Vulvaplicity: Vulvas and Identities in Contemporary Performance

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Covid-19 Impact Statement

I began this PhD in October 2019, although Covid-19 reached the UK shortly afterwards. For the first eighteen months, this PhD was conducted during lockdown restrictions with theatres largely closed. During this time, certain elements of practice as research (PaR) were conducted at home or online while face-to-face performances, meetings and workshops were prohibited. The inability to conduct face-to-face research with both audiences and participants restricted my initial practice as I had hoped to exhibit my work in a gallery space. However, my initial PaR research was curated at home and performed online where possible. Additionally, some of the initial workshops were also facilitated online.

I took the decision to continue my research part-time once lockdown restrictions were lifted. This enabled some of my work to be facilitated in person which ultimately furthered the development of the work and my desire to explore it with others.

During the creation of my curated performance *Obscene to be Seen*, I felt it necessary to use a smaller cast to ensure that Covid-19 restriction measures could be followed and to maintain as safe a working environment as possible. My performers and I contracted Covid-19 at different stages within the process which interrupted the timeframe and the showing of the work.

Despite the impact of Covid-19 on this research, I formed new strategies to disseminate my work. For example, part of my practice was produced through the curation of performance prompt cards. These cards were sent to participants engaging with my research, outlining specific instructions that would help them form a moment of practice, either with or without

my presence. My passion for this topic continues to consider how my project can grow and reach people outside the academic domain.

Abstract

This PaR thesis analyses the politics of vulvas in performance, considering vulvic practices and the intersecting politics of gender, sexuality, sex, body politics and identity. It analyses the key topics of monstrosity, mythology, obscenity, abjection, morality, legislation and alienation and how such topics have helped rationalise patriarchal structures that have informed Western understandings. This research expands and contributes to the field of bodies in performance but proposes that the vulva – specifically and in terms of its wider connotations – calls for its own point of analysis.

This thesis engages with queer and feminist theoretical frameworks to consider representations of the vulva in contemporary performance alongside the expanding landscapes of body autonomy, non-cis bodies, fluid sexuality and race. As such, gender, sexuality and race are explored through key theorists including Barbara Creed, Jack Halberstam, José Muñoz, Paul B. Preciado and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmi. This research explores the works of The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein, Del LaGrace Volcano, Chiyo Prinx and Buck Angel, all of whom intentionally frame their vulvas in order to resignify the social, political and cultural meaning of their bodies in contemporary performance.

Vulvaplicity is a key term coined for the purposes of this thesis and is presented as a manifold praxis and methodological *lens*. Vulvaplicity utilises the qualitative methods conventional in applied theatre and autoethnographical experimentation in the form of workshops, performative prompt cards, performance-making and sharing as a means to challenge, confront, illuminate or expose necessary conversations around vulvic politics and intersecting discourses. Due to the taboo nature of this topic, the praxis works both through and against the

challenges of patriarchal structures, proposing new approaches for performance creation and the understanding of identity politics. This PaR contributes to both the destigmatisation of vulva politics and a shift in the way we think about bodies.

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I would like to dedicate this work to my granddad who hugely encouraged me to do this PhD and who passed away just after I accepted my place on the course. Thank you for pushing and believing in me. I miss your loving lectures about my future at every family occasion. I told you I would do it!

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Introduction

Growing up, I was told to call my 'downstairs' a 'mini'. I did not know specifically what that referred to but I knew it indicated my vulva. From an early age, the language I was taught to use to describe my body made it clear that my genitals were not to be discussed. With that in mind, I grew up with no opportunity to openly discuss such an important area of my body, a body part which shaped a huge part of my identity. When I was 13, I remember looking at my vulva and feeling ashamed of my protruding labia. With no education about what my vulva should look like, I assumed that my long labia were abnormal. I wondered if I needed them at all and whether I could cut off the elongated part. I once sat on my bed with my inner labium between a pair of scissor blades, debating on the best method to remove it.

I do not present this story to shame or embarrass my younger self – or anyone who may have had similar experiences; rather, I offer a dialogue around the origins of my initial ideas for this research while offering an explanation of why the representation of vulvas within contemporary performance is important. Even before writing this thesis, my performance practice was always interested in feminist theory and body politics. In 2015, my work explored gender politics and the objectification of women's bodies in contemporary performance. My performance *Yoohoo I'm Horny* involved aspects of clowning and self-objectification and, through this, my practice evolved into an exploration of female subjectivities and slut-shaming. In 2017, I curated *Lady Garden,* an autobiographical show about desire that confronts the vagina as taboo. The performance sought to challenge patriarchal attitudes around sexuality, playing with personal stories and body images to analyse the ways in which women, in particular, have been told to censor their bodies and desires. I used the term 'Lady' in the title of the work, not to indicate gender or class, but because I had been told that my 'promiscuity'

rendered me ‘unladylike’; a trope that inspired the way I challenge and create work using my body. In this performance, I projected my mouth talking over the top of my vulva and inserted a bouquet of flowers into my vagina as I lay upside down, legs spread wide in the air.

My interest in using my vulva and vagina as a site of resignification in performance was crucial to my practice, which led to deeper research of these themes. Also in 2017, I began working for the Vagina Museum – the world’s first bricks-and-mortar museum dedicated to vulvas, vaginas and the gynaecological anatomy – where it became apparent that people need spaces like this to discuss, learn about and share their experiences of their bodies.[1] This influenced a significant part of my practice: I became invested in facilitating a space where voices can be heard and experiences shared through the accessibility of contemporary performance.[2] As such, my work led me to investigate the anatomy and the ways in which people view their genitals within current socio-cultural climates.

Sometimes when we use the word ‘vagina’, we may actually be referring to the vulva. The vulva is the external part of the anatomy comprising the mons pubis, labia minora (inner labia), labia majora (outer labia), as well as the clitoral hood, clitoris, urethra and the vaginal opening which are all within the vestibule. The vagina is the muscular canal that extends from the vaginal opening to the cervix. There is no single word that describes the whole of the vulva, vagina and gynaecological anatomy. It was not until I started working with the Vagina Museum that I learnt the correct terminology, and I keep discovering that I am not alone in my unknowing. As late as 2021, a study conducted by a group of gynaecologists in the UK asked

[1] The project was launched in 2017, initially as a pop-up exhibition. In 2019, the Vagina Museum was opened in Camden Market but now has a permanent home in Bethnal Green, London.
[2] I conflate performance art and contemporary performance, due to their experimental nature and the entwinement of multiple disciplines.

participants to label parts of the vulva: 'just 46% [of people] identified that there are three "holes" while almost half left the labelling section blank. Only 9% correctly labelled all seven structures' (Morgan, 2021). In fact, although the vulva is just another part of the body, it has been woven into cultural prejudices that have caused taboo and stigma to thrive.

