The mediums of conceptual art and performance—which seize the characteristic capriciousness of the adolescent taken as their subject—align as frameworks befitting a game of action and language that do not transparently offer their meaning, modalities wherein the question of what one "actually means" often remains an open one. Swanson, Gilmore, and Young engage the ironic stance as one that lends feminism a multiplicity of meanings (no, yes, maybe) that, activated in the undecidable liminality of performance, remain imbued with potential. These artists perform the adolescent for her ability to say something that power does not completely understand, something that cannot be easily assimilated as telos or cliché, because it is already allegory, already caricature.

Adolescent drag, enacted as tactical dissimulation, proposes a critical framework for interpreting the contemporary phenomenon that Swanson, Gilmore, and Young dramatize, whereby young women have increasingly claimed to disidentify with feminism: uttering the now-familiar phrase personified by Swanson's sorority girl, "I'm not a feminist but..." In her 2010 book *Enlightened Sexism*, Susan J. Douglas associates this phenomenon with what she calls "the new girliness" that emerged in 1990s media representations, a collage of images that straddle both third-wave feminism and postfeminism. This proliferation of representations, she argues, contributed to a girl culture of "postfeminism triumph." "Young women were not supposed to identify with feminism; instead, they were supposed to actively *dis*-identify with it," Douglas writes (2010:103). Douglas does not account for the possibility that such "girliness" might be a performance, rendering it instead as evidence for her diagnosis of a pervasive political nihilism that

37. See Claire Colebrook's book *Irony* for an extended account of the term. Colebrook writes, "Despite its unwieldy complexity, irony has a frequent and common definition: saying what is contrary to what is meant, a definition that is usually attributed to the first-century Roman orator Quintilian who was already looking back to Socrates and Ancient Greek literature" (Colebrook 2004:1).

threatens the legacy of feminism. Without the depth model offered by Muñoz's account of the term, Douglas misreads "girliness" as a flat counter-identification, failing to register it as a tactical maneuver available to young women who seek to work on the concept of feminism in their very disavowal of it. What would it mean to consider this form of dissimulation as, rather than the crisis for feminism that Douglas claims, a performance staged by young women who desire to expand the repertoire of feminist discourse beyond the normative borders (patrolled by feminists such as Douglas and Faludi) of affirmation and frontal earnestness? The sense of estrangement that has been produced within feminism by these apparent denials, cast as the mother-daughter conflict, gets reworked in the figure of the adolescent for whom irony manipulates pressures to render oneself coherently and legibly feminist, staging a critique of compulsory performances of having to "bear witness" in order to be counted.

Recognizing adolescence as a form of drag, rather than always a "straight" or sincere identification (as Douglas reads "girliness"), recommends a widening of the normative feminist scope beyond the rubric afforded by third-wave feminism. In her study of third-wave feminism, a phenomenon she describes as little understood even by feminists, R. Claire Snyder surveys popular and academic literature in an attempt to read beyond the movement's appearance as "a confusing hodgepodge of personal anecdotes and individualistic claims" (2008:175). Third-wavers, Snyder explains, rejected media-sensationalized postfeminism and were unwilling to cast aside completely the agenda of second-wave feminism.[38] Snyder identifies third-wave feminism with its active play with signifiers of femininity toward a "fun, feminine, and sex-positive" politics that nevertheless has often been critiqued for reproducing the same white, middle-class bias that first and second-wave feminism did, despite claims made to queer, multiracial, and ideologically flexible multivocalities. Snyder notes third-wavers "girly" play with femininity, sexual pleasure, and self-expression through consumption:

> Girl power, or girlie culture, is a central—yet contested—strand within the third wave [...] Girlie encompasses the tabooed symbols of women's feminine enculturation—Barbie dolls, makeup, fashion magazines, high heels—and says using them isn't shorthand for "we've been duped." Makeup isn't a sign of our sway to the marketplace and the male gaze, it can be sexy, campy, ironic, or simply decorating ourselves without the loaded issues. (2008:179)

Rather than merely reproducing signs of third-wave feminism, Swanson, Gilmore, and Young *caricature* its investment in the adolescent figure, dragging its "girl power" slogan to mock its commercial complicities with their own amateur aesthetics—from Swanson's cheap parodies of pornography to Young's ironic mash-ups of karaoke, fairytales, and improv comedy. All the signs are distorted and degraded: the doll is rendered as life-size by Swanson, the makeup caked on like a clown by Young's alter-ego Sherry, the high heels soiled and broken down by Gilmore. The artists challenge third-wave feminism's presumption to represent them by reproducing and manipulating characteristics associated with the movement, satirizing the "spiritedness" of its "spirited individualism," allegorizing the "girl" of its embrace of "girlie culture," and camping its "camp" celebration of sex, gay culture, and fashion. The girlish aesthetics of Swanson, Gilmore, and Young mock the at times naïve, hyperbolic, and liberationist rhetoric of a "girl power" feminism that celebrates a discourse of mastery over and purity within commercial culture, advocating instead a representation of the girl that, quite simply, does not aim to master her universe. All the while, the artists also demonstrate their inheritance from the third wave, further elaborating on what Snyder considers third-wave feminism's turn to tactical approaches by which they negotiated three important critical impasses with the second-

