

Abstract

This thesis concerns the prevalent western concept of femininity as narcissistic and exhibitionist, and addresses the stereotyping notion that women are obsessed with their appearance and preoccupied with themselves as the object of the gaze. This notion is also examined in a video performance art practice that draws on a central concept of '*seducing the machine*', a model of gendered behaviour in which a woman's apparent 'love for the camera' encodes her as a submissive, subordinate object via the logic of the male gaze. The thesis explores how such images of femininity demand a 'becoming' in a self-perpetuating cycle: images of femininity beget further such images. The central question is whether a heightened and self-conscious performance of such narcissistic becoming can challenge this process, rather than simply continue to repeat its terms.

In order to consider this question, psychoanalytic concepts of narcissism and their application to the analysis of socio-cultural patterns of the gaze will be investigated, exposing in particular Freud's apparently contradictory view that a woman is at the same time narcissistic and exhibitionist. Various views that may pose problems for feminist discourse in relation to the erotic representation of women will be examined, as will the ways in which 'raunch' images have leached into mainstream visual culture. There is a popular view that the offer of 'narcissistic becoming' that is posed by sexually explicit images equates to liberation and empowerment: I shall use Judith Butler's concept of 'performativity' to suggest that such narcissism is a key driver of self-regulation in terms of gender norms. The historical oppression of women by the 'masculinised machine' raises concern about the way in which digital technology has normalised self-imaging practices. I shall test the parameters of the politics of women's self-representation, in order to consider strategies that may subvert, transgress and disrupt habitualised modes of spectatorship in the context of a hyper-visual society.

During the history of performance practice, various artists have deliberately heightened women's sexualised role in order to challenge an over-determined relationship to the (self) image. The issue of sexuality continually threatens to undermine the criticality of women's performance art practices, and case studies of Helen Chadwick, Pipilotti Rist and Jemima Stehli will explore how these artists attempt to subvert prevailing cultural notions of women by stressing the artist/model's relationship to the camera. My performance practice involves inhabiting stereotyped images of sexualised display such as burlesque and soft porn, which demand a 'becoming' through glamorisation. It heightens the 'desiring' relationship with the camera in order to examine how the pleasure of narcissistic becoming works, via the familiarity of habitual cultural scripts, to disavow codes of subordination, submission and even dehumanisation. By making explicit the process of 'becoming the image', and pushing the performance of 'love for the camera' to its limits, my work seeks to subvert the idea of women's addiction to their own image.

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But most of all, I would like to dedicate this to Dada.

Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M. M. M.', followed by a period.

Dated:

18/06/13

Introduction

'Even before Norma Jean Baker changed her name to Marilyn Monroe, she began her passionate and enduring love affair with the camera.' Jane Russell ¹

Though she was a movie star of the mid-20th century, Marilyn Monroe's image has been recycled almost ad nauseam, so that it could be said to represent and produce the ultimate stereotype of westernised femininity. Russell's observation suggests a personal emotional relationship between Monroe and the photographic apparatus, which constructs her as desiring its gaze. It typifies the attribution of exhibitionism and narcissism to the performer rather than the performance, naturalising them as part of a female image. In general, the adoption of a stage name distances performer from public persona, but as Russell's remark reflects, in this case the perception is that Norma Jean actually became Marilyn. The elision of performer and role, personal and public identity and female subject and image naturalises the cultural notion of woman's desire to be looked at; a woman's desire for the camera, her desire to be seen and to become an image, is often regarded as a definitively feminine attribute. The core concern of this research project is the displacement of the cultural image of femininity on to the female performer via her relationship with the photographic apparatus, which is explored through the conceptual proposition of 'seducing the machine'.

My experience of this 'desire for the camera' and its counterpart of identification with cultural images of femininity prompted an investigative studio process in which I seek to inhabit such images. This work aims to push the performance of desire for the camera to its limits, in order to expose and subvert the dominant imagery it engenders. It therefore enacts the process of inhabiting sexualised stereotypes, investigating femininity as a project of 'becoming' the image and performing cultural codes which signal femininity to the camera. This thesis, in tandem with my performance-art practice, aims to explore narcissism as part of the cultural image of femininity and as a process of attempting to 'become' the image, in order to investigate both the problems that this might present and its subversive potential for feminist practice.

A woman's apparent pleasure in performing as an object of the gaze is a habitualised script that is naturalised as feminine. Cultural images of femininity work to teach a

¹ Quoted in Russell, J. and Belmont, G. (2007). *Marilyn Monroe and the Camera*.

female viewer that she desires to resemble the image, by identification with this apparently narcissistic looked-at object. This desire to 'become' the image is not only a wish to copy the physical appearance of the woman in the image, but is also a wish to copy the desire to be an actual image. Thus images of femininity beget further images of femininity in an escalating, self-sustaining spiral.

Continued developments in digital information technology and the hyper-mediatisation of culture have made narcissistic identification with cultural images an everyday reality rather than an isolated event, fuelled by the proliferation of glamorised and highly-sexualised imagery in the media, advertising and celebrity culture. Furthermore, the integration of cameras and internet technology into everyday life has rendered the act of becoming an image increasingly common, to the point of over-saturation. Though men are now also beginning to understand themselves as an object of the gaze, there is an almost-ubiquitous expectation that women should desire to be looked at, so they are increasingly engaging with the project of 'becoming the image'. In everyday life, this is manifested in practices such as mimicking the bodily gestures, dress and cosmetics of glamorised imagery, as demonstrated by the way in which celebrity culture works to support the fashion industry and vice versa. The act of viewing and identifying with glamorised images of femininity, working to make the self approximate such images, and displaying oneself like an image, constructs a fantasy of the self as the looked-at object. Enjoyment and pleasure are therefore entangled in the pressure to emulate idealised, over-produced media images of femininity.

In terms of feminist analysis, pleasure can be a problematic notion. Firstly, the process of discussing pleasure may carry the risk of positing a single universal abstract idea of pleasure, or a type of pleasure that is naturalised as 'female'. Yet pleasure is central to many key contemporary debates, in particular habitualised modes of looking, in which issues of highly gendered, scopophilic pleasure are entwined in issues of power and control. There is a popular notion that pleasure, specifically sexual pleasure, equates to freedom and women's liberation. In fact, since Laura Mulvey's theorisation of how power and desire circulate through the gaze, the representation of women's pleasure has been a key concern in feminist discourse.² Mulvey posited a dominant narrative of gendered looking, structured by a masculinised active desiring gaze that constructed the

² Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (reprinted in Mulvey, 1989) was first published in 1973 and the debates that it provoked are still continuing.

female as the object of this look. In this view, woman must wait passively to be desired, and many feminist analyses have been troubled by attempts to locate women's desire as active. Even if a woman actively chooses and performs this 'desire to be desired',³ men's desire is privileged within dominant heterosexist narratives. As a result, women's desire remains characteristically subordinate and contingent.

The constant reproduction of such codes of femininity through a self-sustaining cycle of the 'desire to become' that is produced by images of femininity as desiring the camera/male gaze, works to perpetuate and naturalise the notion of femininity as submissive, subordinate and even dehumanised and degraded. This is the effect not only of the images themselves, but of the impulse of acting out the desire to become the image, that they promote. Such images are constantly re-produced as 'new', further driving the subject's desire to consume and become. This phenomenon accelerates in the current context of westernised culture, the ubiquity of digital technology and the media that dominates everyday life. My research seeks both to examine this process, and to explore ways in which to interrupt and subvert its cyclical nature through the female artist's relationship to the camera in performance art practice. In particular, my own performance work aims to tease out the power relations that are produced through women's naturalised desiring relationship to the camera, exposing how the subject's emotions become embroiled in cultural codes and habitual scripts that hide subordination in complexity, disavowal and over-familiarity.

³ The phrase 'desire to be desired' is used in Mary Ann Doane's discussion of how the female as the object of the gaze constructs her desire as passive, a desire to wait to be desired, as exemplified by the relationship of the female protagonist to the camera in the films *Caught* and *Rebecca* (Doane, 1987: 156). This classic extension on the Mulveyian discussion of the female as the object of the gaze is contrasted with a search for a more active female desiring gaze in feminist theory as encapsulated in the title of the book in which Doane explores these issues: *The Desire to Desire*.

Chapter 1: Seducing the machine: key theoretical concepts and contexts

1.1 Narcissism and the concept of 'becoming'

The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory defines narcissism as 'the love of one's own image'. While it could be said that the term characterises the demands placed on women by prevailing western images of femininity, its use to analyse gendered cultural texts is less than straightforward. As a psychoanalytic term, its definition with regard to the development of the individual psyche and its processes is complex. Further, its application to cultural images and processes may be problematic, though it is within the theoretical tradition exemplified by Christopher Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism* (1978). This is not least because the shift of focus from analysis of the individual to the wider analysis of culture poses a risk of generalisation. In view of this, psychoanalytic uses of the term and its application to the analysis of cultural texts will be examined in an attempt to offer an account of images of femininity that seem to demand a becoming through a certain kind of narcissism.

In *On Narcissism*, Sigmund Freud outlines narcissism as a psychological attitude that is formed when the newborn is focused on discovering itself through autoerotic activity, and is concentrating all its emotional energies on the self.¹ Thus the subject's initial experience of love is for the self, taking as its 'love object' his or her own ego. In 'normal' development, according to Freud, this primary narcissism diminishes as love for an external object – the parent – increases. In later life a secondary narcissism may occur, which is characterised by total withdrawal of the libido or sexual drive from external objects and its direction instead towards the subject's own ego (Freud, 1953). The term narcissism derives from the myth of Narcissus [Figure 1] who became fixated on the beauty of his own reflection in a pool. It may thus broadly be described as the love of self or of self-image. It is with the use of this particular term, and the implied metaphor of the self-gaze, that Freud's theorisation slips from the inwardly-focused dynamic of an individual subject, into a more generalised, albeit somewhat qualified account of gender.² Though in the myth Narcissus is male, the cultural concept of self-

¹ Freud's essay 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' was published in 1914 (reprinted in Freud, 1953).

² For feminist criticism in relation to Freud's disavowed gender inversion from the original myth see Sarah Kofman on women in Freud's writings (Kofman, 1985); also Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1993) 'Echo', in *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, Volume 24, No.1, Winter 1993, pp. 173–4.

focused narcissism has now become typified by the image of a woman gazing at her reflection in a mirror. This seems to represent both the direction of the libido inwards to the self and woman's supposed preoccupation with her own image. According to Freud, men tend to follow the 'normal' route of object love, but for the most 'typical' and 'purest and truest' type of woman, primary narcissism re-emerges in puberty:³

Women, especially if they grow up with good looks, develop a certain self-contentment which compensates them for the social restrictions that are imposed upon them in their choice of object. Strictly speaking, it is only themselves that such women love with an intensity comparable to that of a man's love for them. Nor does their need lie in the direction of loving but being loved... (Freud, 1953: 88–9)

Freud's belief that attractive women 'love themselves' seems to suggest a narcissistic orientation that precludes 'normal' object love. At the same time, he claims that such women also need to be loved by an external other. This runs counter to the definition of narcissism proper, in which the subject's libido is *entirely* turned away from external objects. Thus, Freud's account of narcissism is highly influenced by the association of woman's appearance with self-love. It takes no account of the fact that a woman of that time was expected to obey and serve her father or husband; she was expected to be both focused inwardly on her own appearance and focused outwardly on catering for the needs of another. The association of a woman's appearance with self-love suggests that a kind of narcissism is 'naturally' characteristic of femininity; that a woman is at the same time self-engrossed and outwardly focused towards men, which seems in itself a contradiction. This socio-cultural pattern is reproduced in many contemporary images of femininity: my research posits that this is produced and may perhaps be undone through the relationship to the camera that can be described through the act of seducing the machine.

The metaphor of self-gaze in Freud's account of narcissism might be said to anticipate Jacques Lacan's use of the term to describe the subject's relationship to its own image in what he termed 'The Mirror Phase'.⁴ Indeed as process of coming into language, the

³ Though Freud briefly states: '...I am ready to admit that there are quite a number of women who love according to the masculine type and who also develop the sexual overvaluation proper to that type.' (Freud, 1953: 89).

⁴ The full title of Lacan's seminal 1966 essay was 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' (reprinted in Lacan, 1977).

narcissism of the mirror phase plays a major part in the constitution of the subject through cultural concepts of sexuality. This may account for the socio-cultural concepts of women's apparent self-love that seeped into Freud's account. As an infant explores its developing motor skills, it begins to recognize that its actions are reflected to it through 'mirrors': the reflective behaviour of the parents. Lacan describes the child's fascination with this reflection of itself:

...in a series of gestures in which he [sic] experiences in play the relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it reduplicates—the child's own body, and the persons and things around him. (Lacan, 1977:1)

The image of the Other that an infant sees in the mirror is more complete than its fragmentary experience of itself that is acquired through its underdeveloped motor skills. The subject cannot fully experience the wholeness that it perceives in his or her reflection: this more complete image that is seen outside of the self thus becomes the basis of an *Ideal-I* (Lacan, 1977: 2). The subject is delighted by the recognition of itself in the mirror/other, and as an idealization of the external image of the self. This narcissistic identification is the basis of pleasure or 'jouissance' in the image.⁵ Thus, for Lacan, narcissism is a process by which the subject identifies with the image as a more complete version of itself. In this sense, as for Freud, there remains the notion that the subject's libido is directed towards its own ego, but through the external device of The Other as self-image. This shift in psychoanalytic understanding of the term, in which the subject's narcissistic relationship to its own image is externally mediated, opens the theoretical possibility of its application to the cultural representation. The subject's first recognition of the self in another eventually becomes the 'dialectic of identification' (Lacan, 1977: 2–4). The subject's identification with external images inducts it into language and cultural knowledge; identifying itself in the cultural image is not simply a process of recognition, but of misrecognition (ibid.: 6). The subject is *not* the more

⁵ Lacan uses the term 'jouissance' to refer to a type of pleasure or orgasm, though there is no direct English translation. He discusses it in his 1960 essay 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious' (reprinted in Lacan, 1977) where he attributes this 'jouissance' to the phallus – which means women's access to it is therefore restricted in patriarchal terms. This concept of desire will be further discussed in Chapter 3 through the work of Helen Chadwick. For an in-depth discussion of the relation of femininity to 'jouissance' see Grosz, E. (1990). *Jacques Lacan: a Feminist Introduction*, in particular p.138.

complete image that it recognises as itself, but its 'misrecognition' of itself in the image prompts the process of 'becoming' that very image.

In her analysis of the cinematic text and its gendering of visual pleasures, Laura Mulvey employed the notion of 'jouissance', or pleasure of the subject prompted by this identification with the self in the image. Mulvey's application of psychoanalysis to the visual image is not without problems, but it identifies cultural patterns of looking and being looked at that underlie a prevalent western concept that woman, as in Freud's writings, is particularly narcissistically concerned with her own appearance. In her seminal 1973 work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey uses the Lacanian concept of narcissistic identification to account for the subject's fascination with on-screen characters in cinematic spectatorship. While positing this in Lacanian terms as fundamentally narcissistic, the gendering of cultural texts, particularly in Hollywood cinema, offers significantly different forms of identification to men and women. In Mulvey's view, mainstream cinema is subject to a dominant cultural heterosexualist narrative in which the male protagonist is represented as active and in control; his actions, fears and desires drive the plot. In contrast, the female protagonist is the passive victim of the narrative, constructed as the sexualised object of a masculine gaze. She contends that, through these on-screen positions, the viewer is offered narcissistic identification with his or her gendered equivalent and position of looking or being looked at.

For Mulvey the camera's movements, as determined by the male hero, encourage identification with the activity of that male hero (Mulvey, 1989: 20). The camera takes up a point of view through which the viewer is 'placed' in the male protagonist's position and sees as he would see (Rose, Gillian, 2001).⁶ She cites Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, in which Scottie, a former police officer, becomes obsessed with a woman he is following during a surveillance job. The camera sadistically follows or 'cuts up' the female body on the male's behalf, structuring the cinematic text through what are produced as his voyeuristic fantasies of watching from a position of control. The spectator is thus positioned via Scottie's distance, his searching, curious gaze, his position of power and his control over the female protagonist. The woman is

⁶ Rose's analysis of Mulvey's text further examines how these exemplars of cinematic conventions produce the masculinised gaze, through the relationship of the gendered protagonists within the filmic space, constructed through position and movement of the camera apparatus. See Rose, G. 'Psychoanalysis: Visual Culture, Visual Pleasure, Visual Disruptions', in *Visual Methodologies* (2001) pp. 74-106.

constructed as the passive victim of his gaze, and the viewer never sees from her point of view (Rose, 2001: 114).

Mulvey says this dominant narrative dictates that the female has little active influence on the plot line; she is instead displayed as spectacle, often in shots aside from the narrative action that focus on qualities of display and eroticization (Mulvey, 1989: 17). Through the male protagonist's 'look' she is cut up into visually enticing images as his fetishistic fantasy, and displayed as sexual spectacle through the masculinised gaze of the camera, which is fixated on her as an object of desire. The female is also encoded with 'visual appeal' or a sexualised 'to-be-looked-at-ness' that is taken to signal her own desire to be looked at. Woman's traditional role therefore appears exhibitionist, as exemplified by the character of Lisa in Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954). Lisa's obsession with fashion and appearance underpins her role as erotic image for the male lead Jefferies (ibid.: 23). Mulvey further exemplifies the female's *to-be-looked-at-ness* through iconic images of starlets during Hollywood's 'golden era'. In the opening scene of *The River of no Return* (1954) Marilyn Monroe, clad in a glitzy frilled showgirl outfit, sings as she stretches languidly across a piano surrounded by the gaze of macho cowboys in 'ten-gallon' hats. In *To Have and Have Not* (1945), Lauren Bacall engages in a sultry flirtation with Humphrey Bogart. Wearing a black silk wrap dress that hugs her waist and plunges to show her breasts, she sings as he looks on, dressed in a conservative suit and captain's hat. Thus, while in the Lacanian terms that underpin Mulvey's theory of the gaze all identification is narcissistic – seeing the self in another – the female role in the dominant gendered narrative is exhibitionist because it seems to speak more intensely about the love of self-image. The female viewer is thus offered identification with the exhibitionist role of the female protagonist, constructed through the visual appeal of her appearance and the visual rhetoric of the film text, to produce a femininity that seems to desire to be looked at.

A woman's exhibitionist role, signified by a visual appeal that characterises her as being deeply involved with self-image, seems to define her as narcissistic. Thus, the image of a woman as seeking the attention of the gaze does not simply offer the female viewer identification with this apparently narcissistic looked-at object; it emphatically demands it. Mary Ann Doane says:

For the female spectator there is a certain over-presence of the image – she is the image. Given the closeness of this relationship,

the female spectator's desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism – the female look demands a becoming. (Doane 1991: 22–3)⁷

The desire to 'become' the image is not only a desire to copy the physical appearance of the woman in the image, but is also the desire to be an image itself. Thus, images of femininity beget more images of femininity. An expectation that women's mission is to become idealised images of femininity is constant. This raises concerns in relation to the unquestioning acceptance of the view that certain codes of feminine behaviour and appearance are the natural state of 'womanliness', and about the social and cultural forces that dictate that a person marked biologically as female should align herself with femininity.

This demand to 'become' has never been more prevalent, and the becoming has never been so widely accessible or desirable. While the social and cultural choices available to many women have broadened since these classic Hollywood images of femininity of the 40s and 50s, the fashion and glamour that surrounds celebrity is even more widely represented as 'feminine' pleasure, by the media and consumer culture now so omnipotent in westernised society. In the digital age, technology has facilitated hyper-mediatization and globalisation to the extent that communication, information and representation technologies now support and dominate daily life in the western world and beyond. Everyday life is super-saturated with media and advertising imagery that bombards us with demands to purchase and consume. Celebrity culture has accelerated, as evidenced by the proliferation of magazines such as *Now* (1996) and *Heat* (2000), and reality television shows such *Big Brother* (2000). These epitomise and emphasise a narcissistic relationship to the image because of the glamorisation of the desire to be seen that dominates westernised media. In this context, celebrities have become icons of both aspiration and detestation, offering the viewer compelling voyeuristic and narcissistic pleasures that can quickly become compulsive. Reality TV extends narcissistic identification into becoming with the premise that a 'normal' person – the viewer – can become one of these spectacular icons. The 'guilty pleasures' of such spectatorship freely interchange offers of voyeurism and identification, distancing and over-closeness, dehumanising and empathetic looks, thus shattering the distinct

⁷ From Doane's essay 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator', originally published in *Screen*, 1982, Vol. 23 No. 3–4; reprinted in Doane (1991) *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*.

segregation of Mulvey's theory. Yet, even within this arena of pervasive visuality, *to-be-looked-at-ness* is highly gendered, and Mulvey's account of the power relations embedded in habitualised cultural processes of looking which produce femininity as narcissistic and exhibitionist is relevant well beyond the bounds of her initial theory.

In the context of hyper-mediatisation men are increasingly seen as objects of the gaze, yet their visual appeal is often seen as a feminisation, such that the qualities of the looked-at object remain anchored as naturally pertaining to women. The pervasive naturalisation of women as objects of sexualised display reflects not only historical power relationships that are embedded in scripts of the gaze, but also women's role in the capitalist economy. In westernised society, which is dominated by the media and advertising, imagery proliferates to support the rampant consumerism of the late capitalist economy. The fundamental premise of such imagery is the inculcation of the desire for products by identification with the more complete, fulfilled, perfected 'self' that is represented by the fantasy of the advertising image. In these terms, Lacan's concept of desire – as distinguished from need and characterised by a sense of lack – is a key understanding. This understanding is connected to capitalism's production of the subject's experience of desire as insatiable, in order to fuel constant consumption. 'Woman' is the key emblem of this insatiable desire: images of women displayed as sexual, and appearing to be sexually aroused and available, are employed to create demand for products, by engendering the consumer's desire to become, or to possess, that woman through the dominant normative narrative of compulsory heterosexuality (Schneider, 1997: 95–6; Gundle and Castelli, 2006: 7). This research project seeks to address the continual demand to become an idealised image that has become a prevalent script of femininity in contemporary western culture, via the media and consumer cultures that feed off each other in a capitalist economy. In the context of the hyper-mediatisation of everyday life, the identities of subjects, and therefore the hierarchal gendered ideologies they may be supporting, are increasingly produced in relation to the (self) image. It may thus be argued that, though over the last 20 years the topography of spectatorship has been transformed, the narcissistic identification with the spectacular object of the gaze that is insistently offered to women via this dominant narrative is even more relevant to the analysis of contemporary culture than when Mulvey's text was published nearly 40 years ago.

The project of becoming an image of femininity now infiltrates daily life because of the insistence and omnipresence of media imagery. It takes on further significance because of developments in digital technology and cultures that support self-imaging practices and provide the opportunity to engage with the pleasures of being looked at. The immediacy and accessibility of digital technology facilitates ubiquitous self-imaging practices. With the integration of the camera into everyday technologies such as mobile phones, iPods, computers, and the growth of online participatory media, practices of performing, capturing, viewing and editing the self as image have become normalised by their 'everydayness'. Online social media sites, including Facebook, My Space and YouTube, are forums for the publication of the self-image via which the subject can construct his or herself in a desired image. For young people such forums for self-publishing in the social context seem almost *de rigueur*; they are entering adulthood with their social interactions organised and framed by this technology. Thus self-representation, in terms of looking at the self and at others, identifying, criticising, desiring and even detesting the (self) image through the 'machine', is becoming a major element of social interaction. As a consequence of hyper-mediatisation, modes of spectatorship including voyeurism and exhibitionism are an insistent part of everyday social and cultural existence. The mimicking of cultural images has also become widespread: super-saturation of glamorised images of celebrity and a hyper-awareness of the self as image means that in western society people are learning to be images from images, copying gestures, poses and behaviour. Through these practices, narcissistic identification with the image has extended to becoming the image, and a subsequent narcissistic interface with the self-image has been produced. A driver of these self-imaging practices is the desire to be seen and ultimately to witness the self being looked at in the social sphere. As a result, subjects are actively and continuously self-editing in order to align themselves with body, gender and lifestyle ideals; this is a form of self-regulation in relation to social and cultural norms. This aspiration to become the image and to be the object of a private or public gaze can mean that, for certain individuals, the images of events and experiences are incomplete unless they are captured as an image; the documentation threatens to supersede the experience.

My work investigates the desire to be the object of the gaze through the camera, in the context of these modes of spectatorship and socio-cultural behaviours, in order to consider how practices of becoming the image may affect habitualised scripts of gendered spectatorship and the narratives of power and subordination that they disavow.

As representational devices progress in the digital age, the research project considers how self-imaging may impact on the ways in which gender is produced through the image, and how this may be addressed through feminist performance practice. In my work, the concept of seducing the machine is used to produce an explicit relationship of myself as performer to the camera, in order to emphasise, critique and explore the cultural idea of narcissism and exhibitionism as being characteristic of femininity. This relationship to the camera in performance produces narcissism in two respects. Firstly, in terms of a psychological dynamic of an autonomous relationship between the self and the machine (as distinct from the camera which was historically controlled by a 'male' gaze), espousing Rosalind Krauss' view of narcissism as characterising the genre of video performance (Krauss, 1986)⁸, my work aims to examine the complexity and contradiction of the prevailing concept that westernised femininity is self-focused because of an emphasis on physical appearance. Secondly, the concept of seducing the machine works to imbue the performance of the female body with codes that signal woman's apparent desire for the camera. In relation to femininity, narcissism is understood in my research as the love of self-image, entangled in exhibitionism as the desire to be looked at, and increasingly manifested via self-imaging technologies as the desire to experience oneself as image. An exploration of the activity of becoming the image involves inhabiting sexualised media imagery and enacting and teasing out the project of becoming, which women are constantly persuaded to undertake by exposure to a constant stream of glamorised, idealised images of femininity. My practice, in erotically and seductively presenting myself to the camera, explores specifically how the staging of a woman's narcissistic relationship to the machine may expose and shift the language of the gendered gaze that is so prevalent in western media, thus situating my work in a field of concern that aims to challenge and provoke the politics of representation.

1.2 Power, desire and the gaze: feminist discourse

Feminism has sought to address issues of inequality with regard to gender, and feminist criticism has contributed by the analysis of cultural texts and the exposition of patterns relating to power and gender that replicate and produce the patterns of wider society. Feminist film theory has sought to examine and critique the ways in which power

⁸ Krauss' important essay 'Video: the Aesthetics of Narcissism' was first published in 1978; it is reprinted in Hanhardt, J.G. (1986) (ed.) *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*.

operates through the gendered gaze: its delineation of dominant narratives and habitual modes of looking becomes a mode of analysis that is pertinent to the cultural script of seducing the machine examined by my research.

Even as a seminal text of feminist film theory, Mulvey's concept of the gaze is not a straightforward concept that may readily be adapted to underpin a contemporary analysis. Further questions are raised by the theory's delineation of singular, unchanging positions for undifferentiated male and female viewers; its unquestioning reliance on Freudian theory, and its context and medium specific narrative. Mulvey's application of psychoanalysis to the cinematic text as feminist critique in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' became the basis of much subsequent feminist film criticism. Her structure of the gaze has been widely employed in analyses of imagery, within and beyond the cinematic context. The presence across media, histories and geographies of this gendered narrative, in which man's dominance over woman is reflected and produced through the look, resonates with wider cultural criticism. As pointed out in many early feminist deconstructive approaches, there is a danger in outlining this oppressive structure of the gaze that this narrative of the look – albeit dominant – begins to be defined as the *only* possible narrative. References to male/female desire or pleasure as singular and unified are also problematic in the presumption that they are what all men or women desire. In this respect, Mulvey's deployment of psychoanalysis was both the text's greatest innovation and its theoretical weak point. Freud's formulation of the masculine drive as active and the feminine as passive was employed by Mulvey as a critical tool to mine implicit power structures of the look. Equating male with masculine/active and female with feminine/passive has a naturalizing effect, however, through which the active look is masculinised and the female has no recourse to active desire.

In the context of discussing the gaze, therefore, it might be more appropriate to consider scripts of desire within cultural texts that effectively define 'normal' desire, and thus cater for a subject that becomes defined with regard to this. The prevalent script of a woman's desire as exhibitionist, while offering women pleasure in identification with images of beauty and decoration, also produces their desire as passive and contingent in relation to the male's. In terms of women's supposed narcissistic orientation, Freud says: 'their need lies not in the direction of loving but being loved' (Freud, 1953: 88), while Doane believes that women can only 'desire to be desired' (Doane, 1987: 156).

Denied the power and subjectivity of actively taking a male as the object of her desire, a woman must make herself the object and passively wait for this desire. In one way this might be seen as a narcissistic orientation towards the self, but at the same time this desire is understood as directed ultimately towards attracting the gaze; a woman's object love is thus repressed into appearing narcissistic. Teresa de Lauretis asserts that narcissistic pleasure 'seduces women into femininity' despite restricting them to a submissive and contingent role (de Lauretis, 1999: 85).⁹

These contradictions in a woman's role as object of the gaze form a key part of the analysis of my research: they disavow power relations by decreeing that a woman is a passive object of the gaze because she wants to be looked at, not because she is denied an active role. With this restrictively passive form of desire that is scripted in the dominant narratives of the gaze, narcissism as a supposedly feminine pleasure becomes problematic for a feminist project: the bounds of the narrative that offers a woman this pleasure also subordinate her. Under the terms of this pleasure, a woman is not permitted to be subject of her own desire, and an acceptance of this passive pleasure might appear to be a regression to a position of contingency and oppression. On the other hand, in this same narrative of the gaze, it is the male's desire that positions him as powerful, so desire also seems key to recuperating a position of power: a double bind.

Mulvey's theory was highly influential both within and beyond film theory, because it located and exposed the dynamics of narrative pervasive in visual cultures including film, art and advertising, which insidiously subordinated women through familiarity and convention. The binary Freudian terms that Mulvey relied on, however, seemed to lead to a theoretical dead-end: equating masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity seemed to offer no way to represent women beyond this, as autonomous subjects in their own right. In 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"', Mulvey accounts for the female spectator's identification with on-screen action by positing an oscillation between a 'correct' feminine passivity and a regressive masculine activity via a kind of 'trans-sex identification' or 'psychic transvestism'

⁹ De Lauretis' 1984 essay 'Oedipus Interruptus' is reprinted in Thornham, S. (1999) (ed.) *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*.

(Mulvey, 1989; de Lauretis, 1998: 174).¹⁰ Mulvey's theory was admittedly polemical, but captured the status quo to the point that it seemed omnipresent and inescapable. Much subsequent feminist film theory became concerned with locating exceptions to the male-dominated narrative. This may offer alternative formulations of the gaze that could identify the female viewer with the act of looking, rather than being looked at. For example, analyses of films in which the female look was prominent, including Linda Williams' account of a persistent female look in the horror movie genre, as epitomised by 'the bold smouldering dark eyes of the silent screen vamp' (Williams 1984: 85). This look, however, is always narratively punished, and therefore exemplifies women's prohibition from an active gaze. A compilation of essays entitled *The Female Gaze* (1988) was a direct response to Mulvey and investigated other possibilities for women's spectatorship, accounting for diversity in terms of race, class and sexual orientation. Suzanne Moore's essay in this collection explored a gaze that might be implied in images of the 'new man' that emerged in 1980s advertising. This representation of a more sensitive and erotic male was designed to engender a desiring female gaze and was exemplified by *Athena's* famous 1986 poster of a muscular man holding a baby.¹¹ This imagery posed the question of how a woman might actively desire men as sexual objects, rather than herself desiring to be an object. Moore contends that because of the absence of cultural imagery of the male body as the erotic object of an active female gaze, encodements of male sexualised *to-be-looked-at-ness* had to be borrowed from homoerotic imagery (Moore, 1988). This locates a deficiency in cultural images of women's desire as active, direct and non-contingent, and its representation as problematic: the only recourse is a masculinisation of the woman's look.

By the late 1990s, female-centred narratives proliferated in Anglo-American media, most notably the blockbuster film *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and television successes such as *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002) and *Sex and the City* (1998–2004). *Sex and the City*, which depicts women at the centre of the sexual experience from an empathetic

¹⁰ Mulvey's 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"' (reprinted in Mulvey, 1989) was first published in 1981 and was inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946). The phrase 'psychic transvestism' is used by de Lauretis in 'A Woman's Gotta do...What a Man's Gotta do?', her discussion of the female fantasy in the Western film genre. She refers to the discussion of 'transvestism' in the cinema by both Doane and Mulvey, noting how the female is forced to identify with a masculinised position in order to identify with activity. (De Lauretis, T., 1998).

¹¹ See Milmo, C. (2007) 'The Curse of Man and Baby: Athena, and the Birth of a Legend' in *The Independent*, January 16, 2007. Viewed online at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/the-curse-of-man-and-baby-athena-and-the-birth-of-a-legend-432331.html> (accessed 16.10.11).

viewpoint, may be argued to be taboo-breaking: its female characters fervently pursue sexual partners as part of their metropolitan life, without the 'shame' that socio-cultural norms across many cultures suggest that promiscuous women should feel. The main characters' preoccupation with the act of sex however, seems again to be a masculinisation of female sexuality in order to assert sexual freedom, and further produces the expectation that this is how women should behave. The characters are reductively typecast, which is reinforced through the show's emphasis on clothing and appearance.¹² Lead character Carrie's obsession with designer shoes re-produces a contemporary script of feminine pleasure in excessive consumption and the fetishisation of high-end clothing products. Her exclusive, visually arresting fashion statement clothing, masterminded by flamboyant stylist Patricia Field, made her an icon of femininity for a generation of women, and taught them how to be an eye-catching object of the gaze. Thus, even the female-centred narrative prescribes women's pleasure in becoming a more visual, more beautiful, more desirable object of the gaze by both glamorising and normalising conspicuous consumption. Recourse to active desire is not, therefore, the only issue: the over-active desire to be desired continues to proliferate in representations. These are idealised as ostensibly expressing the liberation of contemporary women, but at the same time reinforcing women's role as consumers, as well as consumed, within the capitalist economy.

In *Cinematic Howling: Women's Films, Women's Film Theories*, Hoi Cheu claims that the role of the female auteur, though still unusual in the mainstream film industry, presents a model that might begin to assert an active female agent through ownership of the gaze. It must be asked, however, whether the substitution of a female for a male in itself guarantees a subversion of the status quo: a female looking through the camera lens may not necessarily construct a 'female gaze' that reflects women's experiences and viewpoints. Cheu says: 'An alternative women's image within the convention of classical cinema can hardly break the code of gender in which women remain the object of desire for the male' (Cheu, 2007: 12). Thus the gendered conventions embedded in cultural images must be troubled by visual texts that may begin to construct and/or privilege the female gaze – or at least a gaze differentiated from that which excludes a woman's experience of herself as subject in her own body, if indeed a woman ever fully experiences herself as 'subject'. This must also strategically compromise the very

¹² For further discussion of *Sex and the City* see Rosalind Gill's (2007) *Postfeminist Romance in Gender and the Media*, pp. 218–48, and Ariel Levy's (2006) *Female Chauvinist Pigs*.

language by which they are produced. My work, in this drive to disrupt the *status quo*, endeavours to create new viewing conditions that women might inhabit and enjoy, beyond the historically restrictive binary positions. This does not suggest a female gaze singular, i.e. universal and unified, but opens out the possibility of women's authorship and spectatorship beyond existing codes and looks towards the potential of subversion.

In a woman's self-imaging practice, she is not only director but also performer, which means that in addition to the potential to control the narrative, woman as author enters the frame of the image as signifier. In my work, authorship is sometimes subtly implied via inflections and gestures through the lens of the camera. At other times, it is explicitly and forcefully asserted, for example through the cable release. In consequence, the work produces shifting, nuanced and complex understandings of the female performer as both submitted to, and in charge of, the camera's gaze. Where the author behind the camera positions the viewer, and who and where both author and primary viewpoint might be, are brought into question. The seduction of the machine, performed through a pronounced emotional and physical relationship to the camera, also crucially forces women's desire for the camera – as a kind of narcissism that produces cultural codes of femininity – to become more explicit. The work, by emphasising this disavowed cultural convention of women's invested relationship to the camera, seeks to expose a taken for granted understanding of the camera's gaze as at once 'neutral' and 'male'. Ultimately, my work seeks to emphasise the 'act' of being looked at, in addition to an understanding of the image through the scopophilic dominance of the viewer.

1.3 Female authorship and performance art practice

I locate my performance practice primarily within the field of fine art. The long tradition of western art practice has worked to exclude anyone other than the privileged white male middle-class subject from image production. This has been the focus of much contestation, challenge and subversion from feminist discourse, and debates around the genre. In this section I shall consider some of the key writing about women's exclusion from the art-history tradition, and in particular how debates around the female body as loaded signifier have shaped performance art practice. As I begin to discuss performance art in the context of feminist theory, the role of the art practitioner in political debates raises the question whether a feminist practitioner should make work

that aligns specifically with feminist theoretical understandings, or whether art practice should take a stance that involves interrogating the status quo even within feminist discourse.

The work of British feminist art historian Griselda Pollock has highlighted the historical exclusion of women from the western canon of art as authors. Much feminist discourse has focused on recuperating women's artistic practices that art institutions have worked to marginalise and oppress. This includes US feminist art critic Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?'¹³ and Pollock and Rozika Parker's *Old Mistresses: Women Art and Ideology* (1981). In *Vision and Difference* (1988) Pollock claims that this exclusion from authorship is in stark contrast to women's frequent role as art object. Woman has thus been permitted to be an image, but not a cultural producer of that image, to the extent that her body became a canvas for the projection of the male artist's fantasies. US art historian Carol Duncan critiques the representation of the female nude in the Fauvist and German Expressionist movements of early 20th century painting as passive and sexually available; ultimately a confirmation of the male author's dominance and virility (Duncan, 1974). Thus within the conventions of art historical representation, woman's body was encoded as object of fetish and distanced from any experience of living in a female body.¹⁴

The issue of how to liberate women from this narrow role through art practice has been the subject of much debate, even schism, within feminist discourse. Women's art practices began to come to the fore in the 1970s with the groundswell of feminist activism. Many artists made a case for the importance of representing women's experience: for example, concerns around the domestic environment were addressed in the 1977 exhibition *A Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife*.¹⁵ In the first instance, striving for the acceptance of women as producers of the art image was a struggle in itself. In the context of these critiques of women's oppression through the female image – Nochlin, Duncan, Mulvey et al. – the cultural significance of the female body became overwhelming to the point at which it seemed 'unrepresentable': how would it be

¹³ This essay is reprinted Nochlin (2001) *Feminism, Art, Theory: An Anthology 1968–2000*.

¹⁴ For more discussion see Linda Nochlin (op.cit.). John Berger's famous quote in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) summarizes the art historical spectatorship of the female nude, echoing Mulvey: 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' (Berger, 1972: 1). Lynda Nead dismantles the female nude as *the* icon of art history in *The Female Nude: Art Obscenity, Sexuality* (1992).

¹⁵ This exhibition at the ICA, London was organised by an artists' group called Feministo.

possible to represent the female body without reproducing women's oppression? Mulvey later refers to this as a crisis in the representability of the female body, the ultimate conclusion of which seemed to be the elimination of the female from imaging practices (Mulvey, 2007: 286).¹⁶ This has often been noted as being registered in art practices, particularly those informed by theory.¹⁷ Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973–9) aims to represent the psychological experience of a mother-child relationship through a sequence of text and objects, endeavouring to evoke experiences particular to women without representing the image of the female body in the artwork.

Theorists such as Lisa Tickner in the UK (Tickner, 1978) and Lucy Lippard in the US (1976), however, contended that an alternative iconography of the female body should be produced by women artists in order to undermine conventional male orientated images of women (Tickner, 1978; Lippard, 1976). The vaginal imagery of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in the 1970s sought to create a positive language of the female body, representing and celebrating women's genitals as a symbol that departed from the sanitised art historical image of woman, yet some critics maintained that this was simply another fetishisation of the female body (Parker and Pollock, 1981: 127). The relationship between the practice of making images and the literal voice of theory was and is often fraught.

In the late 1960s, women's performance art practice began to emerge strongly with the work of artists including Carolee Schneeman, Marina Abramovic and Valie Export. At this time performance art must have offered immediacy in the articulation of the female body as author, against women's historical role in art representation as mute object. Many of these performances harnessed the potential of the live public moment to 'speak' the body: in the symbolic space of performance the artist's body is understood not only as the body in the world, but also as a body enacting a representation. When understood in this way, the female body can simultaneously inhabit both social and representational spheres, providing potent opportunities for dialogue and slippage between them. The 'doing' actions of the body in performance, which unfold meaning over time, were able to signify a woman as 'making subject', as distinct from her art-

¹⁶ In her essay 'A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body', Mulvey notes that 'Women artists and film-makers, while rejecting this wholesale banishment, were extremely wary of the investment of "dominant meanings" in images of women; and while feminist critics turned to popular culture to analyze these meanings, artists turned to theory' (Mulvey, 2007: 286). The essay was originally published in *New Left Review* 1/188, July–August 1991, and is reprinted in Mulvey (2007) *Cindy Sherman*.