In her book *The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History* (2013), Emma Rees states how the term 'cunt' is 'the most inclusive term, referring to the vulva, labia, vagina and clitoris', as it is the only word that describes the whole anatomy (2013, p. 7). Although it is considered highly offensive due to the violent way in which it is frequently used, it is defined as referring to 'the female external genitals, the vagina' (Oxford Reference, 2010).[3] In fact, cunt is not the only offensive or shameful word linked to the vulva, vagina and gynaecological anatomy. In her book *V: An Empowering Celebration of the Vulva and Vagina* (2023), Florence Schechter writes that 'Pudendum is an old-fashioned English word for external genitals [and] is derived from the Latin word pudenda, which means "a thing you should be ashamed of"' (2023, p. 207). Additionally, terms used for the labia in many languages and the biological term used by doctors can be translated literally as "shame lips" (Schechter, 2023, p. 207). The Latin word 'vagina' means a 'sheath or scabbard, a scabbard into which one might slide and sheath a sword. The "sword" in the case of the anatomic vagina was the penis' (Stöppler, 2022). The representation of a sword being inserted into a vagina creates problematic connotations of sexism, violence and heteronormativity.

Misogyny infiltrates the language used for vulvas, vaginas and the gynaecological anatomy and trickles down into everyday views, understandings and vocabulary. For example, research

[3] Further illustrating the disparity of knowledge around the anatomy of the vulva, this dictionary definition describes the vagina as the 'external' part when in fact it is the 'internal' part. The vulva is essentially everything that touches or faces the underwear.

conducted by the Eve Appeal in 2014 asked 1000 women to label parts of the anatomy and found that many participants had 'problems using the words vulva or vagina' (Morgan, 2021). Not only this, but a BBC report by Jenny Rees, *Women's Health: Body Part Names Taboo a Risk to Health* (2023), cited Dr Aziza Sesay stating that the embarrassment felt when using terms such as vulva and vagina could lead to people 'not getting the medical help they need. There is also concern that children who are taught euphemisms could be taken less seriously if they are abused' (Sesay, 2023, cited in Rees, 2023). These cultural attitudes can also be seen in other narratives of the vulva, vagina and gynaecological anatomy. The hymen, for instance, 'is a small, thin piece of tissue at the opening of your vagina' and is often problematically associated with a person's virginity (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Although virginity is a social construct associated with slut-shaming, it is widely believed that the structural integrity of the hymen is broken upon having sex for the first time. In some cultures, it is believed that virginity can be determined by whether or not the hymen is still intact, an unreliable test as the hymen can be broken from everyday activity such as inserting a tampon. Virginity testing is still legal across the US and was only made illegal in the UK in 2022. In this context, organisations such as Karma Nirvana and the #metoo movement carry out crucial work in the community to help 'reframe and expand the global conversation around sexual violence' and beyond (Me Too, 2019).[4]

From wandering uteruses, female hysteria and mythical creatures living inside the vagina to an elected president claiming to have grabbed a woman 'by the pussy' before cutting federal funds to family planning clinics offering abortion, the history of the vulva is rife with taboo and

[4] Karma Nirvana is a charity that campaigned to end the practice of virginity testing and hymen repair. 'From the 1st July 2022, the UK government has made it illegal to carry out, offer aid and abet virginity testing or hymenoplasty in any part of the UK under the Health and Care Act 2022' (Karma Nirvana, 2023).

pervaded by patriarchal influence.[5] However, the vulva was not and is not always the subject of shame and disgust. Schechter writes how 'around the world, different cultures, religions, folklores and myths have honoured and celebrated the vulva', such as Ishtar Ishtar, otherwise known as Inanna, a 'Mesopotamian goddess of Sex and War' (2023, pp. 148–152) who was worshipped by ancient Mesopotamian civilisations and linked to love, fertility and war.[6] The opening of one story about Inanna narrates that 'when she leaned against the apple tree, her vulva was wondrous to behold ... Rejoicing at her wondrous vulva, the young woman Inanna applauded herself' (Dekkers, 2023). The opening of this story celebrates the vulva as a symbol of power and fertility, refuting narratives that vulvas are disgusting or shameful.

In Queensland, Australia, there is a stoneface that features many engraved vulvas. It dates back to the Stone Age and it has been named 'The Wall of One Thousand Vulvas'. Indeed, many prehistoric carvings of vulvas exist, found across the world. While there is no consensus as to why these vulvas are engraved on the stoneface, Catherine Faurot states that 'Scholars believe early humans had no awareness of the role men play in fertility, while, in contrast, a woman's role in creating life is unequivocal. The vulvas carved all over the world are invocations to this creative power' (Faurot, 2023). In Christian iconology, Yvonne Owens writes how some 'depiction[s] of Mary or Christ in Majesty are framed within curving contours' (Owens, 2021). This oval shape has connotations of a 'portal, birth canal or vulva' which Owens suggests is 'the door through which all entrances, exits, epiphanies and transformations occur' (Owens, 2021). Moreover, some images of the fifth holy wound made on Jesus's body by the Lance of Longinus also share vulvic connotations, further portraying the vulva as a site of power, life and transformation (see Appendix one for image examples).

[5] The overturn of Roe vs. Wade will be discussed later within my thesis.
[6] Mesopotamia is an ancient region that was located in the Middle East and roughly correlates to Iraq, Syria, Kuwait and Iran in the modern day.

Racism in Gynaecology

It is imperative to discuss the racist history of medicine and, more specifically, gynaecology as part of this thesis. In her book *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender and the Origin of American Gynaecology* (2017), historian Deirdre Cooper Owens discusses how the most 'pioneering surgeries' were developed by experimenting on enslaved women. She cites the colonial scientist James Marion Sims, also known as the 'Father of American Gynaecology' as an example (Owens, 2017, pp. 1–4). Slavery 'provid[ed] doctors the bodies and sometimes labor needed for experimentation, treatment, and repair' (Owens, 2017, p. 6). In fact, many of the women on whom Sims operated were expected to continue with their domestic duties in his household as well as working within the 'slave hospital that … Sims founded for his training and for the surgical repair of his patients' (Owens, 2017, p. 1). For Sims and many other 'slave owners', these women were nothing more than bodies for experimentation and labour. Their names and identities remain largely unacknowledged.

This racist approach to women's bodies is further examined by Schechter who discusses how stigma surrounding the vulva and, more specifically, the labia, can also 'be traced back to scientific racism in the 18th century, where colonialist scientists made sweeping false generalizations about the differences between the labia of Black and white women, with hugely harmful impacts' (2023, p. 257). Schechter attributes this to Black women being seen as more sexually deviant than white women (2023, p. 257). These ideas were compounded by other colonialist scientists, such as Baron Georges Cuvier (1769–1832) who described longer labia as a sign of 'animal sexuality' (Stormquist, 2018, p. 23). As Liv Stormquist writes, '[Cuvier] argued that the inner labia of civilized women (i.e., white women) had shrunk as a result of evolution. Therefore, elongated labia – according to Cuvier – indicated racial inferiority and

all-around moral corruption' (Stormquist, 2018, p. 23). Indeed, American gynaecology developed from the labour and lives of Black women and, as in many other institutions, the long-lasting effects of subsequent racial discrimination are still prevalent within healthcare systems and beyond.