38. Snyder differentiates third-wave feminism from postfeminism, which she associates with a number of figures (such as Katie Roiphe, Camille Paglia, and Rene Denfeld) who gained prominence by misrepresenting second-wave feminism and exploiting such misrepresentations (Snyder 2008:176).

wave. The politics of adolescent drag is deeply informed by third-wave feminism's embrace of the collapse of the category of "woman," their turn to multivocality and action over synthesis and theoretical justification after the rise of postmodernism, and their emphasis on approaches that refuse to police boundaries of feminist politics following the sex wars (Snyder 2008:175). By wearing out its own overprocessed forms, adolescent drag presents a critique of third-wave feminism's complicity with dominant narratives of success, refusing to move easily within certain artistic and political economies of profit, influence, and triumph with their use of vulgarity, awkwardness, and amateurism that render their work less easily commercially digestible by the public body that might buy pornography and kid culture separately but not together. Such "vulgar" juxtapositions are enabled by irony, which at the same time exposes the artists' own complicity within structures of dominance that sanction their art (no, yes, maybe...). The play with enjoyment and humor to be had in caricature enacts a generative distortion in adolescent drag that produces an image of feminist impurity through irony, whereby everything cannot be made neatly reconcilable.

At the close of *Brave New Girl*, Neal Medlyn's October 2010 drag performance of pop sensation Miley Cyrus's onscreen alter ego Hannah Montana, he tells the audience that you can be as many people as you want at once. Snow is projected onto The Chocolate Factory's small stage, falling throughout the show, though the stage "never remains lily white for long,"[39] despite Medlyn's description of the show as "about": "purity, snow, teenage-hood, multiple personality, secrets, pop, indie music, 5 A.M. 'me' time, loneliness, parenting, ghosts, forests, cassettes, pop music, Disney, Twitter and fairytales" (in Stonebraker 2010). But as one critic of the show writes, "At the center of this look at purity is Mr. Medlyn, a performer who evokes giggles by the nature of his gawky appearance (greasy hair, a slightly distended stomach and hunched shoulders)" (Stonebraker 2010). Adolescent drag, for Medlyn as for Swanson, Gilmore, and Young, visualizes the ironic potential in failing to pass as the ideal.

Adolescent drag exploits the already fractal and performative identity of the adolescent girl in mainstream and feminist discourse, refracted back by Swanson, Gilmore, and Young as a generative and ironic reflection for its very overcitationality. Adolescent drag draws upon the adolescent figure as a chain of significations, a network of reflections that bounce off of each other—the "girliness" of girl power, the African-American inflected "grrl," the "riot grrrl," the "girl" camped by drag queens. She is always multiple, always overloaded, both allegorical and caricatural. Swanson, Gilmore, and Young mobilize in adolescent drag a set of tactics whereby feminists might exploit such impurity by reappropriating images that have been projected onto them, images that they do not recognize as representative of them. As a performance of alienated self-parody, adolescent drag enacts a model of autogenesis or self-making whereby feminists might give birth to the self that they are given and that they are given to embrace, to have and to hold.

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39. Medlyn's irreverent association of the false innocence and purity of youth with the "snow" of white privilege is reminiscent of Muñoz's interview in *Disidentifications* with artist Vaginal Davis who appears in the chapter dressed as a white child—blond wig, pigtales, polka-dot dress. Davis provides this description of her disidentification with the white girl: "When you come home from the inner city and you're Black you go through a stage when you try to fit the dominant culture, you kinda want to be white at first—it would be easier if you were White... That's what I call the snow period—I just felt like if I had some cheap white boyfriend, my life could be perfect and I could find some treasured thing" (1999:97).

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PLEASED TO MEET ME

Amber Hawk Swanson shrewdly explores issues of eroticism, objectification and violence by playing with dolls.

BY DARIA BRIT SHAPIRO + PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN KAZAR ASARE

Amber Hawk Swanson's debut Miami exhibition – To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: Amber and Doll *– documents quite the deviant love affair: girl orders custom silicone self, whisks her doppelganger off to Vegas for a quickie marriage, pops new wife into the passenger seat and takes the HOV lane to party with the "Girls Gone Wild" in Miami. Fabricated from silicone and steel, Swanson's mute twin is one of approximately 3,000 RealDolls currently in existence. Infiltrating a niche that caters primarily to men, Swanson's work not only investigates the objectification of women, but it unearths the darker and more dangerous workings of eroticism, physically manifested in her hyper-sexualized "Amber Doll".*

In his writings on eroticism, French theorist Georges Bataille describes our perpetual struggle to experience the moment of death without actually dying – an effort to recapture the wholeness experienced at birth, before our psyches cleaved into the "self" and the "other". Bataille relates the Rush felt at death to the Rush felt at orgasm, the latter an attempted fusion that requires both bodies to lose their individuality and merge for one gleeful, yet fleeting moment. Bataille asks, "What does physical eroticism signify if not a violation of the very being of its practitioners?... The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators."