¹⁷ For example Chadwick, W, (1990, revised 1996), *Women, Art and Society*.

historical role of passive mute, and object of masculinised fantasy. From the late 1970s through these debates of the 1980s many artists, including Andrea Fraser and Hannah Wilke, directly addressed the codes of the sexualisation of women in the art context using their own bodies. This insistence on continuing to represent the female body as an embattled ground flew in the face of some of the major theoretical trajectories of feminism at the time, showing that feminist art practice can offer significant and important challenges that test theoretical understandings.

Performance thus held the potential to recuperate women's authorship and language of their own bodies by representing them as active, doing, meaning-making subjects and interrogating themselves as both sexual spectacle and authorial subject. The subjectivity of the body in performance, however, is implicit and therefore volatile: the female body as culturally loaded sign constantly attempts to default to its conventional role as sexualised object and to override the subjectivity implied by authorship. In consequence, the female artist's body in performance often struggles fully to stake claim to a legitimate and authoritative subjectivity. Despite this, the awkwardness of this subject/object role, which sits uncomfortably with unified notions of self such as the Cartesian subject constructed as body/mind, is a potentially subversive device, with the ability to dismantle 'taken-for-granted' concepts of self and subjectivity. Marsha Meskimmon describes this as the paradox of woman as cultural producer:

Women making art interrogate [these] conventions of the subject since 'woman' allied with the feminine position, is structurally defined beyond the bounds of articulate subjectivity...the question that this so pointedly raises is just what sort of subjectivity women articulate when they come into voice or materialise ideas in the visual sphere. (Meskimmon, 2003: 71)

It is precisely because of this instability between subjectivity and objectivity that the female performance artist stretches our understandings of self and so eloquently 'asks us to reconsider the parameters of the subject in new and productive ways such that difference and process might inform more nuanced concepts of subjectivity' (Meskimmon, 2003: 71).¹⁸ The awkward subject/object role that woman, as author of

¹⁸ Meskimmon refers her to art practice in general. I propose, however, that performance in particular opens out subjectivity through the subject-object nexus.

herself as sexual spectacle, is able to represent in the context of performance art offers a radical potential.

1.4 The politics of erotic self-representation

Erotic (self) representation as a strategy of feminist performance seems irreconcilable with early deconstructive approaches such as those of Mulvey. Further, during the 1980s there were even more embattled struggles around the meaning and politics of erotically representing the female body, such as those of US radical feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon. Such discourses contended that pornographic representation represents male desire to subordinate women, and encourages actual physical violence by dehumanising and degrading them. My performance practice employs clichéd codes of sexualised performance, many of which draw on a mainstream version of soft porn as a device for raising critical dialogue around female sexuality. These early, yet key debates around censorship and the politics of representing the female body continue to shape the context in which such a practice sits. In the following section, key feminist debates on the pornographic representation of women will be outlined, considering how artists positioned themselves in relation to such ideas. Subsequent sections will consider the ‘mainstreaming’ of soft-porn imagery and debates around choice and self-objectification, and how these add to and complicate such debates.

Mulveian discourse outlined a habitual operation of gendered looking that privileges the male and sexually subordinates the female. This heterosexual narrative, still dominant in western imagery, represents and produces gendered hierarchies in which the male is active, in control and powerful and the female is passive and subordinated. In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1979) Dworkin asserts that a similar, yet even more pronounced symbolic subordination is enacted upon the woman in pornographic representation. For Dworkin, the sex act itself is one of aggression, in which the male violently acts upon the female. She contends that pornography is a reflection of male sadistic fantasy of domination, through the degradation and defamation of women. This attitude was crystallised by Robin Morgan’s phrase ‘Porn is the theory, rape is the practice’ (Morgan, 1980: 139). Dworkin argued that in pornography women are depicted as passive victims of aggressive male sexuality and that the proliferation of this representation naturalises such attitudes to women, in turn leading to their sexual

harassment and abuse. She claims that the penis, and by extension the camera and the pen, are penetrating weapons of symbolic violence which men deploy against women (Dworkin, 1979: 26). Dworkin, along with MacKinnon, founded The Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) movement. Campaigns against symbolic representational violence aimed (via the US Attorney General's 1986 Commission on Pornography) to ban its depiction on the premise that it leads to actual physical violence on the female body. Such political and juridical action was concerned with the 'protection' of women from what Dworkin and McKinnon asserted was their abuse for male pleasure (Dworkin and McKinnon, 1988).

Other groups, including the *Feminists Against Censorship Taskforce* (FACT), were concerned about the possible effect of such censorship on women's sexuality.¹⁹ In her essay 'Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality', first published in 1984, member Carol Vance argued that by focusing on sexual danger and violence, radical feminist discourse prohibits sexual practices and repeats the oppression of women's sexuality, albeit in another guise of 'safety'. While praising consciousness-raising around issues of rape and violence, Vance argued that the censorship of pornography accorded with the morals of an American conservative Right, which safeguards 'traditional' values that contain woman's sexuality to her reproductive role within the sanctity of marriage, and thus both limit her freedom on issues such as marriage, abortion, contraception, and police lesbian and gay sexualities (Vance, 1997). She contended that feminism could not progress woman's position by 'protecting' her through censorship and restriction of sexual practices, but only through exploration of sexuality, despite 'danger'. She says:

...feminism must speak to sexuality as a site of oppression, not only the oppression of male violence, brutality and coercion which is has already been spoken about eloquently and effectively, but also the repression of female desire that comes from ignorance, invisibility, and fear. Feminism must put forward a politics that resists deprivation and supports pleasure. It must understand pleasure as life-affirming, empowering, desirous of human

¹⁹ FACT was formed in 1984 following the 1982 *Barnard College, NY Conference Towards a Politics of Sexuality* and led by theorists such as Carol Vance, Anne Snitow and Ellen Willis (see Willson, J. 2008: 54–5). The original programme for the conference can be found at <http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/sfxxx/sf09.htm> (accessed 31.8.10).

connection and the future and not fear it as destructive, enfeebling or corrupt. (Vance, 1997: 334)

Vance emphasises how women may be oppressed through the censorship of their sexuality as well as its over-representation. She makes a case for working towards constructing positive representations of pleasure for women as a progressive feminist strategy (Vance, 1997: 330). Merri Lisa Johnson's *Jane Sexes it up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire* (2002) and Nancy Friday's *Women on Top* (1991) are collections of 'confessions' of women's sexual fantasies, the publication of which aims to strategically flout society's policing of women's sexuality through 'shame' and 'propriety', by making public thoughts that women may have but not share, in defiance of taboo and prohibition. The diametrically opposed 'sex positive' and 'sex negative' positions produced an ideological schism, which continues to trouble feminism. When socio-cultural scripts of sexual pleasure seem to predominantly represent women as subordinate, the concept of female pleasure as 'empowering' that Vance espouses is far from straightforward.

Even in the context of such highly charged debates, women artists continued to represent their bodies in performance, and many controversially addressed the codes of pornography in a direct way. These include former prostitute and porn star Annie Sprinkle, who rose to fame in the New York art world in the late 1980s in work such as *Post Porn Modernism* (1990–93), displaying herself using an ironically didactic 'sex educator' persona as both the object of spectacle and the subject of sexual experience. Earlier, performance artist Cosey Fanni Tutti published 'magazine actions'; images of herself in the soft porn magazines *Playbirds* and *Knave*, which were then exhibited in the famously controversial exhibition *Prostitution* at the ICA, London.²⁰ Such artists sought to seize and exploit the erotic encoding of the female body as a political tool, largely operating through shifts from pornographic context to art gallery, and through the incongruity of the sexualised female body as authorial body. There is a kind of instability and uncertainty as to whether such work is legitimate 'art', but it is this tenuous hinge of meaning that calls into question the naturalised boundaries of acceptability as arbitrary social agreement. In this kind of work there is always a risk that the complexity of meaning will collapse. This approach is confrontational, and demonstrates how the art context has a capacity to bear meaning in a way that raises

²⁰ *Prostitution* (1976). ICA, London; Cosey Fanni Tutti's work was also exhibited in *PopLife* (2009–10). Tate Britain, London.

debate rather than a definitive conclusion. This is arguably the value of art for feminist discourse, and certainly for the approach of my practice.

My work has something of a similar operation to these earlier practices because it accesses iconographies of the female body, which allude, amongst other things, to mainstream and clichéd codes of contemporary soft porn. Again, the shift of meaning to the art and academic context is crucial to its ‘legitimation’ as artwork, and yet the work operates to disrupt these frameworks as a space for objective judgement through its highly charged sexual nature.²¹ This re-contextualisation lends a discomfort to the viewing conditions: the work provokes questions about whether this kind of imagery is permissible in the art context or as feminist practice. Again, there is a risk of the collapse of the performance into the iconographies that it intends to question, which is further tested when the work ventures beyond the studio or gallery context. In this way, my work aims to address the boundaries that have shifted between mainstream media imagery and pornography, with less innocuous printed matter and illicit, ‘under-the-counter’ publications; thus complicating the already-contentious politics surrounding the representation of the female body.

The widespread sexualisation of mainstream, western popular culture has been recognised by numerous studies and has been variously termed *raunch culture* (Levy, 2006), *striptease culture* (McNair, 2002), and *the pornification of culture* (Paasonen et al., 2007). From the 1990s, porn culture began to seep from ‘under the counter’ into the more mainstream and acceptable media, as exemplified by the way in which soft-porn ‘lads’ mags’ including *FHM* (1994), *Loaded* (1994), *Zoo* and *Nuts* (2004) became commonplace; slogans could be seen announcing ‘Playboy’ and ‘Porn Star’ on fashionable merchandise and t-shirts, and a overall fascination with overt sexuality and porn culture became evident. The female porn star, with her overtly sexualised and highly produced *to-be-looked-at-ness*, the glamorisation of which works to produce narcissistic identification, has become an aspirational image of westernised femininity through exposure in the popular media. This image is typified by large, buoyant breasts, a deep tan, long bright blonde or dark brown hair, long manicured nails, heavy make-up, lip gloss, Brazilian waxes and thongs. All these are invariably achieved via

²¹ Amelia Jones discusses the potential of female’s performance of her own body in the artwork to disrupt the Kantian system of judgement that underpins the ostensible disinterestedness of aesthetic judgement, particularly in relation to modernist art criticism (Jones, 1996: 223–41).

augmentation and grooming, so the image produced lends itself to a vast and constant project of 'becoming'.

This drive to become the image is a vigorous force in contemporary society, such that it has often failed to address concerns over what the re-performance of the self as a sex industry worker might mean in terms of the individual's identity, let alone the wider political implications. Furthermore, Ariel Levy notes that while such raunch culture's mainstream representation of erotic images contrasts with earlier feminist drives against *Playboy*, there is a popular perception that such sexualisation of the self equates to liberation and 'empowerment'. Such imagery, however, purveys a narrow idea of 'sexiness' driven by sexual trends that support commercial interests such as grooming and augmentation. This idea of sexuality is embodied in images of 'silent girlie-girls in G-strings *faking* lust' in which arousal is reduced to gestures and mannerisms originally or ultimately intended for the viewing pleasure of a male viewer. The attendant rhetoric of 'empowerment' works to rationalise the political implications of everyday public consumption of such imagery, in which women are often submissive objects of display. Rosalind Gill also refers to the view espoused by the popular media that women are entirely liberated and that feminism is out-dated and redundant, supported by an individualism in which 'choice', and the subject's pursuit of their own desires equates to liberation and sexual equality. Gill observes that women's grooming and adornment practices, or tools of becoming the image are particularly shrouded in such rhetoric: the wearing of make-up, fashionable clothing and 'sexy' lingerie are claimed to be empowering when they are 'being done for yourself and *not* in order to please a man' (Gill, 2007: 261; emphasis in original). Gill believes this is self-regulation disavowed as liberation. She says it is:

a shift from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze. I would argue that it represents a deeper form of exploitation than objectification – one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalised to form a new disciplinary regime. In this regime power is not imposed from or from the outside, but constructs our very subjectivity. (Gill, 2007: 259)

It might be argued, as will be asserted later via Butler, that socio-cultural regulation had always been enforced internally. What can be taken from Gill's analysis is a reformulation of the Mulveian gaze as a tool for interpreting how power operates

through visual pleasure. This becomes a particularly pertinent structure for the analysis of sexualised representations of women in contemporary western media, and offers an understanding of the cultural construct of the male gaze as no longer simply a man looking at a woman, but a woman looking at herself *as if* through the male gaze. This logic of the male gaze is prevalent in westernised culture even in contexts such as fashion magazines, in which the images are largely of women for women, thus maintaining the heterosexual narrative of the mainstream (Lewis and Rolley, 1996:179). Such imagery encourages women to rehearse the act of being looked at by looking at images of other women, and through the demand to become.

The brash sexual identities of raunch culture are easily distinguished and have dated even in a relatively short space of time, but soft-porn codes have leached in more subtle forms into the mainstream. There has been a more widespread sexualisation of western culture, beyond, but linked to, the raunch imagery that might be termed *the mainstreaming of sex*.²² In a study on the use of the female figure to advertise underwear in public spaces such as bus shelters and hoardings, Leena Maija Rossi asserts that there is an increasing similarity between the encoding of women's bodies in soft-core pornography and mainstream advertising. Analysing an advertisement that shows two women frolicking together in their underwear, she notes that rather than being focused on each other in sexual intimacy or even friendship, their gaze is directed towards the viewer or submissively away. She says:

The codes utilised in this knowledge production are not only heteronormative, they also normatively restrict the ways that heterosexuality and hetero-eroticism may be performed...Only certain types of bodies are represented as desirable, only certain types of poses as 'sexy' or erotic. (Rossi 2007: 136)

In this way such imagery teaches the viewer how to be 'sexy', erotic and aroused. In addition to the play of power in the gaze that equates women's submissiveness with 'sexiness', such images teach the female viewer that she must look and behave in a certain way in order to be 'womanly'. The draw of the narcissistic identification with the social-cultural inclusion offered by the fantasy of becoming the/this image often works to override the recognition of submissive codes.

²² See Attwood, F. (2009) (ed.) *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*.

Companies such as Ann Summers and the more exclusive Agent Provocateur sell lingerie using images that allude to pornographic codes: a woman dressed in such lingerie is shorthand for a body ready for sex.²³ Their promotional campaigns offer women a way to ‘buy into’ a popular and glamorised fantasy of the self as this object of the sexualised ‘male gaze’. It is this glamorisation and the pressure to become the hyper-sexualised image – a homogenising, restrictive and sanitised ideal of femininity – that my work seeks to address as urgent in contemporary discourse. In my work, the female body is often dressed in lingerie, black stockings, underwear and stilettos, thus referencing not only mainstream soft-porn iconographies, but also the impulse to become the image that now seems so prolific through the implications of self-imaging. In this way, it seeks to emphasise and examine how such sexualised images produce women’s desire to become, and thus to intervene in the codes that naturalise and glamorise even submissive codes by offering an idealised fantasy of the self.

1.5 The pleasure and pain of narcissistic becoming

The concept of the logic of the male gaze is central to my research because of its prevalence in contemporary westernised images of femininity, from hyper-sexualised media imagery to personal social-networking posts, which may emulate such imagery. This dominant cultural image of femininity operates through the implied heterosexual narrative to solicit exhibitionist desire in the female viewer, in identification with the female as the object of a sexualised fantasy of male dominance. Such imagery of a woman as desiring the gaze ‘demands a becoming’ (Doane, 1991: 22). The consequences of this prevalent representation in hyper-visual digitised globalised culture will be explored in the next section. Issues around self-regulation and the normative operation of gender arise through this concept of an internalised male gaze; indeed, the fundamental premise of the Lacanian theory that informs Mulvey’s concept of the gaze is that the subject does not simply speak, but is itself spoken through language. This offers a potentially radical understanding of the constitution of the subject that was later taken up by Butler. In the first instance, however, I shall discuss in detail the process of identification with images of femininity through the activity of

²³ The Ann Summers sex shops chain was founded by Cabron Waterfield in London, 1970; for more discussion see Grose. Thomas, K., (1999) ‘Naughty But Nice’. Fetishistic underwear supplier Agent Provocateur was founded by Joe Corr e in London, 1994; for more discussion see O’Hagan, Sean (2009), ‘His Dark Materials’.

pole-dancing as an example of the practices of becoming the image that currently proliferate in the western media.

The process of becoming the image and its consequences for the construction of the subject is exemplified in the mainstreaming of sex and pornographic cultures. Propelled through the western media, these have constructed an over-determined sexuality as an idealised feminine identity. This can be seen in a particularly prominent contemporary example: the popularisation of pole-dancing and its spin-off products and services, which has led to widespread mimicry of the bodily gestures and appearance of its associated imagery, derived in this case from the sex industry. Pole dancing is a form of sexual display that originated in strip and lap-dancing clubs, in which a semi-naked female performer uses a ceiling-to-floor pole to perform provocative gymnastic dances aimed at a presumed, and most often actual, male viewer. It may be said to represent the mainstreaming of porn culture: promoted by the media as an activity of the chic contemporary woman, it was de-stigmatised and eventually glamorised by promotion as a leisure pursuit of celebrities, and is now widely being 'sold' to women as a glamorous form of fitness activity.

Feona Attwood and Samantha Holland's UK-based study 'Keeping Fit in Six Inch Heels: The Mainstreaming of Pole Dancing' (2009) sought to understand the attraction of this activity by interviewing participants and teachers, and by taking part in classes. Attwood and Holland believe that there is an inconsistency between the marketing of pole dancing equipment as a form of exercise that promotes strength, fitness and endurance, and its overtly sexualised image and presentation (Attwood and Holland, 2009: 171). It is implied that the more 'wholesome' premise of exercise legitimises the sexual associations to render the activity more acceptable in the mainstream commercial context. Typically, this manifestation of raunch culture operates through the rhetoric of 'being done for yourself and *not* in order to please a man' supported by the generally female-only nature of classes. Attwood and Holland emphasize the classes as sites in which women, supporting each other as a group, become comfortable in performing physically challenging and overtly sexual moves. After initial self-consciousness, discomfort and feelings of inadequacy in performing with pole in 'skyscraper' heels, the participants became more confident in performing the choreography. There is an emphasis on 'having a laugh' 'egging each other on', group support and approval in a contained, all-female environment. The participants describe the narcissistic pleasure of

watching other women perform the sexualised gestures: 'I could do that – I could make myself feel good, I could feel powerful up there' (Attwood and Holland, 2009: 176). In this scenario, women are looking and being looked at through the logic of a sexualised male gaze that is implied by the original context of the mode of performance, but without the 'danger' of an actual male gaze. It is arguable whether the 'female-only' nature of the scenario in which the postures are performed renders them an appropriation of the iconography of the sex industry by women for their own pleasure, or whether this legitimises the origins of the performance and disavows uncomfortable personal and political issues that may arise.²⁴

It seems that the support of the environment works to overcome the women's lack of body confidence, yet there is a broader question as to why they may believe that they have to become a hyper-sexualised image of femininity in order to feel that they can comfortably inhabit their own bodies. Participants in Attwood and Holland's survey all cite media sources as influences for their motivation to attend classes, in particular idealised celebrity culture icons such as Kate Moss, and those that embody raunch culture such as Katie Price in the UK and Pamela Anderson in the US (ibid.: 173). While Attwood and Holland, as in the rhetoric surrounding raunch culture, note the subject's feelings of accomplishment and exhilaration in the process of becoming the cultural image of femininity, the underlying sense is that this 'pleasure' derives from being relieved of the feelings of inadequacy produced by the same images.

In her 2009 book *Bodies*, Susie Orbach, author of the influential *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978), notes that in the context of late capitalist society body anxiety has increased in both men and women, as has a tendency to see the body as a project that must constantly be produced in response to a media that defines ever-changing and increasingly 'unrealistic' body images. Indeed, the basis of consumer cultures that support western society is to 'create demand' by subtly convincing the subject of their need or desire for a product by the offer of identification with over-idealised imagery. As Helen McDonald says: 'By inducing women to strive with all their purchasing

²⁴ In addition to debates around body image, pole dancing and such practices raise other questions such as those concerning the ethics and regulation of the sex industry, in terms of the treatment of women, and whether the proliferation of such bodily practices glamourises (yet disavows) any of these underlying issues. In media discussion surrounding pole dancing and stripping there is an equation of money with power and choice, but while money can provide economic independence, arguably a feminist aspiration, it might be asked whether how this is done has any bearing on its meaning.

power towards an ideal that is difficult, elusive and obscure, capitalism ensures the threat of failure is maintained and the purchasing never exhausted' (McDonald, 2001: 2).

Orbach suggests that the dominance of western ideals through global visual cultures provides a restrictive and homogenising language of the body, and that the key to relieving the anxious relationship of the subject to its own body that such narrow ideals work to produce is to broaden definitions of what is considered both 'beautiful' and 'normal'. To this end she took on a consultancy role with the multi-national organisation O&M Advertising for the Unilever brand Dove's *Campaign for Real Beauty* (2004). This aimed to include women with a variety of body shapes, skin types and tones, ethnicity and ages to celebrate and construct a wider, more inclusive concept of beauty.²⁵ The Dove campaign is, however, a venture ultimately driven by commercial interests and which has an emphasis on women's role as spectacle and appearance as definitive of their identity.

The effect of the body ideals constantly reproduced in visual cultures is regularly debated in terms of the size and shape of women's bodies such as the 'size zero' debate' on the endemic use of extremely thin models in fashion campaigns. This reflects and produces an overall cultural obsession that an unhealthy and unrealistic thinness signifies femininity, which in turn has led to an epidemic of body issues, especially in young girls. This increasing mediatisation of culture and society has extended to a range of 'body difficulties' in both men and women. Orbach says:

anorexia, self-harm, the wish to do away with a body part, eczema, sexual identity confusions, fear of ageing, compulsive exercising – can be seen as a the individual's constant search for a reliable body and to rid herself or himself of body shame (Orbach, 2009: 141)

She contends that increasingly idealised images and the means to alter the body through thriving cosmetic, surgery and exercise industries not only lead to the normalisation of body ideals, but of body ills, low self-esteem and bodily concerns that must be 'fixed' as the subject measures itself against cultural images.

²⁵ Information about the campaign can be found at <http://www.dove.co.uk/campaign-for-real-beauty.html>. Orbach discusses her consultancy role with the campaign in Orbach, S. (2005) 'Fat is an Advertising Issue', <http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/news/481078/Fat-advertising-issue/>

As social and cultural life becomes ever more mediated, the constant stream of visual pleasures on offer works to produce a compulsion to become these images, which within a hierarchical system often leads to the subject's complicity with their own oppression. Yet beneath the narcissistic fantasy of becoming the image, is a sense of lack and inadequacy in relation to the image, which is more 'perfect' in cultural terms than actual bodies can ever be. Mulvey's assertion of women's relationship to the image, as defined by narcissistic pleasure in identification with the position of the looked-at object, might therefore be extended to include narcissistic pain. Advancing digital technologies, which offer self-imaging and self-publishing facilities, provide a way in which to rehearse and perform the self through gendered social and cultural codes, and to view the self as an image in the social sphere. Across my practice the processes of performing, capturing, reviewing and publishing the self as visual document of the event of becoming – and therefore its materialisation – are investigated. As I endeavour to inhabit prevalent cultural images of femininity, themes of disintegration and collapse of the image, self-objectification, self-deprecation and self-destruction arise as consequences of the acts of becoming. 'Car-crash' viewing, a contemporary form of spectatorship premised on the act of watching another's pain as at once unbearable and compelling, is mobilised in my performance practice. In endeavouring to open out the complexities of such viewing, my work aims to underscore a disavowed, discomfiting ethic of the spectacle that compulsively self-destructs, raising questions around practices of self-surveillance, trying and failing to become the image, and the consequences of the impossibility of inhabiting normative social and cultural fantasies of femininity. In the work, there is also a perhaps utopian drive to 'flip' the power relationships of the looked-at female object of desire, which aims to affect spectatorship through the hopelessness and ridiculousness evoked through the ultimate failure of what the image seems to propose.

1.6 Performativity: narcissism and the regulation of gender

In Orbach's claim that representations of the body are moving away from the 'physical reality' of bodies, there is a danger of positing a 'natural' body that is not shaped by culture. Indeed some feminist authors, such as Judith Butler, would more radically assert that the body has been, and continues to be acted upon culturally in this manner (Orbach, 2009; Butler, 1999). What is clear is that the way in which culture acts on the body through normative body standards is becoming more pronounced and physically

evident; its disciplining is becoming more extreme because of the everyday invasive presence of the image and the technologies that promise to fulfil (gender) identities by augmenting the body. Theoretical concepts of the performativity of gender such as Butler's offer an understanding of the subject's own self-regulation to re-produce cultural norms of gender that can be applied to the rhetoric of 'choice' and 'empowerment' which stem from raunch culture. The following section outlines this theoretical understanding with a view to investigating whether the subject, in the context of a compulsion to become the image, might acquire agency and if so how, and whether performance practice might operate subversively within Butler's terms.

Gen Doy suggests that while the subject might experience itself as a consciously-acting agent, many theorists including Foucault, Butler, Derrida and McRobbie assert that the subject is produced and regulated through systems of language and law (Doy, 2005: 2). Doy claims that it is through 'the play of social texts' – political, religious, legal, medical, educational and so on' – that the subject is constituted (ibid.: 3). After Foucault's observation on how subjects are produced through the regulation of judicial systems, Judith Butler focuses particularly on how the gendered subject is produced through language. She believes that binary categorisations of gender – male/female, masculine/feminist, sex/gender – produce and regulate gender norms (Butler, 1999). She says that this essentialising force operates both within the socio-cultural field, and is also replicated by the use of language in 'French Feminisms', such as those of Luce Irigaray, that sought to undermine what was seen as imposed patriarchal femininity. Approaches that rely on the sex/gender distinction are based on an assumption that a constructed socio-cultural gender lays on biological sex. Butler claims that this produces a naturalisation of the category of 'sex' which is itself produced through the same regulatory norms. She says: 'gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive', prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts' (Butler, 1999: 11; emphasis in original).

This has consequences for our theoretical understanding of the gendered subject, creating a shift in the locus of how the subject is constructed, or rather produced. While the subject may have a sense of itself articulating or 'choosing' gender, there can be no transcendent subject 'behind' language that articulates it: the subject is itself constituted through language, and cannot therefore be before it. Thus, there is no prediscursive

space or 'outside' to language, and there is no 'I' before the Law; there is rather 'an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates' (Butler, 1999: xv). This idea stems from Jacques Derrida's interpretation of Franz Kafka's short story *Before the Law* in which: 'The one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits'. In this sense 'the anticipation conjures its object.' (ibid.: xv).

The rhetoric of choice and the equation of the experience of pleasure with empowerment that surrounds images prevalent in western media, which produce femininity as overtly sexualised and narcissistic, operate through this kind of reversal of cause and effect. That is, the subject is constructed as the active agent; the one who chooses, whereas in effect consumer cultures and the media produce the desires and fears that guide those choices. The laws that govern the subject's sexuality are internalised through pleasure and punishment in relation to regulatory norms, and may therefore come to appear as their own desires. This effect is further reinforced through, for example, a rhetoric of choice as the subject's own decision. The subject is thus held within, and re-produces the regulatory norms of, the gender hierarchies that structure social and cultural life. Butler claims that, rather than being the essential core of the subject, identity and gender are produced through a sustained set of acts that are not an articulation or expression of the subject's gender, but actively construct it by the reiteration of regulatory norms. In the preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble* (first published in 1990) Butler succinctly reiterates her theory:

The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylisation of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an 'internal' feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalised gender. (Butler, 1999: xv)

Within the heterosexual matrix that governs society, notion of the ideal woman and the ideal man are naturalised as stemming from biological sexuality and reproductive instincts. This is of course highly exclusive, as Butler argues in relation to gay, lesbian and other marginalised individuals who are constructed as non-subjects. Even for those whose sexual identities might align with the normative heterosexual trajectory, such as

the female /feminine equation that the research is primarily concerned with, these regulatory norms are exclusive in relation to the restrictive codes of behaviour that one must adopt in order to be 'feminine', to be 'normal', or to be 'womanly'. It is with this normative action of the cultural image of woman as narcissistic that my studio practice is concerned, as it endeavours to investigate how it constantly produces the desire to become; the pressure for women to undertake an endless project of trying to inhabit an elusive femininity.

Butler's collapse of the sex/gender distinction is useful in conceiving how the embodied subject becomes gendered through acts of doing – or what might be usefully referred to in relation to the gendered image – acts of becoming. This concept is key to the premise of my research as it explores how narcissistic pleasure drives processes not only of desiring to be, but of acting to become the image. Such binaries as male/female, masculine/feminine represent socio-cultural categorisations through which bodies are marked and interpreted, producing understandings by which others may be conveniently categorised and contained, and offering a 'social safety' by maintaining the social order (Schneider, 1997). The disruption of such binaries is therefore threatening, as Rebecca Schneider notes:

The terror that accompanies the dissolution of a binary habit of sense-making and self-fashioning is directly appropriate to the social safety insured in the maintenance of such apparatuses of sense. The rigidity of our social binaries – male/female, white/black, civilised/primitive, art/porn - are sacred to our Western cultural ways of knowing, and theorists have long pointed to the necessity of interrogating such foundational distinctions to discover precisely what they uphold and what they exclude.
(Schneider, 1997: 13.)

While within her theorisation Butler does not accept the categorisations of sex/gender, male/masculine, female/feminine, on the premise that this binary system naturalises sex, they are still extremely useful categorisations for the analysis of the western ideological system of gender, which still endemically defaults to binary codes through the insistent operation of the stylisations that Butler critiques. Within this study I therefore refer to 'female' as a biological categorisation and 'femininity' as a set of socio-cultural codes, but with a constant focus on the processes of becoming in relation to cultural images.

In my studio practice I try to locate and perform ideas of ‘classic femininity’, accessing ‘stereotypes’ as personas that may be inhabited by assuming certain ‘looks’, behaviour and poses. In my work, I seek to perform clichés of femininity that are part of the westernised social and cultural mesh of gender, but do not imitate a specific iconic image: the flirtatious ‘dumb’ blonde; the 1920s vamp with a bob and red lips; the bejewelled, sultry vixen with big hair and soot-black eyes; black stockings and lingerie that draw on raunch culture and underwear advertisements. The work thus seeks to reference the process of becoming the image as it might infiltrate everyday thoughts, fantasies and viewing experiences, rather than being reduced to a singular event. Puns and clichés are also referenced to draw out the complex power relations embedded in cultural codes of sexuality, such as Madonna’s call to ‘strike a pose’, the attitudes of 1950s pin-up girls and cabaret dance moves.

The work aims to perform the clichés as seemingly generic sexualised codes that exist somewhere in an ever-changing yet ever-naturalising, collective bank of sexualised codes of western culture. The work of artist Barbara Kruger seems to provide a comment on women’s relationship to the performance of stereotyped femininity: ‘*I am your reservoir of poses.*’ (1982). Craig Owen’s discussion of Kruger’s de-naturalisation of the gender stereotype in works such as *We won’t play nature to your culture* (1983) suggests that the stereotype operates crucially in social processes of ‘incorporation, exclusion, domination and rule’ (Owens, 1990: 192). Drawing on Barthes’ phrase ‘The rhetoric of the image’, Owens institutes a ‘rhetoric of the pose’ whereby the feminist artist employs her body as language: not as simply ‘natural’ biologically sexed flesh but shaped, formed, inscribed and within culture (ibid.: 191–2). Thus conceived of, the body has, and is, language: within the performance space the performer’s body can be understood both as a body in the world and as a body in the space of signification. In this way, the artist can be seen both to ‘speak’ her body and to ‘be’ it. The *rhetoric of the pose* might then be understood to be the way in which the pose convinces or persuades that a woman is ‘womanly’ or otherwise; through such ‘speaking’ of the body, what might be entrenched as naturalised sexuality might be dismantled. In my research practice the particular pose of femininity that produces desire for the machine/viewer is performed, exposed, investigated and pushed to the point of collapse, deconstructing the naturalised representation of woman in the process of becoming the image of femininity.

The cyclical action of the cultural image of ‘woman as narcissist’ raises the question of how this self-perpetuating process might be subverted in performance practice. Butler’s theorisation that gender is produced through constant repetition, while offering a radical understanding of the very construction of the sexed subject, in turn raises the question whether, in these terms, the subject can ever articulate anything in resistance to and beyond the ideological systems that produce it. It may only be capable of repeating the terms that have been prescribed to it through culture. In *Bodies that Matter* Butler herself argues that, because regulatory norms must be constantly and forcibly reiterated through the ritual repetition of gender, the fact that bodies never fully become these idealised norms is highlighted (Butler, 1993). Within these ‘instabilities’ subversion may occur through a process of ‘rematerialisation’ in which ‘the force of regulatory law may be turned upon itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law’ (ibid: 2). Butler believes the possibility of subversion arises in the failure of the repetition of normative ideals of gender. Vicky Kirby interprets Butler’s theory thus:

agency occurs in the interstices of those different and often competing rules and the variation of their repetition. Indeed, it is in the slippage, dissonance, or even contradiction of their repetition that the subversion of identity becomes possible, if not inevitable (Kirby, 2006: 45).²⁶

If gender and identity are conceptualised as being constituted over time through the compulsive repetition of stylised acts, rather than as a unified and stable whole that determines those acts, a space opens out across this temporality for something else to happen. Butler claims that the fundamental phantasmatic quality of gender identity as an *effect* of socially and politically enforced norms that the subject can never fully embody – though its task is perpetually to strive for this – is indicative of the precariousness of the constitution of gender, and locates the potential for its disruption. This takes place when gender is revealed to be a ‘phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction’ through ‘the failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition’ of the performative acts that produce that effect (Butler, 1999: 179). The nature of the stereotype is that it tends continually to naturalise: in my performance

²⁶ Kirby also says: ‘it is in the friction and unavoidable incompatibility of these demands that failures to conform must occur, and subversive or non-normative subjectivities must arise.’ (Kirby, 2006: 45).

practice various strategies that critically address stylised sexuality are employed. These include parody through ironic humour; a 'knowingness' in performing narcissism in order to produce 'pleasure' and self-deprecating humour, through to a disintegration or implosion of the pose. Repetition is also a strategy of the performances themselves: whether through doubling, re-doubling, recurring actions, insistent reiteration or constant repetition, phrases, tropes and gestures of femininity are pressed until they give way. If gender is produced through repetition, by exploring repetition in a number of ways I shall seek to force the process of gendering to reveal itself or in some way to come apart, even through the female-feminine alliance that helps to hold normativity firmly together.

1.7 Women and machines: the gendering of technology

In my research, the term 'machine' refers to the 'machine of the visible'. This is primarily the camera, incorporating both the still and the moving image, but also extends to its associated paraphernalia of microphones and cable releases, and further to devices of viewing such as the screen and projector (Rose, J., 1986: 203).²⁷ The performers' physical and emotional interaction with this apparatus in the studio practice as 'seduction' pushes to the fore not only the camera as non-neutral device, but also the relationship between the gendered subject and the machine that touches on concerns of some contemporary feminist criticism surrounding the embodied subject and technology. As technology advances in such areas as travel, communication and medicine it opens up new and previously inconceivable possibilities. These in turn present new problems and dangers relating to moral, ethical, legal and existential issues. Science fiction represents the wonder and fear at the possibility that technology holds to transform our everyday lives and human capability, which may in turn radically alter the nature of our existence. This bending of our ontological knowledge presents rich territory for feminist analysis, as issues of gender and the very nature of the subject are challenged, and reform themselves round new and prospective developments.

²⁷ Jacqueline Rose, in her essay 'The Cinematic Apparatus: Problems in Current Theory' (in Rose, J., 1986) uses the phrase 'machine of the visible' to refer to the 'cinematic apparatus' as a method of production. This terminology breaks the seductive fantasy of the cinematic image by tying its processes to the technology that enables the image. Extending the concept of the 'machine' beyond the camera to various props of production opens out a similar operation in the performance practice.

It might be said that women have historically been *Mechanical Brides* (McLuhan, 1951) both in the sense of being ‘Othered from’ and oppressed by the machine.²⁸ Ellen Lupton says, for example, that there is a duality between the gendering of technology as a male domain and the definition of certain machines – the telephone, typewriter, washing machine and iron – as pertaining to ‘women’s work’ (Lupton, 1993). This attitude contained women in male-subservient roles, as menial workers in both home and office. Some feminist thought, however, argues that technology has the potential to open up new possibilities in women’s roles: for example, the manipulation of the reproductive process might be seen to offer women choice in relation to their ‘natural reproductive role’ and thus the potential to radically alter both their social role and understandings of biological femaleness. Whether this is liberation from ‘biological destiny’ or a further oppression and control of women’s bodies is a controversial issue.

The camera itself is a highly gendered technology. Its historical control predominantly by men prescribes that many conventions of the image of femininity work to produce women as subordinate passive objects to the masculinised gaze. The digitalisation of the image presents numerous possibilities and problems for feminist practice. In the 1990s ‘Cyberfeminism’ emerged in response to the internet boom, when ‘virtual reality’ seemed to offer a new space of potential. This seemed as if it had not yet been socially and culturally encoded with gender-, race- or class-based prejudice and inequality, or what David Bell terms the expansive space of cyber culture (Bell, 2007).²⁹ In some instances, the internet has supported social change because of its ability to connect, (re)organise and mobilise groups of people across boundaries, as for example in the use of social networking sites during the 2011 Egyptian uprising that led to political reform. On the other hand, when global giants such as Google monopolise, control and regulate the majority of internet use, the subsuming of the web into the capitalist economy is undeniable. Internet technology has also supported the mass commodification of desire, both in the sense of pornographic representations and of the publishing of personal emotions, experiences and images, transmuting them into transferable bytes. The concept of seducing the machine refers to such investment in digital technology, or

²⁸ The Mechanical Bride concept raises a strong association with the connection between mechanics and eroticism in modernist ideas, as epitomised by Marcel Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* 1915–23.

²⁹ For instance, science fiction writing practice developed in which women used their authorial voices to script potential new progressive futures for women. Cyberpunk explored the radical possibilities of human-machine hybrids positing a revolutionary and subversive stance towards the mainstream and authority.

more specifically the camera as a device to fulfil and produce fantasies of the self as cultural image. The accessibility of digital modes of representation has rendered it an everyday activity to conceive of oneself as a cultural image in the social and public setting of the internet, through the taking, reviewing and re-performance of the image until a satisfactory resemblance to it is achieved.

As we become the image through the machine, we may also in a sense become the image of the machine: we certainly become marked by it. In the abstract space of the internet, individuals adopt a surrogate self-image or avatar, often with transcendental abilities such as the human-machine hybrid of the cyborg. This concept of the human-machine became a metaphor for feminist thought concerning the theoretical questions opened up by advancing technology, and was highly influenced by Donna Haraway's seminal text *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991). Haraway located the cyborg, a 'hybrid of machine and organism', in relation to Darwinian thought. She projected that hybridization of human and machine was the next step in evolution, polemically overwriting this ostensibly natural body with the machine, in order to undermine the category of the 'natural' and in turn to undermine fundamental ontological understandings such as the instinctual drive to reproduce. Haraway's conceptualisation of the cyborg as a transitional being between both human and machine and fiction and materiality embodied the transcendence of ontological boundaries; it opened out a theoretical space in which such gendered binaries as man/mind/machine in opposition to woman/body/nature might have the potential to dissolve (Wajcman, 1991). Helen McDonald, however, claims that Haraway's cyborg exists in a utopian intellectual space which 'claims only a fictional responsibility to the 'human' and the 'real' (McDonald, 2001: 28).³⁰ The body-machine nexus seems to offer the potential to transcend the limitations of the flesh-and-blood body, yet the danger that the concept of cyberspace will slip into a 'blank', not yet encoded space and place it beyond the socio-cultural field has haunted cyberfeminism. When reconsidered in social and cultural context the cyborg is revealed as a flawed metaphor: the cyborg is already embedded in western cultural consciousness as a highly gendered and particularly sexually encoded figure. The Cyborg appeared more than 60 years before Haraway's text in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927) as the 'man-machine', named to represent

³⁰ Anne Balsamo also critiques Haraway's selective reading of the Cyborg outside cultural narratives. She says that rather than 'rendering ambiguous the human/machine construct' [...] 'the dominant representation of cyborgs reinserts us into dominant ideology by reaffirming bourgeois notions of human, machine and femininity'. (Balsamo, 1996: 157)

the mastery of the male creator but shaped with the appearance of a biologically female body. The cyborg as 'male fantasy' continues in the hyper-sexualised bodies of contemporary computer avatars such as Lara Croft from the film and game franchise *Tomb Raider* (2001).