The lineage of racial injustices experienced by women can be observed in the story of Henrietta Lacks, a Black woman from the United States. In 1951, Lacks visited The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore due to vaginal bleeding. During her treatment at the hospital, a sample of her cancer cells was given 'to a researcher without Lacks' knowledge or consent – a process that was legal at the time. In the laboratory, her cells turned out to have an extraordinary capacity to survive and reproduce; they were, in essence, immortal' (Nature, 2020, p. 7). Lacks' cells were shared widely amongst scientists and now, in modern medicine, 'HeLa cells … have been involved in key discoveries in many fields, including cancer, immunology and infectious disease. One of their most recent applications has been in research for vaccines against COVID-19' (Nature 2020, p. 7). Henrietta Lacks' story is just one of many that demonstrate the systemic and racial inequality embedded in our political, social and economic frameworks. Lacks passed away from cervical cancer that same year. Although her cells were widely disseminated and used by large biotechnological companies, her family did not receive compensation until 2023, when Lacks' estate placed a lawsuit against Thermo Fisher Scientific for their use of the HeLa cell line, resulting in a settlement. For decades, her family was not asked 'for consent as they revealed Lacks' name publicly, gave her medical records to the media, and even published her cells' genome online' (Nature, 2020, p. 7). The story of Henrietta Lacks illustrates the systemic racism within medicine and science and raises questions about how contemporary medicine must address its past unethical practices.

Racial disparities in the healthcare system continue to affect many women of colour within contemporary Western society. A report conducted by MBRRACE-UK (2021) – an organisation headed by the National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit (NPEU) at the University of Oxford – found that 'women from Black ethnic groups [were] four times more likely to die [in pregnancy] than women from White groups. Women from Asian ethnic backgrounds are almost twice as likely to die in pregnancy compared to White women' (2021, pp. 2–3). Furthermore, 'in the UK, Black women, Asian women, and women of other ethnic minorities still log lower uptakes of cervical screening, which can lead to greater incidences of cervical cancer that may progress to severe disease' (Sowemimo, 2021). Charities including Race Equality, Sisters Network, Black Mamas Matter Alliance and Reproductive Justice Initiative (formerly Decolonising Contraception) – an organisation that 'addresses the complex social, economic, and political factors that impact individuals' reproductive lives' (Reproductive Justice Initiative, no date) – continue to combat the systemic inequalities prevalent in the structural frameworks of Western societies.

Approaches to this Thesis and Boundaries of Research

Above, I situate vulva politics within culture in order to centre its context and significance in historical and contemporary socio-political frameworks. It is imperative to recognise how a vast proportion of what is understood within gynaecology stemmed from scientific racism and colonialism which has undoubtedly shaped Western societies understandings, knowledge production and power dynamics. Such racist underpinnings persists both overtly and covertly within broader discourses such as sex, gender and sexuality, a topic I will return to in Chapter 4. This Practice as Research (PaR) thesis foregrounds the notion of vulvic work as a distinct practice in performance, exploring a host of rationales, themes and discourses that intersect

with the vulva, vagina and gynaecological anatomy. More specifically, the overarching questions of this project examine vulva politics in contemporary performance, enquiring how performance can reveal the socio-cultural contexts that shape perspectives and knowledge of vulvas and bodies as well as how performers and audiences ascribe meaning to them.

My research primarily focuses on the identities of my case studies and participants and as such, this thesis does not extensively examine research surrounding Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), religion or other peripheral topics.[7] While I acknowledge their intersections within this field, this thesis does not aim to appropriate an individual's identity outside the scope of this research, ensuring that my focus remains as authentic to the case studies under analysis. Similarly, in the analysis of the vulva, vagina and gynaecological anatomy, my research inevitably intersects with the body as a whole, exploring its various functions and symbolic meanings across different contexts. This approach may raise questions surrounding why other significant orifices, such as the mouth, are not more prominently considered.[8] In her PhD thesis, 'The Transgressive Mouth in Live Art and its Relationship to the Audience', academic Angela Bartram examines how the mouth is perceived as 'both public and private', similar to how the vagina is also perceived. Bartram argues that 'vast powers are given to this space that inform how social placement is categorised. The corporeal and cultural complexities of this site inform a definition of transgression based on how it operates' (2009, pp. 17-18). The mouth as an orifice, undoubtably holds many rich cultural and symbolic similarities to the vagina; they both

[7] Due to the psychological and physical impact FGM can have on an individual, I also recognise the need for a more in-depth exploration than what the scope of this research permits. Additionally, the World Health Organisation (WHO) states that in order to accurately approach the discussion of FGM, a multisectoral conversation within the areas of 'health, education, finance, justice and women's affairs', must take place (WHO, 2024). While this research briefly references FGM in Chapter 3, based on these outlined reasons, this topic would require extensive research which would be beyond the scope of my selected case studies and Practice as Research (PaR) objectives.

[8] The orifice of the anus is discussed through the theories of Paul B. Preciado in Chapter 4.

represent identity and expression, can be alienated or perceived as abject, act as a gateway to the outside in or be a sustenance for life. However, the mouth is also a highly visible and expressive part of the body which we largely see and use in some capacity every day. My choice to solely centre the vulva/vagina stems from an effort to give space to an orifice that has been historically marginalised, shamed or tabooed within multiple discourses. While more contemporary performances, education and scholarship are now produced around the topics of vulvas, vaginas and gynaecological anatomy, my research seeks to establish a framework that illuminates the need for more discussion and awareness.

As no single word linguistically encompasses the vulva, vagina and the internal gynaecological anatomy, this thesis uses them interchangeably dependent on the context of the research discussion. I primarily use the term 'vulva' as my research discusses its physicality, external appearance, and cultural and artistic representations. Additionally, I use 'vulva' to cement it within used language and combat the frequent misuse of the word 'vagina'. The term 'vagina' is used when discussing the vaginal canal or how it has been documented historically. Similarly, the term 'gynaecological anatomy' is often used when discussing internal anatomy such as the womb/uterus. However, it is important to highlight that anatomically, all three terms intersect; the vulva includes the external genitalia, which is connected to the vaginal opening; the vaginal opening extends to the cervix; and the cervix leads to the uterus. Although 'gynaecological anatomy' typically refers to the internal structures, it is imperative to understand the connections between the external and internal organs. Similarly, due to the multifaceted socio-cultural contexts surrounding the genitals as a whole, this thesis cannot focus solely on a singular body part and function without acknowledging its physical interconnections and broader discourses. In some cases, I use the word 'women' as it has been used in historical research; however, not all women have a vulva and not all people with a

vulva identify as women.[9] Additionally, 'non-binary people can have any genitals' (Schechter, 2023, p. 10). It is important to acknowledge the rich diversity and plurality of bodies. I will therefore – where possible – reconsider the article of 'the' body and utilise the term 'bodies.'

Through the methodology of vulvaplicity – a curated term I return to in Chapter 1 – this practice explores a plurality of vulvic narratives with scope for revealing and looking anew. Adopting a manifolded approach, this research uses qualitative methods of autoethnography and applied theatre conventions in workshops, performance-making and sharing. This PaR comprises visual material including photos, digital prompt cards curated for performance-making, written documentation and links to video footage of my performance practices. Since I started this PhD in 2019, significant events have shaped my research. I hope to show the trajectory or at times, the reclination of policies, societal attitudes and discourses that influence the importance of and need for this research and thus demonstrate the ways in which my PaR elements work in tandem with theoretical frameworks. In what follows, my research acknowledges cultural feminists of the 1960s–70s who pioneered a forum for vulvic art.