The very embodiment of this complex dichotomy, Amber Hawk Swanson and Amber Doll act as a unit, their union symbolizing a derangement of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Journeying across America, Chicago native Swanson and Amber Doll partake in wildly erotic encounters with ordinary people in public spaces, eliciting reactions that are surprisingly terrifying, many of which were wrought with unexplained violence and aggression toward the inanimate doll.

On view at Locust Projects through the end of June are Swanson's video and photographic documentation of this unusual collaboration, as well as Amber Doll's funerary installation, where the artist has laid her "other" to rest – coffin included. Working to dismantle our unspoken social codes, Swanson delivers the viewer into an uncanny setting where "self" and "other" meet, proving that, after all, you only live twice.

MAP: Who is the real Amber Hawk Swanson?
SWANSON: What a question! I am, certainly, but I feel like Amber Doll stands in when I need her to.

MAP: Do you think this project is like elaborate ventriloquism – are you throwing out your voice, in a way? If the doll had a voice, would it be your voice, or a different one?
SWANSON: You know, I'm not sure, I can't really think about that. It is a part of the project that she doesn't have a voice, and that's what enables her to be this extension of myself, but there's this negotiation of self, too – certainly that's what gives people permission to explore her.

MAP: Have you changed the way you view yourself after getting Amber Doll?
SWANSON: Yes, and I am first going to answer that question in an appearance way. At this point late in the project, her eye is cracked, so is the silicone on her face…she is quite broken. It is sort of odd to look at a part of her body that's broken, then look at my own. Kinda trippy, really.

MAP: Are you simply a spectator in Amber Doll's activities, or are you a protector as well?
SWANSON: I think it's important that I am not her protector. I planned for Amber Doll to embody the concept of victim/victimizer by allowing all these things to happen to her without stopping them. In other components of the project, we have a partnership where, in a way, we are fulfilling each other's needs, but that's separate from taking her to these ritualized spaces and interrupting the social codes of those spaces.

MAP: Your photographs range from Amber Doll being pampered sweetly to Amber Doll being violated utterly. Have you done any of the things that Amber Doll has done?
SWANSON: Well, I haven't spread myself in the middle of a tailgate, no. But there is some violent fantasy fulfillment happening – while I haven't done these things, there is still an interest in staging them.

MAP: Do you feel like you've done them now?
SWANSON: Yes, a bit!

MAP: What response are you looking to elicit from the viewer? On one hand, there are the people who visit the show, taking a critical approach, and then there are the people on the street who have much different responses.
SWANSON: It is easy for people to interact with the doll by creating a back-story or a future for her in their imaginations. Since she's a doll, there's not only the physical exploration, but then the fantasy storyline people enjoy coming up with. There is also a ceremonial aspect that's built into the way we look at art in galleries. So I am drawing upon that and allowing viewers to interact with Amber Doll, laid out in her casket, at her funerary installation.

MAP: On that note, how does necrophilia figure in? Not only with Amber Doll, but with RealDolls in general? Essentially, people are having sex with an inanimate "person", right?
SWANSON: That's a good question and one that many people have! The first article I read about RealDolls addressed necrophilia and now that I understand the community of men who own RealDolls, I understand their relationships, sexually or otherwise, but of course necrophilia factors in somehow – we are thinking about spaces where we don't feel permission to be sexual, certainly funerals and also wedding receptions.

MAP: Were you afraid to lay Amber Doll in her casket? Do you still love her?
SWANSON: I do. I still do, but there were moments when I think, "Wow, I can't wait to leave her in Miami." But I know when I get back to Chicago I will really miss her.

MAP: Is this the end for Amber Doll?
SWANSON: It might be, but I have some proposals pending about burying her and then exhuming her. I am fascinated by the publicity that surrounded Anna Nicole Smith's death…

MAP: …who was treated like a living doll, at least in the early days of her career…
SWANSON: Absolutely. There were so many days I was afraid for her body after her death. It struck a chord with me. I don't remember all the details…there was this extended amount of time before she was laid to rest and I was just concerned for her body. I am also interested in the look of [Smith's] whole funeral and the fact that there was this beaded, feathered thing draped over her casket.