Haraway's notion of a dissolution of boundaries between fictional representation and physical bodily reality can, however, be seen in the effect on the body of the perfection of the digitised image. Susie Orbach partly attributes an increasing body image instability to constant exposure to the results of image-manipulation technologies such as Photoshop.³¹ The subject becomes conditioned to images stretched and smoothed into photo-realistic hyper-idealizations; he or she comes to regard these as normal and consequently themselves as 'abnormal'. Orbach claims that as a result people are manipulating the substance of the body through diet, exercise, procedures and surgery to relieve anxiety around what they perceive as their flawed bodies. Thus: 'in a post-industrial western world ...the body has become a series of visual images and a labour process in itself' (Orbach, 2009: 75). The machine, while altering the body in the symbolic register of the image, is also by proxy manipulating the physical constituents of the body. Tim Piper and Yael Staav's video *Evolution*, which was released on YouTube as part of the Dove campaign, reveals the step-by-step photo-manipulation of a model's face, into a 'perfected' billboard image, thus emphasising the forceful, but disavowed processes of contemporary image production.³² In Orbach's terms then, the desire to become the more 'perfected' digital image is rupturing the subject's ontological understanding of itself, producing identity in relation to the body that they believe they *should* have.

Some feminist theorists argue that through advancing technology the fictional cyborg is increasingly close at hand, or is actually in existence (Balsamo, 1996: 11).

Developments in robotics seem to move increasingly closer to this reality, particularly in terms of high-tech artificial limbs, pacemakers, steel plates and valves that embody the vision of the cyborg in which body meets technology. Body augmentation techniques including breast, cheek and buttock implants and the inhuman,

³¹ Though Orbach's conceptualisation of the body risks reducing it to its 'physical reality' which is then manipulated through technology, in positing a 'natural' body, prior to culture, she underscores the increasing action of culture on the body, and how changes in representation are making the cultural sculpting of the body more visible and pronounced.

³² *Evolution* (2006). Directed by Piper, T. and Staav, Y. for Ogilvy Advertising.

expressionless appearance that results from the use of Botox seem to embody the fusion of artificial and organic bodies. Yet, as the body and technology encounter each other intimately through both robotics and surgery, in many ways they have never seemed more disparate and distinct from each other. The contemporary relationship of body and machine is not the straightforward fortification of body towards the transcendence of the physical being and the promise of immortality held by the cyborg; it rather underscores the vulnerability of the body. This is demonstrated by the strange corporeality of the augmented body, both that deemed successful and that which has malfunctioned dramatically, as the growing, bruising, scarring, ageing, pulsing, bleeding, sagging body comes into contact with metal, plastic and other alien substances that cut, stretch, mould and reshape its organic matter. This meeting of the body and the machine produces a violent jarring of incongruent but relentlessly colliding materialities, rather than melding into some super-organism. In addition to progress and potential, this emphasises both the vulnerability of the body in the face of the brutalising machine, and the limitations of the machine to mimic and integrate with it. The body-machine relation thus places stress on the matter body, pulling apart flesh and sinew and rupturing ontological understanding.

In contrast to the cyborg, the understanding of the body/machine relationship that underpins my research is not based on a simple merging or elision of body and machine, but is also a collision that emphasises the matter of the body, as soft flesh and warm pulsing blood meets cold, hard, inanimate (perhaps) machine. Nor does the boundary between human and machine remain distinct; my performance practice project seeks to expose the over-investment relationship to digital technology of the image through the concept of seducing the machine, which produces a more dramatic emotional and often physical relationship to the camera. Thus the camera becomes in one sense surrogate for another (male) towards which desire and seduction is directed, functioning as the historical male/machine/gaze. Yet, as the machine becomes the focus of desire, the performer sometimes resembles the fetishist who treats 'things' as if they are others. In this way, my performance work focuses on a perversity and absurdity at the point where the subject and camera meet: the performer's relationship to the camera often transgresses conventionally appropriate socio-cultural understandings of the boundaries between female body and machine. This is done in order to explore the possibilities that this presents in terms of shifting the psychological and symbolic space of the image and the structuring of the gaze, and ultimately to disrupt the relationship with the camera

that produces a naturalised femininity as both narcissistic and exhibitionist at the same time.

Chapter summary and conclusion

Narcissism, as it relates to femininity, is a less than straightforward concept. Freud's psychoanalytic definition of the term as a turning inwards of the libido slips into a Victorian western socio-cultural assumption that women are preoccupied with their appearance. This points not only to a continued widespread cultural concept of women as objects of beauty, but to a contradiction in that such a concept sees femininity as both inwardly focused (narcissistic) and outwardly focused (exhibitionist). The idea of the self-gaze of Narcissus accounts for the subject's self-love, because desire is directed towards him/her self as image. Women's historical role as objects of the (male) gaze, however, means that even this narcissism as a characteristic of femininity is understood as ultimately for the gaze of another. 'Woman' is thus constructed, paradoxically, as a narcissistic exhibitionist.

There are inherent problems in Mulvey's concept of the dominant narrative of the gaze, structured as active male sadistic gaze at passive, contingent, female object, because of its fixed and unified concept of the viewer. Nevertheless, it resonates powerfully in the contemporary context, in which erotic imagery is proliferated across mainstream media. The hyper-mediatisation of culture and the increasing dominance of the image through rapidly growing diverse media mean that visual pleasures such as voyeurism and exhibitionism are not occasional, isolated and perverse, but are constant, everyday normalised activities. The understanding of the gaze in my research is a more complex concept of the logic of the male gaze, where a woman might view herself or other women through the construct of the male gaze, which dominates eroticised images of women contemporary context. While still operating with an undifferentiated western heterosexual spectator, my research endeavours to open out a more intricate and complex understanding of the ubiquitous erotic 'male' gaze from the position of the female performer/author.

Through this concept of the logic of the male gaze my research seeks to incorporate an understanding of a 'female gaze' not as biologically determined but as something that is socially and culturally constructed, internalised and reproduced. The approach of the research seeks to appropriate and subvert this operation of the gaze, through mobilising

the self-imaging of female subject explicitly and cannily within the symbolic space of the representation. This approach is derived from self-imaging that is historically rooted in feminist performance practice. This resonates with the prolific, everyday and normalised use of the camera in the digital age, particularly in a context of contemporary social practices that proliferate in self-imaging, asserting that female authorship may not necessarily be subversive in itself (or guarantee a 'female' gaze). Within my research project, the concept of seducing the machine aims to produce images that act to stage the dynamics of power and the desire of the gendered gaze, through which the explicit mobilisation of self-imaging in an avant garde art practice might push for a shift in the language of the gendered codification of the image. Thus the work seeks to explicate complex relations of subjectivity and objectivity, passivity and activity and their implications for representing the female within the image as symbolically different from the mute, submissive, dehumanised, subordinate and oppressed position assigned to her via the traditional dominant, male-authored gaze.

The erotic nature of the studio practice positions it within difficult, yet highly relevant and potentially progressive territory within feminist discourse. In the context of embattled debates around women, power and pornography, the notion of positing a woman's erotic (self) representation as a feminist practice enters a territory of risk that is precariously balanced between danger and possibility: facing accusations of complicity and regressive practices or being subsumed back into the imagery intended to be critiqued, particularly in the light of pseudo feminist neo-liberal rhetoric that circulates around erotic imagery in the media. I intend, however, to demonstrate that this pushing at the parameters of the politics of representation is a progressive, cutting-edge strategy that offers a timely and original contribution to knowledge.

In this chapter, narcissism has been located as a key to the operation of normative gender. In a hyper-mediatised culture, narcissistic identification with the idealised image is instrumental in the production of the gendered subject, as it is the pleasure of the prospect of becoming the ideal that drives the subject to align themselves with normative gender codes. Thus narcissistic pleasure operates to hold the subject in place within the hierarchical western socio-cultural system. Yet other evidence might also suggest that in some instances pleasure and power are quite intimately aligned, as Mulvey's theorization of the sadistic controlling gaze in which power itself acts as a source of pleasure. The research examines the feminist performance artist's negotiation

of such facets of power and pleasure, and in particular the passive pleasures prescribed to women, where in order to become erotic she must desire to be desired.

The relationship of the female performer to the camera is instrumental in the rounded and critical thrashing out of issues around narcissism; this relationship acts as a tool of both criticality and pleasure. Women's historical relationship to technology, and in particular the camera apparatus, is one of both subordination and pleasure: the machine has been instrumental in the construction of a male fantasy of the female as object of his desire. The research seeks to shift the encoding of the female, subverting traditional conventions of the gaze, and investigating the potential of self-imaging practices to twist and invert dominant understandings of the erotic representation of the female. The intensification of the relationship of the body and the (imaging) machine in the digital age is producing new, if perhaps disavowed, ontological understandings of the subject and the nature of subjectivity. At a point where the subject's narcissistic relationship to the image machine is in constant flux yet ever growing in significance, the research investigates how self-imaging practices may hold the potential to shift conventions of producing and consuming erotic images of women.

Western culture is saturated with images of femininity. In these, women's desire is persistently reproduced as the desire to be the desired as the object of the (male) gaze. Further, self-imaging practices have become a normalised part of everyday life. In this context the self-perpetuating cycle of the image of femininity as the desire to become has the potential to proliferate endlessly, along with codes that signify women as submissive subordinate sex objects. These, however, are easily disavowed through the constant pseudo-newness that drives consumerism. This research project seeks to intervene in the accelerating and potentially endless cycle of the image of woman as narcissistic exhibitionist. It considers how a performance of heightened, exaggerated and explicit eroticism, enacting the concept of seducing the machine, might examine and critique this process.

Chapter 2: The narcissistic problematic: the feminised body in performance

Chapter introduction

Feminist discourse has wrestled with the concept of narcissism, regarding it at times to be deeply embedded in the language of sexuality that maintains gendered hierarchies: it thus seduces women into a position of subordination and passivity (de Lauretis, 1999). At other times it has been thought of as holding the potential to subvert the pervasive logic of the male gaze as an assertion of a particularly feminine pleasure (Myers, 1982). This chapter outlines how the socio-cultural assumption of woman's narcissistic relationship to her own image, widely represented through the female's art-historical role as the object of the male author's gaze, has proved problematic for feminist performance artists' use of their own bodies. For many feminist performance artists, this has proved an urgent and rich territory from which to challenge the status quo, and to address the way in which the assumption of a woman's desire to be desired challenges her authorial voice, by presenting their bodies as sites of struggle in relation to the language of gender. In video performance practice, the camera has been a key tool by which to examine, test and dismantle a woman's over-determined relationship to her own image. This chapter considers how performance artists have employed the live feed of video to produce a narcissistic self-relation, and investigates how this develops the concept of seducing the machine.

2.1 Narcissism as a strategy of feminist performance

As previously discussed, Mulvey claims that the narrative of the gaze in Hollywood films is one in which man is 'bearer of the look' and woman is its object (Mulvey, 1989: 20). This narrative in various forms still dominates western media and visual culture, and works to enforce the compulsive heterosexuality of the mainstream and a gendered hierarchy in which men dominate women. While in the Lacanian sense all identification is *fundamentally* narcissistic, through this dominant narrative of the gaze the identifications offered to spectators differ according to a stark gender division. Mulvey shows how the action of the male hero drives the plot, so that identification with deeds of power, drive and dominance are masculinised. The on-screen female, however, is constructed as the sexualised object of display through the male's

voyeuristic and fetishistic fantasies. Identification with the visual appeal of the female on-screen, or her '*to-be-looked-at-ness*', her position of passivity, is feminised (ibid: 19). These different identifications, offered along gendered lines, lend themselves to an easy *disavowal* of identifying with the image of the male hero as looked-at object while *naturalising* woman's role as the looked-at object: a woman's apparent desire to be looked at produces an over-determined relationship to her own image. The pervasiveness of this narrative of the gaze in the media reflects a dominance of social and cultural 'knowledge', which means that a desire to be seen as image, to be signified visually through *to-be-looked-at-ness*, is attributed far more frequently to women than to men. This fulfils the female role as the visually appealing exhibitionist object of the gaze.

In *The Beauty Myth* (first published in 1991), US social critic Naomi Wolf claims that the concept of femininity as visual and decorative can be traced to 19th-century industrialisation in the west and the redundancy of middle-class women's previously supportive role in domestic production. When production moved to industrialised locations, men as 'breadwinners' went to the workplace and women remained in the home. Wolf suggests that the activities designated 'women's work' in the domestic sphere were invented and naturalised as the female role in order to 'expend female energy and intelligence in harmless ways' (Wolf, 2002: 15). These activities, such as lace-making or needlework, were often repetitive, painstaking and decorative, and related to the appearance of the woman or her home, Ellen Lupton supports this idea and extends it to the 20th century, during which 'labour saving devices' in the home actually increased the levels of domestic work required of the (US) housewife, suggesting that the value of these tasks might be cosmetic (Lupton, 1993). 'Keeping up appearances' became the activity of the 'ideal' middle-class woman; concern about how things looked reinforced women's role as inwardly focused on self and home. This echoes Simone de Beauvoir's description in her seminal 1949 work *The Second Sex* of how a woman's domestic isolation contained her social role:

The reality of man is in the houses that he builds, the forests he clears, the maladies he cures; but woman, not being able to fulfil herself through projects and objectives, is forced to find her reality in the immanence of her person. (de Beauvoir, 1988: 641)

Women's historical role as objects of the (male) gaze, and the idea of a woman as fixated on her own appearance in compliance with this role, emerged as a problematic issue of early feminist performance art practice. In performance, the artist is seen to constitute the artwork through her actions across time and space, producing the female as 'making' subject. The 'doing' actions of body in performance offered an immediacy of medium that could construct woman as cultural producer, as distinct from her art-historical role of mute passivity to male authorship. As performance practices emerged during the 1960s, the female artist sought to deploy her own body as a 'meaning-making' device. Yet, unlike the male body whose authorship was firmly established historically, the female body, which had more often been aligned with a role as object, mobilised meaning that problematised the recognition of woman as important cultural producer. In 'The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art' (1976), Lucy Lippard mapped the emergence of feminist performance practices, claiming that they represented a struggle for acceptance in the art world.¹ She attributed this to the highly loaded sign value of the female body. She posited: 'Although such "women's work" eventually suffered a brief vogue, it was initially considered clever, or pretty, but not important, and was often relegated to the categories of naive art, or craft' (Lippard, 1976: 122; emphasis in the original). The socio-cultural stereotyping of a woman as 'essentially' narcissistically over-invested in herself as image undermined the feminist artist's use of her own body as a site of struggle. The performance of her body, already sexualised, narcissistic and exhibitionist simply because it is female, signifies a desire to be seen which threatens the criticality of the work. Lippard discusses the implications for women's self-representation of the notion of femininity as characteristically narcissistic:

Men can use beautiful, sexy women as neutral objects or surfaces, but when women use their own faces and bodies they are immediately accused of narcissism. There is an element of exhibitionism in all body art, perhaps a legitimate result of the choice between exploiting oneself or someone else. Yet the degree to which narcissism informs and affects the work varies immensely. Because women are considered sex objects, it is taken for granted

¹ First published in *Art in America*, 1976, Vol. 64 No. 3, this article was republished along with 32 further articles concerned with feminist art by Lippard, in Lippard, L. (1976) *From the Centre*. Fitzhenry and Whiteside, Toronto.

that any woman who presents her nude body to the public is doing so because she thinks she is beautiful. (Lippard, 1976: 125)

Thus, while the male use of the female body in an art context was considered to be a classical form and therefore 'neutral', or at any rate not at odds with critical judgement, the female's use of her own body was radically troubling to the male-dominated art establishment. Lippard notes that the marginal position of feminist work in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which was largely aimed at consciousness-raising and was radically opposed to the mainstream, may have contributed to such perceptions of early female performance (Lippard, 1976: 122). This is, as she also notes, in stark contrast to the reception of male artists including Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman, whose use of the (male) body as art medium was not only accepted but was fashionable at the time. It was, she contends, the art-historical heritage of woman as an erotic, beautiful or decorative object of display, reproducing social assumptions about women as fundamentally narcissistically-motivated subjects, that led to this biased interpretation of early performance work. (Lippard, 1976: 22).

Feminist artists, however, recognised the particularity of the signification value of their body in performance, and began to challenge such assumptions by addressing them strategically. Carolee Schneeman notes that she deliberately placed her body as the focus of her work, an act provoked by the fact that she 'was permitted to be an image but not image maker creating her own self-image' (McDonald, 2007: 68). In the now-iconic *Interior Scroll* [Figure 2] first performed in 1975, Schneeman stands naked with mud stripes painted along her limbs and reads a scroll of paper that she unfolds from her vagina. She recounts a conversation in which, rather than being regarded as a film maker she is termed 'charming' and a 'dancer', thus reducing her performance to the pleasing movements of her body.² This narrative is likely to have been informed by the fact that within the art world in the early 1960s she had been labelled 'the beautiful body' (Lippard, 1976: 126). While her work was not overtly concerned with narcissism, often its reception continually tried to claim that she was over-involved with her own image by focusing on her physical attributes and her 'beauty'.

In works such as *Interior Scroll* (1975) and *More than Meat Joy* (1964) in which her naked body was smeared with mud and blood, Schneeman stressed corporeal processes

² A complete transcript of the verse recited during Schneeman's performance *Interior Scroll* can be found in Phelan and Reckitt (2001) (eds.) *Art and Feminism*, p. 82.

in order to represent the female body as a breathing, pulsing, feeling subject rather than as a distanced dehumanised image [Figures 2 and 3]. Her work disrupted the art-historical ideal of the female body depicted by male artists by mobilising an abject femininity; a bleeding, seeping, defecating body which represented a woman's private experience of her own corporeality gushing into the public site of representation. In defying the social and cultural taboos that work to keep such 'messy' bodily processes hidden and preserve a sanitised socio-cultural image of the female body, Schneeman disrupted its sexualisation through a threatening and transgressive viscosity.

While Schneeman refuted the notion that woman's role was to be over-invested in herself as sexual object, artists such as Lynda Benglis flaunted it. This was demonstrated by Benglis' notorious series of exhibition advertisements in *Artforum* in 1974, which included an image of her holding an exceptionally large flesh-coloured dildo to her naked, tanned, oiled body as though it were a penis [Figure 4]. These images, which attracted much controversy, were intended to sensationalise the exhibitionist role to which a female artist was often reduced, by the dramatic and overt sexualisation of her own body. This aggressive assertion of female sexuality as erotically exhibitionist deploys what Lippard describes as a 'defiant narcissism' (Lippard, 1976: 127).

Early feminist performance artists negotiated the narcissism and exhibitionism attributed to the performance of their own bodies, whether by strategically disrupting or by ironically performing the female's historical role as object in order to assert their use of their bodies in their artworks as critically valuable. Yet for the woman artist such self-representation, especially when eroticised, may still provoke a collapse of distance between the maker of meaning and the performer. As a consequence, it may produce a tension between the female body's signification of the desire to be looked at and the critical role required of the artist. Criticality may also be threatened by the perception that the artist is beautiful. This is demonstrated by critical responses to the work of Hannah Wilke, who used her body to parody mainstream erotic codifications of women in works such as *Through the Large Glass* (1976–8) [Figure 5]³ and *SOS Starification Object Series* (1974–9) [Figure 6]. These works by Wilke received substantial and

³ *Through the Large Glass* (1977–8), viewed in the video archive in Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, February, 2008; and <http://www.vdb.org/>; further information on Wilke's video at <http://www.eai.org/eai/title.htm?id=1787> (accessed 30.01.09).

widespread commentary that continuously referenced the beauty of her face and body.⁴ Lil Picard, for example, describes her in gushing terms as ‘a very beautiful woman’ who was obsessed with pink and roses, adding that she is ‘tall, slender, a long-haired brunette, in fact she looks like a rose’ (Picard, 1973). For Elizabeth Hess, Wilke’s performance is self-absorbed: ‘Wilke has struck innumerable narcissistic poses to wallow in cultural obsessions with the female body’ (Hess, 1989: 93). Such readings⁵ suggest that the artist performs *only* because she is beautiful, and indeed narcissism was routinely conflated with women’s physical beauty, as illustrated by Freud’s attribution of narcissism to women with ‘good looks’:

Such women have the greatest fascination for men, not only for aesthetic reasons, since as a rule they are the most beautiful... it seems very evident that another persons narcissism has a great attraction (Freud, 1953: 88–9).

This perception of Wilke as physically beautiful, Amelia Jones contends, leads to the conclusion that she is too invested in the seductiveness of her body to maintain a critical stance (Jones, 1998). Such interpretations, however, do not account for a deliberate and ironic performance of the feminine position as narcissistic. Wilke could not have performed thus had her body not been ‘beautiful’; a woman is always defined by the appearance of her body as sign, and her closeness or distance from idealised body types is constantly measured, most particularly as an image. What is at stake here is the reading – or not – of women’s self-conscious and critical use of their own bodies as language. Later artists such as Jo Spence, who represented her middle-aged female body, and indeed Wilke’s performance of her own body swollen and deteriorating through illness, challenged socio-cultural ideas about the kind of woman who wants (or should/should not want) to display her body publicly [Figure 7]. These are powerful and important works, but in the same way that idealised bodies are exclusive because of their narrow delineation of what is desirable or even ‘normal’, criticism of the female performance artist for her ‘beautiful’ body begins to construct another form of ideal. It privileges women with less-than-beautiful bodies as more proficient producers of art,

⁴ See, for example, Jones, A. (1998) ‘The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and The Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art’, in Jones, A., *Body Art/Performing the Subject*; also Jones, A. (1996) ‘Interpreting Feminist Bodies: The Unframeability of Desire’ in Duro, P. (1996) (ed) *The Rhetoric of the Frame*, pp. 223–41.

⁵ An extensive list of reviews of Wilke’s work can be found at:
<http://www.feldmangallery.com/pages/artistsrffa/Selected%20Press%20pages/wilkepress.html>

more acceptable to feminist politics and beyond, and renders those that may more closely resemble ideals as less-capable of criticality. Commentators have suggested that Wilke's work is complicit with the mainstream media she intended to critique:

In objectifying herself as she does, in assuming the conventions associated with a stripper (as someone who will reveal all), Wilke seems to be teasing us as to her motives. She is both stripper and the stripped bare. She does not make her own position clear; is her art work enticing critique or titillating enticement? It seems her work ends up by reinforcing what it intends to subvert. In using her own body as the content of her art, in calling her art 'seduction', she complicates the issues and fails to challenge conventional notions of female sexuality. (Barry & Flitterman, 1980: 38–9)

This position in relation to Wilke's work is also exemplified by Elizabeth Hess' critique, which refers to that which reclaims codes of femininity 'for better or worse' (Hess, 1989: 93).

Wilke's 'scarring' of the glossy surface of her attractive body clearly marks her intervention in the codes that she performs, yet the apparent desire to be looked at signified by the feminised body threatens the irony of her performance, particularly in the context of feminist performance as an emerging practice in the early 1970s.⁶ Wilke's work is deliberately provocative of this problematic, as attested to by her other works, which explore how the female body signifies in the artwork. For example the works *I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver* (1977–8) [Figure 8] and *Through the Large Glass* (1976–8) [Figure 5], which remake artworks by Marcel Duchamp, rely on a dislocation between the familiar use of the female body by the male author as sign, and the female artist's self-representation. Simply through her assumption of the position of a male-authored art-historical nude, she appears to be over-invested in herself as image, through her displacement of the original. Rather than being simply a body shrouded in the familiar convention of the female nude, her act of re-performance seems to signify a fantasy of the self as the object of the male artist's gaze. Amelia Jones asserts that this self-representation eroticises the interpretative exchange, 'opening up the circuits of desire that motivate art production and reception that are scrupulously veiled in modernist art history, which frame the object within a masculinised rhetoric of

⁶ Jones also discusses this 'scarification' of in relation to ethnicity citing Wilke's Jewish heritage. (Jones, 1996: 230).

“disinterested” interpretation’ (Jones, 1996; and 1998: 166). Thus, Wilke provocatively and strategically employed the desire to be looked at signified by the female body, emphasised through self-representation in order to disrupt the ‘neutral’ use of the female body by the male artist.

The cultural image of femininity as narcissistic, even when strategically deployed, is so bound up in women’s traditional role as object and in prescriptive ideals of feminine behaviour, that it still entails a risk, and leaves the work open to the ‘slipperiness of the interpretive exchange’ (Jones, 1996: 229). This image is so naturalised, so intertwined in the codes of femininity, that its signification value seems engrained in the female body itself. The self-absorption that is associated with narcissism seems incongruous with the criticality so valued in the art world, and this can still present problems for the critical agency of the feminist performance artist.

2.2 The camera and the auto-erotic

The naturalisation of the idea that women desire to be the object of the gaze is therefore a problematic territory for artistic practice, as a woman’s use of her own body in performance is easily reduced to her apparent desire to be seen. Within art practice, however, such problematics are often the most urgent and potent. In considering the role of artistic practice to challenge, radicalise, experiment, take risks and to subvert the status quo, my work has focused on a desire to be seen as image, characterised particularly as feminine: as a contentious and yet highly relevant aspect of gender. The female artist’s performance of the desire to be seen must be nuanced in order to delicately negotiate a tension between polarised criticality and desire. To this end, via the concept of seducing the machine that underpins the ideas of my research, my artwork becomes a staging of narcissism as femininity through the relationship to the camera.

As demonstrated by Mulvey, and later by Gillian Rose’s analysis of the dominant narrative of the gaze in Hollywood cinema, it is the relationship of the female body to the position and movement of the camera that works to construct the female protagonist as the object of the look, as it pursues her or cuts her body into fetishised chunks, while constructing the male as owner of this look through point-of-view shots (Mulvey, 1989; Rose, 2001). Self-imaging practices arising from digital technology construct the image text differently via a relationship between the subject, the camera and the screen. In

examining this autonomous relationship to the machine – which is nonetheless culturally constructed – my research seeks to consider women’s narcissistic self-regulation in relation to idealised images of femininity that are constructed through the logic of the male gaze. The digital live-feed means that the subject is able to experience itself immediately as image, and can edit and perform itself in relation to its expectations of such an image informed by its social and cultural experiences and situation. My research proposes to explore this relationship to the imaging machine – as a means to expose and explore the ‘desire to become’ that has been engendered prolifically through contemporary western images of femininity – as a key process which works to perpetuate ubiquitous stereotypes of femininity that produce woman as submissive, subordinate and even dehumanised and degraded.

Self-imaging can be traced as a method of production from seminal foundational practices of the 1970s by reading the history of performance and video practices through the conceptual framework of seducing the machine. In *Video: the Aesthetics of Narcissism* (first published in 1978) US art critic Rosalind Krauss considers the use of early analogue video technology in art practice, locating its potential for autonomous image production and the ‘leaking’ of this particular relationship to the machine into the representational space to become a self-reflexive trope of the medium. Indeed, she asks whether narcissism might be ‘the condition of the entire genre’ of (analogue) video (Krauss, 1986: 180; emphasis in original). Krauss believes that the body played a central role in artists’ exploration of the emerging analogue medium. Video’s capacity for live feed was often used in the studio space; its function as a method of monitoring and critical reflection of performance leads readily to a disruption of straightforward and comfortable spectatorship by sundering and destabilizing the viewing subject. This became a major concern of video performance art practices in the US in the 1980s.

Using a visual metaphor that links the spaces of production and consumption and is produced through this live feed, Krauss locates the body in a relation to the machine, conceptualising ‘the paradigm situation of video as a body centered between parenthesis of camera and monitor’ (Krauss, 1986: 188). She cites Vito Acconci’s *Centers* (1971) and *Air Time* (1973), Richard Serra’s *Boomerang* (1974), performed by Nancy Holt, Bruce Nauman’s *Revolving Upside-down* (1968) and Benglis’ *Now* (1973) as representing self-reflection and encapsulation via technology, by looping the time and the space occupied by the performer into a ‘sense of a collapsed present’ (Krauss, 1986:

182). The immediacy and accessibility of video, unlike analogue photography or the large scale production of cinema, meant that the subject could now view itself as a moving subject, so not only could the image of the self be viewed, but it would also be affected in real time. Much early video art, in testing the parameters of the emerging medium, acts as a re-staging of the narcissistic fascination with the image of the self in the mirror stage, and thus also functions as a self-reflexive commentary on the medium itself. Joan Jonas's *Left side–Right-side* (1972), for example, uses 'splitting' devices to produce doubled images of the artist as she performs. Using a mirror, a split screen, a monitor and a live feed, she attempts to demonstrate her left and right sides: these become confused through reversals and reduplication, thus producing a disjointed relationship to the self-image.⁷ Through such techniques, video tended towards a spatial and temporal exploration of the psychological situation of narcissistic interaction with the self as external moving image, leading to Krauss' claim: 'Video's real medium is a psychological situation, the very terms of which are to withdraw attention from an external object – an Other – and invest it in the Self' (Krauss, 1986: 184).

My research is situated in relation to the tradition of video and performance art that manipulated and warped the time and space of the representation via the artist's performance with the recording apparatus as a prop. This both disrupted comfortable spectatorship and underscored the authorship of the artist through self-reflexivity. In my performance practice, the imaging apparatus – camera and/or screen – is conceptualised in the space of production not as a disavowed machine that merely produces a reflection of reality, but self-consciously as a key element in the production of the image as an object that has a relationship to the performing subject. This treatment of the apparatus produces 'narcissism' not only as an attribute of the subject, but as a consequence of the medium itself: the consequent critical self-reflexivity offers the potential to subvert assumptions concerning the self-focus of women's desire to be looked at.

Such a narcissistic relationship to technology of the image was mobilised in an early feminist performance piece to camera by Lynda Benglis. *Now* (1973) [Figure 9] begins with a profile headshot of Benglis positioned against a large television that is showing a video of the artist's face in profile.⁸ It shows Benglis dictating directions in a commanding voice: "Start recording"; "I said start recording"; "This image here?" and

⁷ Viewed during visit the video archive in Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, February, 2008.

⁸ Viewed during a visit to the video archive in Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, February, 2008, and at <http://www.vdb.org/>

“Now? Now. Now? Now”. As the video plays, Benglis stands before the screen trying to copy her own pre-recorded actions, thus enacting a mirroring relationship to her own image. She caresses the screen and gestures as though to envelop her own protruding tongue. Amelia Jones claims that Benglis’ self-referential, female-to-female actions exclude the male viewer, rendering him superfluous to the desiring relation that is represented, while the female viewer is able to identify with the autoerotic pleasuring of her gender equivalent. She maintains that the male gaze is shut out because the internal gaze is directed only towards a female character (Jones, 1996: 228). As a further example, Jones uses *Female Sensibility*, in which Benglis passionately kisses another woman, and again contends that what she terms ‘gynoeroticism’ excludes the male gaze (Jones, 1996: 226). This reading of this desiring relationship to another woman is, however, dangerously close to the popular fantasy of ‘girl-on-girl action’ now prevalent in media representations as an extension of the cultural idea of woman’s auto-eroticism as a male fantasy. It seems that even the female’s self-pleasuring cannot be fully owned by her because it has been recuperated into the dominant cultural narrative.

It is, however, the configuration of the spatial organisation in Benglis’ *Now* that disrupts conventional and comfortable viewing. Unlike the narcissistic loop in which a woman enters into a relationship with her own image, Benglis’ disjointed self-reflexivity radically alters the space of the representation and works to discomfit and destabilise the viewer’s gaze. Benglis’ relationship to herself as pre-determined image is very different from a direct mirroring: it unhinges woman’s naturalised relationship to herself as image. This is compounded through the echo effect of her simulation of her own actions: as layer upon layer of image appears on the monitor, this echo begins to seem more distant from the original. The spatial organisation of the image is infinite, and destabilises the precise location of Benglis as subject within the ‘now’ that she repeatedly references. The work demonstrates the potential of the manipulation of woman’s desiring relationship to the camera to subvert the signification value of the female body in performance.

The autoeroticism in *Now* is mediated by the mechanics of the apparatus and also represents an unconventional and perverse relationship to the technology. Benglis’ caressing and kissing of her own image takes place against a background of the constant whirring of the primitive technology. Benglis’ gaze, which is firmly focused on her own image, is one of intent concentration as she tries to mimic her own actions: she becomes

a kind of automaton, disjointedly repeating her erotic actions. This mediating and marking of the subject with the technology distinguishes Benglis autoeroticism as radically different from popular 'male' fantasies of the female. The use of the self-reflexive potential of emerging video technology not only mediates female auto-erotic desire through the apparatus, but also eroticises the technology of the image itself to produce an unconventional relationship between the female and the machine that enacts a subversively deviant desire.

Chapter conclusion

Krauss' metaphor of the performer – as encapsulated by the parenthesis of camera and screen that opens out the relationship between apparatus of production and consumption, performer and viewer – has the potential to disrupt radically the space and time of the image via nuanced and shifting manifestations of subjectivity and objectivity, activity and passivity, human and machine. In this way, video artists have self-reflexively employed live-feed to reconfigure the space that might be occupied by the performing body. The spaces of production and consumption – and therefore woman as image/not an image – have a less straightforward, seamless and disavowed relationship than a recording of an image of a perspectival space as an apparently direct reflection of reality. This aspect of the relationship between body and imaging apparatus is central to the performance of 'woman's desire for the camera' as explicit, leading to the production of self-reflexive tropes that comment not only on the production of the image, but also on the processes that produce woman as image.

In a similar way, the explicit performance of desire for the camera – the seduction of the machine – plays with the relationship between the space of production and consumption, real and representational. Thus my work is a staging of acts of looking and being looked at, in which the female's gaze enters the representational space of the image as signifier. This relationship between the performing body as input and the image of the body as output is played out and configured in many ways as the work explores the processes of becoming the image. My research, through these reconfigurations of the representational space and the gazes that replay across and through them, endeavours to produce more complex manifestations of the habitual binaries of author/model, subject/object, activity/passivity, desiring/being desired, invested/critical and image/non-image.

The forthcoming case studies further extend the concept of seducing the machine beyond a simple, disavowed relationship of the woman to the camera, as they examine how feminist performance artists have theatricalised women's desiring relationship to the camera, thus pushing into the frame the social, cultural and historical forces that produce and naturalise woman's overdetermined relationship to her self image. The strategic use of the camera to self-reflexively represent the psychological dynamic of narcissism is thus a key strategy for both performing and disrupting the naturalised 'desire of women to be looked' at that proved so problematic for early performance artists and is a continuing concern of contemporary practice, particularly in the light of developing technology of the image. Early performance artists disrupted and subverted assumptions that a woman who used her own body in performance was carrying out a narcissistic act, and showed how the issue of narcissism can be used as an exquisite point of tension in the codes of representation and the language of gender.

Chapter 3: Surface, image, femininity

Chapter introduction

This chapter explores ‘surfaceness’ as a condition of femininity, in connection with the idea that the adornment and decoration of the body is a definingly narcissistic feminine pursuit. By exploring decoration as an attribute of femininity that has roots in Anglo-American Victorian bourgeois ideals, it considers how the metaphor of woman as decorative surface has developed and continues to influence contemporary understandings of femininity. This enduring metaphor can imply a derogatory meaning, which may have consequences of subordination for women, because it naturalises and idealises the attributes of artificiality and passivity. Feminist performance has mobilised and addressed the concept of surface, its shaping of ‘womanliness’ and its inscription of the female body, exploring themes that involve the impact of the image on the surface of the body. In considering some of these works it addresses how the materialisation of surface within the image can be used to raise questions relating to woman’s narcissistic pleasure in becoming an image of beauty and decoration, and unhinge the metaphor of woman as surface through the camera or machine of visibility. A particular focus is the imagery of Helen Chadwick’s multi-media installation *The Oval Court* (1984–6).

As Chadwick’s work was first exhibited, Dworkin and MacKinnon were agitating for legal sanctions against makers of pornography: her provocative self-objectification would no doubt have inflamed this line of feminist critique. The installation is rarely shown because is fragile, but its rich imagery is so fundamental to debates surrounding the politics of the representation of female desire that it warrants a thorough analysis. *The Oval Court* presents a decorative surface of swirling motifs, through which the artist’s body swims to suggest themes of masquerade. Chadwick’s use of a photocopier to produce the imagery evokes surface through the screen of the apparatus; its implication of self-imaging practice through the unconventional relationship between performer/artist and machine offers the potential to develop and extend the scope of the concept of seducing the machine.

3.1 Woman as ornament

Western gender ideals encourage women to participate in practices of self-adornment through, for example, changing fashions in clothing and cosmetics that produce an idea of women as the 'decorative sex'. These bodily practices involve a high level of self-surveillance, auto-erotic touching and grooming; these feminised pleasures produce the psychodynamic of self-focus that signifies woman as supposedly narcissistic. While male bodies are also styled and shaped through socio-cultural practices, this has typically been in a more 'natural' manner that tends to present functionality and 'effortlessness' as signifiers of masculinity. In contrast, excessive grooming, and 'becoming' are naturalised as feminine attributes: thus vanity as glamorous and yet trivially self-indulgent is ascribed to women.

Katrina Rolley, discussing the ways in which feminised practices of self-adornment are reproduced through the fashion magazine, says: 'from an early age women are encouraged to develop a potentially obsessive concern with their own and other women's appearance' (Lewis and Rolley, 1996: 179). The contemporary women's fashion magazine, which is typically concerned with clothing, grooming, decoration, relationships and the visual display of women's bodies, reveals how their objectification is perpetuated by a self-regulation that operates through pleasure. An aesthetic of the high-fashion image which coats themes of death, violence, and soft-core pornography in a glamorous sheen was highly influenced by photographers including Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and promoted by publications such as *S Magazine* and contemporary photography duo Mert and Marcus. Bourdin's trademark was to position women as though in the aftermath of a violent act, or in physically-demanding poses that are belied by the models' impassive expressions: in its identification with such glamorised images of femininity this propagates the notion of women as victims and may carry the risk of distancing them from the experience of their own bodies. The rhetoric of the fashion magazine is predicated on a fantasy of becoming these images: when the image of beauty is intertwined with misogynist fantasy which is reduced to stylisations that disavow the content, the notion of women's complicity with their own subordination can be easily effected through the desire to be the object of the gaze.

The Victorian concept of femininity as decorative, and its attendant practices of self-adornment, can be seen as having been produced in relation to the socio-cultural roles defined by the highly gendered hierarchy of that society. One example is the flower, a quintessentially Victorian and yet enduring metaphor of decoration as feminine. In 'Floral Femininity' (1992) Annette Stott discusses how flowers symbolised the youth, beauty, fragility and passivity of a desirable femininity to the middle classes of the Victorian era. The vogue for floral decoration of the home and the female body represented and produced an ideal of 'idol decoration' that was exclusive to white women in privileged social positions (Stott, 1992). She says: 'Just as the motion of flowering plants blown lightly by a breeze suggested ideal feminine movement (not self-determined but submissive to a superior force), the shapes and colours of their blossoms described desirable feminine form'. (Stott, 1992: 70) The flower, in its correlation with femininity, couched in its delicate petals an oppressive role for women: beauty must be passive and non-functional, or as Stott claims, must bow to a 'greater' force. Victorian femininity was encapsulated in the image of a flower dancing in the breeze, or rather being made to perform *by* the breeze: a woman's role was ornamental, and docility and compliance were both expected and idealised. Thus the social and cultural image of the flower, which appears to be 'merely' decorative, ensnares through the symbolisms that are woven into the propriety and pleasures of being a 'lady'.

Women's oppression in the late 19th century is eloquently evoked in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 novella *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in which a housewife becomes consumed by the overbearing decor of her home. Women's role as decorative 'idols' is continually manifested in ever-changing motifs that are sold to women through the fashion and celebrity industries. These promote, as aspirational fantasy, the lifestyles of those who are rich and privileged enough to be able to afford to make themselves into manifestations of woman as decorative object. For many women, however, the effort of maintaining an appearance through self-decoration shifts between leisurely pursuit and a demanding pressure of modern life.

The metaphor of femininity as surface, in which a subtext of insidious implications lurks in the ornate decoration of woman's home and body, is closely linked to the concept of femininity as decorative. Laura Mulvey suggests that an over-insistence on surface is often read in social and cultural terms as implying a motive to hide something that is lurking beneath, because historically women have often been perceived as

manifesting a duality between surface and depth (Mulvey, 2007: 288). In *Beauty's Body*, a study of 'woman as muse' in the 19th century, Kathy Alexis Psomiades discusses such a concept in Victorian ideas of bourgeois femininity. She maintains that because of women's containment within, and moral governance of, the private and personal sphere of the home, they were understood to possess hidden, unknowable psychological depths that contrasted with a knowable, material surface. Femininity therefore became synonymous with duality, split between contradictory roles: 'the sexless ideal woman came to contain her opposite, the dangerously sexualised and desiring woman, in her capacious psychological interior' (Psomiades, 1997: 5). Woman, not trusted to be what she appeared, was conveniently both surface/depth; materiality/soul; Madonna/whore and Mary/Eve (ibid.). Woman as surface is thus also a surface of projection: her duality means that attributes convenient for those in power can easily be ascribed to her. Psomiades suggests that in the 20th century this idea of femininity as surface/depth developed further, through conspicuous consumption, into a 'visible artificiality'. Psomiades is drawing on work by Rita Felski which similarly addresses the relation between femininity and surface. In *The Gender of Modernity* (1995) Felski posits that the association of artificial surface with femininity arises from the *Fin de Siècle* trend of the 'feminized male' that was embodied in literary figures such as Oscar Wilde. The knowingly-frivolous, vain and decadent dandy's use of artificiality could be performed with the parody and self-reflexivity of camp: after all, it was not his own attribute but one that aligned more 'naturally' with women. In a woman, however, this artificiality was naturalised as deriving from her deceitful and false 'nature'. Decorativeness continues to represent a cultural marking of women's bodies with implications of artifice and duality, as well as of desire.