Clit Review: Vulvas in Contemporary Performance

In her book *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997), Rebecca Schneider argues how the 'explicit' body has become the *mise en scène* for feminist performers, as they 'use their bodies as the stages across which they re-enact social dramas and traumas which have arbitrated cultural differentiations between truth and illusion, reality and dream, fact and fantasy, natural

[9] Similarly, I want to acknowledge the contentions surrounding the word 'female' and how, historically, it has been used in a dehumanising or exclusionary nature to reduce individuals to their sex or reproductive organs. As such, this term is only used within specific contexts, such as in quotes, particular historical documentation, or where 'female' is discussed as an adjective rather than a noun.

and unnatural, essential and constructed' (1997, p. 7). For Schneider, the explicit body is a continuous dichotomy, a contradiction, illustrating multiple associations with the body, both historically and in the contemporary moment. Performance is a tool for artists to reclaim, embrace or challenge the significations of their body. Whilst the body in performance has been the subject of close analysis, comparatively little research has been conducted on representations of the vulva within contemporary performance, in particular, the ways in which artists discuss or expose their genitals in performance to analyse socio-cultural themes of gender, sexuality, medical discourse, body politics and beyond. Vulvas and vaginas can be used in performance to elicit a reaction, demand attention or arouse interest as well as to interrogate particular discourses around identity politics, particularly when nudity is involved. Feminist artists of the 1960s–70s, such as Hannah Wilke, Annie Sprinkle, Carolee Schneemann, VALIE EXPORT and Judy Chicago, pioneered a forum for vulvic iconography. Their work sought to interrogate feminine objectification, misogyny and the sexualisation of bodies, drawing on second-wave feminism which challenged patriarchal structures. Thus, it is important to provide an analysis and genealogy of early feminist performance from the late 1960s to the early 2000s as this laid the foundations for the field of vulvic art.

In her performance *A Public Cervix Announcement* (1990), Annie Sprinkle inserted a speculum within her vagina to reveal her cervix and invited audience members to take a look. Sprinkle stated that she wanted to 'assure the misinformed, who seem to be primarily of the male population, that neither the vagina nor the cervix contains any teeth' (Sprinkle, 2019). Many audience members chose to approach Sprinkle's exposed cervix, quizzically, excitedly and apprehensively. An often taboo or literally concealed body part was revealed, providing the opportunity to *really look*. Nicholas Ridout argues that Sprinkle offered the gazer the opportunity to 're-evaluate and reconsider theatre as a state of ethical happenings' (2009, p.

100). Whilst Sprinkle acknowledges the myth of the vagina dentata, Ridout's quotation highlights the moral paradox of the impact that performances involving the vulva and vagina can have upon spectators. Schneider offers a similar reading of Sprinkle's performance which analyses the body as a fantasy-reality dichotomy within commodity capitalism. For Schneider, Sprinkle's exposed vulva is a catalyst for ethical change and 'spiritual transcendence' (1997, p. 58). The idea of the vulvic performance as a catalyst for change, connected to wider themes, is a particular facet I am interested in exploring.

Mythology is also depicted within Marina Abramović's video series *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005), which explores the vulva as a site of both terror and reclamation. The videos were filmed in Abramović's birthplace in Yugoslavia and sought to depict ancient rituals. As Richard C. Haber (2019) writes, 'From medieval times to the 18th century, [people] believed they could use their sex organs as tools to ... boost the crops, for example, or showing their genitals to the sky to scare the demons that caused storms' (Haber, 2019). Abramović explored ideas of mythology within her practice as a means to represent them through sexual liberation as well as to challenge cultural understandings of sex. Comparisons to the vulva as a site of terror are analysed in VALIE EXPORT's poster *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969), which features her holding a machine gun whilst wearing a leather jacket and crotchless trousers that expose her vulva. The poster was influenced by a performance that EXPORT gave in an art cinema in Munich, where she walked among the audience with her uncovered vulva at face-level, although art theorist Amelia Jones suggests that this performance never actually took place and was, rather, a fabricated rumour (Manchester, 2007; Jones, 2012, p. 211). Her work sought to challenge 'the perceived cliché of women's historical representation in the cinema as passive objects denied agency' (Manchester, 2007).

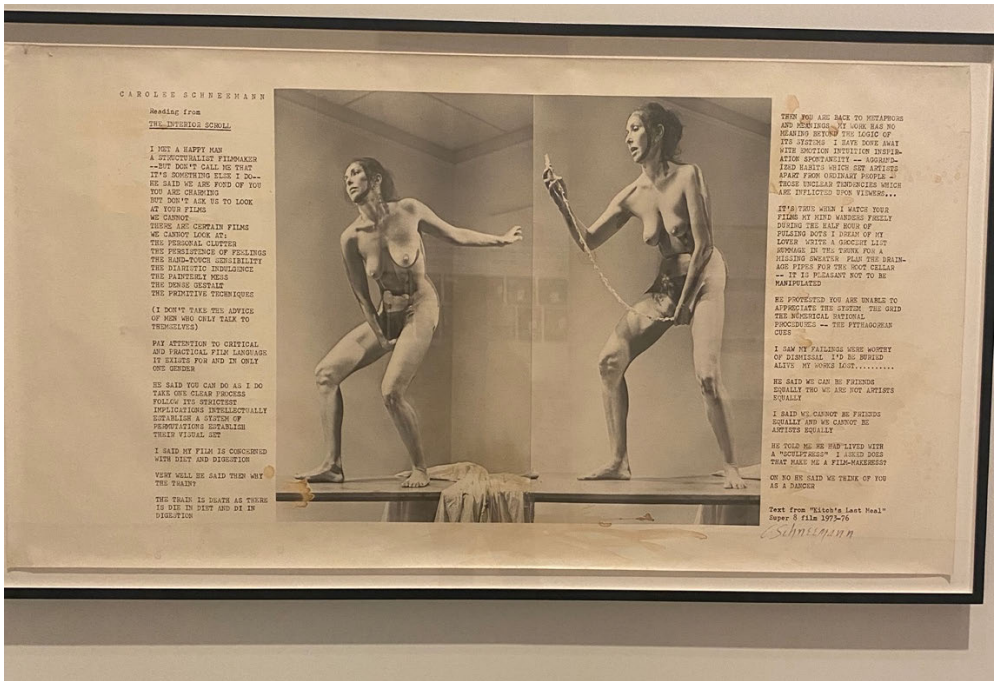

Figure 1. Carolee Schneemann, Interior Scroll (1975). Image taken by author at the: Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics Exhibition, Barbican (2022-23)

Carolee Schneemann's well-known performance *Interior Scroll* (1975) offers another apt example of vulvic art as she extracts a scroll from her vagina and begins to read the text from it. In her article 'The Obscene Body/Politic' (1991), Schneemann states:

> I didn't want to pull a scroll out of my vagina and read it in public, but the culture's terror of my making overt what it wished to suppress fuelled the image; it was essential to demonstrate this lived action about "vulvic space" against the abstraction of the female body and its loss of meaning (1991, pp. 32–33).

Schneemann confronts the overtly sexualised associations of the female body and utilises her vagina, otherwise seen as obscene, instead as a tool for activism, adequately discoursing the vulva as a site of terror. Judy Chicago's *Red Flag* (1971) also boldly pushes associations with obscenity by capturing the image of a bloodied tampon being pulled out of the vagina. This image has been widely accepted as one of the first depictions of menstrual blood within

Western contemporary art. Chicago's work depicts her vagina's menstrual blood as a symbol of pride, challenging themes of shame and disgust.