MAP: Did you intend for more of a celebration than a funeral?
SWANSON: Yes, I was going for a little bit of that. A funeral that leads to an eventual exhumation. You know, Buffy came back to life, so anything's possible… ≣

amberhawkswanson.com, locustprojects.org, realdoll.com

AMBER HAWK SWANSON + AMBER DOLL

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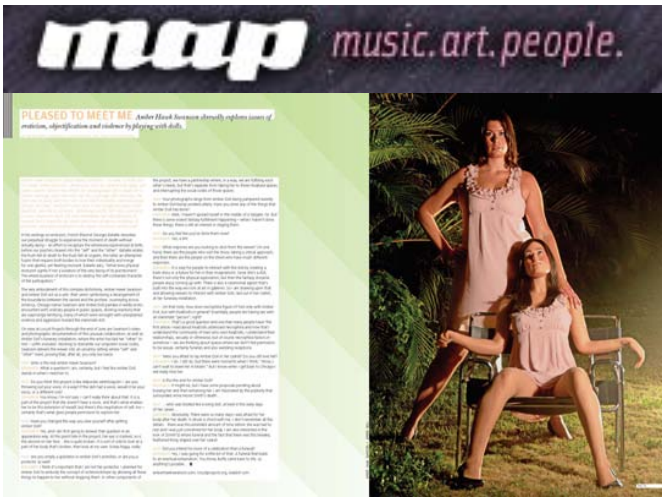
Pleased to Meet Me



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AHS: You know, I'm not sure, I can't really think about that. It is a part of the project that she doesn't have a voice, and that's what enables her to be this extension of myself, but there's this negotiation of self, too – certainly that's what gives people permission to explore her.

MAP: Have you changed the way you view yourself after getting Amber Doll?
AHS: Yes, and I am first going to answer that question in an appearance way. At this point late in the project, her eye is cracked, so is the silicone on her face…she is quite broken. It is sort of odd to look at a part of her body that's broken, then look at my own. Kinda trippy, really.

MAP: Are you simply a spectator in Amber Doll's activities, or are you a protector as well?
AHS: I think it's important that I am not her protector. I planned for Amber Doll to embody the concept of victim/victimizer by allowing all these things to happen to her without stopping them. In other components of the project, we have a partnership where, in a way, we are fulfilling each other's needs, but that's separate from taking her to these ritualized spaces and interrupting the social codes of those spaces.

MAP: Your photographs range from Amber Doll being pampered sweetly to Amber Doll being violated utterly. Have you done any of the things that Amber Doll has done?
AHS: Well, I haven't spread myself in the middle of a tailgate, no. But there is some violent fantasy fulfillment happening – while I haven't done these things, there is still an interest in staging them.

MAP: Do you feel like you've done them now?
AHS: Yes, a bit!

MAP: What response are you looking to elicit from the viewer? On one hand, there are the people who visit the show, taking a critical approach, and then there are the people on the street who have much different responses.
AHS: It is easy for people to interact with the doll by creating a back-story or a future for her in their imaginations. Since she's a doll, there's not only the physical exploration, but then the fantasy storyline people enjoy coming up with. There is also a ceremonial aspect that's built into the way we look at art in galleries. So I am drawing upon that and allowing viewers to interact with Amber Doll, laid out in her casket, at her funerary installation.

MAP: On that note, how does necrophilia figure in? Not only with Amber Doll, but with RealDolls in general? Essentially, people are having sex with an inanimate "person", right?

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Pleased To Meet Me Continued

AHS: That's a good question and one that many people have! The first article I read about RealDolls addressed necrophilia and now that I understand the community of men who own RealDolls, I understand their relationships, sexually or otherwise, but of course necrophilia factors in somehow – we are thinking about spaces where we don't feel permission to be sexual, certainly funerals and also wedding receptions.

MAP: Were you afraid to lay Amber Doll in her casket? Do you still love her?
AHS: I do. I still do, but there were moments when I think, "Wow, I can't wait to leave her in Miami." But I know when I get back to Chicago I will really miss her.

MAP: Is this the end for Amber Doll?
AHS: It might be, but I have some proposals pending about burying her and then exhuming her. I am fascinated by the publicity that surrounded Anna Nicole Smith's death…

MAP: …who was treated like a living doll, at least in the early days of her career…
AHS: Absolutely. There were so many days I was afraid for her body after her death. It struck a chord with me. I don't remember all the details…there was this extended amount of time before she was laid to rest and I was just concerned for her body. I am also interested in the look of [Smith's] whole funeral and the fact that there was this beaded, feathered thing draped over her casket.

MAP: Did you intend for more of a celebration than a funeral?
AHS: Yes, I was going for a little bit of that. A funeral that leads to an eventual exhumation. You know, Buffy came back to life, so anything's possible…
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Interview between Lori Waxman and Amber Hawk Swanson

LW-The first question that I want to ask is about how your relationship with Amber Doll has changed since you first acquired her.
AHS-I probably wouldn't even have been talking about it as performance at one time; I imagined her as real. During the nine months of waiting for Amber Doll, I was buying things for the project—but as if I was buying gifts for her—and preparing my house. Every minute of my time was consumed with waiting for this doll. I had so many expectations for what she would fulfill for me.

LW-So if those were the initial expectations, that she was going to be this new, real person in your life, how has she turned into something else over time?
AHS-Now I'm thinking more about the fact that she's this sexually available silicone replica. So she's no longer filling emotional needs for me. By putting her in all of these ritualized spaces, I'm looking at her less as a partner and more of an extension of self.