As a metaphor of femininity, 'surfacedness' refers to both practices of self-decoration and the splitting of woman into surface and depth. In my research project, which investigates the process of 'becoming the image' of various stereotypical ideas of femininity, the metaphor of woman as surface is usefully correlated with the symbolic and representational surface of the image. 'Surfacedness' emerges as a recurrent theme in feminist performance that is concerned with woman's relationship to representation via her role as object in the economy of the visible. In *SOS Stratification Object Series* (1974-9) [Figure 6] for example, Hannah Wilke's parodic game of 'dress-up' in front of the camera provokes, through the pose, the surface of image as mirror. Wilke performs codes of advertising in which the woman's apparent desire to be looked at encodes her

as desirable. Her body is decorated with bubble-gum vagina shapes, and it is this 'scarring', both of the gloss of the photograph and of the smoothed perfected female body, that punctuates the naturalising surface of the image. Other artists mobilise surface in relation to the female body even more forcefully, such as in Ana Mendieta's *Glass on Face* (1972) and *Glass on Body* (1972). In these photographic series she presses a pane of glass against parts of her body to flatten her buttocks, drag her breasts, compress her abdomen or distort her features. Her body seems to meld with the surface of the photograph to materialise a violent action of the image on the body.

These early performance works evoke a sense of pressure on women's bodies. This seems to have intensified further, as reflected twenty years later by Jenny Saville's 1995–6 *Closed Contact* series.¹ These images are taken from below a large glass sheet, so that as Saville's body mass stretches across the surface her body is transformed into a sea of oozing flesh. They represent a dysmorphic self-image that becomes distorted through an over-determined relationship to the surface of the photograph. The mobilisation of material qualities of surface, both of the image and of the body, can represent a struggle to become the image through the pane/pain. The pressure of the surface of the image on the female body, a metaphor for the action of social and cultural expectations, continues as a concern for feminist discourse in relation to a society which is dominated by images that demand a becoming. Skin as membrane – the physical, permeable, mutable boundary of the body – is a key site on which the developing relationship of the subject to technology is played out and becomes visible. In my studio practice, surface is brought into play with the female body in various forms, through which the subject's relationship to, interaction with and transformation via the image is explored through the effect of different qualities of surface that range from a barely-discernible screen to an opaque shutter.

3.2 Vanity and pleasure in Helen Chadwick's *Oval Court*

In *The Oval Court* (1984–6) [Figure 10] Helen Chadwick's use of the photocopier to produce the image also represents the relationship between the female body and the surface of the image. This mode of production, with its direct indexical correlation between the surface that 'takes' the image and the image's actual surface, materialises

¹ The work was made with images taken in collaboration with Glen Luchford; it is published in book form as *Closed Contact* (Jenny Saville, Glen Luchford, 2002) by the Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles.

the process of becoming the image: specifically the self-image as an autonomous production is also implied. The trace of technology on the body assumes further significance with regard to the concept of woman's desire for the camera, by suggesting a physical engagement with the apparatus as both an act of image production and an act of performance. In this way, the discourse surrounding Chadwick's work offers the potential to develop and extend the concept of seducing the machine. Her work explores the sensate female body using a metaphor of surface, in order to re-appropriate the image of 'woman' as emblem of desire and in an attempt to begin to recuperate a woman's pleasure in her own body. The provocative sexuality represented in *The Oval Court*, which coincided with intense activism against pornography, contributes to debates surrounding the politics of representing women's sexuality, in particular self-representation.

As part of the larger installation *Of Mutability* (1986), *The Oval Court* comprised imagery mounted on an oval platform that appeared to float above the floor, gilded sculptural spheres, and decorative imagery on the walls of the room that enclosed the piece [Figure 11]. Round the surface of the oval were twelve tableaux, presenting images in which Chadwick appears to swim naked amid a swirling display of flowers, fruit, animals and other ephemera. The imagery was sensually evocative, as the body brushed against bristly twine or floated among feathers, and sought to represent the bodily pleasures of the artist as a female subject. Chadwick was seen gorging on a plethora of fare, including fruit that was open and tempting in its fleshy lusciousness, or cavorting with various creatures; lunging acrobatically to kiss a sacrificial lamb or floating languidly to caress a goose [Figures 10, 12 and 13]. In the catalogue for *Of Mutability* Marina Warner compares this to a cornucopia of pleasures, suggesting that Chadwick's performance of the Garden of Earthly Delights subverts Eve's position with regard to Adam and the shame of her seduction of him with her 'forbidden fruit' (Warner, 1986). The biblical figure of Eve, a cultural prototype for all women, is constructed as a temptress who both represents and solicits men's desire yet at the same time is punished for representing these earthly pleasures and carries the shame of banishing humanity from paradise. While the Christian Church exerted control on its subjects by forbidding 'earthly desires', woman – Eve – represents the shame and sinfulness of these desires.

In a contemporary context, in which the media frequently openly and graphically represent sex and sexuality, most often through the image of woman as emblem of desire, it might be argued that a prohibition of sex and sexuality in much of western society is no longer in operation. However, while there may be widespread representation of women's bodies as hyper-sexualised, femininity is also stringently regulated through propriety and shame, which produces a swathe of contradictory idealisations of femininity that women must negotiate. Women's active sexual desire is discouraged because of the accusations of promiscuity that are often levelled at women who actively seek sexual partners; forbidden supposedly because of the female body's reproductive ability, for which women are seen to carry a stigma. Some feminist discourse has argued that the shame that surrounds women's sexuality can only be challenged through recuperative practices which endeavour to represent women's desire in defiance of the historical sexual objectification of women (Johnson, 2002). Carol Vance (1984) has argued that the exploration of a positive female sexuality was an important feminist endeavour, despite the representational and real dangers it might entail. She contended that censorship, even on the grounds of safety, only repeated the oppression of women's sexuality. Chadwick's imagery in the *The Oval Court* affects such an attempt at re-appropriating the female body as image of desire. She accesses historical themes, motifs and phrases from art and myth, inhabiting the female bodies within this imagery, in search of a visual vocabulary by which to speak to women's desire, seeking to twist existing visual and symbolic language.

Chadwick's elaborate symbolic still lifes reference in particular the *vanitas*, a 16th-century Dutch genre of painting. These elaborate tableaux displayed objects of wealth and beauty with lurking signs of death and decay, as allegories for the sinfulness of 'earthly pleasures', in line with Calvinist Church doctrine that aimed to reform the Christian church through austerity.² Such works embodied a contradiction, in that they fetishised the very objects they claimed to prohibit by describing them in intricate and exquisite detail, and the paintings themselves were also fetishised as valuable objects (Bryson, 1990). Chadwick's work raises questions about pleasure and its prohibition, and in particular around the ascription of the shame of vanity to women, by her mobilisation of the *vanitas* tradition. Vanity, as an adjunct to a notion of femininity as

² See Livingstone, E.A. (2006) (ed.) *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (2006): 'Calvinism', at <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=195.e921> (accessed 17.9.08).

narcissistic in modern use, refers to obsession with appearance and can carry particularly negative connotations. Marina Warner notes the treatment of female pleasure as a vice in the *vanitas* tradition:

In such a work, woman sins when she adorns herself, because the objective of her vanity is the satisfaction of her lust; the same appetites that may be wicked in youth become unseemly folly in old age, and the allegory of Vanity then becomes a warning against foolishness of another sort. The Vanitas genre, rooted in Northern European Calvinist reform, chastises women in particular for their addiction to pleasure. (Warner, 1986: 5–6)

The idea of woman as vain simultaneously disdains and covertly reinforces pleasure in the beauty of youth. Jeremias Falck's 17th-century engraving *Vanitas* shows a woman, wizened by age, who is sitting before a mirror adorning herself with lavish folds of fabric, bows and pearls and foolishly lamenting the loss of her youth [Figure 14]. Chadwick explicitly references this genre in her own *Vanitas* [Figure 15] within the *Of Mutability* installation; this *Vanitas* mirror is also shown in her hand in one of the Oval Court panels [Figure 16]. The focus on age and lost beauty is as relevant as ever today. Youth continues to be idealised as the epitome of beauty in contemporary western society; cosmetic surgery promises the fantasy of halting or turning back the process of ageing and offers the subject the means by which to retain a youthful appearance, but only by cutting, penetrating and mutating the body.

Chadwick addresses the issues of youth, beauty and bodily pleasure in the imagery of *The Oval Court*, ingeniously both referencing the decadence of, and subverting the regulatory prohibitive action of, the *vanitas* symbolism, in order to open out a nuanced representation of a woman's enjoyment of inhabiting of her own body. As her body cavorts and tumbles, symbols of death and decay surface from the display of gratifying abundance, as in the nearby piece *Carcass* [Figure 17] – a glass column containing putrefying, reeking matter – the luscious fruits and vegetables of *The Oval Court* rot (Sladen, 2004: 16–17). Through these references to decay, the work neither signifies a youthful body that is foolishly unaware of its eventual decline nor a moral tale about such 'vanity', but is a contemplative yet joyful performance of bodily experience. Chadwick, aware of the ultimate fragility of her body and the passing of youth, said: 'As you grow older you are more conscious of mortality. And of time passing, of

pleasure turning into grief. And of the two being inextricable, one from the other' (Januszczak, 1987). As Waldemar Januszczak notes, as decay hovers around Chadwick's slim youthful body: 'her pleasing nudity, like one of the apples in *Of Mutability* (was) on the turn' (ibid.).³ Chadwick, who was 33, represented her body at a particular point in life between youth and middle age, within a space in which all life grows, flourishes, declines and decays. The intertwinement of life and death is evoked in the cyclicity of the oval (Cork, 1986: 35–6). Within this natural order of things, the naked gambolling female body does not simplistically imply vanity but rather a grasping of life through the sensuality of the physical body, which was made all the more poignant by Chadwick's death at just 42.⁴

Warner, noting Chadwick's narcissistic relationship with her own image in the dual role of artist and model, compares the pool of *The Oval Court* to that of Narcissus, of the self-image. In accordance with this Chadwick's gaze is averted from the viewer throughout the piece, as though she is focused within her body and its experiences. This is unlike the images of sexuality in western media in which a woman's gaze is so often made to indicate that her pleasure is ultimately a submissive display for an external (male) other. And, despite the fact that the work is clearly aware of itself as image, it is thus that it begins to diverge from the dominant heterosexual narrative, in which female pleasure is constructed as subordinate to that of the male. This does not imply that the male gaze is – or can be – entirely 'shut out'; in many panels Chadwick is seen to insert herself in the context of art-historical, male-authored images of the sensual female body, such as Bernini's 1652 sculpture *The Ecstasy of St Theresa* [Figure 18] and Francois Boucher's 1751 painting *Mademoiselle O'Murphy* [Figure 19]. In this way Chadwick attempts to appropriate an existing language of female sexuality by provocatively performing herself as cultural images of the female body as emblem of desire. The work, by representing her as becoming these images through the direct connection between female body, apparatus and image, raises questions around the politics women's self-representation. Though replacing a male with a female author does not in itself necessarily act subversively, the work, through Chadwick's insertion of herself into such iconic vignettes of femininity, provokes the question: 'What is it like to become that body?' It suggests a way in which feminist practice might produce more

³ Here, Januszczak is discussing the auxiliary piece *Vanity*, but in the context of *The Oval Court*.

⁴ See: 'At the Edge of Mystery and Taboo: Obituary of Helen Chadwick', *The Guardian*, March 18, 1996 (Newspaper Database, Expanded Academic ASAP, Gale; accessed University for the Creative Arts 30.10.08).

empathetic – or at least nuanced – understandings of the female body in performance: a body that is routinely distanced, objectified and dehumanised through habitual operations of looking.

In the goose panel [Figure 13] Chadwick references both the Greek myth of Leda and the swan (Evans, 1986: 18) – in which it is ambiguous whether Zeus/the swan rapes or seduces Leda – and also the pose of *The Ecstasy of St Theresa* in which the female figure acquiesces in ecstasy (Warner, 1986: 7). Bernini's work shows the saint being 'penetrated' by the word of God (Macey, 2000: 210). In the Christian tradition, which attributes both purity and shame to women's sexuality, the image of the 'virgin in ecstasy' holds an inherent contradiction. As Mary Horlock notes, however, Bernini's work significantly came to represent female *jouissance* for Georges Bataille, whose writings inspired Lacan's consideration of the possibility of female *jouissance* (Horlock, 2004: 37). Lacan contended that, while a woman can *experience* *jouissance*, she cannot articulate it in cultural terms, and yet feminist critics have noted that this does not accord with Saint Theresa's abundant accounts of her experience of ecstasy (Macey, 2000). What Chadwick underscores is the challenging and taboo depiction of sexuality in Bataille's sadomasochistic fictions such as the *Story of the Eye*, by shrouding her head, placing a noose around her neck, and incorporating both images of floating fish hooks and an axe and frequent references to the binding of the body as fibres encircle and knot themselves around and over her flesh [Figures 12, 13 and 20]. Such dangerous sexuality is not easily accepted as 'feminist': in the first instance the sadomasochistic imagery of the female body, trussed in rope and hooded, scathed by blades and courted by animalistic phalluses, might be seen to refer to a habitual cultural representation in which the female is violently punished as a male sadistic fantasy. Commenting on criticism from her feminist peers, Chadwick said: 'It's been generating extreme hostility...I've been accused of driving men out to rape young girls' (Januszczak, 1987).⁵ Controversy around the piece contributed to Chadwick's movement away from figurative representation of the body in her practice towards the more metonymic representation seen in *Loop my Loop* (1991) and *Piss Flowers* (1991–2). It might be argued, however, that censorship of desire, albeit in a subordinate form, is another oppression of women (Vance, 1986). It might also be argued that in the play of social and cultural texts, such imagery might not *only* have this meaning or *only* be

⁵ This critique is referred to in many articles such as Horlock (2004) and by Chadwick herself, but is not substantially reflected in feminist literature.

read in this way.

In 'The Politics of Feminist Spectatorship and the Disruptive Body...' (1999) Fiona Barber claims that, while critiques of imagery of women that represents them as debased, humiliated and subordinate are highly important, it is problematic to delineate the boundaries of female sexuality within what is politically sanctionable for feminism. She discusses Willem de Kooning's abstract expressionist painting *Woman I* (1953), a representation of a female figure that is depicted through chaotic expressionist brush strokes. For some feminist critics of the 1970s this became an emblem of the symbolic representation of violence on the female body, supported by the ideologies of feminist groups such as the WAWAW movement:

The feminist artist history which emerged (subsequently) in the 1970s was also to make specific links between these paintings and actual violence against women, an attribution which, in effect, set the limits of a discourse by identifying areas which were neither desirable nor indeed permissible for feminist spectatorship (Barber, 1999: 127)

Barber's recognition of her own desire in this apparently misogynistic depiction of the female figure jars with this reading, and thus poses the question whether her investment as a woman in this emblem of misogynist violence changes or subverts its meaning. As with debates around 'raunch culture' and the issue of a woman's complicity in her own oppression, a definite answer to this would be simplistic. What Barber's reading of the image does provoke is the power of a desiring impulse to court the taboo and in doing so highlight and push beyond the boundaries of normativity. Barber argues for 'the recognition of desire as both perverse and ambiguous rather than as necessarily within the channels of normative sexuality' (Barber 1999: 132). Thus conceived of, forms of sexual desire marginalised as deviant and taboo might be mobilised to become notions that subversively transgress the conventions that regulate and contain sexuality.

Chadwick's evocation of pleasure does indeed court the deviant, as underscored by her reference to Bataille's transgressive writing. Some emblems of sado-masochistic sexual fantasy have become somewhat stylised in the contemporary context because 'fetish gear' has become mainstream, yet Chadwick's symbols are less sanitised and stylised: she cavorts with the bodies of dead animals, juxtaposing the sensation of the limp, cold, yet tactile carcasses with her naked flesh as their phallic extrusions slither towards her or nestle in her bosom. This highly visceral imagery provokes reactions that oscillate

between gratification and disgust. Januszczak (1986) is repulsed by the grotesqueness of the animals and putrefaction of the fruit, while Richard Cork (1986) identifies with a blissful gratification in Chadwick's abandonment of taboos in favour of pleasure.

Chadwick, by drawing on the symbolisms of art and mythology, and eloquently interpreting and appropriating an existing vocabulary of desire from male-centred texts, explores how her re-articulation of such codes transformed through an embodied female subjectivity could produce a language of desire that might speak more ardently of *women's* sexualised pleasure. Her attempt to emote her desire as experienced 'from the inside out'⁶ articulated an alternative language of autoeroticism through the female body. This was rooted in, but pushed the boundaries of, existing conventions and motifs that reproduce a gendered hierarchy in which men dominate women. Her representation of the female body skirts the edges of the taboo and, while sensual, is not comfortable to consume.

3.3 Masquerade: surface and transgression

My work seeks to explore how women's desire might be produced through the acts they perform, and the images they seek to inhabit. As previously noted with regard to the work of Bourdin, cultural images of femininity can often work to alienate women from their own bodies as they require the performer to hide her physical effort, discomfort or pain. There is a sense that such representations of women's desire distance her from her internal experience in favour of her external performance, particularly when re-performed in the terms of stylised codes and gestures of desire that arise through the western media's commodification of sexuality. This section will explore masquerade as a concept which may offer a more complex understanding, while avoiding suggestions that a 'true' or 'real' pleasure is on the inside waiting to come out beneath the 'fake' act of pleasure.

Masquerade is a psychoanalytic concept of femininity that can account for a cultural construction of women as split between surface and depth, deriving from Joan Riviere's 1929 text 'Womanliness as a Masquerade'.⁷ Riviere notes that codes of femininity may

⁶ This phrase is a quote from Chadwick's interview with Tom Evans: see Evans, T (1986) 'A Mirror to Yourself: Helen Chadwick in Interview with Tom Evans', in *Creative Camera*, 1986, No. 6.

⁷ This early analysis of issues concerning women and self-presentation is reprinted in Hughes, A. (1991) (ed.) *The Inner World and Joan Riviere: Collected Papers 1920-1958*.

frequently be summoned by women in order to mask behaviour that is socially stigmatised as ‘unladylike’ because they are considered masculine attributes: for example displays of power, accomplishment, and drive for success. Such self-regulatory impulses, which are couched in the mysterious ‘wiles’ of femininity, prevent women from staking a claim to power through guilt or fear of reprove. Masquerade in feminist terms has been understood as a means of negotiating the multiple and contradictory layers that reflect the complex issues of knowledge, access, and propriety to which women are expected to conform. For example, discussing the social etiquette of Victorian society, Annette Stott claims: ‘A lady will always fail to hear that which she should not hear, or having unmistakably heard, she will not understand’ (Stott, 1992: 62). The prohibition implied in such statements excluded women from power and knowledge, and the suggestion that it was ‘improper’ ensured their collusion in this oppression via a pretence of naivety. In Mulvey’s view, social and cultural understandings of femininity as a masquerade produce woman as representing a dichotomy between interior and exterior: the prevalent ‘topography of the feminine masquerade’ produced through the fetishisation of the female body in masculinised discourse disavows the female ‘wound’ of castration through the deflective artifice of surface (Mulvey, 2007: 294).⁸ Thus, Mulvey says, femininity is structured as a dichotomous metaphor of attractive surface and rotten interior, and woman comes to represent a schism between artifice and truth. Mulvey says: ‘An over-insistence on surface starts to suggest that it might be masking something or other that should be hidden from sight, and a hint of another space starts to lurk inside a too plausible surface.’ (Mulvey, 2007: 288). Chadwick turns this ‘rotten interior’ inside out, challenging the stereotype that female desire is shameful and improper as her own transgressive desires spill evocatively across the surface of the image.

This visceral spilling out evokes the sense of masquerade found in European social and cultural traditions of carnival, as a space in which to assume a new identity and gain temporary liberation from everyday social and sexual constraints. In ‘Reflections on Mask and Carnival’ Efrat Tseëlon claims: ‘The idea of masquerade became a potent cultural symbol, a modern emblem, carrying multiple metaphoric possibilities; as a site of excess, ecstasy, intrigue and moral danger harbouring erotic, riotous and mysterious associations’ (Tseëlon, 2001: 28–9). As Chadwick’s multiple personas parade around

⁸ Mulvey discusses masquerade in relation to the work of Frida Kahlo.

the Court she embodies this notion of masquerade as a transformative identity and liberation from social and cultural conventions, through excess. The title of the whole installation that comprised *The Oval Court* and auxiliary pieces *Vanitas* [Figure 15] and *Carcass* [Figure 17] is *Of Mutability*, which suggests the capacity for bodily transformation both in terms of identity and of the body's organic matter returning to the earth. Chadwick said: 'The title is really a cue for a concept of the self as being subject to change. There is continuity, but in perpetual shifting, of the notions of what we are through what we feel.' (Wegner and Batiste, 1996: 49). Chadwick does not perform the feminine masquerade as a 'trivial' surface beneath which secrets lurk: she pushes that which 'a lady should not know or understand' to the surface through her endeavour to represent desire from the 'inside out'. The photocopier becomes key to the process as its manifestation of the image through an indexical screen presses on the body, so the skin is represented as both external surface experienced by the viewer and as the surface on which internal experience of the performer's body begins. Placing objects on the screen of the photocopier allows the imagery to represent two sides simultaneously, producing potent ambiguities. These resist the simplistic but habitual binaries which construct women as an artificial surface, an appearance which she is required to perform and which may carry the risk of alienating her from her own depths.

The objects in the imagery of *The Oval Court* bear the marks of contact with the unrelenting screen of the photocopier. The glass pane has magnified their texture and emphasised their tactility: animal hair, crumpled materials and Chadwick's breasts, buttocks, and features have subsided under its pressure. The surface of the image materialises through the physical qualities of the objects it inscribes: thus, to be represented is to be culturally marked. Chadwick's use of the photocopier represents the female body in the process of becoming image through a mutual constitution of body and screen. There is a particular emphasis on tactility and the female body, emphasised through contrasts in sensation: the rough bristle of twisted twine, the oozing flesh of tomatoes or the leathery skin of cabbage. The juxtaposition of myriad tactile objects against naked flesh transforms abstract texture into tangible sensation as the strands of a disintegrating straw basket prick Chadwick's tender upper thighs, or the goose's leathery webbed feet press against the yielding cushion of her belly. In art historical terms, the evocation of sensual textures against skin was used to encode the female body as an erotic object, in order to incite a desire to touch. Chadwick makes explicit reference to this in her mimicry of a work like Francois Boucher's 1751 *Mademoiselle*

O'Murphy [Figure 19]. Boucher's painting depicts his fourteen-year-old mistress, lying nude on a chaise longue with sumptuous white velvet and satin crumpled beneath her. The exquisite textures of the fabric evoke the touch of her smooth skin and her milky white buttocks, which are as plump and voluptuous as the cushion on which she rests. Chadwick adopts a similar pose in one panel of *The Oval Court*, lying on her front with her soft buttocks pressed against the surface of the photocopier. A gust of soft white feathers seems to billow from her mouth, and as they float across the pool they imply the sensuality of her pale skin that has given way beneath the hard surface of the glass. The primacy of touch in the image is made more explicit by the covert presence of auxiliary hands that appear in unexpected places throughout the imagery. These hands emerge from the darkness as fingers grasping an octopus, tugging on a net or ball of string, nestling in the underbelly of a manta ray or hiding among finger-like bananas. These hidden hand motifs echo the structure of the installation which, according to Warner, was designed to echo the proportions of the artist's hand: the blue platform representing her palm, and the gilded spheres measured stereometrically in relation to her fingers and thumb (Warner, 1986: 2). In this way, the authorial hand of the artist coincides with the sensual pleasure of touch.

Chadwick's stimulation of the senses is not as palatable as the traditional sensuality of the female body in art history. The textures of artefacts such as the searching tentacles of the octopuses and the wet ridged underbelly of the manta ray are extremely evocative, yet they also produce a disturbingly squeamish response. An example of this is the phallic entrails that tumble from the goose's belly, an abject extrusion of glistening innards and ridged muscular tubes that slither intimately between the artist's legs [Figure 13]. Chadwick offers a range of complex emotions relating to tactility, disregarding the limits of the language conventionally used to represent the sensual female body: she uses surface to produce a body that experiences sensations rather than being merely a surface of projection. As she lunges through the pool her body caresses and brushes against the various textures to represent a tingling, quivering, transgressive female auto-erotic.

Chadwick rehumanises the distanced art-historical female body, not only via the implication of her authorship, but by the emphasis on the tactility of the female body beyond soft and comfortable and towards more bristling sensations. She evokes sensate pleasures beyond conventional codes, which provokes a sense of the experience of the

female body in the performance. In her discussion of 1970s performance art such as that of Acconci, Abramovich, Ulay and Budden, Kathy O'Dell refers to a 'masochistic bond between performers and audiences' (O'Dell, 1998: xii). The artist's self-inflicted discomfort or pain, she claims, constitutes the mirror stage through performance and opens out the dialectic of identification. In Chadwick's imagery a sense of physical unease, pressure on the body, and the lurking danger of axes and blades heighten perception. This provokes identification with the artist's body as a physical and emotional being: as she pushes through the surface towards the viewer she might be both a distanced image and an over-close bodily experience. In challenging the conventions of representing the female body, Chadwick shows how feminist practice may provoke the viewer to engage with the experience of that body in performance.

Chapter conclusion

Chadwick's method of producing an image of desire via an interaction of the surface of representation with the female body seeks a way to articulate women's bodily pleasure from the inside out, thus emphasising the experience of the performer. The evocation of the performer's body as a sensate entity that is clearly understood to feel both pleasure and pain seems remarkably relevant in the context of contemporary modes of spectatorship, in which human emotion and pain are commodified into a disposable viewing experience. The western media's emphasis on femininity is as distanced image: as surface and appearance. This produces the risk that, through the constant demand to repeat stylised codes of sexuality, women may become alienated from their own bodies and complicit in a reinforcement of their role of functioning as distanced and dehumanised, though beautifully ornamental, objects.

Chadwick's re-performance of art historical images of femininity is revealed to be a search for a language by which to represent female pleasure. According to Lacan, women can experience 'jouissance' but cannot articulate it in cultural terms. Thus, prohibited from complete subjectivity, women's performance of their own bodies runs the risk of reduction to a relentless signification of male desire. Chadwick subverts the sensual, tactile surface of the female body so that it becomes not simply a surface of projection, but a surface that projects and articulates. Her work is provocative, and courts a controversial sexuality that interrogates the oppression and censorship of women's desire. Through the work's historical context in relation to debates concerning

the politics of representing women in pornography, it may be understood as challenging how such oppression operates not only through the historical hierarchies of gender, but may also operate through discourses that seek equality.

Chadwick's work makes a case for the explicit female body in performance. When society glamorises and naturalises the pain, oppression, submission and subordination of women through, for example, fashion images, it becomes vital to provoke debate about and reaction to the representation of the erotic female body. In taking the risk of breaching the boundaries of 'safe' territory for feminist representation, performance practice can expose and undermine the restrictive and oppressive codes of femininity that operate to retain normativity. Stressing the position of the performer and engaging the viewer with her experience – even through an intensification of her pain or discomfort – can act to re-humanise the female body as distanced sexual object. These strategies, however, run the risk of slipping into the conventions of representation that re-produce women as the subordinated victim of masculinised sadistic fantasy. My work seeks to address how performing desire for the camera privileges the viewer's gaze by producing an appearance of pleasure, and subverts it through an assertion of this as a more pervasive, uncontainable, intensified version of the convention of women's desire for the camera. This extends to a perverse physical relationship with the machine, which transgresses the perceived boundaries between body and machine. My research project explores whether the camera and its production of such restrictive cultural narratives can become implicated through the pain/pane.

Chapter 4: Hysteria, technology and the distorted self-image

Chapter introduction

This chapter investigates hysteria as a stereotype of femininity that is emotional, irrational and melodramatic. Jean Martin Charcot's use of the camera to produce visual evidence of this characterisation of women demonstrates the cultural encoding of their bodies through the power relationships played out via the camera. The relationship between Charcot as authoritative 'doctor' behind the camera, and his mainly female performers as 'patients' is also significant. The reasons why the female body 'became' and continues to be marked by the visual manifestation of emotional pain, will be examined. The aim is to investigate how this historical encoding of femininity through the camera continues to resonate with highly charged contemporary interactions between gendered subject and 'machine of visibility' (Rose, 1986: 203). In particular, the work of Pipilotti Rist will be analysed: her early experiments with the medium of analogue video add a useful perspective to my analysis of the digital. Rist's practice explores the subject's relationship to technology and a fast-paced visual culture, as she re-performs, recycles, cuts up and scrambles visual imagery. Hysteria, understood both stereotypically as over-emotionality and in a more nuanced interpretation as self-inflicted destruction continues to characterise women's relationship to their self-image through the camera. Though aberrational, hysteria is nonetheless a prescribed feminine role which operates normatively. Its deviance, however, contrasts usefully with and challenges narcissism as an idealised condition of femininity. Exploration of this will broaden and extend the scope of the analysis. Through Rist's work, consideration will be given to whether the 'hysterical' female body might be employed as a device of subversion and how this might be achieved.

4.1 Hysteria: the feminine condition

Hysteria is a stereotype of femininity. In psychoanalysis, hysteria is seen as the surfacing of unresolved, repressed emotions that may be expressed through the body or as an anxiety or phobia. Freud's work was fundamental to the development of psychoanalysis and subsequent understanding of the gendering of the subject.¹ Hysteria has at times been attributed to men, for example, male war survivors, but is far more

¹ See Macey, D. (2000) (ed). *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, pp. 193–5.

frequently considered to be the ‘woman’s disease’ (Micale, 2008). The term ‘hysteria’ derives from the Greek for ‘uterus’: in Ancient Greece it was thought that a womb that was not fertilised would roam the body causing various disorders (Macey, 2000: 194). This idea speaks of the regulation of woman’s behaviour by affirming childbearing as the ‘normal’ course and pathologising its absence as a phenomenon that causes the female body to malfunction. This anchoring of hysteria to women’s capacity to reproduce naturalised it as ‘womanly’. Notions of hysteria contributed to the demonisation of women who were believed to have been bewitches in the 16th century, as the 19th-century ‘female malady’, and as the female-specific ‘vapours’ (Showalter, 1985; Macey, 2000: 194). Many feminist scholars suggest that the idea of hysteria was a means by which to contain women’s voices of protest. Both Elaine Showalter (1985) and Diane Hunter (1998) contend that its rise as a ‘fashionable disease’ in the 19th century coincided with the initial stirrings that became the women’s movement.²

Jean-Martin Charcot’s study of an apparent epidemic of hysteria in women in 19th-century Paris was undertaken under the premise that hysteria was a neurological disease. Its legitimisation within a scientific framework further naturalised it as characterising femininity. Charcot’s major study greatly influenced Freud, whose work on the disturbance formed the foundation of psychoanalysis and continues to influence understandings of the gendered subject (Isaac, 1996: 193).³ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s review ‘The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth Century America’ (1972) suggests that early feminist writings expressed the belief that women were victims of the malpractice and misogyny of the male medical profession. This later shifted to an understanding of hysteria as a broader consequence of contradictions to behaviour expected of women in various social roles, leading to an inability to cope and ultimately psychological breakdown. In contrast to the role in which a woman obediently and subserviently put the needs of others such as her husband and children before her own, hysteria was a means by which she could attend to herself. As such it was a retreat into the self, a narcissistic self-focus that was a healing process in a time of crisis. There was great incongruity between women’s sexual and maternal roles: in European society in Victorian times women were expected to be delicate and passive

² The phrase ‘fashionable’ disease is used in Douglas Wood, A., (1973) ‘The Fashionable Diseases: Women’s Complaints and their Treatment in Nineteenth Century America’, in *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 25–52.

³ Charcot’s studies were to influence Freud and thus psychoanalysis, as asserted in Isaac (1996: 193) and Laplanche and Pontalis (1983: 195).

like flowers, yet also to be strong and to bear pain in childbirth. Hysteria was a means by which they could assert repressed emotions that had been provoked by their role but were inhibited by socio-cultural regulatory norms (Smith-Rosenberg, 1972: 672). Smith-Rosenberg suggests that 'hysteria' was a form of resistance to normative gender roles, a notion later supported by Juliet Mitchell, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, who saw it as an unconscious revolt against masculinised ideologies, or a kind of *profeminism* (Mitchell, 1984: 116–7; Cixous and Clement, 1985). Hysteria is thus a frustrated protest that masculinised discourse refuses to hear, so that women are characterised as over-emotional and irrational in contrast to the 'naturally' logical male. While the idea of hysteria as a deviant behaviour was used to marginalise and control women, its deviation from expected behaviour and the fact that it often dramatically fractures the status quo suggests that feminist discourse might redeploy it strategically as a language of femininity, recuperated as protest, resistance and transgression of regulatory gender norms.

Viewed as a form of resistance, hysteria presents certain problems, as attested by contemporary manifestations. As a desire to externalise a repression through the body, hysteria still manifests itself in, for example, the eating disorders that Orbach contends are increasing among teenage girls (Export, 1988; Orbach, 2009: 99).⁴ Anorexia Nervosa, in which the subject struggles with a dysmorphic sense of itself, represents self-destruction of the body from inside out. This turning of the destructive impulse on the self repeats the psychological dynamic of narcissism. As for many 19th-century women, the demands of the feminine role – to become the image and to look or behave in a particular way – may seem so unachievable that the only coping mechanism is to make oneself ill. Anorexia is a strikingly visual protest: an extreme and life-threatening image of the idealisation of femininity as fragile.

4.2 Charcot and the photographic iconography of hysteria

The connection between hysteria, femininity and visibility can be traced in Charcot's study at the Salpêtrière in Paris,⁵ and continues to characterise women's relationships to their bodies, through the idea that inscribing psychological trauma on the body makes it more 'real'. Charcot's use of the camera to show the 'disease' reveals the manipulation

⁴ Export posits anorexia as a modern form of hysteria.

⁵ Charcot was chief clinician at Paris' Salpêtrière asylum in the late 19th century (see Didi-Huberman, 1982: 80).

of women's bodies by clinical methods in order to produce visible evidence of the disease. Charcot's considerable study was largely of women, in accordance with contemporary belief, though counter to this he did establish the possibility of male hysteria. He adopted the positivist premise that privileged sight was the purveyor of ontological knowledge: that visibility equated to truth. The study was marked by the visual: observation, documentation and classification were used to seek evidence of the intangible psychic disturbance of femininity through the female body. The resulting *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1876–1880)⁶ produced a compelling *body* of evidence that supported social ideas about women as fragile and emotionally volatile. The images are often those of dramatic, spectacular and highly visible bodily states: faces distorted into strange expressions; staring eyes; protruding tongues; bodies wrestling with nightgowns and bedclothes; passive, fallen bodies; and strangely contorted bodies [Figure 21]. Such was Charcot's belief in the integrity of this photographic reproduction of hysteria that he used the technology itself literally to reproduce the symptoms: the role of the camera slipped from documentary into provocation and further into fabrication. Devices such as exposure to a bright light or the sound made by a tuning fork, or the application of an electrical current to the body, were all used to 'stimulate' visual symptoms of the disturbance [Figures 22, 23 and 24].

In the 19th century, despite a far greater understanding of anatomy, women's reproductive organs were still thought to be the cause of hysteria. Charcot devised the ovarian compressor, an archaic apparatus that was strapped to the patient and was believed to prevent the ovaries sending hysterical impulses to other parts of the body via the spinal cord [Figure 25]. The drive to suppress the female body was in evidence in the wider socio-political context of 19th-century Paris, as the state sought to manage poverty and subsequent labour unrest (such as the Paris Commune of 1870–71) by controlling reproduction. Many working-class women and prostitutes were interned under the Contagious Diseases Acts 1864–68 (Isaac, 1996: 183). In the 1870s, 4000 women were held in the Salpêtrière. Joanna Isaac notes: 'It was in the context of this legal wrangle for control of the bodies of working-class women that the disease of hysteria was invented' (ibid: 183–4). She contends that the representation and categorisation of the female body was an endeavour to make visible that which is invisible; a mapping of the *terra incognita* of femaleness and its mysterious interiority (Isaac, 1996: 165).

⁶ Compiled by two of Charcot's disciples, D.M. Bournville and P. Regnard.

Charcot publicly demonstrated his knowledge and command of the ‘mysterious’ female body in clinical lectures such as the weekly *Lecons du Mardi* that attracted up to 500 people (Showalter, 1997: 31). André Brouillet’s painting *A Clinical Lecture at the Salpêtrière* (1887) shows a limp female body, paralysed within the discourse of hysteria, displayed for an abundance of male gazes [Figure 26]. Charcot used techniques such as attaching feathers to a patient to exaggerate body tremors for the expectant audience (Didi-Huberman, 2003: 238). The feathers may simply have augmented a symptom, but clearly demonstrate Charcot’s spectacularisation of the female patient’s body. The medical discourse enabled a curious and controlling, yet supposedly distanced, masculinised gaze that sought to observe and master this body.

4.3 Troubling evidence: the camera and the re-performance of hysteria

Through Charcot’s extensive use of the camera, such power relations were to influence the relationship between women and technology at this early stage of its development to produce an understanding of the female body as image. The epidemic of hysteria seemed to affect only Paris, and suggestions that he had fabricated or exaggerated the disease placed Charcot under pressure to legitimise his study (Showalter: 1997: 31). Using photography to capture its symptoms seemed to provide unequivocal evidence; at the time, photography was understood to be fundamentally indexical in nature and thus an instrument of scientific proof, or indeed ‘truth’. The camera was used, quite literally, to reproduce the symptoms of the disease. In *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, Ulrich Baer describes how a patient would be set in front of a camera in a dark room. The intensity of the unexpected light when the flash was triggered would dazzle her into a state of paralysis, freezing her mid-motion [Figure 22], and when the light was extinguished, she would collapse. (Baer, 2002: 35). With the patient thus numbed into a state in which she had no control over her body, Charcot could manipulate her into the form he required, in order to re-present his understanding of the female body as hysterical. The act of inscribing the photographic plate was also an act of inscribing the female body. With regard to women, photographic technology can thus be traced historically as shaping the female body to conform to a male-dominated ideology.

The use of photography, which produced a relationship between the camera and female body in which tensions between truth and fabrication shape its physical matter,

continues to develop through contemporary technology. Charcot's images are the visual manifestation of the socio-cultural regulation of women's bodies, and while with hindsight the acceptance of such manipulated images may seem absurd, in the contemporary context the rhetoric of such images is highly coercive. This has resonance with today's visual cultures: despite the knowledge that digital airbrushing technologies such as Photoshop are used extensively in the media, such images are still identified as a more complete mirror-image of the self, absorbed through the ever persuasive dialectic of identification. Thus the camera has long influenced our understanding of ourselves as embodied subjects.

In *Pre-history: the Frenzy of the Visible* (1990) Linda Williams notes a mutual influence between Charcot and his scientific contemporary Eadweard Muybridge, who in 1879 produced a prototype of the animated moving image using a revolving cylinder known as the *Zoopraxiscope*.⁷ By studying bodies in motion using sequential photographs he was able to demonstrate that a galloping horse lost contact with the ground when in motion, a nuance undetectable by the unmediated eye.⁸ As noted, women were absent from early scientific studies of the body, leading to Williams' claim that in early photographic explorations a woman's body became known as a body that is an image, rather than a body that is inhabited and experienced. Muybridge's influence on Charcot and in turn Charcot's on Freud, means that the development of the filmic apparatus is entangled in a discourse that sought to know the female body in order to solve 'the riddle of femininity'.⁹ This, she maintains, continues as the voyeuristic and fetishist framing of the female body as a standard of moving image production, naturalised as an attribute of the medium itself (Freud, 2001: 116; Williams, 1990). Thus the body of woman as distanced image rather than inhabited body was to become embedded in the languages of cinema and psychoanalysis. Contemporary understandings of femininity continue to be highly influenced by the cultural knowledge that was produced through the masculinised gaze of the camera (Williams, 1990: 46–7).