Figure 2. Hannah Wilke, SOS Starification Object Series.
Creative Commons Licenses. (Source: hyena-in-petticoats, 2011) CC BY-NC 2.0

In her performance piece, *S.O.S – Starification Object Series* (1974–82), Hannah Wilke asked audience members to chew a piece of gum. She then folded each piece of gum into small labia-shaped vulvas which she stuck to her body. Wilke stated that her performance work sought to rival penis envy by what she termed 'Venus Envy' (Frueh, 1996). The term recalls the male depiction of Venus as female beauty whilst also challenging the Freudian theory of 'penis envy', a concept that proposes that young girls experience anxiety due to their lack of a penis. Sigmund Freud's theories were widely valued in his time but have been heavily criticised by socio-political thinkers today. This is perhaps why *The Vagina Monologues* by V (formerly Eve Ensler) (1996) received widespread global recognition and was proclaimed by The New York Times 'as one of the most important plays of the past 25 years' (Eve Ensler, 2021). The play 'draw[s] on interviews [Ensler] had done with more than 200 women', addressing topics

around women's sexuality, rape, abuse, body image, reproduction, menstruation and sex work, among others (Saner, 2011). It also sought to remove the shame associated with the vulva and vagina through celebrating women's voices. Each year, *The Vagina Monologues* is updated with new monologues and includes a plurality of identities. In 2005, V added a new section, entitled 'They Beat the Girl Out of My Boy' which is written from the perspective of trans identities (Laughland, 2015).

Performances of the vulva can seek to directly challenge and reframe patriarchal influence with the aim of provoking audiences into considering alternative narratives of social, cultural and political value. However, when analysing feminist performance art at this specific moment in history, it is essential to acknowledge the lack of post-colonial discourse and diversity as well as the predominance of cis bodies. Therefore, this research explores the expanding landscapes of feminism and its intersection with queer politics, which has given rise to an urgent debate around non-cis bodies and fluid sexuality. My PaR will extend and complicate the discussion around vulva politics to address current issues surrounding gender, sexuality and identity politics. I will also analyse contemporary examples of artists who have built on the legacy of vaginal iconography to further explore discourses around body autonomy, trans and queer rights, race and the way we think about bodies. The artists discussed within my work are those who intentionally frame their vulvas in order to resignify the social, political and cultural context of their bodies in contemporary performance.

Summary of Chapters

The first chapter, 'Vulvaplicity: Methodology and Practice', considers vulvaplicity as a term and its formation and explains how my research will utilise it as a methodological approach.

Drawing on Robin Nelson's *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (2013), the conceptualisation of my research methods is informed by Nelson's 'multi-mode approach'. However, this chapter also calls for a deviation from Nelson's methodological approach when considering the nature of my research topic. While it acknowledges the influences of established methods, this chapter emphasises the necessity for an approach that addresses the complexities and sensitives of my research subject matter. Vulvaplicity takes a mani*folded* approach to PaR through the exploration of body-based research and qualitative methods which include applied theatre conventions and autoethnographic experimentations. This chapter frames the characteristics of vulvaplicity, focusing on how my approaches and methods interconnect with the overall aims of my project and research questions.

The second chapter, 'Obscene to be Seen', is the culmination of my PaR practice which became a collaborative stage performance with artists Orlanda Forrest, Dan Memory and Anna Armitage – The Vulvaplicity Collective – at Clifftown Theatre, Southend-on-Sea (2022). The overarching theme of the performance was exploring the vulva and intersecting themes in performance, combining myths with real-life stories to dismantle taboos around bodies. This performance was curated as an extension of my workshops (detailed in chapter 4); however, examines how vulvaplicity as a methodology was fully conceptualised within my PaR process. *Obscene to be Seen* was developed through applied theatre conventions and body-based practices, with particular attention to autoethnography and theoretical analysis of mythology, gender identity, selfhood and history, drawing on Elizabeth Ettorre's *Autoethnography as Feminist Method: Sensitising the feminist 'I'.*

The third chapter, 'Monstrous Identities and Witchy Acts', explores the monstrous female body through both critical and practical research. It introduces ideas around how history, mythology and policy under patriarchal regimes affect societal and cultural understandings of vulvas, vaginas and gynaecology, both implicitly and explicitly. Using *Notorious* (2017), a performance by The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein, as a case study, I explore the artist's embodiment of monstrous female narratives (from witches to the myth of Medusa) in order to provide a theoretical framework of how capitalism, mythology and patriarchal control affect bodies. A selection of literature – Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine*, Julia Kristiva's *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* and Anna-Maria Pinaka's *Porno-graphing: 'Dirty' Subjectivities & Self-Objectification in Contemporary Lens-Based Art* – are analysed to offer insight into female subjectivities in the contemporary socio-cultural climate. Although feminist discourse has combated the Freudian framework, Freud's theories have had a profound impact on Western science and thinking, contributing to harmful discourses around women's sexualities. For this reason, Freud's writings will also be discussed in this chapter as a tool for critique or incorporated into a footnote, where necessary, ensuring his theories do not receive predominant weighting within this thesis. In the final part of the chapter, I analyse my own PaR performance, *The Alien,* through the lens of vulvaplicity to reveal understandings around the womb, misogyny, autonomy and sexuality. Further, I employ a reading of Karl Marx and *Xenofeminism: A Politics of Alienation* by the collective Laboria Cubonik to analyse the politics of alienation, and use Creed's reading of classic horror films such as the *Alien Trilogy*, *Psycho* and *The Brood* to discuss queer identity and the ways in which women are presented as 'monstrous in relation to [their] reproductive and maternal functions' (Creed, 1993, p. 83).

The fourth chapter, 'Performing Vulvic Spectacles: Looking Twice, Thinking Anew', analyses interest in staging spectacles of the vulva to elicit a reaction, demand attention or arouse interest and those of work that interrogates particular discourses around gender, sexuality, sex and identity politics. This chapter examines spectacles produced by the artist and photographer Del LaGrace Volcano in Jenny Saville's painting *Matrix*, Prinx Chiyo in *The Sound of the Underground* and Buck Angel's appearance in the porn performance *Cirque Noir*, all of whom expose their vulvas to find pleasure in the liminal space between shock and unlearning. I will contextualise my ideas through José Muñoz's *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), Oyèrónké Oyěwùmi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997), and Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* and *Counter-Sexual Manifesto* (2000). This chapter analyses the binary that has consumed Western thought and acknowledges how colonialism established gender and sexual binaries that are performed and upheld by society today. Vulvic spectacles in performance are presented as a space of transformation, challenging patriarchal constructs and conjuring dialogue around an often-tabooed body part.

Following on from the theme of spectacles, my PaR within this chapter focuses on the workshops and vulvaplicity prompt cards that I curated as an educational resource influenced by my research. Informed by a queer and feminist reading, the prompt cards feature artists and academics who engage with vulvic discourses. Each card offers methods to create and share performance work, which I refer to as performative 'interventions' (a term I employ in protest against dominant patriarchal structures). My prompt cards were employed in a workshop setting as participants were given the space to explore themes of gender, sexuality, and body politics through applied theatre and autoethnographic approaches. In this chapter, I also acknowledge Petra Kuppers' book *Community Performance: An Introduction* which

thoughtfully demonstrates how applied theatre conventions within the frame of my PaR can facilitate different modes of expression, thinking and experiences surrounding bodies. Lastly, the chapter reflects upon my practice and its dialogue with others, which includes interviews with artist participants from *Obscene to be Seen,* outlining their experiences and inspirations as well as the impact of the project.