LW-So more than a replica of you, she becomes a proxy for you in certain kinds of situations. But what are these situations where you need this Amber Doll proxy?
AHS-It stared out with the wedding reception, way back when I was feeling connected to Amber Doll. I wanted it to be a celebration of our six-month wedding anniversary and joint birthdays. There were a lot of people who knew me personally [at the event], so it surprised me to see them molest my doll, and it made me wonder if those were things that occurred to them to do to me or to women in general. Someone took her tongue out, and her skirt was lifted up, and there was a real interest in her vagina and her mouth—and of course she's penetrable in three orifices, which is exciting to everyone.

Watching these interactions blew my mind, and I realized afterward that that's really where the project lies. Since we had already started using this hyper-ritualized setting, I wanted to find others, so I went back to my early research on cinematic rape scenes. There was always a partnership scene that preceded the rape scenes in these films. Roller-skating rinks came up all the time, especially in the movies with queer content—so that was the next ritualized space we hit.

All the spaces we pursued had something to do with dating. They also had this kind of innocence, but it's this innocence that feels like it could turn at anytime. It's interesting how the social codes of innocence are broken by Amber Doll's availability. In all of the settings, I was the most surprised by how a leader of violation as well as a protector would emerge.

LW-So even in a situation like the tailgate, a protector emerges?
AHS-Yes.

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LW-In the pictures I've seen from that setting, this wasn't apparent to me. And that makes me think that maybe you're leaving out the photos that have a kind of redemptive content.
AHS-I may have edited out the redemptive images but the video tells a really different story. In it there's no way to get away from the fact that a protector emerges in each scenario, whether it's overt like in the wedding footage, where someone says, "Be careful!" or, "She's a lesbian, you can't touch her like that." It happens in the tailgate, too, but more subtly. Someone walks by and says, "Hey man, look out, we're on the street." And just that little mention, in the midst of this free for all, was enough to make me think that somebody might stop this. In another instance, the doll interrupted a group of men and women who were tailgating together, and one of the women grabbed Amber Doll's hand and made this waving motion, trying to bat away the people who were investigating her.

LW-In the earlier photographs, it becomes very clear that Amber Doll is both a live performance prop and also a studio prop. How do these two very different artistic situations play out?
AHS-The studio shots are the partnership of Amber and Amber Doll, our interaction and the love I once felt for her. Those pictures are important in a larger group, because they stand in the way of the viewer's potential position of voyeur. The relationship between me and my doll I think complicates that whole idea, or I hope it does.

LW-What strikes me as being very different between studio-prop Amber Doll and live-performance Amber Doll is that in the latter nothing's a setup. Real curiosities and desires are being acted out on this doll and real protection is coming into play. Whereas in the earlier photos, I feel I'm not seeing a relationship, but rather the faking of one.
AHS-Well, outwardly it may come off as staged, but what I was trying to get at was the partnership between Amber and Amber Doll. It's also part of this violent fantasy fulfillment, the embodying of victim and victimizer, that is more developed when I'm using Amber Doll as a prop and trying to understand what she does in these spaces and how she interrupts things or not. I'm putting her in these positions and I am not personally protecting her.

LW-In all of these situations though, she's still a prop. Whether she's a live prop or a staged prop, props are something that we use. Is Amber Doll just a thing to be used in the end? Or is she something else?
AHS-Just when I think I've snapped back into reality, someone says something like that: Like a prop! [laughs]. You're calling Amber Doll a prop? It hurts a little bit, so I'm clearly still assigning meaning to her. Perhaps in a lesser amount than I was, but I still don't think of her as something to be used. I feel like she holds the answers to something and that's probably the personal side to this whole project. But she's not a prop to me. She's an Amber Doll. Whatever that is.

LW-That's a good corrective because if I'm thinking about something performative, it's with participants. There are people, but people are not props. In Vanessa Beecroft's performances, I think people are props and that's a huge issue one can take with her performances and it's also a huge part of their affective tension. So it's very interesting for you to insist that

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Amber Doll, who is in fact an object, doesn't get reduced down to being just a prop.

AHS-I think some people think of her that way but I think an equal amount of people think of her as real as I do. Otherwise, I don't think those protectors would emerge. There's something about the one person assigning meaning to this doll or protecting this doll for whatever reason that gets more people to understand her as real. I've watched that happen in many settings.

LW-Now for a totally different question: Why does it all come down to sex, and sexual violation? Why are these the situations in which we keep finding Amber Doll?

AHS-The wedding is a great example of a place where I really didn't expect those kinds of things to happen. But because it happened there, it made me think, this is going to happen no matter where Amber goes. And that might have something to do with the way that Real Dolls have been presented in mainstream media. People understand what they are, that they are sex dolls as opposed to mannequins, which are not penetrable.

There is also something related to the way children explore dolls. I remember Jeanne Dunning talking about this years ago, when she was doing her work with dolls and the way that children assign sexuality to them or not. Exploration and dolls go together and often in a sexual way.