⁷ This proto-cinematic viewing apparatus is a hollow cylinder in which a series of images are placed and spun to animate them. See 'Muybridge, Eadweard', in Ann Lee Morgan (2007) *The Oxford Dictionary of American Art and Artists*: <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t238.e941> (accessed 7.4.08).

⁸ Muybridge's famous galloping horses can be seen in his 1887 multi-volume work *Animal Locomotion: An Electro-Photographic Investigation of Consecutive Phases of Animal Movements* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia).

⁹ This phrase refers to Freud's words in his lecture/essay 'Femininity' (*New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*).

Women were not entirely absent from the discourse of hysteria: they were present as performer. Men were permitted to acquire the knowledge of how to capture the photograph, yet women too acquired knowledge: knowledge of how to become an image. While Charcot's masculinised discourse *re-presented* the female body as hysterical, the 19th-century 'hysteric' could also *re-perform* herself as pathologised, thus manipulating the power relations of the image from within. Georges Didi-Huberman's extensive study of the complex relationship between Charcot and his patients reveals an unspoken power structure at the asylum that was based, perhaps inadvertently, on a tacit bribe offered by the doctor: 'either you seduce me (showing yourself to be hysterical), or else I will consider you to be an incurable, and then you will no longer be exhibited but hidden away, forever, in the dark.' (Didi-Huberman, 2003: 170). Participation in Charcot's observations afforded hysterics higher status than those who were simply deemed incurable, so it was advantageous to repeat their symptoms for the camera. Though this demonstrates that the women were complicit with their own pathologisation, it can also be seen to undermine Charcot's objective claims for the study. Joanna Lowry asks: 'How could he be sure that the women's symptoms were authentic and that they weren't performing them?' (Lowry, 2007). The 'hysteric' learned to be the visual representation of hysteria that Charcot required: it seems that she may have been aware of herself as the object of his curious gaze. Within the clinical environment of the Salpêtrière, perceptions of the hysterics studied resemble present-day understandings of woman's over-determined relationship to herself as image: they were considered vain, preoccupied with their appearance, deceitful and self-dramatizing. Charcot's assistant Charles Richer viewed these traits as 'varieties of female character... one might even say that hysterics are more womanly than other women' (Showalter, 1997: 35). Charcot, suspicious that the hysteric was supplementing the somatic symptom, deduced that the pleasure that she took in exaggerating its bodily effects was itself a part of the disturbance (McCarren, 1995: 765). The implications of such a desire to be looked at threatened to undermine Charcot's discourse. Baer says: '...indeed is it not the doctor who suffers the hysterics' charades – suffers them as a threat to his authority, his mastery, his grasp of the truth?' (Baer, 2002: 31). The female hysteric's exhibitionist performance subverted her position as straightforward passive object of curiosity and display, so her apparent desire to be an image began to undermine the discourse that sought to control her body.

Despite the inference of narcissism in the *re*-performance of the ‘hysteric’, she was bound within the terms of the disturbance and her body was marked by it. Though the hysteric’s body was twisted and distorted, a narcissistic ‘womanliness’ was attributed to her. Both narcissism and hysteria are normative characterisations of femininity, but while narcissism demands that the subject should become the idealised bodily image, hysteria is constituted through a dramatic departure from ‘normal’ bodily behaviour. The desire to be looked at, implied in the re-performance of the hysteric, is subversive not only because it destabilises the positivist gaze, but because its gestures deviate from idealised bodily norms and yet still present a kind of spectacularised sexuality. Didi-Huberman’s account interprets the typical hysteric’s experience of this theatrical performance:

And she remains the captive of a situation, the spectacle (of her body), thinking that through a choreography of convulsions and ‘attitudes passionelles’, she can incorporate all gazes, all the possible imaginable ‘libido spectandi’; thinking she can become “a kind of idol, perhaps stupid but dazzling and enchanting, who holds destinies and wills suspended in her gazes”. Her gaze dreaming of creating a master-gaze in its own image. In short, she dreams of being the feminine idol about which all men dream. (Didi-Huberman, 2003: 169).¹⁰

If this account is accepted, it might be imagined how the hysteric responds to the doctor’s gaze and finds new ways to enthrall and capture it, thus attempting to reclaim a kind of power by speaking her body. Hysteria is diagnosed via visual peculiarity of the body; its gestures are eccentric, yet often strangely erotic. The iconographic record of the Salpêtrière thus represents a mysterious and flamboyant encoding of the female body. One plate from the *Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière* [Figure 27] shows a subject in an incongruously sexual pose: her white nightgown falls suggestively from her shoulder and is hitched up to reveal a taut leg and pointed foot. Many images of Augustine, Charcot’s favoured and most photographed patient, display this mysterious *to-be-looked-at-ness*: a potent mix of allure, romanticism and wretchedness. Thus, from the historic image of hysteria, emerges an alternative corporeal language of female sexuality that may not straightforwardly be re-performed as subversive. From

¹⁰ Didi-Huberman is referencing Baudelaire’s poem *La Femme*. See Baudelaire, C. (1970-79) *Oeuvres Complètes*. 2 vols. Gallimard, Paris (first published 1888–92).

this discussion emerges the idea that pleasure in being looked at is not inextricably linked to possession of an idealised female body; hysteria offers a model of sexualised yet deviant, feminine behaviour and examples often contrast the emotional/sensual/feminine body with the logical/objective/masculine machine. There are parallels between the processes of femininity and such re-presentation, which might be used in feminist performance to suggest the constructedness of both.

4.4 The scrambled self-image in *Pipilotti's Mistakes*

The 'knowledge' of bodies that emerges from new technology questions how knowledge that is produced digitally might construct our understanding of ourselves as embodied subjects. Instant playback features, for example, are increasingly facilitating new forms of narcissistic self-imaging and self-publishing practices, by which the subject comes to know itself intimately as image. To consider such questions the work of Pipilotti Rist, whose experimental use of video in the 1980s and 1990s explored the subject as mediated through technology and popular culture, will be examined. Rist's use of analogue video is significant to my research because the scrambling of the self-image articulates notions of 'becoming' through technology. Her work locates itself somewhere between pop video and home-made personal portrait, which seems almost to pre-empt the self-publishing often seen in YouTube video posts. Rist's work transverses the disciplines of music, video, pop and art and was part of a wave of European video art in the early 1990s that mobilised television and popular music cultures, as epitomised by MTV (Art and Video in Europe, 1996: 42).¹¹ The exhibition catalogue for *Art and Video in Europe* claimed:

...viewing from an ironic distance the cultural prisms manipulated by the media, in this case the video clip and the pop song. These artists create a body caught in the mesh of the electronic image, in the images of television and culture, without falling into a militant and restrictive didacticism (Art and Video in Europe, 1996: 42).

Rist's practice continues to resonate with contemporary concerns because it was about digesting, dissecting and recycling the influx of fast-paced audio-visual information that

¹¹ Rist was also a member of the all-woman experimental music group Les Reines Prochaines (1988–94), whose cross-disciplinary performances combined music, performance and multimedia much as in her own practice (Phelan, 2001: 43).

continues to demand consumption in modern westernised visual culture. Her work is characteristically pastiche, in which criticality and accounting for the investment of the subject in dominant imagery are not mutually exclusive. Her experimental approach was a potent mix of mainstream pop references and irreverence for convention, which bred radical disruption. Her unpolished, hallucinogenic anti-aesthetic was deliberately unmasterful against the synthetic heterogeneity of electro-pop music culture. *I am a Victim of this Song* (1995) references Chris Isaacs' *I don't want to fall in love* (1991), a bitter-sweet ballad that was promoted via a video in which supermodel Helena Christensen frolics on a beach in her underwear: imagery riding the wave of the hyper-commercial glamour of the *CK One* era of the 1990s. Rist re-sings the song in a childlike voice that is later undercut by hysterical shouting of its lyrics. She evokes the subject's longing to inhabit the glamorised representation and her ultimate failure. The notion of falling short and non-mastery is a key theme of Rist's approach that offers the viewer an alternative method of processing the narcissistic pleasure and pain offered by such seductive commodifications.

Rist's interrogation of the subject mediated through the machine is also exemplified by (*Absolutions*) *Pipilotti's Mistakes* (1988) [Figure 28], a single-channel work that was originally distributed on television. This too was characterised by the subject's failure, and referenced the stereotype of emotional volatility and melodrama that often characterises femininity as hysterical (Ross, 2000). The piece was characterised by the process of remix, in which performance vignettes by Rist were intercut with experimental post-produced AV footage that ranged from electro-coloured abstracts accompanied by organ music to stuttering imagery allied to a booming voice and erratic percussion. Distortion is a key trope of the piece and underwrites the persistent struggle of the female body in the video: her face pulls and distorts, she fights against the threat of submersion in a swimming pool or tries to scale a wall. Rist also dramatically drops from an upright position; again and again she falls helplessly to the ground, the sound of a drumroll adding to the sense of drama. This 'fainting' is perhaps the most iconic and enduring image of feminine hysteria. The ubiquitous modern references in popular cinema to the ultra-femininity of fragility and emotional volatility include Véra Clouzot in *Les Diaboliques* (1955), Marilyn Monroe in *Niagara* (1953) [Figure 29] and Kim Basinger in *Batman* (1989).¹² Rist's performance, however is parodic, and becomes

¹² See *I Feel Faint* (12.12.08) on YouTube for a montage of filmic references to women fainting: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TynbO3eWk0> (accessed 18.7.10).

absurd through its repetition, as though in representing how women's re-performance of feminine behaviours might be compulsively self-subordinating acts through which woman continually repeats her own oppression.

Repetition and failure resurface constantly through the video: just as Rist seems to progress, the footage jumps, skips or rewinds. Thus the footage itself is characterised by malfunction as it stutters, freezes and plays at hyper-speed, and distorts with analogue noise and scratch lines. In 'Pipilotti Rist: Grist for the Mill' (1998) Terry Myers holds that Rist's aesthetic of distortion draws on MTV culture and is symptomatic of the medium of (analogue) video itself. He says that video 'has easily gravitated toward the raw visual and/or aural effects of static, bleeds, jump cuts, and so on' which have been employed for 'the psychological impact of those moments, received as disruptions, mistakes, and/or problems' (Myers, 1998). In Rist's video portrait, these glitches scramble the self-image as her face stutters and glares, her mouth agape as though in distress: the subject caught in an audio-visual stream compulsively repeating itself as image. The hyper-fluctuating flashing imagery speaks of the effect of technology on the human image and how the subject relates to such images as mirror. As the image stutters into and out of pause frames, bleeding colour and distorting, the subject also sees itself malfunction. Elizabeth Bronfen's discussion of Rist's work connects these audio-visual errors with the psychic processes of hysteria:

The aberrations, distortions and disturbances in the field of vision, which introduce a narrative about her protagonist's psychosomatic malfunctions, are the result of self-consciously undermining the prescribed rhythm necessary for clearly stabilized audio-visual impulses that produce recognizable images and sounds. (Bronfen, 2001: 87)

Rist's interference with the audiovisual information via her pop-punk anti-aesthetic disrupts the persistence of vision and, as an auto-portrait, represents the impact on the subject as she tries to process the stream of images in western culture that constantly demand a becoming. The materiality of the image, as something that bends, breaks, distorts and malfunctions, is used to explore how the subject's identity becomes scrambled as it tries to attach itself to each passing image. This is a symbolic signification of the processes through which subjectivity passes in a hyper-mediatised culture. From this we might extrapolate questions about how the subject understands

itself as material image: celluloid, videotape, digital pixel or other material that can be cut up, fragmented, transposed, or transferred across time and space. It might also be asked how the subject understands itself when it views and takes part in these processes of transformation through self-imaging as a narcissistic dynamic. The idea of a narcissistic relationship not only to the self as image, but as a material image and self in the process, can open out a kind of struggle to 'become'.

Rist's strategically non-masterful video of sequential errors, which connect the malfunction of the machine to her own struggle, is a search for meaning and value in failure and loss of perfection, that begin to give way through their repetition. In contrast to the 'logic' of the machine, Rist employs a poetic 'nonsense' in which the images are joyfully obscure, each succeeding the next. As the machine itself seems to become hysterical, she subverts the idea of technology as something that is anchored firmly within a masculinised logic. Thus she undermines the privileging of 'rational thought' that bypasses the emotional through the assertion of an absolute 'truth' or normative standard of correctness, and that shuts down the capacity for complexity, divergence and difference: ironically, through repetition, Rist makes a case for heterogeneity.

The title *(Absolutions) Pipilotti's Mistakes* (1988) indicates that her re-enactment of aberrations may offer the promise of kind of absolution. Bronfen notes:

... a utopic element underwrites Rist's embellished enactment of somatic aberrations. Namely, a belief that something will change if the pain is a self-consciously distorted and self-referential, audio-visual performance of imperfection. (Bronfen, 2001: 89)

Just as the hysterical symptom is repeated in order to exorcise the original trauma, the imagery continues to replay Pipilotti's mistakes, in the hope of absolution. By submitting herself to the processes that produce the image of femininity, it seems that Rist is trying to push beyond restrictive codes and binaries. For example, the feminised trope of fainting, which repeats a clichéd drama that works to idealise women's helplessness and fragility, is addressed.

Bronfen asserts that the repetition of Rist's struggles not only repeats her malfunctions and failures, but demonstrates her resolve to keep trying against the odds (Bronfen, 1989: 80–81). In this way Rist subverts the helplessness of the act through the determination signified by the repetition. At the point where progression seems most

imminent, when there is the prospect of release following the execution of the threatening 'mistake', she assumes her previous standing position, yet is ready to fall once again. Rist falls from a standing position a total of seventeen times. These episodes occur across various scenarios: an intensely coloured ochre wheat field; a car park with a glowing green verge; a grey urban road with double yellow lines. These locations imply distance in terms of time as well as space, stretching the repeated actions out across the temporality of the video. As the video speeds forwards and backwards, she oscillates between potential transgression and regression. Thus the motion of the tape and the motion of the body are intertwined, so that both might be implicated in the constant reiteration of femininity as weakness. Bronfen contends:

Restitution significantly occurs in reverse motion, as though underscoring the way even as drastic a gesture as fainting is always recuperated back into the very order that produced this psychosomatic expression of discontent. (Bronfen, 2001: 80)

In this way Rist's work speaks of the cyclicity of stereotyped femininity, which continues to repeat itself, subsuming even dramatic protests back into normativity. Despite this, in constantly re-enacting the struggling female body she searches for meaning other than failure. She thus opens out a space in which the 'malfunction' of hysterical behaviour is explored as a release from the pressure of becoming the 'perfect' image. Rist said: 'I glorify hysterical actions. They are powerful gestures, a form of resistance when one is in a weak position. Hysteria is at the same time a falling apart into many pieces, an ecstasy, and a personal exorcism.' (Ross, 2000).

Rist's narration, which booms over the top of the footage, speaks of her struggle with a conflicted experience of herself as both object and subject of the gaze:

I see

You see

I see you seeing

You see me seeing

I want to see how you see

You want to see how I see

I want to show how I see

You want to show how you see

Nirvana im rosen garten

(Rist, excerpt from *Pipilotti's Mistakes*, 1988)¹³

She speaks of herself both as 'seen' and 'seeing', but her repeated and unsatisfied endeavour to 'see how you see'; that is, to see herself through the eyes of another, is underscored. This demonstrates not just an external, controlling gaze, but an attempt to reconcile oneself with such a gaze; to 'get inside' another gaze; to see oneself as seen, and ultimately suggests its impossibility. Her response to this position is a dramatic loss of pose as she hysterically faints again and again. Instead of waiting for the omnipotent gaze, she denies it by assuming a vacantness, thus subverting the position of being looked at by manifesting an extreme passivity. Rist recuperates hysteria as a mode of performance in which passivity subversively operates as a mode of resistance to woman's own compulsive repetition of her role as sexualised object of the gaze.

Chapter conclusion

Butler states that stylisations of gender require constant repetition to produce the illusion of stable identity (Butler, 1999). Rist, however, pushes repetition into slippage, thus representing the psychological impact of the struggle to become the (gendered) image; she endeavours to push beyond the compulsive repetition of femininity. Repetition therefore becomes a useful device by which to stress and push the constant becoming of the image that is required by normative gender. Rist's performance enacts the aberration of the female body, as a refusal of the unrealistic perfection of unattainable ideals: it asserts error and failure as a humanised response, and by this struggle is transformed from an act of marginalising to an agent of transgression. Conceived of in this way, hysteria is a means to contravene normative concepts of femininity by asserting deviance as a subversive way of performing gender. The hysteric's body exploded the genteel composure of Victorian femininity by presenting a raucous, erratic and unruly behaviour that allowed her to resist and transgress the parameters of her prescribed role. Though her body was un-masterful, helpless even, and deviated from idealised gentility, she was nonetheless spectacular via this aberration of her body as she took on another kind of deviant *to-be-looked-at-ness*:

¹³ Translation provided by the artist.

flamboyant and dramatic behaviour that held a curiosity for the gaze. This phenomenon begins to open out a mode of becoming the image: it deviates from the normativity of the idealised erotic female body which prescribes a narrow set of conditions that are considered necessary for the female to be regarded as desirable. Such a performance might shift, contravene, and expose the codes of normative sexualised feminine behaviour.

Rist's 'collapse' is also a collapse of the pose. It presents a kind of resistant passivity, in which the process of becoming the image of femininity finally begins to break down. Rist's work on representing the subject's struggle for self-image within a constant stream of images prefigures digital technologies, and the instant exchangeability and transformation of the self-image. Revisiting the studies of Charcot and Muybridge, it may be seen that the knowledge of our bodies is produced through technology, prompting us to ask how today's developing technologies are constructing our understanding of ourselves as embodied subjects. The inward focus of a narcissistic orientation often leads to self-criticism and self-destruction, and the consequence of an understanding of the self as image is often persistent self-surveillance and self-doubt. Charcot's discourse of hysteria has left a striking visual record of women 'becoming' the cultural image of femininity; its legacy continues in the naturalised idea of women as fragile, emotionality volatile, melodramatic. Contemporary forms of hysteria continue to define and characterise women's relationship to their own bodies through the camera. Charcot's use of the camera to evidence the 'disease' reveals the production of a clinical hysteria materialised through the female body, and the subsequent notion of a subject inscribing psychological trauma on the body has resurfaced in modern times as dysmorphic self-images and self-harm.

My work often employs the idea of narcissism as a situation in which the subject is turned upon itself, and in which the gaze of self-admiration and self-objectification often descend into a discomfiting self-destruction or parodic self-deprecation. It endeavours to represent the experience of the subject's attempt to inhabit images of femininity, as a complex and often contradictory struggle rather than the effortless achievement that the media's flawless fantasies of the self promise. Addressing and examining such consequences of self-destruction, in a way similar to Rist's subversive use of passivity and failure, might offer modes of performance through which the

habitual and comfortable modes of spectatorship of the erotic female body may be disrupted.

Chapter 5: Self-image and the logic of the male gaze

Chapter introduction

For a woman, the culturally prescribed act of self-imaging is one in which she is split between her role as object of the gaze, and her role as author and subject implied by the act of turning the camera on herself. In feminist performance, the act of performing oneself as image could be said to be implicit, because the performing body is understood as something that is within a space of representation as well as a body in the world. A woman's cultural role as object, and in turn questions surrounding the nature of subjectivity itself, are raised and critiqued through feminist performance that enacts such a subject/object role, the nature of which sits uncomfortably within the language of representation. Self-imaging practices that arise through digital media, however, complicate this as a disruptive act. Many women who turn the camera on themselves learn how to become an image by observation of media representations; submissive codes that produce the female body as feminine, erotic and sexualized are often disavowed by the glamorous identity that offers narcissistic pleasure in the process of becoming, as demonstrated, for example, by raunch culture. The self-perpetuating image of the *desire* to be the image means that women, more than ever, understand and know themselves in this way.

The work of Jemima Stehli explores the process of 'becoming the image' through self-imaging practice, and raises questions about the representation of the erotic female body. Stehli's work, in which she re-performs herself as the object of sexually-controversial and iconic images including works by Helmut Newton and Allen Jones that exemplify the dominant narrative of the 'male gaze', is highly provocative. This chapter considers Stehli's work as acts of 'becoming' the image, and examines how her representation of her self-imaging practice creates subtle, yet powerful shifts in the signification of the female body. While authorship may be said to act against the objectivity of the erotic position, any simple assertion that this is in consequence unambiguous, straightforward and resolved overlooks the very issues at stake.

5.1 Self-objectification as feminist practice

Authorship is a major concern that runs throughout Stehli's work from 1997–2001, as explored through appropriation of existing images and/or the cable release as signifier of authorship. In her re-making of Allen Jones' iconic series *Women as Furniture* (1969), Stehli considers how – and even whether – this authorship sits with women's role as object. Jones' *Table* [Figure 30], *Chair* [Figure 31] and *Hatstand* are slightly larger-than-life fibreglass sculptures of women's bodies, bent into the shape of furniture and with objects such as a padded cushion or glass pane appended, so that they may serve their subservient function. These representative bodies are trussed up in corsets, PVC and knee-high spike-heeled boots; they are obedient and eroticized. With their slim waists, long legs and impossibly pert breasts they represent an unrealistic and idealised image of the female body: their exaggerated sexual features and submissive poses render them icons of a male fantasy of domination. The literal objectification of women in Jones' work, which was made just as second-wave feminist activism was emerging forcefully in the late 1960s, crystallised the controlling action of the male desiring gaze on the female body, and came to represent the oppression and degradation of women for male pleasure. In 'Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious',¹ Laura Mulvey asserts that in such fetishistic representation women are simply 'puppets' in a male fantasy, in which a man can dominate and fetishise the female body in order to disavow his own fear of castration (Mulvey, 1989: 11). Mulvey says:

Women are constantly confronted with their own image in one form or another, but what they see bears little resemblance to their own unconscious, their own hidden fears and desires. They are being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by men. Yet in a real sense, women are not there at all. (Mulvey, 1989: 13)

Mulvey's critique of Jones' work claimed that it had no bearing on women's own desire. Thirty years later, Stehli performed herself as the contentious sculptures, documenting them in large black and white photographic pieces (137 x 241 cm)

¹ Mulvey's seminal essay 'Fears, Fantasies and the Male Unconscious or "You Don't Know What is Happening, Do You, Mr Jones?"' was written in 1973 and is reprinted in her book *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989).

entitled *Table 1*, *Table 2* (1997–8) and *Chair* (1997–8) [Figures 32 and 33].² In the images, Stehli bends on all fours bearing the weight of a glass table-top, or lies on her back with legs drawn to her chest and a cushion strapped round her thighs and waist. Unlike Jones' corseted women, Stehli is naked apart from fetishistic footwear. Stehli's re-performance of the work might begin to suggest a feminist re-appropriation from male authorship of the representation of the female body. The female body in early performance art, emerging alongside a second wave of feminist theory and activism, functioned powerfully under the premise of women as authors of their own bodies, in contrast to their art-historical role. Examples include Wilke's 1977–8 diptych *I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver* [Figure 8], discussed in Chapter Two, in which the artist lies naked across a rock in a re-performance of Marcel Duchamp's *Etant Donnés* (1946–66). Through the elision of the roles of artist and model, the subjectivity of authorship disrupts the convention of the female object of the artistic male gaze.

Stehli's re-performance of Jones' *Women as Furniture* seems at first to function in this way: as exposition, critique and displacement of the male author's representation of his fantasy of the female body. When she was producing the 'table' images, Stehli found that her body did not fit easily into Jones' model, because he had truncated or elongated parts of the female body in order to keep the glass pane horizontal and the legs neatly out of the spectator's way (Windsor, J: 1998).³ Her enactment of these fantasy women thus emphasized Jones' manipulation and constraint of the female body, not least his idealization of its form and sexuality. Further, the acting out of these fantasies as a flesh-and-blood, pain-feeling body exposed the violence to which Jones' imagery submits the female body. Glass manufacturers refused to sell Stehli a sheet of glass for the purpose because of the very real possibility that it would break in two and seriously injure her (Windsor, J: 1998).⁴ These are physically punishing positions in which the female body is dramatically constrained, inert beneath a pane balanced precariously on her back, or with a leather strap pinning her thighs to her chest. The severe submissiveness of the position raises questions in relation to the politics of self-representation, and a high degree of tension between authorial subjectivity and the self-subjugation of the act. It might be asked whether Stehli's work can be considered

² The measurements relate to *Table 2*: see Burrows, D. (2002) (ed) *Jemima Stehli*, pp. 24–7.

³ Jones comments: 'I took two-and-a-half inches out of the upper arms. I also took the same out of the lower legs, so that the feet would not protrude and trip people up.' (Windsor, J., 1998).

⁴ Stehli eventually had to use the more innocuous material Plexiglass.

‘feminist’, when she re-performs herself for the purposes of feminist discourse as work that so ‘ironically’ crystallises the female as the passive and humiliated object of male fantasy. In this sense, Stehli’s work is strategically provocative, seeming at once to support and contradict a feminist agenda of re-appropriation; the works seem to shift between a recuperation of the image of the female body from male authorship, and a reinforcement of the codes of femininity that represent and produce women as subordinate to men through a sexualised role. Thus, the work is a deliberate testing of the politics of representation, which in turn gives rise to an important question relating to women’s narcissistic relationship to the image: what does it mean for a woman to make herself into an (art) object? The literalisation of women’s role as object, as her flesh and blood body tries to bear the weight of the role, renders the symbolic subordination a physical reality and its toll on the body becomes tangible.

Stehli’s earlier work reveals her concern with the nature of the art object, as demonstrated in such sculptural pieces as *Black Still Life* (1997), a collection of everyday items in black resin that are polished excessively to a fetishistic shine. John Slyce notes that this investigation of objectivity was transposed to Stehli’s performance practice, and that the transition from sculptural object to the self as object is played out in her 1997 work *Wearing Shoes Chosen by the Curator* (Slyce, 2002) [Figure 34]. In this performance Stehli lies face-down, naked but for a pair of shoes, with her skin pressed against the cold concrete of the gallery floor: she is acting as both object and non-object against the other exhibits. The pose is again physically punishing and dehumanising, because Stehli assumes what Slyce calls ‘a position of extreme abjection’ (Slyce, 2002:12). The title suggests that she submits *herself* to the will of the curator, yet articulated in this way the act is deliberately and provocatively submissive.⁵ Slyce describes a ‘pair of axes, a vertical and a horizontal, on which one could write degrees of submissiveness and the degree to which Jemima could be said to be presenting herself. But I don’t feel these values are ever fixed or certain’ (Slyce, 2002: 12). Stehli’s choice to submit herself does not necessarily cancel out her submissive pose through its assertiveness or subjectivity, but the work does provoke questions about whether submitting herself to another shifts the power relations involved in women’s role in art and representation.

⁵ Stehli discusses the curator as ‘he’ in Windsor, J. (1998) ‘Turning the tables on Mr. Jones’, in *The Independent*, March 18, 1998.

The wretchedness of the forlorn position works to give the viewer the sense that the cold concrete is sapping warmth and comfort from the body on the floor. Stehli's physical and emotional endurance are highly evocative, drawing the viewer into the experience of the performing body and inviting their empathy. Thus, the female body as spectacle may not be so simplistically distanced through dehumanisation, because her position constantly calls the viewer to 'step into her shoes'. The submissive position that so often characterises erotic images of women is thus cleverly subverted. This centring of the work on the artist's *submission* to this sustained position of discomfort might prompt viewers to ask why she would "push [her body] to such extreme physical and psychological limits?" (O'Dell, 1998: xii). Explicit acts of bodily endurance as spectacle can be uncomfortable to watch, as the viewer becomes implicated in the act of pain performed for their spectatorship.

5.2 Subverting the dominant narrative of the male gaze

In the *Strip* series (1999–2000) Stehli continues to push the feminine pose as submissive to the point of subversion, in this instance very explicitly in relation to a narrative around the male gaze. For this series of images six male critics, curators and dealers were invited to participate in a photoshoot in her studio [Figures 35 and 36]. Stehli sat the men at the centre of brightly coloured backdrops and undressed in front of them until she was wearing only a pair of black patent stilettos. The men watched the striptease, fully clothed in contrast to Stehli's eventual nakedness. This rendered her yet more naked and vulnerable; as in Edouard Manet's critique of the convention of the female nude in *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (1863), the clothed male/naked female juxtaposition constructs and emphasises a gendered power imbalance, making the familiar practice of stripping women's bodies in the name of art representation absurd and incongruous. Stehli's act, of course, might be seen to differ because of her implication as authorial performer, which raises questions about why she submitted herself to this position of subordination and vulnerability.

The scenario was staged so that the male protagonist was forced into the position of voyeur: he was placed on a chair facing forward, so that he was seen to have a prime view of the female's body; he held a cable release that signified his apparent control of the representation. The work plays with the narrative of the controlling male gaze/female sexual object so prominently critiqued by feminist discourse. Robert Doisneau's

Un Regard Oblique (1948) epitomises such narrative dominance of the male gaze. In this black and white photograph, a middle-aged couple in prim 1940s overcoats and hats look at a shop window display. The viewer is situated as though inside the window, behind the frame of an artwork that the central female figure is attending to [Figure 37]. She seems engrossed in discussing the work with a male companion to her right, but his attention is distracted. In his line of sight is a gilt-framed painting of a woman in black stockings, who is bent over with her rounded behind displayed prominently in the air. As the gazes of both women are averted, the male steals a naughty sideways glance at the erotic display. The trajectory of his gaze crosses that of his female companion, dominating the relay of looks within the image. Mary Ann Doane comments on this work in her essay 'Film and the Masquerade':

the photograph appears to give a certain prominence to a woman's look. Yet, both the title of the photograph and its organization of space indicate that the real site of scopophilic power is on the margins of the frame ... not only is the object of her look concealed from the spectator, her gaze is encased by the two poles defining the masculine axis of vision. (Doane, 1991: 28)

For Doane, this image represents the dominance of the male erotic look, as illustrated by the relay of gazes across the pictorial space of the photograph: the woman is unwittingly deceived and degraded by the insidious male gaze. Victor Burgin, however, reads the image differently in terms of a childhood memory of an outing with his mother that invokes an experience of his own 'sly look' (Burgin, 1996). On passing a theatre, the child tries to distract his mother with questions relating to a strong-man act, in order to steal glances of photographs of a striptease artist. Burgin recounts 'I could tell from my mother's terse replies that she knew what I was up to and I allowed myself to be tugged away, the sudden inexplicable excitement of the moment giving way to a terrible shame' (Burgin, 1996: 63). Burgin's anecdote evokes the tense pleasure that seems to resound in the covert look of the male in the window of Doisneau's image: the forbidden pleasure, the distraction and re-direction of the woman's gaze, the excitement of stealing a look and the potential shame of being caught.

Stehli's image exploits the shame of 'being caught looking', subverting the naked female body from passive spectacle into confrontation. Indeed the men in the images look highly uncomfortable: whether tensely trying to reveal no emotion or with their

legs spread assertively as they return the anticipated gaze to the viewer they appear embarrassed and self-conscious, in their enforced role as the owner of the look. While ostensibly in control of the representation, the men appear to have been coerced into 'exposing' themselves as voyeur, and their role in the art world further implicates them in this. By staging herself as confrontational erotic spectacle Stehli subverts the control signified by the male gaze, opening a chink in the social and cultural conventions that produce gender hierarchies through acts of looking and being looked at: they work only in the terms of the social agreement that deems them acceptable.

5.3 Becoming the image of desire

Stehli's deadpan, mechanical performance lacks flamboyant or playful moves, and subdues the 'I want to be looked at' femininity that acts to put the viewer at ease with their role as owner of the gaze. Many of Stehli's works play on the premise of women's desire to be looked at, through her use of the cable release which she uses to signify: 'I took this image of myself'. It might be said that the cable release became the leitmotif of her practice, occurring in the majority of her images from around 1999–2002.⁶ Slyce notes:

In many ways the cable release is a baited element that draws me into one of Stehli's images. When it first appeared in her photos I fixated on its presence. It signalled self-reflexivity or doubling of the self and produced an explicitly narcissistic link between the maker, the means of production, and an image
(Slyce, 2002: 14)

Through the use of the cable release to represent an autonomous mode of production, Stehli's work raises nuanced debates about codes of femininity as narcissistic, and about what it means for a woman to perform herself as the erotic object of the gaze. She extends these debates further with the controversial nature of the images that she re-performs. A number of her works remake the work of Helmut Newton, whose treatment of the female body as object of erotic beauty was notoriously controversial. Newton's photographic practice, which is situated between fine art and high fashion, resembles

⁶ For other examples of the use of the cable release see *Flirt* (1999), *Red Turning* (2000) [Figure 38], *Red Crouch* (2000), the *Headless Orange* series (2000) *Grey-Green Painting* (2000), *Flesh* (2000), the *Tit with Card* series (2001) and *Ecstasy* (2001).

the fashion portrait in which statuesque and idealised female bodies are displayed glamorously lit in various states of undress. Themes of sado-masochism, fetishism and even death lend shock value and misogynistic connotations to his imagery, which have been stylistically subsumed into contemporary fashion photography as 'edgy'. In Newton's diptych *Here They Come I* and *Here They Come II* (Paris, 1981) four women are seen mid-step on a photographic background paper. In one image they are dressed while in the other, though adopting the same pose, they are naked but for their shoes [Figure 39]. The shoulder pads and stilettos they wear represent the 'office chic' that emerged in the 1980s as women were finding more powerful roles in the corporate workplace. Alison Jones says: 'For a woman it is a photograph with a political mission, an act of sabotage on women striving for economic independence, a photographic image realizing the insult of what men do in their imaginations to passing women in the street' (Jones, 2000). First published in French *Vogue* in 1981, as a glamorised fashion image, the *Here They Come* narrative of the male gaze was primarily intended to address a female audience. As with much of Newton's imagery, the work glamorises misogynist gestures. Within high fashion images, which are so insistent in their demand to become, this aesthetic encourages women's self-subordination.

In *After Helmut Newton's 'Here They Come'* (1999) Stehli acts out a response to this demand to become [Figure 40]. In so doing, with the visible use of the cable release, she enacts a nuanced, but powerful shift in the meaning of the image. In remaking the work, she performs the role of one of the women on the far left of the image but leaves the rest of the space vacant: the image thus becomes very much about an individual woman's relationship to Newton's photograph. The framing, lighting and pose of the original image are faithfully replicated: Stehli notes that she painstakingly tested the lighting, adjusting it in increments in order to achieve a facsimile of the original. This laboriousness of process is represented in *120 Polaroids for After Helmut Newton's 'Here They Come'* (Jones, 2000) [Figure 41]. Though this endeavour to accurately replicate the work might suggest homage to Newton's photographic mastery, it also speaks of the effort involved in trying to re-make oneself into an image, and the impossibility of doing so in terms of images that demand a becoming. Through the sequence from test Polaroids to the finished product Stehli transforms from a smiling artist in full colour to a monotone automaton, which suggests the effect on the subject of endlessly trying to replicate an image, as the body is disciplined by the pose.

The endeavour for technical precision and excellence asserts Stehli's mastery of authorship. Her use of the cable release makes her authorship apparent, yet it may be asked whether this acts as a re-appropriation of the image from its male author, or whether the act of re-performing the image reproduces and reinforces femininity as contingent to male desire. In this way, Stehli's work is deliberately ambiguous. This not only tests the parameters of feminist politics of representation, it also reveals how fraught and unresolved are such issues of gender and the gaze. Stehli's work raises questions surrounding women's relationship to erotic images of women, and what it means for a woman to re-perform herself in terms of the cultural scripts of male fantasy that represent the female as subjugated to the male gaze. Thus, she addresses the impulse to re-perform such images and examines how, despite their subordination and dehumanisation of women, they may still provoke a desire to become.

While it is a clear statement of authorship, what the cable release signifies is far from straightforward because the codes of the gaze that are produced are twisted and complex. In one sense, the cable release displaces the male as author of the image of femininity, asserting Stehli as both model and author. As such, she is in front of the camera, so that when she is metaphorically 'behind' the camera it prompts a sense of absence. Slyce claims: 'it is the viewer and not the camera that is at the other end of the cable release' (Slyce, 1999: 22). In signifying the moment of the photograph, the cable release suggests the black shutters of the apparatus bracketing a moment in time, and the female performer herself revealing a voyeuristic 'peep' of her own body on display. Crucially, however, it is also a view into the artist's studio process: the conflict between her self-objectification and her act of producing the image shifts the meaning of the act of performing erotic codes of femininity. Where a woman's re-performance of codes that eroticise her body are denaturalised through the implication of authorship, her body can be seen to be making meaning, rather than as a surface for projection. It might be asked whether it is possible simply to assert that a woman with an explicit connection to the camera in the image becomes an active subject, despite the historic and habitual use of the body as sexualised object: this relationship to the camera is easily naturalised as an extension of women's apparent desire to be seen. In this sense, Stehli's use of appropriation is instructive: it could not be said that a woman photographing *herself* as an erotic fantasy of male domination is necessarily or completely inverting her position from one of submission to one of control, if at all. Stehli's depiction of herself becoming an iconic image, however, renders the work about a more complex narrative

of a women's relationship to representation: the implications of re-appropriation and re-performance bring such social and cultural processes into the frame, opening up cracks in the naturalised image of women as desiring to be looked at.

Stehli's practice further explores a process of inhabiting erotic male-authored imagery of women. She explores the mirror as a framing device through which 'woman' is produced and understood as image by remaking Newton's iconic 1981 *Self-Portrait with Wife June and Models* [Figure 42]. In this, the rear view of a naked model is on the left of the photograph; her head and her legs are cut off below the knee by its frame. In the centre of the photograph is a mirror that shows the same model's full-frontal nude reflection, this time including entire body and stiletto-clad feet. Behind her Newton, in what appears to be a long raincoat, can be seen behind her operating the camera. On the right of the photograph is a seated, clothed woman, presumably June. The mirror in the centre of the scene frames the nude model as though she were a photograph, thus constructing an internal image as a moment frozen within space and time, and the rest of the image as a moment connected to the rest of life, almost as if it were not a representation. The model, thus imbued with the *to-be-looked-at-ness* of the female body on display, becomes the image, yet Newton entering the frame as male author of this image somehow occupies a different register of the representation. Thus, even disregarding the fact that this is a self-portrait of Newton, the cultural understanding of the female body as sexualised image and men as makers of such images is such that he takes on a pseudo-neutrality against her striking visual presence.

In Stehli's 2000 remake of this work, *Self-Portrait with Karen* [Figure 43], as artist she is clearly distinguished from the naked model posing in heels by her masculinised outfit of flat shoes, jeans and tee-shirt: she is seeking not to be noticed, to be 'neutral'.⁷ Stehli also manages to become somehow a non-image in comparison to the naked model, which exposes the fact that it is the female body that becomes the image through codes of display. The connection between Stehli and the model is different from the connection between Newton and the model, and might signify an identification and empathy with the other woman's position as image, a reading that is underscored by the fact that for Stehli the model is 'Karen', while for Newton the model(s) featured are not given an identity.

⁷ There are actually two versions of the image, though they are not distinguished from each other in name or date. One image contains just Stehli and the model reflected in the mirror. The other, as discussed, also contains a 'non-reflection' of the model in the foreground and a door with glass panes that more accurately mimics Newton's image.

Stehli further explores the mirror as self-reflexive framing device, this time in relation to the self-image in *Standing Nude* (2001–2) [Figure 44]. In the image she stands naked in a studio setting, surrounded by the paraphernalia of the artist as well as the equipment used to set up the image: camera, cable release, lights, cables and tripod. This equipment both defines her role as artist and peels back the edges of the frame, representing her as an image that is being produced. The camera is turned towards a mirror, so the reflection constitutes the main body of the photograph. Stehli stands tall, pressing the cable release while the mirror indicates that she is able to view herself as image: she appears to be turned in towards herself in the psychological dynamic of narcissism. The pose she adopts, however, leaning on one hip with her hand loosely by her side as though making her body a passive object of display, suggests that the act of posing herself as image before the mirror may ultimately be an offer of her body as an object of display to the viewer. This is reinforced by the fact that she stares directly out of the image at the viewer through the mirror, holding her gaze as she presses the cable release. The edges of the mirror at either side of the image suggest an internal framing device, but this framing is much tighter than in Newton's use of the mirror as 'image'. The top and bottom of the mirror are not shown, so that as a framing device it hovers at the margins and often recedes into the surface of the photograph. In this way, the perception of the work shifts between that of an image of a woman, and that of an image of a woman seeing herself as image. Stehli thus oscillates between two psychological dynamics: on one hand she is narcissistically 'turned-in' towards her own image, and on the other she is 'turned-out' towards the viewer in an exhibitionist gesture.