The conclusion draws together the multiple elements of Vulvaplicity as a manifolded practice in exploring performances of the vulva and its wider social, cultural and political significance. It analyses the potential of this project as a means of educating, challenging and opening up conversations on taboo topics within cultural and social parameters, as well as within the fields of contemporary performance, applied theatre and PaR. Further, it discusses the expansion of this project as a tri-monthly performance event at the Vagina Museum, in order to continue the conversations surrounding gender, sexuality and body politics in contemporary performance. This chapter references selected artists who have performed at the event to analyse the further impact of and future within the field as well as the need for continued research.

1 Vulvaplicity: Methodology and Practice

> Bodies are the material through which theatre researchers most often discuss performance; they are scrutinised, critiqued, displayed, transformed, gendered, controlled and determined in critical reviews, historical accounts and theorisations of practices such as theatre, live art and dance. Whether performing or spectating, bodies are often the means for understanding how performance operates and makes meaning. (Parker-Starbuck and Mock, 2011, p. 210)

Vulvaplicity emerged from my desire to further unfold the many representations of the vulva, hence the suffix 'plicit', from the Latin *plicare*, meaning 'fold(ed)'. Words such as implicit, explicit and complicit change meaning with the different prefixes but ultimately intertwine with each other: explicit is 'unfolded', exposed in some capacity; implicit is 'folded in', covert in its visibility and complicit is 'folded together', involved in its relevance (Merriam Webster, 2024; Rees, 2013, p. 252). Schneider acknowledges the element of 'plicit' within her analysis of the explicit body, stating that the word '"explicate" stem[s] from the Latin *explicare,* which means "to unfold"' (1997, p. 2). In her analysis of the explicit body, she seeks to unfold 'the body, as if pulling back velvet curtains to expose a stage, the performance artists in this book peel back layers of signification that surround their bodies like ghosts at a grave' (Schneider, 1997, p. 2). Emma Rees also acknowledges the correlation between 'explicit' and 'explicate' as a means of unfolding:

> [W]e might expect performance art literally to 'unfold' the customarily concealed cunt. Depending on how we interpret it, the innermost folds and secrets of the vagina are a cause for celebration – liberation, even – as details are revealed; or, in their mystery, they are a source of anxiety and doubt' (2014, p. 221).

Not only does ‘plicit’ hold many different interpretations when considered in relation to bodies and vulvas, but it also provides scope for revealing or looking anew. That is to say, through the analysis of the ‘plicit’, I do not wish to ‘make sense of these bodies’ (Parker-Starbuck and Mock, 2011, p. 217) but to negotiate with their interchangeability. Further, my research does not seek to reduce a person to their genitals but, rather, works ‘at the intersection of this tension to address specific qualities of individual bodies as distinguishable subjects and as interconnected beings in the world’ (Parker-Starbuck and Mock, 2011, p. 210). The project of vulvaplicity brings these words together as a useful portmanteau, as two meanings are combined into one for analysis. The vulva encompasses the many folds of the ‘plicit’, hence ‘vulva’-‘plicit’ infers something that *references* or is *present* in the folds of the vulva. The suffix ‘plicit’, i.e. ‘fold’, emphasises the many contexts in which the vulva fits or intertwines, highlighting that the vulva may take many different forms aesthetically, theoretically and ideologically. While the vulva may infer a presumed gendered binary in Western society, vulvaplicity challenges this assumption by acknowledging the fluidity of bodies. In doing so, it urges a rethinking of the embedded histories of patriarchal structures.[10] Through this logic, vulvaplicity also uses the vulva as a symbol of empowerment to facilitate conversations around contemporary culture, seeking to give validity and autonomy to participants who have felt ostracised, marginalised and silenced because of their bodies, gender identity or sexuality within patriarchal and heteronormative norms. Echoing the words of the scholars Meredith Jones and Marija Geiger Zeman in the journal *Transforming Genitals in Culture and Media,* ‘Transcending the essentialist gender ideas and binaries attributed to human bodies opens up space for new understandings of genitalia in movement, transformation and transition’ (2023,

[10] I use the term ‘vulva’ as this research predominantly refers to how society identifies and categorises people through what is seen. However, this research encompasses all parts of the anatomy including the vulva, vagina and gynaecological anatomy.

p.3). Furthermore, the ontology of vulvaplicity as a term is ephemeral, conditional and contingent on the historical, political, social and cultural context in which it is performed.

1.1 Vulvaplicity as a Conceptual Framework

In this thesis, vulvaplicity functions as both a conceptual framework and methodology for my PaR. As a neologism, vulvaplicity incorporates the concept of folding and unfolding to form a critical structure for analysis, exploration and knowledge. My conceptual framework utilises research to connect interwoven relationships between ideas, expectations, assumptions and theories that inform understandings of vulvas, vaginas and the gynaecological anatomy. This framework provides both orientation and context for my analysis, allows for an understanding of existing knowledge within the field, examines how this research provides new insights, and informs the development of my PaR methods.

Vulvaplicity is influenced by and engages with a wide range of theatrical, historical, social, cultural and political theoretical understandings presented throughout the body of this thesis, which include Schneider's theories of the explicit body, Paul B. Preciado's analysis of the constraints on gender identity and sexual orientation, Jack Halberstam's reformulation of time and space, Emma Rees's ideas on the evolution and demonisation of the vulva and C. Riley Snorton's evolving term of transitivity.[11] My theoretical concepts and research investigate key topics such as monstrosity, mythology, obscenity, abjection, morality, legislation and alienation through performance case studies, which I refer to as performances of the vulva.

[11] In his book, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017), C. Riley Snorton analyses the ontology between Blackness and transness from the nineteenth century to today. Snorton argues that racialised gender may have created the foundations for gender mutability, offering an alternative lens to how discourses of queer, Black and trans studies have been interpreted.

More specifically, my research examines how artists use performance as a vehicle to discuss or expose their vulva, in order to alter, transform, raise awareness, confront and rupture socio-cultural themes of gender, sexuality, body politics and beyond within dominant structures of patriarchal power. Through this, I hope to synthesise interrelated topics and theories to provide insight for my project, as well as to illuminate and contribute new knowledge on why vulvic practices in theatre and performance call for its own point of analysis.

Vulvaplicity's framework is deeply connected to queer and feminist research, which challenges patriarchal power dynamics and brings hidden topics to light. As Róisín Ryan-Floor and Rosalind Gill note in their book, *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process,* 'Feminist research is informed by a history of breaking silences' with 'a tradition of demanding that the unseen and the unacknowledged be made visible and heard' (2010, p. 1). Concealment is often intertwined with the politics of bodies, both being 'politically inscribed and … shaped by practices of containment and control' (Brown and Gershon, 2016, p. 1). Bodies are inherently political; historically, bodies have been theorised, institutionalised, illustrated, understood, presented and represented through multiple discourses and operations of power. Nadia Brown and Sarah Allen Gershon suggest that 'social conditioning and normalization incorrectly assume a stable nature of identity and power relations' (2016, p. 1). More specifically, the question arises of how we understand identity when it has become familiarised through social conditioning.