With Amber Doll it's also so overt. She's a sex doll: no matter what shirt you put on her, her nipples peek through. There's enough signifiers that she's a sexual object that it gives most people permission to go there with her—especially at the wedding reception, where you just wouldn't normally accept that. I'm trying to think of what other scenarios exist where that would not be permissible, and I think that might be a funeral. The very first Real Doll article I read was about necrophilia, and the author was comparing the relationship between owner and doll to necrophilia. I've come to understand the relationship in a really different way through my interactions, but there is something to that. I do wonder what will happen when she's laid out and acting in these funerary rituals, if people will still feel that permission.

LW-That brings us to the last question, which is how and when will the relationship between you and Amber Doll end, and if in fact it must end, and why?

AHS-Part of me feels like it will never end, but not in a way that I would feel trapped. Mostly this project has had a really big impact on my personal life. As far as the project goes, you know, she'll be laid out in a casket. I'm interested in drawing upon the ceremonial aspects of a gallery setting to invite viewers to grieve with me for Amber Doll, on her untimely death.

People have asked for my backstory. Real Doll owners often have extensive backstories, about where their doll was before, or when their doll entered their lives. I don't have a backstory. I saw her birth, so before she came to me, she kind of didn't exist. And I actually don't have a backstory for how she might die. But she is going to be laid out. She might be acting, we don't know yet. She might be revived. I also have fantasies of burying her and then exhuming her.

LW-You called her death "untimely." And I'm wondering if, in fact, it's timely, for you and for her and for the project as a whole.

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Interview Continued

LW-You called her death "untimely." And I'm wondering if, in fact, it's timely, for you and for her and for the project as a whole.
AHS-In the Sex TV piece there's an emphasis on the way that my relationship with my doll has waned since I met my current girlfriend, and certainly that's the case. That's one place where this performance gets muddy, and the whole art practice and personal life come together. I also do feel ready to be done taking her to places. But I'm still curious about how people might interact with her when they perceive her to be dead. I'm trying to think of how else it may be timely other than I feel a little bit exhausted by it all, it's been a really intense project.

LW-Rest in Peace.

Lori Waxman is a Chicago-based critic and art historian. Her reviews and articles have been published in the Chicago Tribune, Artforum, Artforum.com, Modern Painters, Gastronomica, Parkett, Tema Celeste, as well as the sadly defunct Parachute, New Art Examiner, and FGA. She has written catalogue essays for small and large art spaces, including Spertus Museum and Three Walls Gallery in Chicago; Spaces Gallery in Cleveland; INOVA in Milwaukee, WI; Turpentine Gallery, Iceland; and Dieu Donné Papermill, New York. Artists written about include Arturo Herrera, Jenny Holzer, William Cordova, Eugenia Alter Propp, Raissa Venables, Gordon Matta-Clark, Joel Sternfeld, Emily Jacir, Taryn Simon, Ranbir Kaleka, and Christa Donner. She teaches art history at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is completing a doctoral dissertation at the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, about urban walking as a revolutionary aesthetic practice of the 20th century.

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Q and A: Amber Hawk Swanson and Nicole Pasulka

NICOLE PASULKA: How did you come to have both a personal and a professional relationship with Amber Doll?
AMBER HAWK SWANSON: The project, from the beginning—and I think I've held true to it—is about wanting to embody victim and victimizer simultaneously. It's what I've held onto during all of the different phases of the work. At first, I was really attached to what I was beginning to understand would be the academic parts of my project with Amber Doll. But at some point, the personal side, which included desiring a RealDoll for many of the same reasons other doll owners/lovers desire their dolls, just seeped in.

NP: As far as your work was concerned, you wanted something to act out on?
AHS: I wanted something that would be an extension of self, a negotiation of self and, more than anything, something that would look like whatever it is that victim and victimizer would look like if conceptually merged and placed in a single frame. I knew I wanted to embody each role, so I needed a double of myself. More than just a double, I needed a sexually available double of myself. Of course, it had to be a RealDoll, since they are known as the "Cadillac" of sex dolls. At the beginning, it couldn't have been any more academic in my mind.

NP: So the project started professionally and then became personal?
AHS: It wasn't until I'd already sent out proposals and put things in motion for my RealDoll project that I started to feel an affinity with the [online] community of men who own RealDolls. I started looking forward to owning Amber Doll in a personal way. I also changed the writing in my proposals to reflect the fact that I was actually buying clothes for her and preparing my home for two. I was surprised to find myself changing the proposals to incorporate that kind of "lived performance" because up until that point I hadn't made that kind of work. It was a strange combination of experiencing the desire and being aware of the desire in a way I knew would influence the work.

NP: How should we understand the trajectory of your relationship then? Were you girlfriends?
AHS: I've heard people interpret [the relationship between Amber Doll and me] as flipping perceived gender roles within queer butch/femme relationships on their heads, [in regards to the high femme gender presentation both Amber Doll and I seem to uphold]. I think that could be true in many of the scenarios we shot. But there are others where that's not the case, where I've played the role of a stagehand of sorts, and happened to take on more masculine codes in order to do so while she remained undeniably feminine. I am able to change my gender presentation but she seemingly cannot. That whole spectrum is explored in the project. It's part of my life and it seeps into the work.