Stehli adopts a distanced expression that lends a potent indifference to the performance of viewing herself becoming an image. This idea of 'vacuousness' as a strategy of performance can also be seen in Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (from 1977) in which she meticulously constructed images that appeared to be stills from Hollywood films which did not in fact exist. These images seem generalised and yet specific, a fact that creates a constant demand to discover a narrative that is not actually there. Mulvey asserts that the constant performance of herself as the female protagonist of the ambiguously titled *Untitled Film Stills* unhinged a stable notion of female identity, yet did not imply a 'true' self beneath but an absence evoked by the ultimate emptiness of the implied narrative (Mulvey, 1991: 288–9). Stehli adopts a vacantness of expression across her performances of herself as object of the gaze, which, as in Sherman's work,

creates a certain detachment between the performer and her role as image of femininity. Referring to Stehli's performance in *After Helmut Newton*, Alison Jones claims: 'The depth of alienation from her own desire is awesome' (Jones, 2000). Her expression interrupts the familiar display of the female's desire to be looked at – a display that offers her desire to the viewer for consumption, through its implication of alienation from her own body performing erotic codes of the female body: codes that familiar cultural scripts dictate should 'turn a woman' on, and in turn, 'turn on' the viewer. Stehli strategically *does not* seduce the machine, but remains indifferent to her position as object of the camera's gaze. Her vacuous expression is underscored by the pose of the body in the accompanying piece *Studio Nude* [Figure 45].⁸ This image is almost identical, except for the fact that the female nude is lying on the floor in an abject pose with her head turned away from the viewer, and the centre of the image is now occupied by a blank studio board. This both contrasts with the upright pose of *Standing Nude* and echoes and underscores the veiled passivity it signifies by employing a dramatic loss of pose that extends beyond a stylised recline towards collapse. Stehli's vacant expression is a key sign on which the meaning of the image turns. Her detachment can be read as an alienation, but this sense of distance from her performance is also the factor that allows the work to be read critically. The work does not simply address as problematic for feminism the idea of representing women's pleasure, but demonstrates the knife-edge of signification on which such issues rest.

Chapter conclusion

Stehli's *Standing Nude*, which depicts a woman viewing and framing herself as image, appears to represent femininity as narcissistic: as desiring to be an image and to experience being the object of the gaze. She considers several devices within the image: appropriation, the cable release, the camera and the mirror, to explore how a woman becomes the image, and how her body signifies 'imageness' through the visual display that implies a desire to be seen. This has resonance with my own work which, expanding into the digital and moving image, seeks to examine acts of self-imaging that are occurring more and more frequently. Stehli's performance of – but resistance to – the cultural script of *seducing the machine*, however, has the effect of draining the image of the desire that it suggests. She subverts passivity through impassivity: the

⁸ Exhibited next to *Standing Nude* in the Lisson Gallery (March 26–May 3, 2003). Seen during visit to the Lisson Gallery.

image depicts the process of 'becoming' the image, but its demand to the viewer to 'become' is hollowed out.

Stehli's representation of a woman's alienation through her own gaze is provocative in relation to debates concerning whether female desire may be represented, demonstrating how even a woman's auto-erotic activity is recuperated in dominant narratives of desire. Her representation of a woman who is indifferent to being the object of the gaze interrupts the notion of femininity as narcissistic, and the cyclicity of the desire to become an image of a woman who desires to be an image.

The culturally laden poses and positions Stehli assumes in her practice should work to produce her as a distanced dehumanised object of the gaze. Yet her images, through strategies of performance and the manipulation of the nature of spectacle and the image, operate subversively or at the very least problematically. She explores the idea that an image of a woman always tends to take her back to her cultural role as object of the gaze and deny her subjectivity. She strategically stresses the processes that produce a woman as an erotic object through provocative self-objectification. The results of these explorations act as a powerful strategy of intervention in the constant circulation in visual culture of woman as emblem of desire.

Feminist discourse continues to struggle with the problem of representing women's desire, when cultural scripts repeatedly dictate that in order to be desirable a woman must be submissive, subordinated and even degraded. Femininity as a desire to be desired means that the notion of consideration of what a woman's desire is, or might be, is constantly displaced by the privileging of masculinised desire. Thus images that demand a becoming run the risk of alienating women from their experience of their own body. Stehli's resistance to the cultural script of seducing the machine interrupts the continual cycle of becoming that is produced by the notion of femininity as narcissistic.

My practice explores and performs such cultural scripts. As in Stehli's work, it explores this as a territory of risk, as something that provokes the parameters of the politics of representation by exposing and exaggerating the process of becoming the image. As it explicitly performs the desire to be desired, my work is intended to raise questions that relate to perceptions of the process of becoming the image of femininity as narcissistic. It also interrogates its dominant presence, not only in a distanced visual culture but also in the everyday lives and rituals of the subject.

Chapter 6: Seducing the machine: narcissism and performance in a contemporary feminist practice

Chapter introduction

The practice element of my research project further explores the concept of ‘becoming’ as a particularly feminised pursuit, through various takes on the performance of ‘a woman’s love for the camera’. It seeks to address the attraction of images of femininity that demand a becoming via narcissistic and exhibitionist pleasure, going beyond the notion that being the object of the gaze produces fulfilment, to explore the consequences of this cultural characterisation of women. The self-sustaining cyclicity of women’s over-determined relationship to their image is a major concern of my practice, which explores how the ‘desire to become’ works to disavow the ways that codes of submission, and even degradation, are concealed in stereotypes of femininity. My performance practice seeks to inhabit stereotypes of female sexuality in order to explore a desiring relationship to the camera and, in turn, the codes of power and desire that may be produced. These ‘types’ include the early Hollywood starlet with her blonde hair and pout – a nostalgic vintage feminine ‘look’ so often seen in neo-burlesque and cabaret revivals – and the soft-porn image of a woman clad in black stockings and lingerie that is now mainstream. The erotic display and visually impactful *to-be-looked-at-ness* of the female body in these spectacular and sexualised iconographies offers women identification with glamorised fantasies of femininity that abound in western media. Though the work draws on iconic images, it does not seek to replicate a singular image of femininity that might in itself become naturalised. Instead, it aims to produce the sense of a ‘reservoir of poses’ which may hold the power to expose codes of behaviour that perpetuate the notion of narcissistic becoming as feminine (Kruger, 1982).

In contemporary western culture, in which technology and the media dominate everyday life, this process of becoming the image is widespread and persuasive. My work seeks to explore the female subject’s relationship to imaging technologies, in terms of performing to and with the camera as an autonomous act. Such acts of becoming are facilitated and encouraged by mobile and accessible self-imaging practices that are enabled by live feed, instant playback and digitalisation. Thus these acts, which are at once narcissistic and exhibitionist, have been normalised through self-

publishing sites such as *YouTube*, *FaceBook* and *MySpace*. For example, the short, easily consumed *YouTube* clip speaks to the pop music video: many posts on the site feature people presenting their own renditions of well-known songs and video clips. The voyeuristic and exhibitionist pleasures – and pains – of habitualised modes of looking and being looked at through such media are informing subjects' understanding of themselves, their (sexual) identities and their self-image. My work, by emphasising the position of the looked-at object through the concept of *seducing the machine*, aims to investigate the subject who is ensnared in an economy of insatiable desire. It will examine how such emotions as pleasure, desire, vulnerability, emptiness and inadequacy are manipulated by images that persistently demand a becoming. My work seeks to emphasise the process of becoming in terms of stereotypes of femininity, through performance to and with the camera, thus exploring the concept of women's desire for the machine. Its aim is to find ways by which to subvert the codes of subordination, passivity and compliance that so many western images of femininity work to produce. It also seeks to intervene in the self-perpetuating cycle in which narcissistic desire begets more narcissistic desire, pressurising women not only because of their role as the sexualised object of male fantasy, but as an emblem of a desire that drives consumerism.

6.1 Video and performance works 2005–2010

The set of works that make up the research's body of practice began in the studio as an exploration of a desiring relationship to the camera. It emerged that it would be possible to test a further area of interest by applying the notion of seducing the machine to live spectatorship in the social and cultural context. Each of the works has sought variously to address the problems raised by previous pieces, as the self-performing body was used as a site of struggle with regard to a feminist politics of representation that is often fraught and unresolved. In my attempts to inhabit glamorised stereotypes and perform to the camera in a 'feminine' way, it was often difficult to reconcile my intentions and experiences with the notions disseminated in the cultural spaces of art and academia regarding the meaning of the body marked as female and its signification as image. It has become apparent, however, that the significance of the work within the research process lies in this disjuncture between the experience of the subject while attempting to inhabit the cultural image, and its (often 'failed') political meanings. In this way, the performances function as a space of testing and experimentation, often dismantling

conclusions that may have seemed 'logical', in order to push for new understandings in relation to feminist practice and discourse.

6.2 *I Get it 5 Times a Day*

I Get it 5 Times a Day (2005) is a performance piece to camera that seeks to raise questions about pleasure, consumption and images of femininity [Figure 46].¹ In the video I become a 'flirty' blonde with a red pout, who performs slowly and seductively to the camera, eating a strawberry while displaying it to the viewer. The rather clichéd seduction scenario addresses the notion of 'spinning out' the activity of eating as a display of tempting pleasure, re-staging stereotyped behaviour in which the woman's role is to 'seduce', arouse and excite via a sultry visual display.² The research project located the idea of seducing the machine as key to producing a social and cultural effect of 'womanliness'. This work, in seeking to re-stage femininity through the camera, was the foundational performance. The performance addresses mainstream western culture that habitually represents 'woman' as a seductress whose role is to lure, to tease and to solicit desire. It thus represents a restricted form of desire, in which in order to be 'womanly' and attract another's desire a female must repress any active desiring impulse. She must appear to be passive yet visually appealing. This normative reduction of women's desire to 'the desire to be desired' works to preserve the gendered hierarchy in which men dominate women through traditional active male/ passive female roles. While these social and cultural 'laws' permit a woman to solicit male desire, propriety insists that she should 'keep him wanting more'; her attractiveness and value is often linked to an appearance of chastity. She is forced continually to self-regulate.

It was clear that subversion via my original intentions was unlikely, so I cut out the edges of the mirror in post-production leaving just an indication of a reflective surface, thus representing a woman's relationship not just to the camera, but to an entire apparatus of visibility. The constantly replayed image of 'woman as seductress' is a kind of representation that offers individuals a fantasy of 'becoming' or 'possessing'

¹ Katherine Nolan, *I Get it 5 Times a Day* (2005), digital video, colour, no sound, 00:02:57.

Exhibited in *Video Trolleys (super-habits; revised)*, an intervention into consumer habits involving works shown in a supermarket. Documentation of the intervention can be found at http://www.gudrunbittner.at/videocarros/info_e.htm.

² The consumption of food as a visual reference and prelude to sex was seen in the film *9½ Weeks* (1986) when Mickey Rourke and Kim Basinger fed each other provocatively. The scene has been copied, pastiched and parodied across mainstream culture.

her/the image, and is also deeply embedded in the structure of western society and the consumerism that supports its capitalist system.

Capitalism is driven through the creation of desire, as distinct from need, in order to create the demand for the consumption of commodities that drives the system (Lacan, 1977; Macey, 2000: 94–5). In the imagery of advertising a woman is displayed, appearing to be sexually aroused and available, in order to create demand for products by engendering the consumers' desire to become her or possess her (Schneider, 1997: 95–6; Gundle and Castelli, 2006: 7). *5 Times* seeks to address this use of women, and its consequences for the subjects who might believe that they see themselves in such imagery.

Advertisements for chocolate habitually employ women's auto-eroticism to endow the product with desirability, as in the now-infamous Cadbury's flake advertisements that were first aired during the 1980s. These showed a woman eating chocolate slowly: ritualising, emphasising and sensualising every bite, as an ostensibly auto-erotic womanly pleasure; chocolate equals luxury, pleasure, sensuality and desire and desirability.³ While there is not one set of desires that male and female viewers respectively share, culturally idealised images place pressure on the viewer to identify themselves with the normative heterosexist narrative. Such imagery constantly reinvents a woman's desire to be desired as the object of the gaze, glamorising this sexualised display as an idealised femininity; the flake advertisement, for example, has taken on a distinctive 'look' for each new decade.

5 Times parodically performs such a teasing-out of the act of eating as a display of female self-pleasuring: it strips away the fantasy *mise en scène* of the advertising image, leaving only the clichéd sexuality. Just as in striptease the act of removing clothing is drawn out, the simple act of eating a strawberry is theatricalised into a spectacle. The video begins with a performance of coy flirtatious gazes to the viewer, looking out of the camera, as though shyly looking to see herself being looked at, and giggling as if her gazes were being returned. The performer displays the fruit up close to the camera, while glancing suggestively from the fruit to the viewer. She opens her mouth and

³ An article in the Guardian states: 'Cadbury has always denied its famously phallic Flake ads are deliberately loaded with sexual symbolism, insisting they are designed to show women enjoying chocolate.' Cozens, Claire (2001) 'ASA clears Cadbury Ad of Sexual Innuendo', in *The Guardian* (online) October 31, 2001 (accessed 13.11.11).

slowly draws it towards her, seeking to create a sense of anticipation. Raising her eyebrow, she gives a knowing glance to the viewer before placing the succulent berry between her juicy red lips. While such displays are premised on the apparent authenticity of the female's pleasure, there is at the same time an understanding, usually disavowed by convention, that it is slightly absurd to find eating fruit so pleasurable. The performance of heightened, clichéd sexuality in *5 Times* produces a parodic quality that can be seen to emphasise the absurdity of this over-familiar social and cultural behaviour. The title plays on the continual conflation of the desire to consume with sexual desire, that has made being 'sexy' and highly sexual not only desirable, but normative. The 'knowingness' of the performance is further emphasised by its borrowing from the style of tabloid headlines, so the performer's '5 Times a day' recommended fruit allowance is also an innuendo for a high sex drive. The work seeks to pastiche media imagery in a hyper-mediatised society in which human experience is sensationalised, and the 'cheap thrill' of consumption works to seduce the subject as the compulsion to view slips into the compulsion to become.

The image of pleasure is also disrupted by the staging and manipulation of the female performer's desiring relationship to the machine. As she 'teases' out the process of eating the fruit, she constantly places its red flesh in close proximity to the camera. This 'display' of her 'goods' replicates commercial advertising, which in its mimetic representation of desire works to stimulate a desire in the consumer that the product promises to fulfil (Schneider, 1997: 89). In *5 Times*, however, the use of mirror makes this less than straightforward. The female performer presents the strawberry, hand on hip; as she does so her hand leaves the shot and a similar large red fruit appears unexpectedly in the foreground of the image. The female looks from the fruit to the left, then to the heart-shaped red berry displayed before the viewer in the foreground. She then retracts the fruit by pulling it back into her space, pausing to glance at the viewer before placing it between her lips. This unexplained transposition of the fruit disrupts the familiar logic of the gaze that is initially created by the performer's relationship to the camera. It particularly disrupts the '180-degree rule' of film making, which by acknowledging the essentially 'cut-up' nature of film creates a continuity between camera shots and discernible relationships between spaces and characters. This crucially affects the narrative: for example, the female as the object of the gaze is frequently constructed not only in shots of her being 'looked at' by the camera, but also by 'reverse angle' point of view shots which establish that the camera's gaze is male. The

side entrance and exit of the strawberry in *5 Times* effectively flips the space, doubling and reversing the performer's action, and opening up the possibility of other trajectories that misdirect the gaze. The over-proximity of the fruit locates the camera and marks it as a device between performer and viewer. This breaks the illusory space that produces a smooth elision of the camera in the space of performance and the viewer in the space of consumption – to all intents, on the other end of the camera. This in turn disrupts western gender codes that produce 'woman as desirable' via the camera. The space's unstable logic operates to discourage the viewer from inhabiting comfortably the position that might familiarly be associated with other cultural images that 'seduce'. The performance follows the slow, sultry, slinky codes of feminine seduction, yet the lack of continuity disrupts the smoothness such seduction requires. The suspension of disbelief that is essential to support the authenticity and effectiveness of the fantasy that the viewer is being sold is threatened. The images' mimesis of desire is underscored in order to interrogate how the rhetoric of such images works to seduce the viewer, but the images are ultimately emptied of the very desire they purport to represent.

6.3 *Sugar Lips*

Sugar Lips (2007) aims to disrupt the habitualised representation of a woman's desire for the camera in western images of femininity by pushing the performance of this encodement to the limits of its cultural understanding and acceptability [Figure 47].⁴ Again, I perform as a flirtatious blonde with pouting red lips, this time wearing a strapless cocktail dress. This is an image of a 'soft' and non-threatening femininity: the performer smiles at the viewer through the camera, rolling her shoulders and batting her eyelashes, in a somewhat docile and submissive seduction. The performance of femininity becomes ever more clichéd as she 'strikes a pose', pouting her red lips. While posing as though she is having her picture taken, she can be seen to be in the process of becoming the image, as though the video camera was snapping a still shot as it recorded. Through this performance, the work seeks to pull apart the mimetic performance of desire for the camera, constructed as a narcissistic relationship to the self image, but re-producing the image of a woman as seen through the logic of the

⁴ Katherine Nolan, *Sugar Lips* (2007), digital video, colour, sound, 00:02:41. *Sugar Lips* was screened as part of *The Narcissistic Erotic: Negotiating the Male Gaze in Feminist Video Art* at the AVPhD Conference in Sussex, July 4, 2007.

male gaze. As a cultural understanding of femininity, this image is dominant and pervasive.

As the female performer in *Sugar Lips* flirts and pouts, she reaches forward to caress the camera/screen with her fingertip. This references the glitches that take place in the self-authored imagery that has emerged through digital technologies, as typified by the 'profile picture' that is often taken by holding a camera at arm's length. Taken in this context, the work opens out an understanding of the image of woman which is different from that of the conventional media image or mainstream film: it suggests a more personal and intimately narcissistic relationship to the camera than a large production scenario. In reading these cues the viewer might interpret this as an autonomous relationship between performer and camera, yet conversely as a desire to be seen across the wider social and cultural networks and mesh of internet imagery. For example, the practical 'need' for a profile picture normalises what is essentially a narcissistic desire to be seen as image; this extends the exhibitionist role of a woman who is already culturally marked as an object of the gaze. The relationship to the camera in the work does allow for a sense of slippage between this autonomous interaction with the camera and the desire that the performer seems to project towards the viewer. The effect of this is to bring narcissistic and exhibitionist desire explicitly into mutual play, thus exposing covert and contradictory encodements of images of femininity.

Across my practice, the 'seduction' of the machine/viewer is appropriated from mainstream erotic codes. In addition to the use of Monroe's image to exemplify the narcissistic desire to be looked at as image, the work draws on images of live interaction that are facilitated via web technology. Live streaming, and the 'bird's-eye view' panorama of early web-cams have been used in internet pornography to offer the viewer new ways to consume images of women. Michelle White examined the trend for 'cam girls' whose private lives are framed as 'live' and 'real' (White, 2006). The sites that promise 24-hour access to their lives do so in order to produce a voyeuristic experience through a sense of immediacy and authenticity. White asserts that often 'the availability of the representation is conflated with availability of bodies and spaces', thus heightening a fantasy of possession. (White, 2006: 74). In such representations 'liveness' is used to heighten the voyeuristic experience of women's sexualised display, as an apparently close 'interaction' that is nevertheless at the same time distanced,

anonymous and voyeuristic (www.camgirls.com)⁵. Such imagery simulates an interaction with the viewer in which sexualised display is conflated with the act of sex. To create the impression of 'live' sexual experience the emphasis is on the female's apparent pleasure in being the object of the viewer's gaze, which she performs through self-touching. The fact that even female auto-eroticism has been subsumed into the heterosexual economy of desire as a script of male fantasy, suggests the difficulty and risk in attempting to represent women's pleasure. Art collective Common Culture's *Private Dance* (2009) addresses this privileging of male desire in the codifications of women's sexuality in the form of a video set in a strip-club that depicts a 'stripper' dancing a routine.⁶ She removes her clothes while running her hands over her breasts and hips and flicking her hair, but as soon as she has done so she puts them back on and begins again. The dancer's vacant expression and the monotony of the repetition suggests alienation from her own physical experience and her performance of codes of desire. It is as though she has performed this routine of auto-erotic touching so many times that she now produces gestures of arousal automatically and in complete detachment from her own feelings. This alienation of a woman from her sexualised body is not unexpected, but it seems to be a condition of femininity itself.

There is a cultural understanding of a woman's ability to 'fake' her own desire, as in the much-parodied scene from the film *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) in which the female protagonist convincingly acts out an orgasm to prove to her male companion in a restaurant that women can indeed 'fake it'. While the apparent authenticity of the act of pleasure is central to the believability of the image of desire, the authenticity of the female performer's experience of that desire is not. It does not imply that a more true, more authentic desire exists beyond this, but does question whether, when a woman's desire is constructed in these terms, her pleasure can ever be her own, or can ever be fully inhabited. Such representations naturalise women's detachment from their experiences of their own acts of pleasure and desire. In *Sugar Lips*, a display of pleasure in being looked at by the viewer escalates into a simulation of a kind of self-touching that seems to be directed towards the viewer. It is displayed on a small television monitor that is placed on the floor and tilted upwards, and this orientation of the

⁵ <http://www.camgirls.com/> (accessed 19.11.11).

⁶ Common Culture is a collaborative artists' group consisting of David Campbell, Mark Durden and Ian Brown. My video pieces *You are a Very Naughty Boy* (2007) and *Silver Screen Shimmy* (2009) were shown along with their video at the *In View* exhibition at the Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast 2010: see <http://goldenthreadgallery.co.uk/in-view-10-12-2010-29-01-2011/>

performance is emphasised. In the final manifestation of this work for the PhD exhibition, it was displayed in the gallery context as installation, so that the meaning of the internet codifications it references were shifted by re-contextualisation. The 2 minutes, 41 seconds of footage are repeated on a loop, which begins to reveal the disavowed simulacra of pleasure: the glitches and adjustments that seem to represent an authentic and live interaction with the viewer accumulate by repetition into signs, which begins to affect the plausibility of the performance and empty it of desire. In this way the work critiques how commoditised images of women's pleasure offer the generic statement 'I am aroused, by you and for you' to each new viewer, thus pulling them in despite their ultimate emptiness.

The politics of representing women's auto-erotic pleasure as a recuperative feminist act inhabit a difficult territory. It has been noted that female auto-erotic touching can be encoded through cultural narratives of the gaze, so that a woman's pleasure is signified as something that exists primarily for the visual pleasure of the (male) viewer. This encoding of the female's self-touching, however, is often accompanied by a look towards the viewer that signals the ultimate aim of the actions as a *display* of arousal. This seems to say: 'I am looking at you, to see you watching me perform these actions for you'. Yet, if the erotic thrill of these images derives from their depiction of a woman in a state of arousal and readiness for intercourse, it is logical to assert that if the female climaxes the fantasy of penetration is deflated. Rebecca Schneider claims that feminist performance has used 'explicit satiability' in order to disrupt the compulsive cyclicity of the capitalist consumption of desire (Schneider, 1997: 105). Citing pop artist Madonna's act of transgender crotch-grabbing (1993) and porn star Annie Sprinkle's masturbation in *Post Porn Modernism* (1989–2006) she notes that the issue of whether such representations subvert or reinforce the status of a woman as an emblem of desire is controversial. Nevertheless, according to Schneider, they 'force a *second look* as the terms and terrain of that sexualization' (ibid., emphasis in original). These gestures force this 'second look' because they seem to manage to signify a woman's desire beyond codes of submission. They are assertive and aggressive sexualised actions that might be considered unfeminine, because women's sexual pleasure is constantly read through a cultural prism of gender hierarchy that works to produce it as subordinate. The internet site *Chat Roulette*, which allows users to video chat at random with other users, has been notoriously misused by men who display a close-up view of their penis as they masturbate. This might appear to be a direct reversal of the fetishisation of

women's bodies that are cut up via the camera, yet the socio-cultural construction of men's sexuality produces these gestures as aggressive; as an assault on the viewer and as relating primarily to *the performer's* physical pleasure. Women's visual display, informed by cultural understandings of female desire that see women waiting submissively to be pleased, even when self-pleasuring, seems to signify only the viewer's pleasure. In this way, a woman's pleasure is at once prominently visible and unrepresentable.

Sugar Lips seeks to subvert this cultural script by deliberately conflating such a display of desire for the viewer with desire for the physical apparatus of the camera. An initial docile desire for the gaze of the camera/viewer becomes more forceful as the performer begins with gentle caresses then, looking doe-eyed into the camera yet insistently holding her gaze, moves closer and closer until the screen is filled with her bright red mouth. She presents her orifice to the camera and continues her fingering, which speeds up and becomes rhythmic to suggest a masturbatory action that is strategically confused between the female body and the lens of the camera. The pouting lips that were posed at a safe distance are now too close to the viewer, and the pictorial space of the video is flattened to a forceful proximity. In an inversion of the Mulveian camera that follows and violently cuts the female body into consumable erotic body parts, it is the female who gradually moves forwards to produce her own mouth as fetish. This might be seen both as an insidious aggressive gesture in which she insists on her fantasy of penetration, or as a self-objectification in which she subjects herself to the camera, and makes herself into a submissive faceless sex object who is complicit in her own subordination. Her red pout, as an icon of groomed, decorated and visual femininity, becomes less sanitised and more explicit and suggestive as it moves so close that it becomes a quivering fleshy orifice. It is, however, still painted with red lipstick, the cultural mark of desirability.

The work seeks to subvert the ease of consumption of images of women's sexuality by forcing the transformation of a woman's apparent desire to be looked at from docile passivity to an aggressive act. This pushes beyond the social safety of the familiar and acceptable codes of femininity. The mouth continues to perform as image, maintaining just enough distance to remain visible, but the performer's action of stroking the *camera* to produce this appearance of self-pleasuring underscores the image as mimesis of desire. The performance aims ultimately to parody how women's over-determined

sexual role is re-produced through the camera. The physicality of the relationship to the machine incorporates a sense of transgression, explicitness and perversion that works to literalise the culturally accepted trope of women ‘making love’ to the camera.

6.4 *You Are a Very Naughty Boy!*

You Are a Very Naughty Boy! (2007) references the genres of sexualised stage performance that have been re-popularised in mainstream western culture over the last two decades, such as burlesque and cabaret [Figure 48].⁷ These genres can be considered to be part of the mainstreaming of sex, alongside advertisements, that has made images of women in underwear a more frequent, socially and culturally acceptable occurrence. The video is somewhere between theatrical display of the female body in the public spotlight and fantasy of the self as such imagery, as it simulates the process of self-imaging through the use of a cable release that snaps the ‘shutter’ of the camera. As the female performer presses the trigger with her stilettos to reveal herself, the shutter clicks loudly and rises to expose her posed in black lingerie, then snaps shut into blackness and winds on. The dual action of black shutter and spotlight signifies the process of becoming a spectacle: framed like a peepshow it speaks of highly gendered visual pleasures and familiar scripts of female sexual display for a male consumer. The generic black lingerie alludes to a plethora of media representations from billboards and magazines to television shows and internet sites, that produce a restrictive idea of sexiness. These reinforce the role of women as needing to seduce through visual display in order to sell lingerie products that are deemed an essential ingredient in what is constructed as a ‘real woman’s’ constant task of ‘keeping her man’. *Naughty Boy* explores how such images promote self-objectification and self-regulation in relation to gender hierarchies, considering the kind of femininity that this might be reproducing and the effects of the demands of such imagery on the female subject.

The performance in *Naughty Boy* is based on the ‘tease’ of burlesque, a form of erotic display of the female body that emerged in North America at the end of the 19th century. Originally the relationship of the genre to mainstream culture was troubling: it was a form of entertainment that was offered in the honky-tonk, a disreputable saloon of drinking, gambling and variety entertainment (Willson, 2007). During the 1990s it

⁷ Katherine Nolan, *You Are a Very Naughty Boy!* (2007), digital video, colour, sound, 00:03:17. Exhibited in *Trans-Cabaret*, Geisha Lounge, Nottingham, 2007: see <http://www.myspace.com/transcabaret>

underwent a revival to become a subversive sub-cultural mode of sexualised performances, through localised acts such as *Velvet Hammer*, which was founded in Los Angeles in 1999. In modern times it has become thoroughly mainstream, as shown by international artistes such as the burlesque performer Dita Von Teese [Figure 49], and in blockbuster films such as *Moulin Rouge* (2001) and *Burlesque* (2010). *Naughty Boy* was developed for *Trans-Cabaret* (2007) a performance art event held in Nottingham's Geisha Lounge club that aimed to explore the genre's more subversive roots by (as they announced it) 'transgressing notions of cabaret, variety, burlesque and drag'.

In a burlesque show the female performer's role is to seduce and entice the viewer. In *Naughty Boy* she slowly and softly purrs: 'You are a very naughty boy!', endowing her words with suggestive undertones. The clichéd phrase adopts a pretence of chastisement while offering a 'come on' that implicitly states: 'I'm saying no, but I mean yes' (to sex). In such a socio-cultural script of desire, a woman's actions are self-subordinating as she constructs the (male) viewer as the active sexual agent whose advances she is trying to resist. The phrase acts as a kind of game play that, via layers of contradictions, 'come-ons' and rebuffs, works to build sexual tension and excitement. Layers of disavowal also construct the performer as both eroticised and chaste: this is a fantasy that preserves the social prohibition of a woman's sexual drive, because she must solicit sex in such a way that she does not become the illicit 'whore'. Such acts veil conventional male/female dominant/subordinate roles, and such idealisations of women's sexuality as contradictory and manipulative makes it difficult for women to know or articulate their own desires. It is highly problematic that women's sexuality is constructed in this way, an issue raised in feminist debates in the 1980s that continues to manifest itself with regard to consent to sex and issues around rape. These debates were reignited in 2011 through the *Slut Walk* campaigns in Canada and the UK that reiterated the feminist activist axiom 'no means no'.⁸ Yet these are still the codes of sexiness to which women's pleasures are restricted by social and cultural gender norms.

The performance in *Naughty Boy* seeks to evoke the ridiculousness of such contradictory behaviours entwined in women's sexual role. The performer snaps the shutter to reveal her pin-up poses, yet at the same time pretends to chastise the viewer, so she seems to be saying both: 'look at me' and 'don't look at me'. In this way the work addresses how women are expected to seduce by sexualised display and yet also

⁸ See <http://slutmeansspeakup.org.uk/> (accessed 19.11.11).

to veil the activity of their behaviour in order to maintain the status quo in which men are the active and dominant participants. In these terms, femininity might be characterised through a kind of passive-aggression, in which direct iteration of desire is repressed, instead being acted out through other manipulative behaviours. *Naughty Boy* seeks to highlight and critique this expectation of women by bringing this prescribed behaviour to its ultimate and absurd conclusion. In the first instance the video seems to simply repeat, as the performer continually repeats the phrase, 'tutting' in mock disapproval as she presses the cable release. The balance between passivity and aggression shifts, however, as the video progresses, and the performer's initial dulcet tones slowly become more assertive as her use of the phrase slides from sexual repartee to more earnest reprimand. Through this disintegration, the sexualised tease begins to parody itself, in order to critique the convoluted behaviour that is entwined in a woman's role as seductress.

This parody is closer to the origins of burlesque, a term that derives from the Italian 'burla' which means farce or joke, than to contemporary mainstream versions, which, when 'stripped' of such irony, are reduced to conventional scripts of gender. Historically, burlesque was a form of erotic performance on the edge of acceptability: a bawdy and brash theatrical sexuality that contravened the requirement for a woman in contemporary society to be 'ladylike' (Willson, 2008).⁹ Many argue that the female self-authorship associated with burlesque means that it differs from the sexuality produced via the machines of capitalism, which 'simply empties representation of the female sexual agent' (Willson, 2008: 46; Baldwin 2004; Camart, 2003). Yet contemporary acts such as those performed by Dita Von Teese have shed the burlesque performer's sense of irony, witty comebacks and rebuff of the audience. Instead, they tend to emphasise the sexualised display of a 'perfect' body. Mainstream burlesque has discarded subversive methods of performing a femininity that 'talks back', thus reducing the genre of performance to just another 'look' that reinvents femininity as an easily consumable image of desire. *Naughty Boy* speaks to such imagery and the fact that women's desires can become entangled in such imagery; how the glamour of such imagery creates an all-consuming desire to become. It also enacts the way in which self-

⁹ This meaning of the term 'burla' is asserted by (Camart, 2003:81). It is also cited as meaning 'ridicule' and 'mockery'. See *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* (2007) 'Burlesque': <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t54.e917> (accessed 3.2.10).

authorship can mean self-subordination, as a sense of control does not necessarily provide power.

The pace of the performance in *Naughty Boy* escalates until the performer is seen frantically jumping on the cable release, wildly snapping the shutter. This continues to reveal the same short, snappy consumable images of the performer as pin-up, but through the performer's sense of manic frustration it seems as though there is a kind of failure of the image through which she becomes 'stuck'. It could be said that this represents a failure to become the image that she desires to be; a failure of the act of her sexual display to fulfil her, or a failure to chastise the viewer for his look. The more the shutter snaps, the more the woman is revealed; the more this is acted upon her own body, and the more frustrated she seems to become. This may perhaps be related to a sense of impossibility around gaining power through scripts of gender that sell a thrill of erotic 'control', but involve acts of submission. The underlying absurdity of the seduction is played out as the video progresses and takes on an even more parodic quality. The pin-up images intersecting the frantic performance remain camp expressions of surprise. As the performance becomes angrier and more frantic, it creates a disjuncture between her hysteria and her poised rehearsed poses, so the female performer is graphically split into representations of contradictory behaviour. The work seeks to represent a disjuncture between a woman's experience of the sexualised act and its political representation of a woman's power.

The performer's self-objectification as erotic image through the camera leads to self-destruction. As she frantically and chaotically leaps around, jumping into and out of the frame of the video, she enacts a violent relationship of struggle between the subject and her own sexualised image. Exhibitionist pleasures and the desire to be the object of the gaze often lead to self-surveillance and regulation; these can quickly become compulsive as may the impulse to display such desire or distress across the body as emblem in the struggle to be seen. The absurd, yet entertaining act of self-berating in the video performance speaks to the 'guilty pleasure' of contemporary modes of spectatorship that are constructed through the media, in which emotional turmoil is commodified into 'car crash' viewing. The work, by evoking this implosion of the subject, aims to raise questions concerning the idealisation of the position of being the object of the gaze: it is a cultural fantasy that claims to offer ultimate fulfilment and

affirmation of self-worth, while at the same time producing the subject's body image as unstable through elusive and ever-changing ideals.

6.5 *Projection Affection*

Projection Affection (2009–10) is a photographic work (in the form of a still image, developed through several versions) that aims to manifest the cultural idea of women's sexualised relationship to the camera. The piece takes this notion to a ridiculous conclusion in the form of a visual pun [Figure 50].¹⁰ It comprises a photograph of a projection of a lingerie-clad woman posing with a video camera. The title might suggest a love for the image literalised to a very absurd degree, or a process of projection in which trajectories of desire are misdirected or misplaced towards something that is intangible. As a photograph of a projection, the image is produced via a number of layers of representation: as such, it is not simply an image of a woman, but is explicitly an image about images of women: a culturally constructed relationship to the camera. Again, I perform as a body dressed in generic black lingerie; by further exploring the significance of this body, the work aims to explore the desire to experience oneself as a glamorised cultural image of sexuality that is nonetheless a pose that is both explicit and submissive. The aim of this is to explore possible political implications of such acts and how their meanings might be shifted or subverted.

The visible layers of production lend the piece a shifting sense of the material manifestation of the image itself, as the performing body becomes rays of projected light that in turn become a material photograph. For its installation in the PhD exhibition, it was presented as a large-scale matt image (50 x 60 cm), mounted an inch from the wall in order to mimic yet another re-projection. The confusion of its identity between image and projection speaks of a subtended relationship between the 'real' and the representational: the double referent that the image struggles to signify – a woman and a projection of a woman – seems to oscillate in an unresolved way between image and non-image. This deferral of the signification allows the work to further explore the process of becoming, because it also signifies that, when this woman became this image, she was *already* an image. Rebecca Schneider contends that capitalist consumption operates on the premise that consumers perceive that there is a gap between themselves and the promise of the product; as such, a distinct polarisation of

¹⁰ Katherine Nolan, *Projection Affection* (2009–10), various versions, C-Prints on Diabond, 50 x 60 cm.

fantasy and reality is produced by the rhetoric of consumerism (Schneider, 1997: 97). As advertisements and marketing campaigns become more slick and more technologically advanced, the gap between the fantasy of the image and the subject's sense of his or her own reality widens. The result is that the 'reality effects' of such images exert more and more weight on the subject and their self-image (Schneider, 1997: 95).¹¹

Projection Affection, and indeed the entire body of work, seeks to evoke the subject who is caught in the mesh of this exchange between the real and the representational; continually caught up in the act of becoming the more complete Other, thus provoking a constant struggle for a stable identity that exists beyond the image. In *Projection Affection* the female performer leans forward and presents her derrière to the viewer. Her pose is one of submission and self-subordination, as if to say: 'I do not act on my desire for penetration; I wait to be penetrated'. Such a pose is constructed as 'sexy' by its submissiveness, thus supporting a socio-cultural script of male dominance. Representations that present such 'moves' and poses as the ultimate in 'womanliness' pressurise women to become this image of 'sexiness' through narcissistic pleasure and narcissistic pain: an example of this can be seen, for example, in Agent Provocateur advertising images [Figure 51]. *Projection Affection* explores a desire to become such imagery despite the often-disavowed derogatory nature of the pose, and seeks to explore whether the political meaning of the pose may be shifted, twisted or destabilised. It also gives rise to questions about whether inhabiting such an image – as a self-conscious act of authorship – subverts or further reinforces the pose as an act of self-subordination.

Projection Affection materialises the fantasy object of the phallus implied by the heterosexual sexual narrative that is inherent, though not necessarily explicit, in the cultural understanding of such a pose. It occurs as a phallic shadow that lurks at the periphery of the image. The apparent coincidence of objects in *Projection Affection* produces this gesture of impending penetration through the momentary nature of the photograph as the shadow of the camera's microphone is directed towards the woman's poised and thong-clad behind. This is a somewhat crude but perhaps humorous sexual gesture. This 'deliberately accidental' erotic incident draws on imagery such as the pin-

¹¹ Schneider borrows the phrase from Roland Barthes' 1975 essay 'The Reality Effect', but states that she inverts Barthes' usage. I am drawing on Schneider's use of it, 'to refer to the way text and image bear on persons in a cultural complex of mimesis and alterity'. For the original use see 'The Reality Effect', in Barthes, R. (1986) *The Rustle of Language* (trans. Howard, R.), Hill and Wang, New York.

up, 50s and 60s cartoon ‘hotties’ in ‘lads’ mags’ such as *Wink* and *Twitter* [Figure 52].¹² These images often depict fantasies of women bending over, perhaps to tie a shoe, and revealing frilly knickers, or catching their skirts on a door handle to ‘accidentally’ reveal thighs in suspenders. The pin-ups react with ‘oohs’ and ‘ahhs’ of over-dramatised surprise as these gestures occur ‘accidentally on purpose’. Here, the target audience becomes apparent: it is constructed as a fantasy of male fantasy in which the female is unwitting victim of the erotic joke. The revelation of the female body in these images produces femininity as at once sexualised and chaste because the woman is not implicated in the display of her body. It also produces it as eroticised, via degradation that offers the viewer a stolen erotic glance. In such images women are the butt of the erotic joke. These images, though now considered somewhat *kitsch*, continue to circulate as cultural fantasies of women. Their visual pleasures are understood to be meant for women’s enjoyment, perhaps even more than men: it is possible that the insult is distanced by the ‘camp’ effect of nostalgia. The pin-up is the poster girl for neo-burlesque, and resurfaces in the sexualised kitsch of pop star Katy Perry, who draws heavily on coy pseudo-innocence to sugarcoat her overtly-sexualised image in the ‘harmlessness’ of its resemblance to cartoons. Her candy-girl image, like so many other glamorised images of femininity, demands a ‘becoming’.

The ‘deliberately accidental’ element in *Projection Affection* imitates the female as stooge in the erotic humour; the fact that her back is turned makes her appear to be the unwitting victim of the joke. There is, however, a further layer in the visual pun, in which the female reduced to the image of her rather prominent behind, is quite literally represented as the ‘butt’ of the joke. The literalisation of the visual pun can work to unveil that which is naturalised through cultural codes: in this way humour may be an incisive device for dismantling gendered insults. This is seen in the work of Sarah Lucas: for example, in *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992) a wooden table represents the female body, two fried eggs her breasts and a kebab her vulva [Figure 53]. Lucas’ absurd genital imagery plays on the crude evocativeness of slang; it is materialised through the familiarity of the everyday objects to provoke a cutting and assured retort to such cultural insults written across the female body. The pun, even though ‘literal’, can signify ambiguously: its double meaning can create an uncertain link between the

¹² Examples of these can be found in Hellmann, H. (2001) (ed.) *Pin-Ups* (Taschen Icons Series).

iterative intention and the articulated effect. In *Eating a Banana* (1990) from the *Self-Portraits* series (1990–1998) a ‘butch’ Lucas is seen wearing a leather jacket and white t-shirt with a phallic banana that is deep in her mouth, and suggestive of fellatio. Lucas looks towards the camera and reflects the gaze aggressively back to the viewer in an accusation that casts doubt on whether the pun was accidental or intentional. In turning the joke back on the viewer, the image knowingly claims: ‘it was just your dirty mind’.