The theorist Judith Butler discusses identity as being wholly 'performative', stating that social reality is formed 'through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social signs' (1990, p. 270). It is through these conventions that social reality is prescribed, enacted and repeated. According to the performer and writer Shannon Stewart, these embodied gestures 'are

understood as individual but enacted collectively and reinforce interlocking systems and modes of being that further systems of domination, exploitation and violence but also (maybe more hopefully) forms of resistance, disruption, reimagining' (Stewart, 2021). For instance, gender binaries have created a system where heterosexuality and gender roles have become embedded and generalised into 'normative' Western culture. Butler describes how social meaning eventually changes a person's bodily materiality: 'One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body' and 'identity is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality' (1990, p. 272; 1999, p. 33). The nature and characteristics of vulvaplicity create a paradox for stability within this research, since I interpret its very fluidity and ephemerality as its point of stability. Moreover, body-based research within this thesis analyses 'the very notion of "body" as interpretable and flexible, yet materially and culturally specific', dependent on identity and environment (Parker-Starbuck and Mock, 2011, p. 211). These corporeal contexts lead my research to consider how bodies may engage, disrupt or interconnect with 'interlocking systems' of the world, as well as how we may develop a sense of self through them.

Genitals, despite their inevitable connection to the body as a whole, are often ascribed their own set of 'ideologies, connotations, inscriptions, norms, practices, technologies, imaginaries, feelings, experiences and representations' (Jones and Zeman, 2023, p.3). As discussed in the introduction, the genitals are frequently regarded as a site through which social, cultural and political systems play out. According to Jones and Zeman, genitals were historically 'often positioned in terms of dualisms: femininities/masculinities, youth/old age, beauty/ugliness, pleasure/pain, hatred/love, disability/capacity, intimacy/violation, private/public, etc. These binaries create, support and reflect social distinctions, hierarchies and asymmetries'. Drawing on how bodies may perform in relation to their social environments, vulvaplicity is interested

in the multifaceted meaning of the vulva and its intersections with how identity may be performed, understood or challenged through the genitals. As Butler describes, the genitals provide a 'process whereby body parts become epistemologically accessible through an imaginary investiture' (2011, pp. 30–31); for example, Western ideas of gender and sex are often coupled as one interlocking system, producing a fixed framework for identification. As Colette Conroy suggests, Western society has a 'relatively arbitrary means of looking at our genitals' and categorising sex (2010, p. 59). This framework's intersection with body-based research centres around the specificity of vulvas, whereby bodies may situate themselves within the inscribed social norms, exploit binaries or open up space for a variety of becomings. As vulvaplicity observes the ways bodies operate, move and exist in time and space, my research also examines how bodies can be subjects of consumption, spectacle and observation.

This investigation uncovers the complex *folds* of meaning and power that influence these interactions. Furthermore, the conceptual framework of vulvaplicity prompted further questions about the function of performance practice. These questions explore what performance may reveal, conceal or make space for. Therefore, I ask, How can performance reveal the socio-cultural contexts that shape perspectives and knowledge of vulvas and bodies? How do we consider the vulva as a point of analysis? If we consider the vulva as a point of study, do we inscribe our understandings of bodies with the same 'hetero' and patriarchal obstacles that feminism and queer practices sought to challenge? Why is the study of vulvas important in relation to bodies, gender, sexuality and marginalisation? How might taboos surrounding the subject matter cause constraints within my PaR? Or how do these constraints offer my research a productive moment of analysis? How do we separate vulvas from binary anatomical structures? How does performance serve as a tool for new understandings or unlearnings to emerge? Can bodies in performance reclaim agency over the vulva? As a queer,

neurodivergent and cis-gendered woman, how can I make my work accessible to the trans, non-binary and intersex community?

Building upon the scope outlined in my conceptual framework and the research questions posed, I will go onto discuss my methodology. Through PaR, my methods seek to investigate the discourses that surround Western perceptions of genitals and the politics that they present both socially and culturally, thereby contributing to the understanding of how the vulva, vagina and internal gynaecological anatomy are perceived in relation to bodies and their connection to the world. Methods, as I consider below, are ways in which my PaR 'encounter[s] bodies to collect evidence and information, and to gain deeper understandings about performance' (Parker-Starbuck and Mock, 2011, p. 211). As such, this thesis utilises qualitative PaR methods which include applied theatre conventions and autoethnographical experimentations, which I will go on to explore.

1.2 Methods and Means

The primary methodology informing and shaping this research is PaR. The initial methodological planning of this research project drew from Robin Nelson's triangular model of the 'multi-mode approach', an epistemology that is 'produced through different modes of knowledge: "know-how; know-what and know-that"' (2013, p. 38). For Nelson, this triangular model was designed as a framework to merge the gap between PaR and academic research, presenting these modes of knowing through the relationship between '"theory" and "practice" in an iterative process of "doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing"' (2013, p. 32). See Appendix two for my analysis of Nelson's triangular model. At the core of my methodological approach to PaR is applied and community theatre conventions that engages with a plurality of

identities, as well as a combination of body-based research and practice, which involves exploring the physical, embodied and experiential aspects of bodies. As well as the contextual research conducted through my conceptual framework, this thesis also views theory as a method. Theoretical frameworks provide analytical perspectives that support my concepts and research, enabling them to inform other methods. This serves as a means to share knowledge and encourage new insights or modes of thinking. These elements function as the foundation for my investigation, drawing from Nelson's framework to emphasise the relationship between practice and scholarly inquiry. However, where my methodology deviates from Nelson, is through its particular attention to socio-cultural contexts, power dynamics and identity. Due to the social-cultural implications that surround the genitals, the need for a more effective methodology that addressed intersecting discourses thoughtfully and inclusively was needed, hence vulvaplicity's development. As such, embedded within these core methods are the processes of autoethnography, reflexivity, performativity, and the intersections between practice and theory. Furthermore, vulvaplicity within this thesis is approached as a manifolded praxis, which I will go on to explore in greater depth.

As vulvaplicity is bound to a purpose that 'seeks to address issues beyond the [theatrical] form itself' (Ackroyd, 2000), it therefore can be seen as an *approach* to community and applied theatre conventions. More precisely, vulvaplicity aims to raise awareness and give agency to those who explore themes around vulvas, vaginas and the gynaecological anatomy. It thus arguably delineates a 'participatory ethos' that challenges my practice to consider 'reflexive and critical research methods as part of addressing wider issues of social justice and equity' (Hughes *et al*., 2011, p. 187). My practice aims to include a plurality of identities and lived experiences in order to engage with the different socio-political and cultural contexts that surround vulvas, vaginas and gynaecology, using workshops and collaborative performance

work as a method to facilitate this. In *Applied Practice: Evidence and Impact in Theatre, Music and Art*, Matthew Reason and Nick Rowe characterise applied theatre as 'projects and workshops that exhibit elements of the radical roots of the subgenre in Marxism and popular theatre' (2017, p. 9). This interpretation is one that also aligns with the conceptual framework of vulvaplicity, through its critique of the socio-political theory and capitalism, that have been constructed through a patriarchal dominant culture. Similarly, this thesis concerns itself with contemporary performance practices which include Live Art, performance art, cabaret and drag among others.