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Q and A Continued

NP: Is she your collaborator?
AHS: At the beginning, I really thought of her as my collaborator. I always used language like "we" and "us." But now I'm taking all the credit. If it actually were a collaboration, she would be upset with me about that. [laughs]. After our wedding reception, where I was surprised by the way our guests "explored" her, I decided to treat her like the replica of myself that she is. I sort of said, "OK, I'm going to place you in these potentially vulnerable situations and you have no choice in the matter."

NP: It's interesting that the wedding was what turned you two into separate entities.
AHS: I know! Honestly, I had received a grant and wanted to use part of it to celebrate the project and my relationship with Amber Doll. Everyone in my world was like, "We have to see your doll." It was the six-month anniversary of her birth and of our Las Vegas wedding, so I threw a big party and screened To Have, To Hold, and To Violate: The Making of Amber Doll documentary. I had my photo tech assistant shooting portraits and a few other tech assistants shooting video of what happened when people interacted with the doll on their own. I didn't expect what happened. The guests were all people who know me personally, which, for the most part, included a bunch of queers and artists. I thought people would pose for some pictures and drink a whole lot of champagne, but it ended up being so much more. I was like, "here's my wife, she's gorgeous and not broken in any way, yet" and people pulled her tongue out and looked up her skirt. There were piles of people on her at once. It was a bit shocking to me at the time.

NP: It sounds like that influenced the direction of the rest of the project.
AHS: Before, we were doing photographic sketches—but they just weren't working. They were telling me a lot about this idea of victim and victimizer that I was trying to pursue, but the wedding reception was a turning point. I saw the potential in allowing other people into the project, at least in the part of the project that involved violent fantasy fulfillment.

NP: It's funny to hear you mention that the wedding reception was full of people you know, because from the photos—especially where you and Amber Doll are cutting the cake—it looks like a very heteronormative wedding. The social acceptance of you and Amber Doll portrayed in this photo was immediately striking.
AHS: I was so obsessed with getting every detail to be heteronormative and/or Barbie-like. What would Barbie want at her wedding reception? Lots of pink and baby blue, the cake had pearled decorations. Nothing that I would pick with my girlfriend, but something I'd maybe pick with some of my former sorority sisters.

Last summer my girlfriend and I went to the wedding of one of my former sorority sisters. My girlfriend's gender-queer appearance stood out among the other wedding guests, and made negotiating the space an interesting challenge. I don't mean to say wedding receptions across the board are uncomfortable.

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Q and A Continued

NP: But they can be horribly uncomfortable places. I've been the weird girl in a suit at awkward weddings before.
AHS: There's something about [my girlfriend's and my] presence at this sorority wedding that was disrupting social codes. And my wedding to Amber Doll was also disrupting social codes—not in exactly the same way, but somehow in a similar way.

NP: So then, is this project explicitly about sexual identity or the way sexual identity can be disruptive?
AHS: My intention of embodying victim/victimizer happened at the same time that I was craving companionship as we discussed earlier. While I wanted to make artwork with Amber Doll, I also really believed that I would be getting companionship with her in the same way that friend of mine and fellow doll-owner Davecat is partnered with his doll. I felt like I was picking out a girlfriend, but certainly in a non-traditional way.

NP: We imagine that the typical "real doll owner" is a lonely, straight man. Does it seem hard for people to believe that you actually wanted a relationship with Amber Doll?
AHS: As I was waiting for Amber Doll, I was saving my hair because I heard that RealDoll owners saved their hair to glue it in the pubic area. I also got excited initially that people were dressing their dolls up. It sounds so much more fun than it is because silicone is so hard to dress. It's certainly an art project and it has always been, but I was single at the time. I knew it was crazy ordering the doll and spending all the money, but I was really excited about it and all of the minute details of doll ownership, like hair, clothes, and cleaning. There was a community of mostly men I was interacting with indirectly. There's a whole community of people who love dolls. It's sort of less about the dolls and more about each other in some ways. It ends up looking like [a lot of other kinds of] fandom. I thought I was going to get all this companionship out of the doll—I enjoyed every second of waiting for her and then getting her—but what also happened was that I formed personal connections online, and it could have been about cooking, you know. I'd never speak for everyone in the community. I'm sensitive about that. But definitely for me that's what it was about.

NP: So I can't help but wonder about your sex life with the doll. And when I think about that, I understand that this project invites the same sort of detached voyeurism or preoccupation that non-normative relationships often encourage in people who feel outside of them or have no experience with gay or lesbian sex and relationships.
AHS: All the time I was waiting for her, I was so excited to strap on and have her strap on and I was imagining all the things that would be possible. I was intent to enjoy Amber Doll separate from any project. The whole time I was waiting, people would ask me how I planned to get sexual pleasure from this doll. Female RealDolls are created for sex with men, but for me getting off with the doll felt really possible.

NP: Isn't that the way people often question lesbian sex? Asking how you do it?