Such humour can play with the boundaries of ‘social safety’ to create an uncertainty concerning who might or might not be ‘in on’ the joke (Schneider, 1997: 13). It must be asked, however, whether the cultural knowledge required to ‘get’ the joke in *Projection Affection* is any different from that which surrounds the pin-up’s mishaps. In the case of the pin-up the viewer is situated as though behind her, in a privileged direct line of sight, in order to see the ‘accident’. This is similar in *Projection Affection*; however, there is no direct gaze to the viewer that protests an over-the-top innocence and surprise, thus suggesting that the accident was deliberate or that the viewer was ‘in on’ the joke. Instead, there is more uncertainty about intention and accident in the visual pun of *Projection Affection*. It is the coincidence of objects across the space of the image that produces the sexual gesture, a coincidence that is both laden with meaning and yet empty of articulation.

The performer's authorship could be inferred from the use of the camera. Read in this way it could act as a foil to the objectification of the pose, by indicating counteractive subjectivity. At the same time, however, this would also position her as explicitly self-subordinating, thus provoking questions of self-regulation. While the authorial camera is imposingly present, authorship in the image is not explicitly claimed. The piece has been made and remade a number of times: its various incarnations could be said to indicate a changing approach to the practice. In previous versions the female performer's back was still turned to the viewer, but she twists from the hip, her elbows bend and the dangling strap of the camera more distinctly reveals her to be in the act of taking the image, or at least *an* image. In the process of remaking, firm indications of authorship were edited out and in this way the work has changed through the process of the research project and its examination of contemporary feminist practice. The piece was initially influenced by the works of artists such as Stehli, in which authorship acts as a recuperative action of the female's own sexualised image from the historically male-controlled gaze. The idea that a counteractive subjectivity troubles the female role

as object meant that, at a certain point, the notion of asserting authorship seemed so key to the success of the work as 'feminist' that it began to seem as though it were a predetermined condition for a woman who was using her body in contemporary performance practice.

It became imperative to me that the studio work should challenge the boundaries and habitual paths laid by traditions and trends of feminist performance practice as well as media imagery. As such, taking risks beyond the safety of familiar practices and known territories with certain outcomes became a key aim of the research, in order to test established parameters. Significantly, in the final version of *Projection Affection* the female performer's connection to the camera is more ambiguous than in earlier versions. Strategically representing a complex relationship that cannot be 'solved' through a simple assertion, the work plays on double meanings, and raises questions and doubts around the possibility of the authorship, power and agency of an eroticised woman. Thus in addition to the question as to whether she is subject or object, it might be asked whether she is author. Or is she perhaps the unwitting victim of the camera? Is she subordinating herself through the camera, or is she perhaps trying to 'penetrate' herself auto-erotically with it?

The female performer, her back turned to display her behind, leans forward with her arms tucked in front, hiding any capacity for action, photographic or otherwise. She is cut up and fragmented by the frame of the image. Minus her legs, head and arms, she becomes simply a set of rounded curves that resembles a shapely hourglass or mannequin. Fetishised in this way, she becomes an object: one that can be understood as a trick of the eye that occurs only because of the coincidence of objects – the camera, the female, the projection, the projector and so on – across the space. As an object that is seen to exist only as image, its provisional nature is further reinforced through the image's 'undecidable' status as defined object or elusive rays of light. It may be an image suspended in the process of becoming or an image as artefact. While the female body is truncated to become a fetishistic object, space is left within the image for meanings other than passivity, restriction and powerlessness. Though the head is cut off by the fetishistic framing of the body, its tilt might be sufficient to indicate the trajectory of her gaze. The twist in her neck might suggest that her attention is directed out of the frame in a searching or active look that is inconsistent with the passivity that might be read from her pose. Her arms are truncated and hidden from view, but there is

every possibility that they are active and authorial, though these subtle indications of the possibility of authorship are never confirmed.

Further, while a camera is dominantly represented within the image, the model's relationship to that camera is in doubt: she is not directly behind as author nor in front of it as image. Thus, though the camera, projection and female performer seem somehow connected: the logic of the image and image production remains reticent and is continually displaced and deferred. The internal frame of the projection recedes slightly from the spectator, suggesting the possibility of another alignment that cannot fully be discerned. In this way, the image works to misdirect the gaze through a series of disjointed trajectories that make the gaze ricochet from point to point. This destabilises the image so that it is difficult to tell who is looking, from where and at what. It is important to examine what this means in terms of the female performer's relationship to the camera. Does she control the camera? Does she desire its gaze? Is she seducing the machine? The phallic shadow of the camera's microphone as it points towards her poised behind might suggest affirmative answers, because of the suggestion of a perverse *autoerotic* physical, sexual and penetrative relationship. Yet this phallic symbol is only a shadow; a ghost; a glitch. Because of this, the sexual gesture seems to exist only provisionally: its visual impact is potent, but its function is impotent. The phallus and the narrative of male dominance that is culturally implied by her pose, and constructs her position as 'naturally' subordinate to a more dominant masculinised force, is ultimately only a ghost that exists somewhere between the real and the representational.

The furtherance of this exploration of the relationship between the 'real' and the representational body in live performance became significant to my practice. The act of moving from the relative safety of the controlled relationship to the camera in the studio into live performance opened up a new level of risk and uncertainty, and the challenge of negotiating the conventions of 'entertaining' a present rather than an anticipated audience. I chose to perform *You Are a Very Naughty Boy!* live in 2009 at the Shunt Theatre and Lounge, an experimental space in which art, theatre and social events intermingle, under the large enclosed tunnels of London Bridge [Figure 54]. This space posed challenges relating to a shift in context of the work from art gallery to a more interactive social space, and also provided an arena that was less conventional, or at least one that was between different conventions. The translation of the piece to live

performance presented technical challenges in terms of maintaining a relationship to the camera as mediatory device, and of resisting the risk of becoming pure titillation by slipping into the conventions of erotic entertainment in order to appease my own preconceptions of what a live audience might expect. The performance took place in front of a screen, on which was projected a live feed of my image that included audience members whose silhouettes became watchers on the screen. In this way the work played out in front of the audience the process of the female becoming the image, and also the role of the spectator in producing her as spectacle. Thus the work, which initially constructed the spectator as being at the other end of the camera, began to bring the spectator into the representational frame. In its form as a documented performance, the piece plays on the contrast between the performance as image and the performance as 'live', so that it materialised the female performer becoming the image. She was at once the tangible 'live' body moving in the same space as the spectators, the acting body that might act and be acted upon by the audience and the uncertainty of the live scenario, and a body that existed as image, as pre-determined, as a body that could only repeat. Thus the piece plays out the process of the female performer becoming an erotic spectacle through the gaze of the spectator, a process not normally considered part of the representation itself, which allows the performer to remain distanced and anonymous.

6.6 *Silver Screen Shimmy*

The idea of exploring the live body in the process of becoming representational body became a key focus of my work and is further explored in *Silver Screen Shimmy* (2009) [Figure 55].¹³ The performance took place in the window of an old shop, facing on to a public street. The window was lit from within as a staged representational screen; as a space inhabited by the 'live' body as opposed to the surface upon which the image materialises. The title alludes to the glamorising surface of the cinematic projection; the work aims to theatricalise the role of the screen in becoming, and its impact upon the body. The 'machine' becomes not simply an enclosed box of technology the operations of which are invisible, but a machine that is inhabited by the performer, materialising

¹³ Katherine Nolan, *Silver Screen Shimmy* (2009), digital video, colour, sound, 00:06:48.

This is a documentation of a live performance, as part of MART artist's collective's exhibition *Open Door Policy* at the Galway Arts Festival, July 2009. The resulting film *Silver Screen Shimmy* was exhibited in *Visual Deflections*, featuring Pipilotti Rist, Artist's Moving Image Screening and Installation event at Corbet Place, The Old Truman Brewery, August 29 2009. I co-curated this event, which gave an opportunity to see the work alongside (*Absolutions*) Pipilotti's *Mistakes* (1988).

how the subject is 'passed through' the machine and might be produced and transformed by it. The performance was recorded from two different perspectives. One camera was positioned outside the window capturing the body framed by the screen, and one was positioned inside capturing a view of the streetscape with spectators as well as a partial view of the movements of the performer. Unlike the filmic, televisual convention in which different subject positions and viewpoints that construct the narrative are 'cut in', these are shown alongside each other in a constant stream. The contrast between internal and external perspective seeks to construct the performance as something that is taking place between the audience and the performer, as opposed to being simply performed *to* the audience. This splitting of the viewpoint represents the female as both image with a frame, and as a performing body being watched. In this way, the act of performing and the act of spectatorship are underscored so that the work becomes about the social and cultural production of the erotic spectacle itself. The internal camera viewpoint stresses the position of the performer through close proximity to her body and the sound of her movements as her heels clunk around inside the space; it also slightly precedes the wide shot on the screen. At the same time, however, the camera looks up the female's legs, from the shiny black stilettos to the top of her black stockings, through which the audience itself is framed, often very explicitly between her legs and crotch. This cuts up and fetishises her body while at the same time implicating the audience as 'guilty' watchers of this spectacle.

The capturing of the spectacle through these framing mechanisms seeks to emphasise the tension, risk and anticipation of the live and very public performance, both from the position of the performer who faces an unknown and potentially hostile audience, and of the audience gathered in a social setting, who may perhaps anticipate what will be performed and their role as audience in relation to this. The female performer in black stockings and lingerie evokes particular codes of the body from underwear advertisements, thus suggesting that it may perform in a particular way. It references the look of mainstream soft-porn through which women are taught how to 'seduce' their man by being a submissive, erotic spectacle, so that a familiar slinky, pleasing and titillating performance might be expected. The performer is initially still, then she 'strikes' a pose: she is frozen, hand on hip with back arched, stomach in, legs taut and ankles erect, thus shaping her body into poses as though attempting to represent an image of desirability. Unlike the seamless movements of the striptease or burlesque artist her attire might suggest, however, she moves in a staccato way from erotic pose to

erotic pose, thus interrupting the smooth performance of seduction. While a conventional burlesque performer might coax the viewer, there are no smiles, winks or playful gestures that might seek to put the audience at ease. The performer's rather more awkwardly disjointed movements and her distanced stare offers nothing to break the tension of the public display of eroticised nudity.

The work was performed live within the streetscape as part of an arts festival at various points across the evening, and drew different audiences, from the interested art observer who solely intended to view the work, to passers-by who happened on the performance. The move from studio and gallery into a less regulated social space entailed risk, both on a personal and an artistic level, in relation to a practice that sought to raise criticality around the spectatorship of the erotic female body. Through this move into the public space in Galway, a small provincial city in the west of Ireland, however, the work aimed to intervene as a shock spectacle in the midst of everyday life: out of context and unexpected. In many cases audience members are seen to happen upon the performance, steal a glance while passing by, view it from a distance or even to return for a second look. In this way the performance aimed to confront the viewer, by presenting the codes of the eroticised image as an actual female body that should not be seen in the everyday setting of a commercial street. It aimed to contravene the social safety of conventions of spectatorship via this play on the context of the erotic spectacle. Sexualised encodements of the female body from the media and advertising imagery were thus performed not as distanced image but as confrontational flesh-and-blood body.

In the case of the take that was exhibited as the final outcome of the run of performances, those seated in front of the window dutifully played their role as audience. They hardly move throughout the performance, as though afraid to reveal themselves as people who do not know how to act when confront by a spectacle that is out of context, and for which a social convention cannot be pinpointed. Others watch from a more anonymous and safer distance in the background, walking by and giving the tableau a passing glance or taking photographs as though trying to contain the event as spectacle. In late-night performances, however, as people from nearby bars and pubs happened upon the performance, the shock value of the spectacle began to break down; inhibitions and concern for social niceties had been diminished by alcohol. Audience members were raucous: they leered, shouted and mocked the female performer who seemed to become more vulnerable when reduced to dehumanised object solely for their

entertainment. This revealed the specificity and the fragility of the conditions of the social contextualisation of the work, lending both risk and experimental and explorative value, by its performance in the live context. It is this vulnerability, however, that emphasises the power and desire that circulate in cultural narratives of the gaze: when played out in this way in a social setting it forces a second look at how habituated we have become to narratives of the gaze in a hyper-mediated society. Further, the performance aimed to underscore how the woman's 'imageness', her status as culturally encoded representation, can distance her as human being from the audience. Midway through the act she begins to press herself against the glass, symbolically breaking the invisible fourth wall that outlines the imaginary space of the stage in which she is 'actor' and moving into a space in which she is more like a 'real' body. Her breath clouds the glass and her stomach beats against the cold, hard pane, as though trying to make the experience of her body in the performance visible: she is almost forcing it towards the viewer. As she presses herself against the surface of the image, it is now like a flimsy membrane that exists between the space of the performance and the space of the audience; the performer as image and the performer as person. The cold, hard glass impacts on her body, pressing and squeezing it, to both materialise the impact of the representational surface on the female body and evoke a sense of the female performer's haptic experience of her own body.

The model continues to perform flamboyantly before the pose begins to collapse upon itself. Eventually, she lies crumpled on the floor. This creates another *to-be-looked-at-ness*, that of the body distorted from within as it collapses: the performance seeks to provoke compulsive yet discomfoting viewing. The female performer struggles to maintain the pose and to become the encoded erotic image, as her stockings roll, her thighs dimple and her stomach bulges. The image is of a less-than-'perfect' body, but because it is still dressed in black lingerie the body moves between erotic and abject. In one sense the woman's struggle is degrading, as she presses against the cold glass or lies wretched in her underwear, yet her vulnerability in this out-of-context situation works to subvert the image of the eroticised female body, so that rather than a distanced object, it becomes an object more likely to provoke empathy. Thus degeneration and debasement of the sexualised female figure may unexpectedly lend a kind of 're-humanisation' to the performer, and shift the political meaning of the image. Just like 'car crash' spectatorship, this spectacle seeks to evoke a complex range of emotions that move from pleasure, guilt, discomfort, and empathy in response to watching another

person's pain as public spectacle. And, unlike the cheap thrill of reality television and throwaway 'gossip' magazines, the work seeks to 'trap' the audience through the manipulation of social conventions of spectatorship: given a false sense of security by the spectacular promise of the performance, then implicated as complicit in the woman's self-destruction for the sake of her role as image.

Chapter conclusion

This set of works has explored the ways in which an image of femininity as narcissistic and exhibitionist is culturally produced and perpetuated through a naturalised concept of 'a woman's desire for the camera'. The works seek to expose and subvert the codes of femininity as submissive and subordinate that are constantly reinvented by capitalist cultures. In exploring the concept of 'seducing the machine' through performance practice, the initial works quite literally set about the task of examining how a woman performing 'seduction' through the camera seems to speak to the viewer on the other end of the camera. They employed simulations of the live scenarios in which spaces of production and consumption are understood to be linked, in order to expose how the woman's performance, actions, looks and poses produce her as an image that appears to desire to be looked at. The works, in exploring the subject caught in her relationship to the camera, her own image and her desire to be looked at, and often her failure to become the image, address issues of self-subordination and self-destruction that are veiled in cultural fantasies of becoming.

Through the performance of a clichéd seduction, *5 times* parodies the almost ubiquitous representation of a woman as naturalised emblem of insatiable desire, through her supposedly narcissistic self-pleasuring. The performance is emphatic in its reiteration of these codes, but the work flips and misdirects the gaze, disrupting the easily-consumed pleasure that is associated with such images. *Sugar Lips* performs an image of a docile femininity posing for the camera, an image that is widely naturalised and expected of women, and very familiar in the role of dominance that it delineates for the viewer. Yet, in stressing women's over-close and over-determined relationship to the camera and self-image, the work heightens it to the point of perversion, transgressing the boundaries of women's normative desire and subverting the familiar production of an image of woman's desire as a product to be consumed, so that it becomes an image that threatened to consume.

Naughty Boy is a parodic performance of a woman's role as seductress. It seeks to represent the ways in which glamorised images of femininity, that claim to offer the female viewer the 'empowerment' of acting out her pleasure, in fact often repeat the restriction of her role to compliance and passivity. The contradiction that women must appear to be passive even when 'actively' enacting desire speaks of the impossibility of a straightforward desire, so that a woman's repression of her active impulses directs her emotions inwards, often leading to self-destruction. The work represents the process of becoming images of femininity as a compulsion rather than as a choice. Yet, through gradual slippage in the repetition of codes of femininity, *Naughty Boy* makes the contradictory and convoluted roles women are expected to assume appear humorous and ridiculous, thus opening them up to criticism.

Projection-Affection produces a visual pun in relation to women's desiring relationship to the camera; it emphasises, parodies and critiques their apparent 'love for the camera'. The work aims to explore submissive codes of femininity, and how they might be subverted by bringing women's relationship to the camera explicitly into the frame. The work, rather than using the camera to represent the woman's authorship of the image as a subjective counteraction to her role as sexual object, strategically resists such a simplistic resolution: ambiguity surrounding her relationship to the camera provokes questions about the complex issue of the sexualised female object and the possibility of power and agency.

Silver Screen Shimmy works by setting up an expectation of a certain kind of sexualised spectacle, which then 'traps' the spectator, thus implicating him or her in the spectacle itself. The role of the screen is theatricalised because it impacts on the female body as the woman struggles to maintain her pose. The work aims to subvert the sexualised image of woman by offering a familiar distancing titillation, then revealing a vulnerability that is intended to provoke a more discomforting spectatorship, seeking to provoke empathy by representing a more unconventional form of dehumanisation. In this way, the works seek to operate not by means that appear logically to redeem woman from the cyclicity of her role as narcissistic sexualised spectacle, but by performing this role to the limit. The works are intended to push the codes that make up the image of 'sexiness' and femininity – coyness, docility, contradictory behaviour, submissiveness and vulnerability – to extreme and ridiculous conclusions.

Conclusion

My research began with the notion of ‘seducing the machine’ as a way of conceptualising the female performer’s relationship to the camera in the space of production, in order to produce a heightened representation of the westernised idea of femininity as both narcissistic and exhibitionist. By addressing contemporary images of sexualised display from vintage Hollywood glamour to mainstream soft porn, the research has sought to explore and tear apart the ways in which such images demand a becoming, through narcissistic identification with the glamorised ‘womanliness’ that so often couches subordination in ‘sexiness’. In the cultural context, the image of femininity as a narcissistic exhibitionism becomes a self-perpetuating process as images of woman who ‘desire to be the image’ work to produce further such images of femininity. In my performance work I have inhabited sexualised stereotypes of femininity in an endeavour to test the central question of the research: whether exaggerating woman’s ‘love for the camera’ can interrupt and subvert the cyclicity of images of the desire to be desired, which repeats women’s oppression through self-regulation in relation to gendered norms.

Attempts have been made to analyse a wide range of issues in order to tease out this cultural process, and to set the context in which the performance work may address this problem. In the first instance, narcissism was considered as a concept that, even in Freud’s early account, conflates the naturalised socio-cultural idea of women as exhibitionist with the psychoanalytic definition of an inwardly focused libido. The process of teasing out this concept exposed a contradictory view of woman as both inwardly and outwardly focused; this further mapped cultural patterns in which power circulates through the erotic gaze, as first outlined by Mulvey in 1973. This revealed a prevalent but veiled dynamic by which women self-regulate with regard not only to bodily norms, but to oppressive gender hierarchies that are often couched in the dominant narrative of the gaze. Through the dynamics of a capitalist system that constantly creates the appearance of ‘newness’ in order to fuel demand for products, there is a constant recycling of gender stereotypes which works to reinforce the social and cultural norms, and the hierarchies embedded within them. In inhabiting such stereotypes, my work could be at risk of being simplistically subsumed by this economy. I have, however, sought to call into question not simply the ‘type’, because

this will no doubt eventually be reformed into something that appears new, but the very process of this constant re-typing.

The topography of spectatorship is subject to a constant process of transformation via digital technologies. Yet, when dissected, these often raise the issues of older debates on the politics of representation and the gaze, first addressed during the 1970s and 1980s – issues that still have an urgency. The so-called pro- and anti-sex debates of earlier decades have not reached a resolution or conclusion, and may never do so, but remain highly relevant concerns that are at odds with one another. Because subjects increasingly understand themselves as images, my research has aimed to address the codes that are couched in the naturalised concept of ‘women’s desire for the camera’. It has also addressed the ways in which this tends often to reproduce disavowed codes of submission, through which women become complicit in their own oppression as subordinate. Rather than pushing for censorship or an alternative ‘empowering’ image, however, I have used my performance art practice as a ground from which to raise questions and debate surrounding these issues, in order to provoke, challenge and disrupt rather than simply to conclude.

In its examination of narcissism as a supposed cultural characterisation of women, the research located a problem relating to early performance art of the 1970s, in which women were often perceived as being too invested in themselves as image for their work to be considered critical. Women’s historical role as sexual objects in representation seemed therefore not only to exclude them from the subjectivity of authorship, but also to construct them as naïve, trivial and turned away from the important issues of the world, because of their apparent narcissistic preoccupation with their appearance. Within the world of art, female performance practices are now more established, but the persistence of the image of women as narcissistic, allied to the widespread, mainstream, everyday use of the camera, challenges the self-imaging of performance art practice as a critical space. This issue becomes even more pressing when addressing sexualised images in which a woman’s role as narcissistic object of the gaze is particularly persistent. In my research, the use of the concept of ‘seducing the machine’ transposes this ‘inwardly-focused’ relationship to the camera to produce it as an *auto*-erotic: an erotic exchange between both the self-image and the machine that produces a self-reflexive image which is more explicitly about this process. In this way my artworks draw out, explore and challenge the dynamics of power and desire that

produce and naturalise the notion of a woman as the narcissistic exhibitionist object of the gaze. This contradictory position is one that women are under increasing pressure to adopt.

In her analysis of the work of Lynda Benglis, Amelia Jones logically, though polemically, interprets a 'gyno-eroticism': an economy of desire that is shared only between women, whether the self or another woman, as something that 'shuts out' the cultural 'male gaze'. Yet, presumably unintentionally, this artwork alludes to the socio-culturally produced male fantasy of 'girl-on-girl action' that stems from soft-porn magazines and pervades the mainstream media. When even such subversive acts may be recuperated back into the dominant hierarchy in this way, the meanings in the socio-cultural field cannot be taken for granted. In the same way, the inversion of the image of woman from object to subject, from subservient to 'master', and from sexually oppressed to sexually liberated, may not operate as expected. The analysis in the thesis has looked at performance art practices that evoke the idea of seducing the machine from different perspectives, to open out various and often unexpected understandings of this relationship to imaging technology, as well as strategies by which to address the politics of representing femininity and the female body. The case study analyses of works by Chadwick, Rist and Stehli considered how these artists pushed beyond the obvious into the nuances of social and cultural codes of gender, revealing strategies by which gendered meanings might be subverted in radical and unexpected ways. The case studies therefore address the ways in which both the politics of representation and the concept of narcissistic becoming may be challenged by testing their limits.

The scope of the concept of seducing the machine was extended as both a framework for analysis and as a performance technique, via an analysis of Helen Chadwick's physical relationship to the imaging apparatus. In addition to a familiar way in which a woman looks at, and behaves towards, the camera, Chadwick's work involves a full-blown physical and theatricalised relationship to the machine as object. The process by which women are culturally constructed as showing a beautiful but false façade was exposed by manifesting the action of the 'camera' across the entire surface of the body. Chadwick's mode of performance reveals the struggle towards narcissistic becoming as a process that impacts on the body: the collision of the artist's flesh with the surface of the image marks the body literally with the evidence of the fraught transition from soft, mutable, pain-feeling body into the rigid, fixed surface of the image. Chadwick's work

skirted the edges of taboo at a time when an influential and radical line of feminist political thought was leaning towards censorship. Her play on mythical and art-historical language concerning the sensuality of the female body took her work beyond the familiar and palatable to reveal an image of desire that transgressed the boundaries of social and cultural acceptability. This strategy of posing a challenge through becoming, rather than censoring, meant that the image was as politically provocative as it was erotically seductive.

An analysis of the historical discourse of hysteria revealed how many of Charcot's patients learned how to 'seduce' the camera as it recorded their bodily symptoms. That is to say that they re-performed the evidence that seemed to prove that femininity was 'hysterical'. In compulsively repeating the symptom that had been projected on to her, the hysteric became the image that she was expected to be. This reveals a pathologisation of femininity, via socio-cultural codes that construct it as narcissistic: the libido turns in on itself, and the body becomes the articulation of the pressure to 'become'. From early in its history, the camera has produced the subject's understanding of itself as gendered subject and body. The work of Pipilotti Rist addresses the subject's relationship to the image in fast-paced visual culture, and through repetition begins to break the cyclical nature of the relationship to self-image that is culturally defined as feminine. Rist pushes the idea of narcissistic becoming as compulsive repetition into hyper-reiteration, until it yields, breaks down or shifts in meaning. Her work sets out the idea that failure, struggle and even passivity may be used to resist the idealisation of the image that demands a becoming. These strategies are particularly relevant in the context of digitally produced images of 'perfection'.

Jemima Stehli strategically inserts herself into art-historical images made by men, specifically those that have been subject to extreme levels of feminist criticism. Her work explores the process of becoming the image as a woman's visualisation of her 'self' through the male gaze: in particular as a participant in a 'male' fantasy of domination in which the woman is subordinated and dehumanised as an object. Her work thus directly addresses the perceived duality of a woman: 'she' is both narcissistically linked to her own image, as evoked by Stehli's use of a camera/mirror, and also appears as an exhibitionist who desires to be looked at, as suggested by Stehli's replication of iconic images that represent the 'male' gaze. The choice of images that have attracted strong criticism from feminist theorists pushes the politics of

representation through provocation. Her work effects subtle shifts in meaning, demonstrating the ways in which the sexualised codes that have signified women's subordination may be subverted by twisting the performance to challenge and discomfort the viewer. Stehli's work plays on the idea of a woman as narcissistic, but interrupts 'her' presumed desire to be looked at, which in cultural images of femininity usually function to put the viewer at ease. The way in which she performs indifference to herself as object of the highly erotic male gaze suggests an alienation from the sexualised actions of her own body: it calls into question the viewer's position, and constructs them as complicit in this because of their spectatorship. The work thus provokes debate surrounding the type of pleasure that is offered to women through the dominant narratives of the mainstream; while performing a narcissistic 'becoming', it flips the gaze in order to disrupt and discomfort via an image that *resembles* cultural images that offer pleasure.

The work of these performance artists has explored the feminised process of becoming by probing and exaggerating the conventional relationship of women to the technology of the image. This may have been done by transgressing social and cultural taboos of sexuality; by stressing conventional sexual roles to the point at which they start to subvert; by failing to become the image of femininity or by taking idealised femininity to its ultimate and ridiculous conclusion, My performance practice has drawn on the specific notion of a woman's 'love' for the camera, which produces her as paradoxically both narcissistic and exhibitionist, in order to explore and test its parameters to their limit. In works such as *I Get it 5 Times a Day* and *Sugar Lips*, desire for the camera is acted out as though another person were in the performance space, on the other side of the camera, in order to reproduce the conventional view of the camera as male, as implied in the images of femininity that dominate the mainstream. These performances, by tipping this convention towards its absurd conclusion of actual desire for the machine as object, work to expose and unhinge both the mechanics of the gaze and the naturalised image of women's desire to be looked at. They explore the idea that the performance of femininity is produced through a narcissistic relationship between the performer and the machine, but is at the same time outwardly focused on the audience. In *Naughty Boy*, the performer seems playfully to chastise the viewer, but 'beats' herself with the camera lead, thus rendering the expectation of women's self-objectification explicit, extreme and ridiculous. While, in the dominant imagery of the mainstream, such self-objectification might be expected to naturalise the idea of a

woman as 'desiring to be desired', *Naughty Boy* takes the power relations enmeshed in women's role as object to its ultimately ridiculous conclusion. It does this via its exaggeration of the cyclical nature of the image of a woman as narcissistic, in which femininity's pretence of inward focus really does become an inward focus to the point of self-destruction. *Projection Affection* explores cultural codes that produce women's submission as 'sexy'. The piece resists asserting that a simplistic authorial subjectivity is counteractive to woman's conventional role as sexual object, and thus resists repeating this well-worn feminist strategy, which has become somewhat safe territory. Instead, the performance work seeks to expose the image of woman as 'naturally' submissive by casting doubt on the authenticity of her submission, by employing an ambiguous and yet knowingly humorous relationship to the camera.

At first, *Silver Screen Shimmy* seems to present a familiar spectacle of woman in stockings and lingerie. This image of sexiness, however, soon begins to slip from the codes expected of a body dressed in this way, into a more vulnerable and wretched pose. The work presents an image of a woman as abject and humiliated – some of the very qualities that Dworkin critiqued – in an attempt to effect empathy in the viewer. At the same time, it ensnares viewers through the live situation, so they become complicit in the 'car crash' spectacle. The works thus seek not only to push the idea of becoming the image to its limits, but also to test the politics and ethics of spectatorship. The female performer struggles with her apparent desire to be the image and the elusiveness of fully inhabiting the position; while in terms of spectatorship both being and watching the sexual spectacle are shown to offer the potential of both pleasure and pain.

My research does not claim that a woman as erotic spectacle can ever be completely represented as powerful or even as a whole subject: social and cultural scripts of erotic femininity so frequently encode 'her' as submissive and subordinate and 'her' desire as contingent to that of the presumed male viewer. Through both written analysis and performance practice, the research explores the ways in which feminist performance practice has found alternative strategies by which to subvert the gaze. Informed by this, my own work strategically does not redeem the woman in the image to a position of power, but pushes her representation towards the more controversial, seeking to discomfort the spectator in a way that is in stark contrast to the easy consumption offered by media imagery. My practice can thus be seen in the context of contemporary trends in feminist performance, following on from artists such as Hannah Wilke,

Pipilotti Rist, Helen Chadwick and Jemima Stehli, whose practices transgress the edges of acceptability in relation to women's use of their own bodies. These artists test veiled socio-cultural agreements in order to provoke and discomfort the spectator. New forms of exhibitionism and voyeurism are emerging through the subject's increasingly intimate relationship with the camera/image. As these continually take on new, yet naturalised forms that test the established boundaries of ownership, security and safety, it becomes increasingly urgent for feminist practice to find new ways by which to subvert and challenge conventions of spectatorship.

Notes towards further study

The contemporary proliferation of self-imaging practices has exacerbated the cultural concept of a woman's desire to be an image – 'her' desire to be looked at by the self or by another. Hyper-mediatisation has led to a hyper-narcissism and a constant awareness of, or even paranoia about, being the object of the gaze, whether the camera is turned on the self or is covertly watching the subject via closed-circuit television. Men are also increasingly aware of themselves as looked-at objects, because of the normalisation of the desire to be the object of the gaze, and this is certainly an area that warrants further exploration. The word 'metrosexual' has entered the dictionary as a way to refer to a heterosexual man who is highly interested in grooming and fashion. This concern for appearance and awareness of being looked at is stereotypically associated with homosexual men or women.¹ Questions might therefore be asked concerning whether the subject's super-saturation with images and consumer culture is challenging the idea of a man as someone who sees rather than someone who is seen. The demand on women's bodies to become the image of femininity is, however, still increasing: narcissistic pain disguises itself as narcissistic pleasure by which a subject shapes and moulds her own body in a effort to inhabit the elusive 'ideals' of femininity. The intense vulnerability of the body that is revealed through the extreme effort to become as perfect as an image, is a testament to the distancing of the (self) gaze that abounds in contemporary culture. My performance practice has sought to address the use of a women as emblem of capitalist desire – a role that is self-regulated through narcissistic desire – via a literalisation of the act of the pleasures of consumption, the simulation of the consumption of the camera/viewer, or by displaying the body in a commercial

¹ The Cambridge Dictionary online defines metrosexual as a man who is attracted to women sexually but who is also interested in fashion and his appearance: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/metrosexual> (accessed 9.12.11).

environment. I have also undertaken further work which has begun to address the gallery system as a commercial economy in which the female body is exchanged as image. The piece *Untitled (Panties no. 1) Polyester, Walmart knickers, \$3.99, worn during performance in C4 Gallery, LA, duration 6 mins 23 secs* purports to be offering for sale a pair of knickers whose value \$4,503.99 is 'produced' during a performance in the gallery context [Figures 56 and 57]. This functions as a statement about both the consumption of desire and the underlying economy of the commercial gallery system: such works touch on Andrea Fraser's idea of 'institutional critique' in video pieces such as *Untitled (2003)*, in which she purports to have sex with a gallery owner in a hotel room for a fee, thus exposing the presumed neutrality of the gallery system. My work also makes references beyond this, to the ease of fetishisation and the consumption of women's bodies as commodity that is offered by the internet, such as the Japanese trend for selling knickers supposedly worn by schoolgirls.

Since completing my body of work on 'seducing the machine', a further set of performances informed by the explorations of this concept has been, and continues to be, developed. Following on from the physical interaction with the screen and the spectacle of disintegration in *Silver Screen Shimmy*, I have begun to explore the relationship of my performing body and that which frames the body, through a physical interaction with the performance space itself. The work is informed by ideas that have been raised in the thesis around the how crucial the art space is to the work, as it is able to shift the meaning of the media imagery through a recontextualisation. In order to further examine this process, I have begun to think about the space of the gallery as the frame of the performance, and have thus set about the absurd task of 'seducing' the gallery itself as the 'machine', or system of representation. In the series *Surface Attention* I press myself across the surfaces and spaces that constitute the space, thus outlining the parameters of the frame. For this I have chosen to perform in a series of spaces that have been re-used as galleries, as opposed to the conventional 'neutral' white cube: dank, dark railway tunnels, an industrial coal bunker, a disused swimming pool and a Georgian town house. In this context, as body and material rub against each other, a sense of the experience of the performing body is evoked through varied sensations: the squeak of blue tiles; the crumbling of dusty, damp brick walls, or by the body that is pressed and distorted against translucent plastic panes.

In line with my desire to depart from prescribed media codes of erotic femininity and discover new ways by which to perform and disrupt them, I have begun to search out ways of setting different parameters by which the movement of the body may be shaped: different ways of ‘speaking’ the body. The disintegration of the body in *Silver Screen Shimmy* continued to interest me, but I began to think about performing this in a way that was less linear, and more fluid and fluctuating. The spatiality of the exhibition space – particularly in those that retain traces of a past function – provided ways of shaping the body through the physical testing of its boundaries. During the *Surface Attention* performances I set about exploring the space through physical contact with my body: pressing myself against walls; sliding and pushing off surfaces; crawling into gaps and crevices; shaping my body to the space. In this way the body was essentially choreographed by the space: the effort of retaining the erotic pose within these parameters constrains it to the extent that the body puckers, stretches, strains, bends and folds, thus moving between erotic, absurd, strong and strained. By displaying the effort of the body, in contrast to media images that require the body’s effort to maintain often-awkward poses to remain invisible – the body’s presence as flesh is emphasised and made urgent. This performance also easily lends itself to the notion of rupturing the invisible social and cultural boundaries that arise in the fluid space of the gallery around the performing body, in a bid to discomfort and confront. Many of the performances were allowed to bleed into the space of the audience by walking, crawling and slithering into and around them, crossing into their ‘safe’ space and threatening to include them in the piece.

I have also begun to explore collaborative performance, considering how another subject in the performance may be able to play off the erotic female performer as spectacular object of the (male) gaze. I have been examining what happens to subjectivity/objectivity when another authorial body enters the frame. A piece that I carry out in collaboration with emerging Irish artist Joan Healy involves ‘becoming’ an artwork that was originally produced by sculptor Franz West [Figures 58 and 59].² Dressed in a paper boiler suit and mask, Healy attaches herself to a chair and then attaches me to herself by taping, squirting, brushing, wrapping and pouring paint, plaster and expandable foam. As two independently acting authorial bodies intersect, authorship and art object are entangled in the inter-subjective exchange. Processes of

² *Trans-West* was performed live in the Molesworth Gallery, Dublin, July 2010. as part of the MART Collective’s *An Instructional*, a European touring exhibition curated by Ciara Scanlan and Matthew Nevin.

objectification are opened out as the body presses against the material object, and the material presses against the body. The distinctions between what and whom, material and body, and author and artwork, are distended and collapsed in a fluid process of exchange and transfusion. The focus in this work has therefore shifted from becoming the image to becoming a form, but this is not a form set in stone: this form takes shape before the viewer and remains wet and malleable. It never fully becomes, but remains in process halfway between body and object.

The experimentation of such collaborative work represents the direction in which my practice has developed through the research. The study of my own and others' practice has enabled me to recognize the value of allowing fluidity in performance, particularly in terms of the energy of the live context. The body in performance, and using one's own body, remain particularly effective methods of representation and communication, even in a hyper-mediatised culture in which so many bodies are consumed as a distanced image: as a body somewhere between representation and tangible flesh and blood, as something that inhabits the same space, and lives in the same world, as the spectator. During the research project my work has developed from a fledgling video performance practice (I consider *5 Times* my first video piece) into a practice that continues to grow and change. After the intensive study and challenges involved in carrying out a research degree project, I feel there is still enormous potential for exploring women's relationship to the image, as visual culture and imaging practices continue to accelerate and shift, and as technologies reach beyond our expectations and understandings.

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Figures



Figure 1.
John William Waterhouse
Echo and Narcissus (1903)
Oil on canvas, 109.2 × 189.2 cm



Figure 2.
Carolee Schneemann
Interior Scroll (1975)
Performance



Figure 3.
Carolee Schneemann
Meat Joy (1964)
Performance



Figure 4.
Lynda Benglis
Untitled (1974) – detail
Colour photograph, 26.5 × 26.5 cm



Figure 5.
Hannah Wilke
Through the Large Glass (1976–8)
Performance



Figure 6.
Hannah Wilke
S.O.S. Starification Object Series (1974–9) – details
28 b/w photographs, 15 × 10 cm each



Figure 7.
Hannah Wilke (with Donald Goddard)
Intra-Venus Series II (1993) – details
Chromagenic supergloss photographs,
121 × 182 cm each

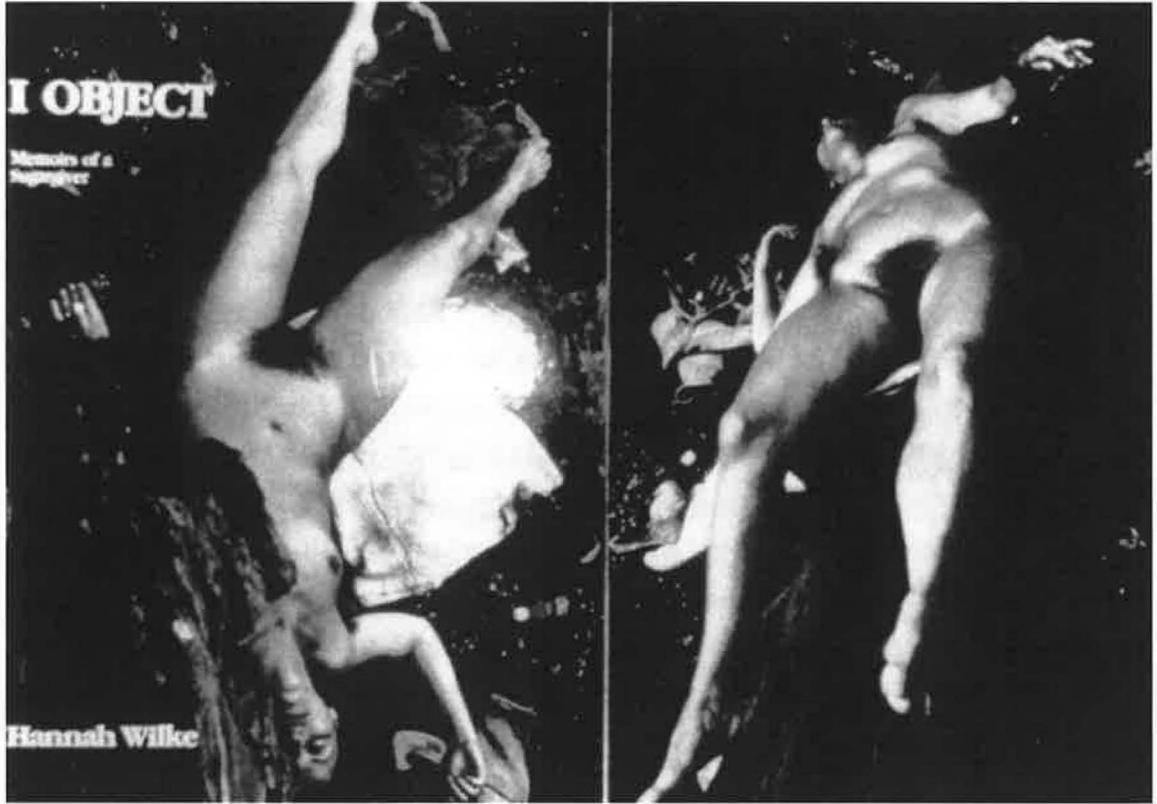


Figure 8.
Hannah Wilke
I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver (1977–8)
Two cibachrome photographs, 24 × 16 inches each



Figure 9.
Lynda Benglis
Stills from *Now* (1973)
Video, duration 00:11:45



Figure 10.
Helen Chadwick
The Oval Court (1984–6) – detail
Colour photocopies, wood, paint, mirrors, dimensions variable



Figure 11.
Helen Chadwick
The Oval Court (1984-6) – installation view



Figure 12.
Helen Chadwick
The Oval Court (1984–6) – detail



Figure 13.
Helen Chadwick
The Oval Court (1984–6) – detail



Figure 14.
Jeremias Falck
Vanitas (17th century)
Engraving, 39.8 × 31.8 cm platemark



Figure 15.
Helen Chadwick
Vanitas (1986)
Engraved mirror and Venetian glass, 30 × 15 × 2 cm



Figure 16.
Helen Chadwick
The Oval Court (1984–6) – detail



Figure 17.
Helen Chadwick
Carcass (1986)
Organic and vegetable matter, glass,
228.5 × 61 × 61 cm



Figure 18.
Gian Lorenzo Bernini
The Ecstasy of St Theresa (1644–7) – plus detail
Marble, dimensions variable



Figure 19.
François Boucher
Mademoiselle O'Murphy (1751)
Oil on canvas, 59 × 73 cm



Figure 20.
Helen Chadwick
The Oval Court (1984–6) – detail



Figure 21.