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AHS: Yes. Totally, and my ultimate fantasy was Amber Doll. But when I watched her "get made" I'm not going to say that killed it, but there was little mystery left. I got her and had my first night with her and did not find her sexy, I'm sad to report. I didn't find her vagina sexy. All three of her orifices are ribbed, but I don't understand how her vagina could provide pleasure because it is really big and wide—like beer bottle big. It felt disconnected to me. It was like putting my hand in a hole. I was determined the whole time to get off having sex with Amber Doll, but it did not happen. In fact, she's a virgin. I explored her vagina, and looked her all over because I was so in shock to finally have her, but I never ended up having sex with her, nor has anyone.

NP: You were just in Miami for your show at Locust Gallery. What was Miami like for you and Amber Doll?
AHS: Part of the mission of Locust Gallery is get artists to do site-specific work. I decided to shoot photographs and video not only in Miami, but also at a popular Florida theme park. My experience in Miami was partly shooting [with Amber Doll] and also meeting folks. A lot of the same things that happen wherever we take Amber Doll happened in Miami. We went to the eXXXotica convention where I didn't know what to expect, but I was very excited because Girls Gone Wild was going to be there.

NP: What happened when you and Amber Doll hung out with Girls Gone Wild?
AHS: I brought Amber Doll into the Girls Gone Wild area. There were two women posing with whoever walked by. When they saw her, they weren't quite sure what to do. Eventually, they approached her and there was a mad rush of mostly men with cameras. When the crowd assembled, the girls got into it. They didn't go as far as we might see on a Girls Gone Wild video, but they were completely interacting with the doll after a few minutes and after more and more people showed up. One of the girls took Amber Doll's hands and put them in her own hot pants. I didn't expect them to interact with the doll that way. Eventually, someone who seemed like a bodyguard came over and asked me to leave, so we wheeled her off and hung out at the rest of the convention.
I was really after the Girls Gone Wild footage because I'd previously taken her to a Chicago Bears tailgate and I was thinking of that loosely as a reverse Girls Gone Wild because the "girl," Amber Doll, is inactive, dead-seeming really, and the men interacting with her are all misbehaving in some cases in order to perform for my camera.

NP: How was the show at Locust?
AHS: The public opening definitely stood out. I had her laid out in a funerary installation. She was in a casket surrounded by fresh flowers. People were able to come close to Amber Doll. Her face and torso, where people might be walking, was surveilled by a camera with a live feed to a monitor on the other side of a free-standing wall. That was the first real-time performance of sorts that I've mounted—the viewers became the stars of the final video that they would encounter. It was surprising as an installation, but then it took on this tone of—I keep using this word—violation. I witnessed a different kind of aggression than I've noticed in other places when a young man wound up and forcefully punched her in her face.

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Q and A: Amber Hawk Swanson and Nicole Pasulka

I spoke with Lori Waxman for a Q&A for the show before the exhibition about how for me it's all about consent and permission. I was curious about what would happen in these places where there's a complete lack of permission to touch and be sexual. She's this RealDoll who gives you this permission in a way, but she's in this casket carries all the codes of "respect." He really punched her, and we watched it in the monitor.

NP: Do you have any insight into how and why that happened?
AHS: People often punch her because they want to know how the silicone feels. I see people punch her, and it seems to me it's to feel the material. It was toward the end of the night. I don't know if he'd been drinking. We were watching down the hall, on the monitor, we saw him jokingly giving mouth-to-mouth to Amber Doll. I found that funny, but then he just backed up and punched her.
At the end of the night, my girlfriend and I walked to our car. He happened to be walking towards us and he really aggressively flicked us off against our car window. I'm not sure if it was about the installation and the work, or if he was just feeling angry that night. Amber Doll seems to invite that kind of behavior, but I hadn't seen it in a way where it meant physical harm or damage to her silicone. She is now torn from mouth to jaw.

NP: And there's no question that this was a violent act?
AHS: Yeah, it seemed really intentional, but then again, I'm kind of facilitating those kinds of actions. People coming through had already seen a series of videos and photographs that document folks "exploring" Amber Doll before encountering the funerary installation. I'm interested in the way that some people can watch the video and think, "Oh, this is awful; I would never do that even to a doll." Or they'll think, "I can do that. In fact, the doll is right behind me, I'm going to sock her in the mouth."

NP: Did you have her face fixed?
AHS: There's no real way to fix her face, at this point. Her face just doesn't stay on any longer.

NP: Some people feel like you can enjoy representations of violence expressly because you know they're not real. It has the thrill, but not the actual fear or repercussions of real violence. So I'm wondering if what happened in Miami is a way of experiencing violence as a representation or if it's the expression of a latent desire. Does who and what she is give people some kind of permission to do this to her?
AHS: I don't know. I'm just the puppeteer. But, I'm there, facilitating the permission in some cases. People in some ways do very little and her sexual availability does it all—whether I'm providing alcohol, like at my wedding reception where all of the guests were people who knew me personally from my art and queer communities here in Chicago, or just rolling her somewhere and leaving her with strangers, like at Girls Gone Wild. I don't even know, in the project as a whole, how much I had to do with facilitating permission, but it ended up being a big part of how I think about the way consent and permission play into the work.