The 'Charcot hand'

Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière

Planche III, Atrophie cérébrale: épilepsie partielle: hémiplégie droite



Figure 22.
Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière
Planche XXII, Catalepsie: provoquée par une lumière vive



Figure 23.
Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière
Planche XL, Léthargie: contraction du zygomatique



Figure 24.
Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière
Planche XXL, Léthargie somniation: contracture artificielle

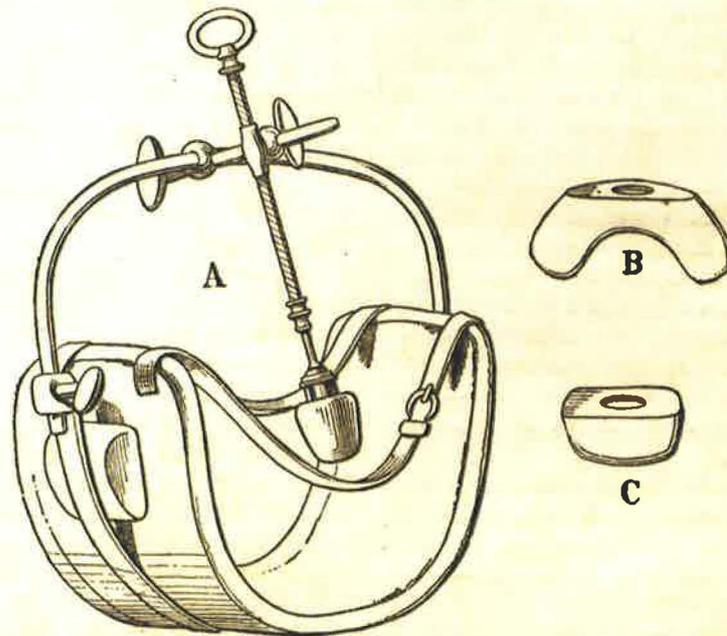


Fig. 8.

la compression des zones hystéro-gènes latéro-mammaires fait cesser la contracture. — X... a toujours une *hémianesthésie* du côté droit, etc.

24 nov. — A sa leçon, M. Charcot a provoqué une con-

cles du larynx, de telle sorte que la malade est *aphone* et se plaint de *crampes* au niveau du cou. Du 25 au 30 novembre, on essaie successivement : 1° l'application d'un *aimant* puissant qui n'a d'au-

Figure 25.

Charcot's Ovarian Compressor

Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière



Figure 26.
Andre Brouillet
A Clinical Lecture at the Salpêtrière (1887)
Oil on canvas, dimensions unspecified

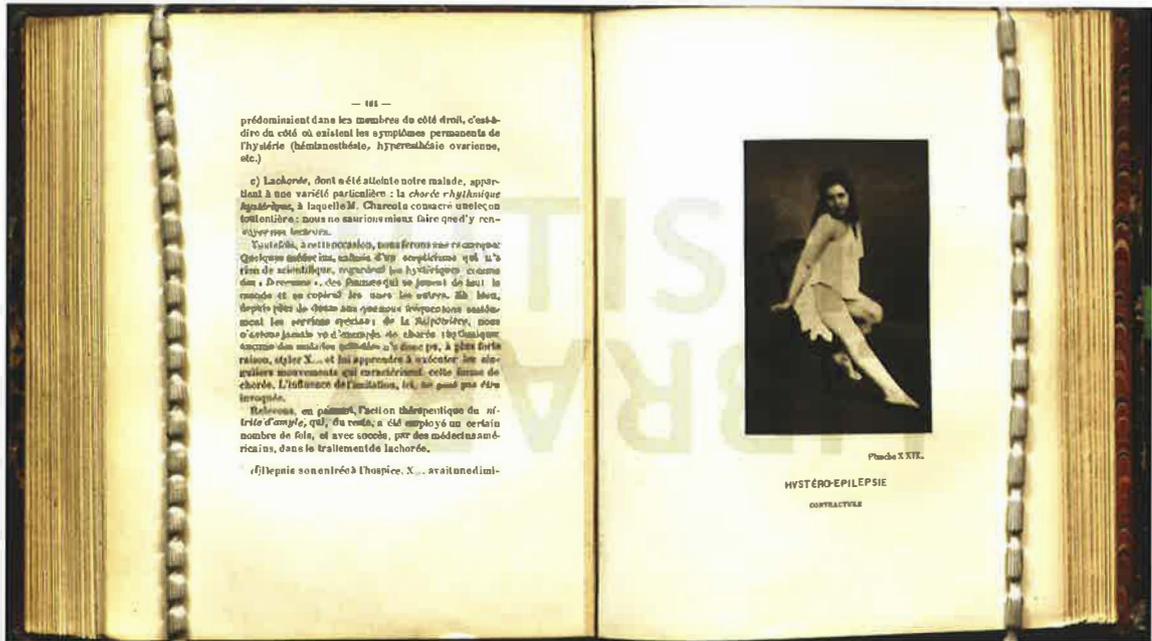


Figure 27.
Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière
 Planche XXIX, Hystéro-épilepsie: contracture

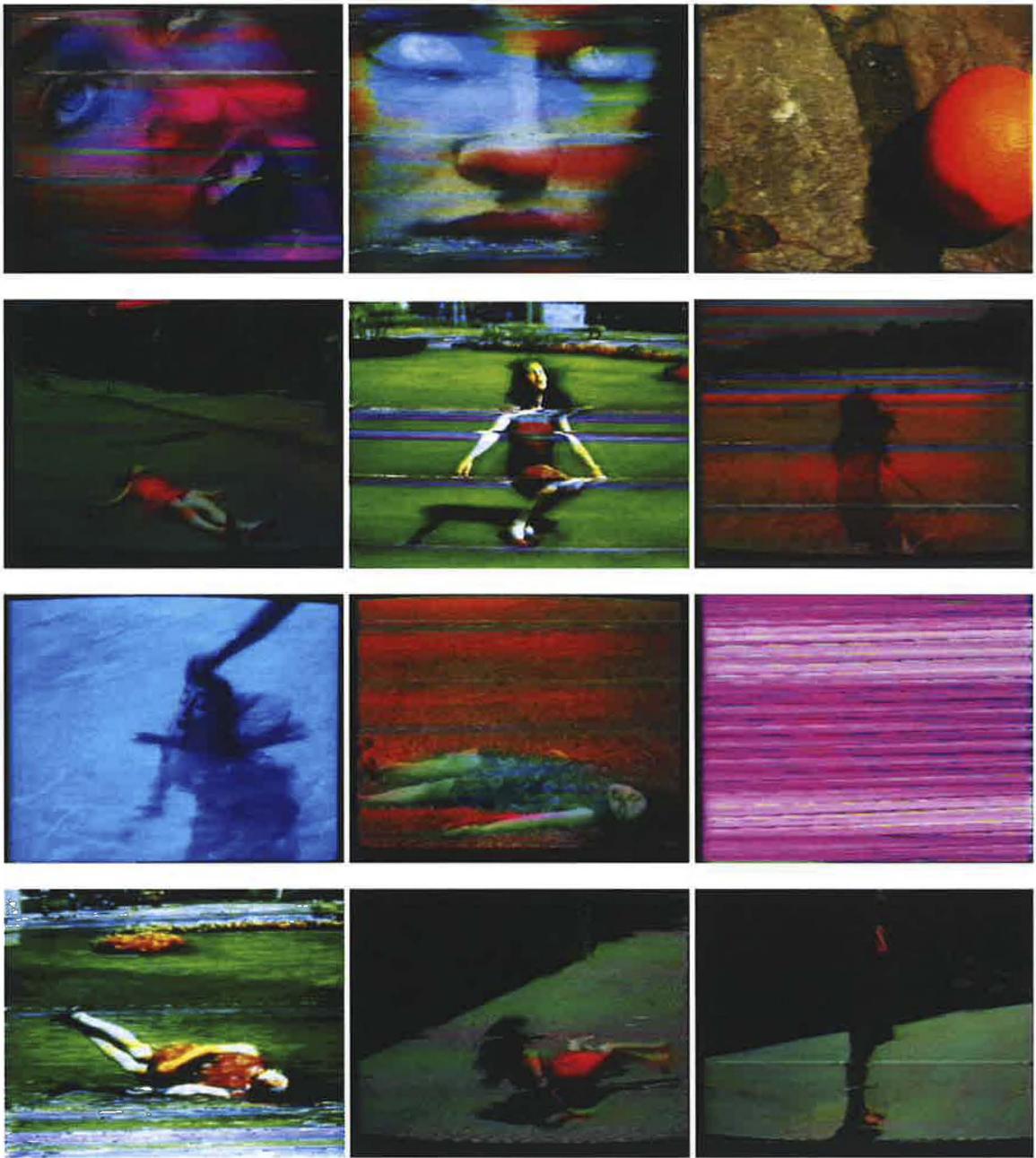


Figure 28.
Pipilotti Rist
Stills from *(Entlastungen) Pipilotti's Fehler / (Absolutions) Pipilotti's Mistakes* (1988)
Video, colour, sound, duration 00:11:10



Figure 29.
Marilyn Monroe and Joseph Cotten, studio shot for *Niagara* (1953)



Figure 30.
Allen Jones
Table (1969)
Painted fibreglass, leather and hair, life-size



Figure 31.
Allen Jones
Chair (1969)
Mixed media with 'metal flake' on fibreglass, 60.9 x 83.8 x 144.8 cm, one of six variations

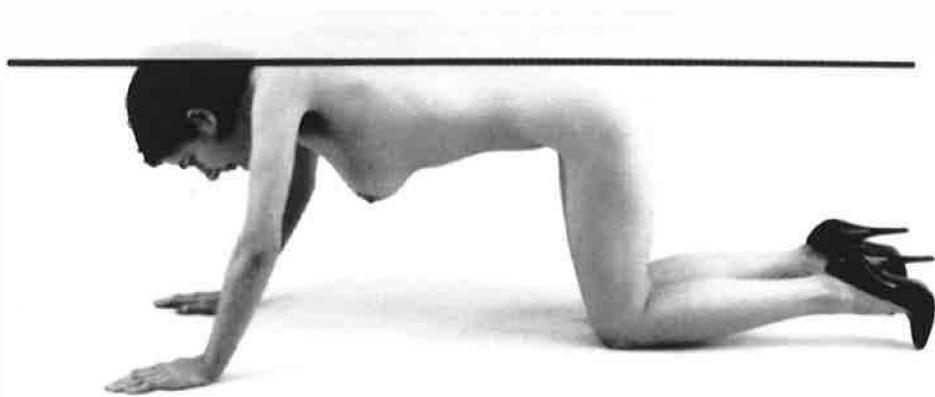


Figure 32.
Jemima Stehli
Table 2 (1997–8)
B/w photograph, 137 × 241 cm



Figure 33.
Jemima Stehli
Chair (1997–8)
B/w photograph, 137 × 230 cm



Figure 34.
Jemima Stehli
Wearing Shoes Chosen by the Curator (1997)
Performance



Figure 35.
Jemima Stehli
Strip no. 7 Writer (2000)
Shot 4 of 11
C-type print, 32 × 27 cm



Figure 36.
Jemima Stehli
Strip no. 5 Dealer (2000)
Shot 2 of 6
C-type print, 32 × 27 cm



Figure 38.
Jemima Stehli
Red Turning (2000)
C-type print, 20.5 × 25.5 cm



Figure 37.
Robert Doisneau
Un Regard Oblique (1948)
B/w photograph, dimensions unspecified



Figure 39.
Helmut Newton
Here They Come I and *Here They Come II* (1981)
2 × b/w photographs, dimensions unspecified



Figure 40.
Jemima Stehli
After Helmut Newton's 'Here They Come' (1999)
2 × b/w photographs, each 200 × 204 cm

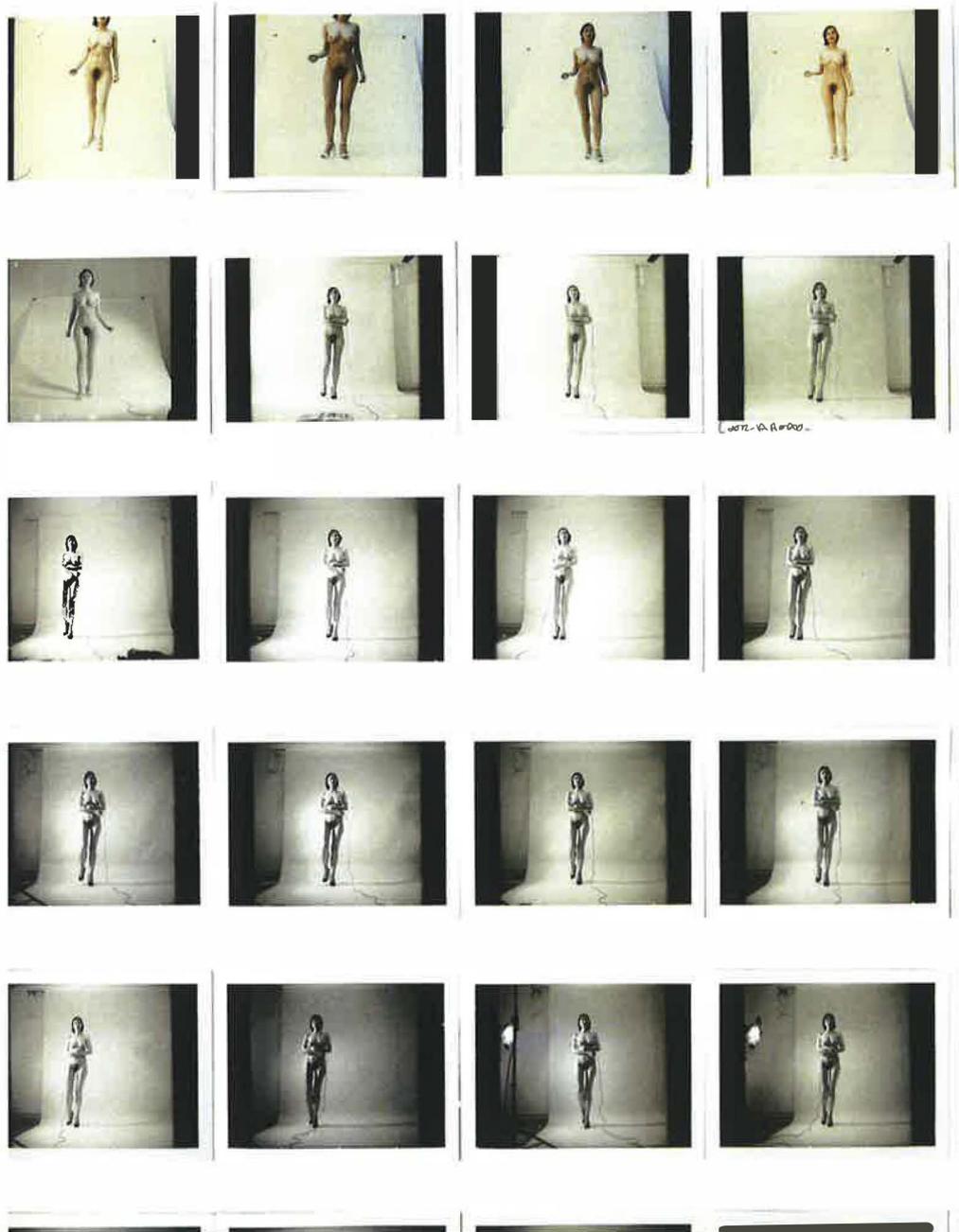


Figure 41.
Jemima Stehli
120 Polaroids for After Helmut Newton's 'Here They Come' (1999) – detail
120 × Polaroid photographs, 152.5 × 96.5 cm overall



Figure 42.
Helmut Newton
Self Portrait with Wife June and Model (1981)
B/w photograph, dimensions unspecified

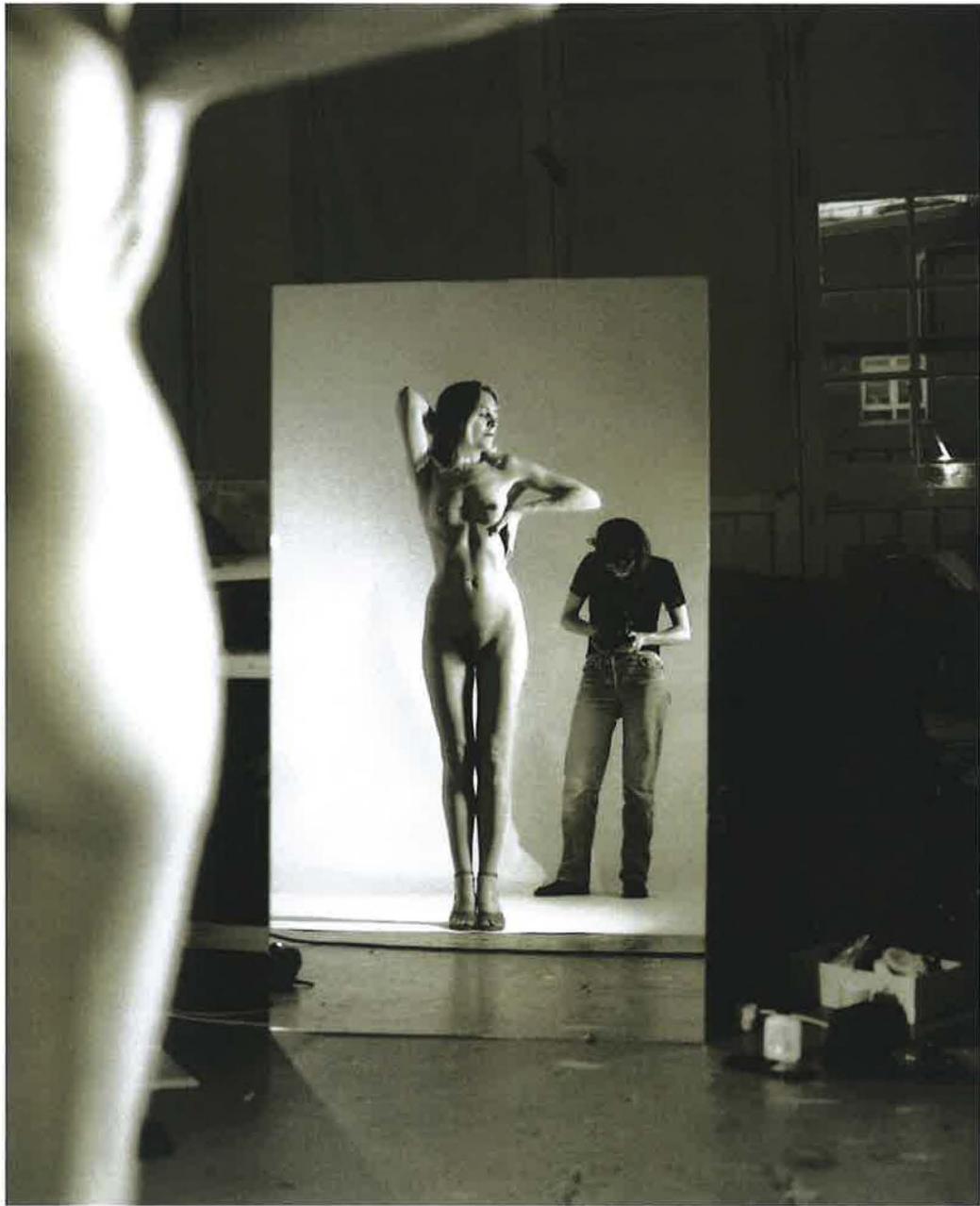


Figure 43.
Jemima Stehli
Self Portrait with Karen (2000) – detail
B/w photograph, 200 × 230 cm



Figure 44.
Jemima Stehli
Standing Nude (2001–2)
C-type print, 122.5 × 150 cm

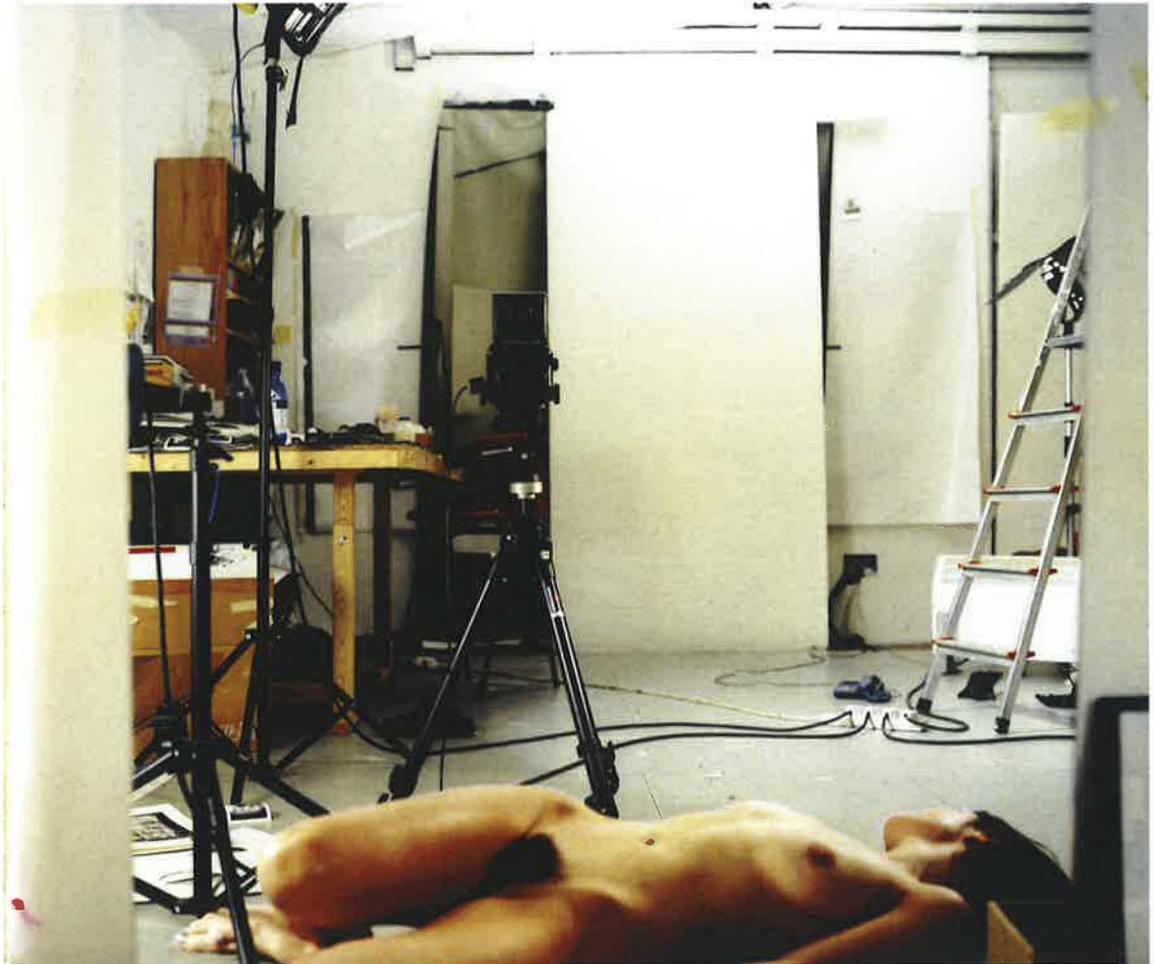


Figure 45.
Jemima Stehli
Studio Nude (2001–2)
C-type print, 122.5 × 150 cm



Figure 46.
Katherine Nolan
Stills from *I Get it 5 Times a Day* (2005)
Video, colour, no sound, duration 00:02:57



Figure 47.
Katherine Nolan
Stills from *Sugar Lips* (2007)
Colour, video, sound, duration 00:02:41

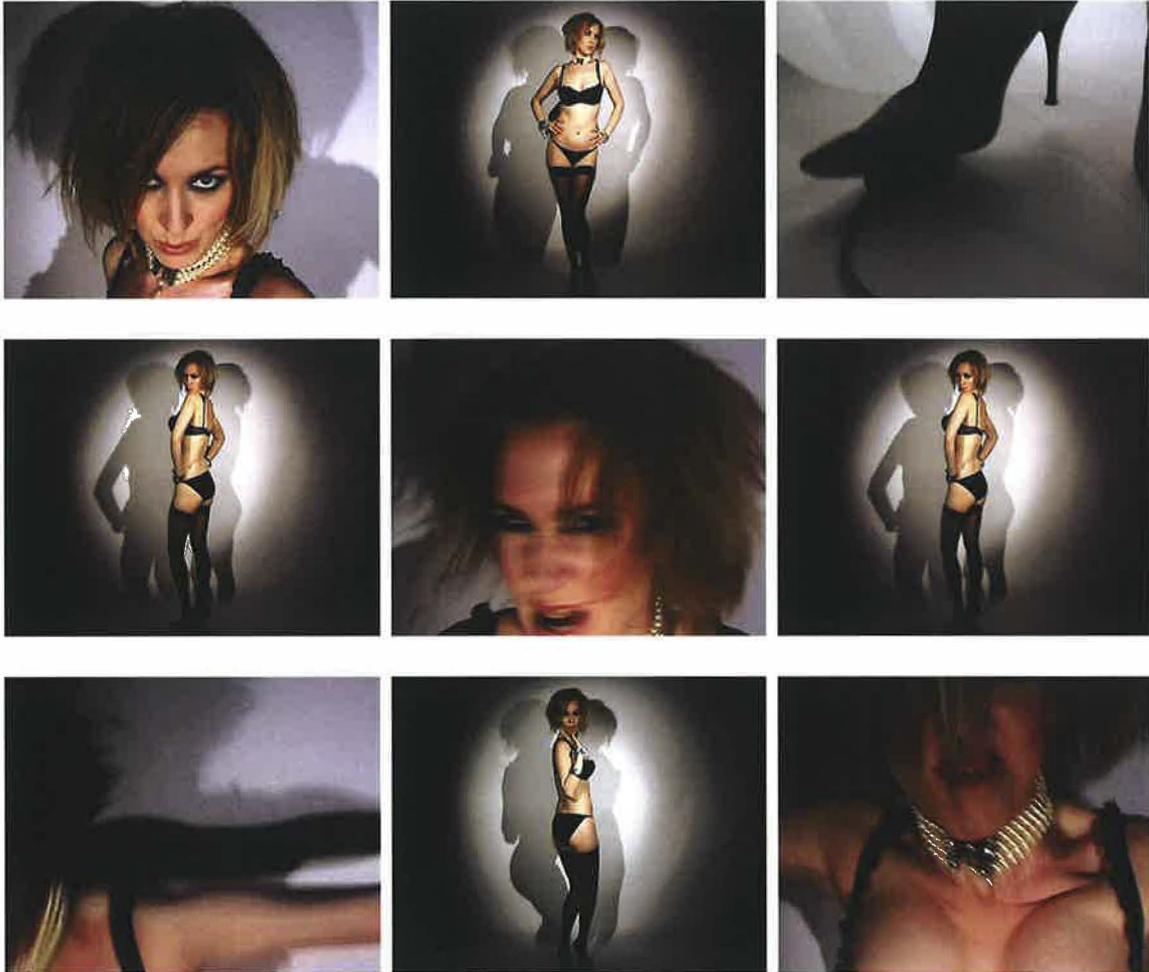


Figure 48.
Katherine Nolan
Stills from *You Are a Very Naughty Boy!* (2007)
Colour, video, sound, duration 00:03:17



Figure 49.
Dita Von Teese, Wonderbra advertising image (2009)



Figure 50.
Katherine Nolan
Projection Affection (2009–10)
Colour photograph, 127 × 152.4 cm



Figure 51.
Agent Provocateur advertising image (2011)



Figure 52.
Gill Elvgren
What's Up? (1957)
Oil painting, dimensions unspecified

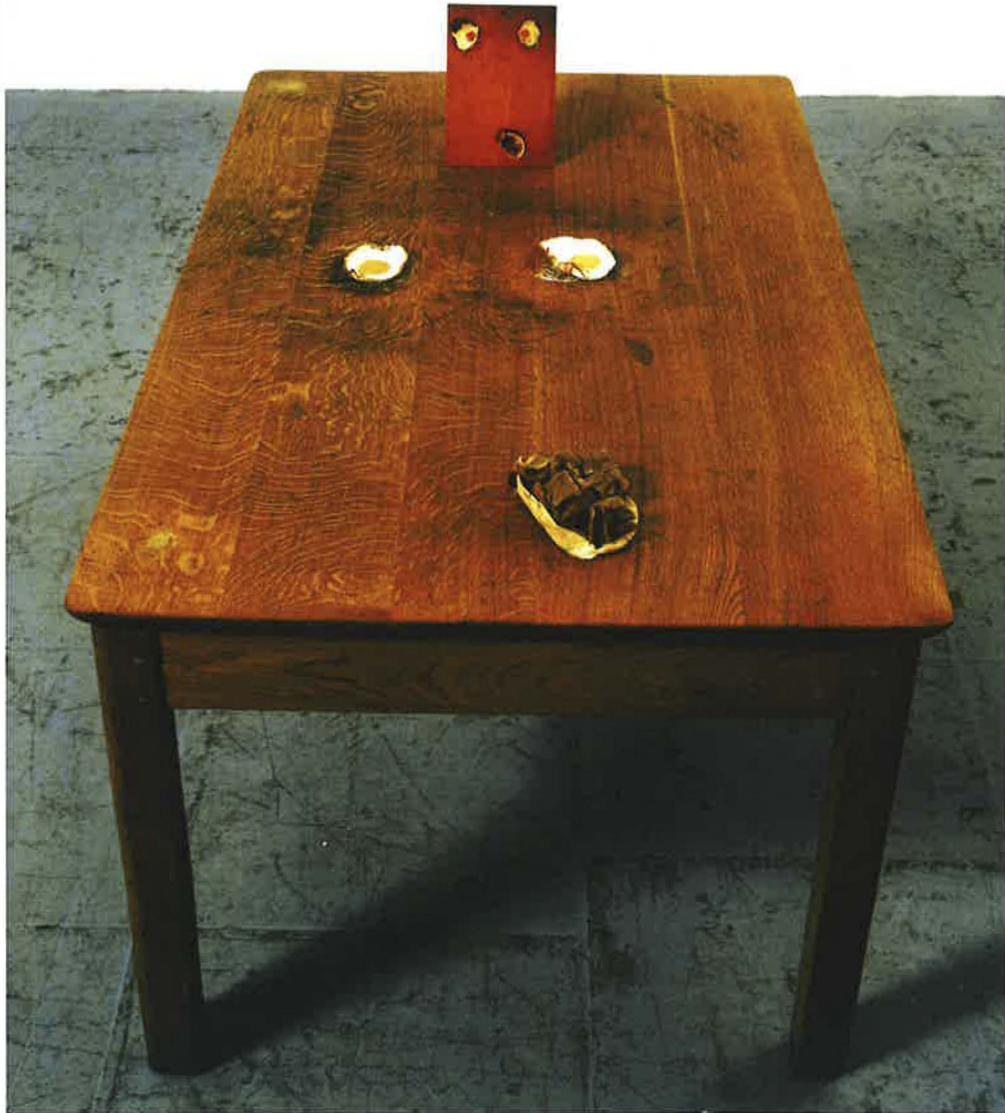


Figure 53.
Sarah Lucas
Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab (1992)
Photograph, fried eggs, kebab, table, 76.2 × 152.4 × 89 cm



Figure 54.
Katherine Nolan
You Are a Very Naughty Boy! (2009)
Performance
(Shunt Theatre and Lounge, London)

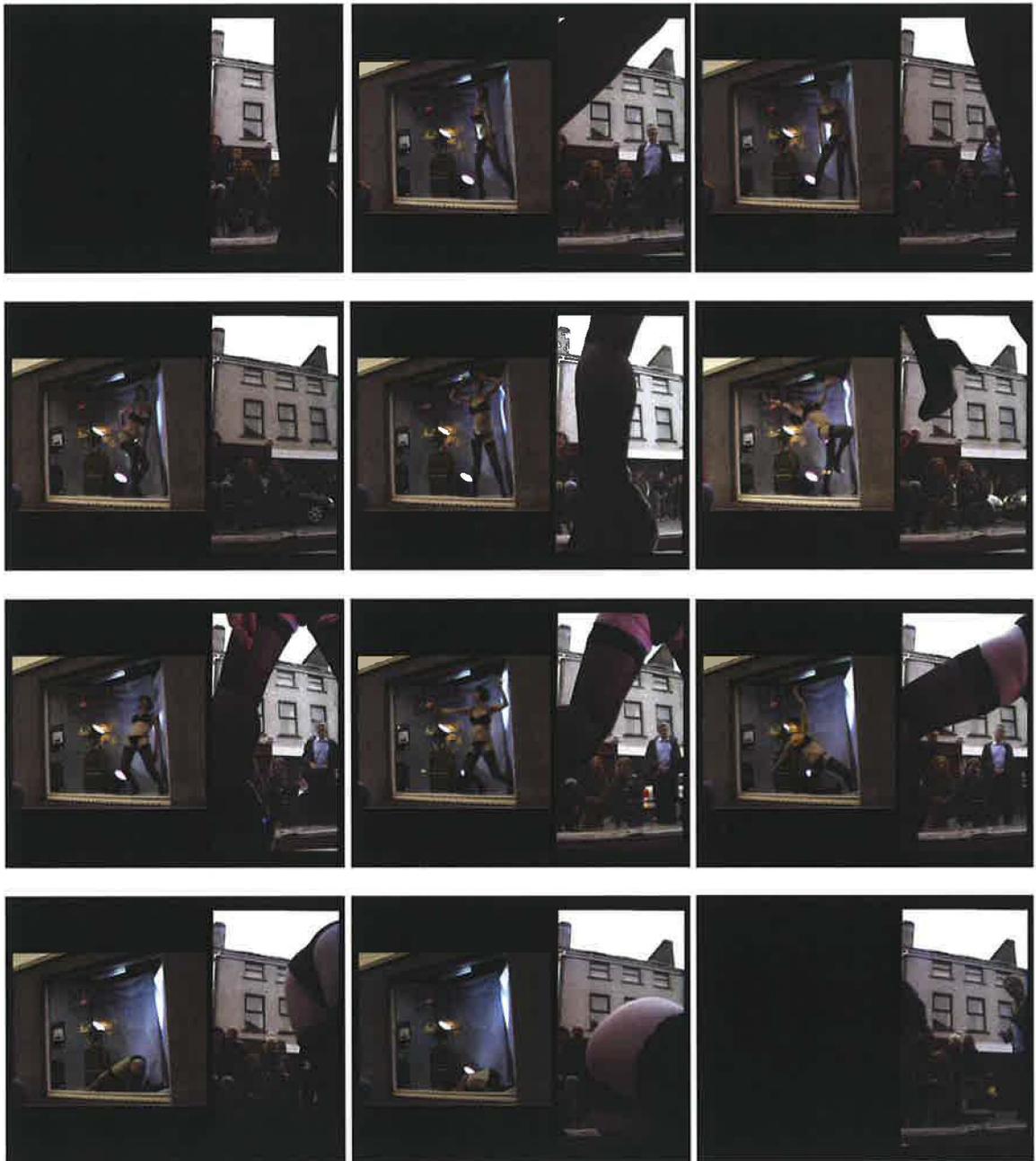


Figure 55.
Katherine Nolan
Stills from *Silver Screen Shimmy* (2009)
Colour, video, sound, duration 00:06:48



Figure 56.
Katherine Nolan
Producing Untitled (Panties no. 1) (2011)
Performance
(C4 Gallery, Los Angeles)

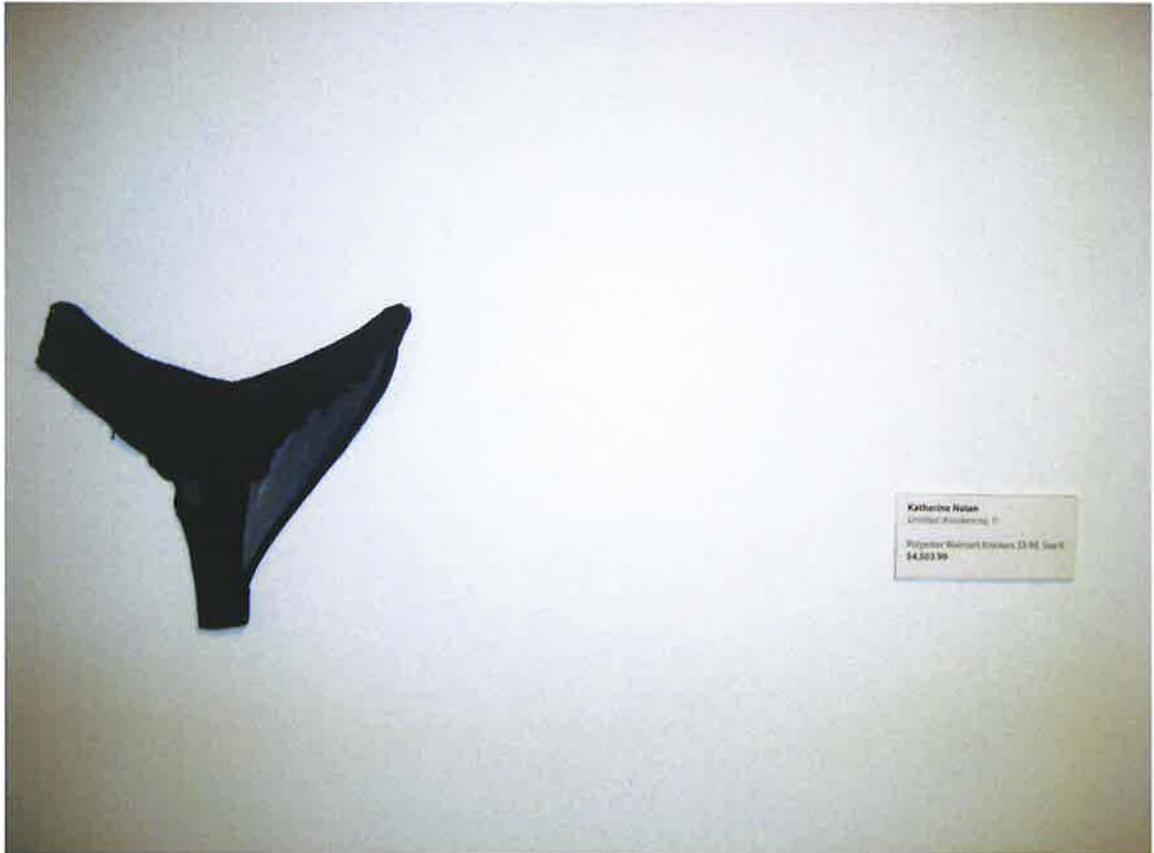


Figure 57.
Katherine Nolan
Untitled (Panties no. 1) Polyester, Walmart knickers, \$3.99, worn during performance in C4 Gallery, LA, duration 6 mins 23 secs (2011)



Figure 58.
Katherine Nolan and Joan Healy
Trans-West (2010)
Performance
(Molesworth Gallery, Dublin)



Figure 59.
Katherine Nolan and Joan Healy
Trans-West (2010)
Performance
(Molesworth Gallery, Dublin)