According to Nelson, reflexivity explores how 'processes of making' can inform 'mode[s] of knowing' (2013, p. 44). Similarly, the practice of applied theatre can be 'defined as a reflexive knowledge-making practice that works to materialise, investigate and remake social experience, narratives, histories and context' (Parker-Starbuck and Mock, 2011, p. 191). The initial starting point of this PhD project, as outlined in my introduction, was self-reflexivity around my own body and labia. Reflexive thinking – when considering the vulva, vagina and gynaecological anatomy – has the potential to ask participants to consider their own understandings of these topics. The result of reflexive thinking may encourage self-awareness (embodied reflexivity) and can facilitate important critical reflections within the PaR process. Due to the stigma that surrounds vulvas, vaginas and the gynaecological anatomy, reflexive thinking as a method has the potential to create sufficient impact that taboo may be replaced with new modes of knowledge-making, unlearning and unknowing knowledge, activism and education (Hughes *et al*., 2011, p. 119). However, due to the subjective nature of reflexivity, its inclusion requires 'continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes' (Olmos-Vega *et al*., 2022, p. 241). As such, it is important to

understand how my research and enquiry may be influenced by my background, experiences, practices, biases and subjective values. In this sense, 'reflexivity, then, concerns not only reflecting on what is being achieved and how the specific work is taking shape but also being aware of where you stand ("where you are coming from") in respect of knowledge traditions more broadly' (Nelson, 2013, pp. 44–45). Reflexivity, as I understand it, does not aim for pure objectivity but, rather, utilises subjectivity as a method to broaden research findings and understandings. Therefore, this research employs strategies that 'ethically, [use] these reflexive processes [to] offer participants a say in how their words are interpreted, ensuring that they can represent themselves and contribute meaningfully to research findings' (Olmos-Vega *et al*., 2022, p. 247). Through such processes, I hope to gain a wider knowledge of the depth of discourses surrounding vulvas, vaginas and the gynaecological anatomy.

Ethnography, or 'performance ethnography', is, as Joni L. Jones states, an 'embodied methodology' that explores 'how culture is done in the body' (Jones, 2002, cited in Parker-Starbuck and Mock, 2011, p. 225). This concept can be linked back to Butler's theory of performativity and also resonates with John Freeman's suggestion of autoethnographic performance practices that present 'an individual performer's perspective, [as] one that draws on and connects to a collective understanding' (Freeman, 2015, p. 167). My practice uses ethnographic methods to explore how socio-cultural environments may shape perspectives and knowledges surrounding bodies. Borrowing from Wolff-Michael Roth, my research presents ethnography and autoethnography as interchangeable as each term 'stand[s] in a dialectical relationship' to the other (2005, p. 3). Autoethnography plays a fundamental role in foregrounding personal understandings and perspectives within my PaR project, deepening theoretical analysis through its focus on lived experiences. More specifically, autoethnography allows both myself and those participating within this project to reflect upon personal

experiences, beliefs and identities within performance which acts as an essential impetus for my research.

Autoethnography, as a mode of qualitative research within this research project, not only explores my own practice but also facilitates a collective understanding of diverse viewpoints that stem from different embodied knowledge through modes of applied theatre. According to Jenny Hughes, Jenny Kidd and Catherine McNamara, in 'The Usefulness of Mess: Artistry, Improvisation and Decomposition in the Practice of Research in Applied Theatre', applied theatre practices also offer multi-model methods and approaches when considered in relation to practice. These methods and approaches can include 'embodied intuitive', 'reflective conversations', 'creative, visual and discursive methods of participatory research and action research that engage groups in investigations of their immediate experiences' and 'interview- and observation-based methodologies of qualitative social science' (Hughes *et al.*, 2011, pp. 191–192). Below, I created the Venn diagram shown to think about the ways in which my proposed methods and approaches may intersect:

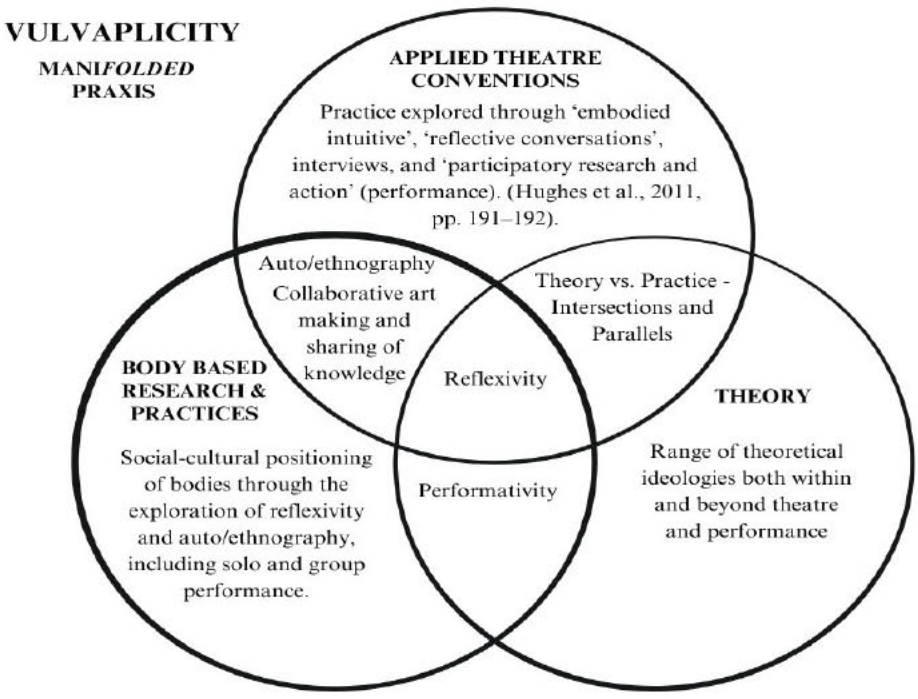

Figure 3. Venn Diagram of Methodology

1.3 Interchanging Roles: Participants, Collaborators and Audiences

As the project aims to represent a plurality of identities through lived experiences, tensions emerge within my work regarding the terms ‘participants’, ‘collaborators’ and ‘audience’ and how they are defined. Moreover, while individuals within my practice may initially engage as ‘participants’, this term can, at times, feel restrictive and inaccurate when considering their potential involvement, reflexive and autoethnographic thinking and engagement with the work. Given the nature of my research topic and its aims to creatively engage with others through the facilitation of PaR, it is clear that the structure of practice regarding how participation is considered needs to adapt in order to align with the aims of vulvaplicity.

Conventional frameworks of applied theatre and performance art, while integral, do not fully capture the specific and nuanced focus of vulvaplicity. Therefore, this structure, proposes an alternative paradigm that emphasises inclusive participation, reflexivity, collaboration and co-creation. This paradigm prioritises agency, knowledge distribution and collective learning and sharing. As a researcher, maintaining reflexivity is also imperative when considering how my own ideas or biases may impose upon people’s responses to the work. In rethinking practice in this way, I aim to establish a structure that not only achieves the goals of vulvaplicity, but also finds accessible modes of addressing complex and underrepresented topics. At times, my PaR will explore these roles as interchangeable (for visual representation of how these roles were approached within practice, see Appendix three).

My practice in what follows specifically employs methods that relate to embodied intuitive, reflective conversations and sharing, interviews and participatory research and action. The manifolded approach within vulvaplicity is also helpful in that it detaches itself from binary

and linear modes of practice. As a neurodivergent academic and performance artist with dyslexia and ADHD, the binary modes of working sometimes presented within academic conventions present their own challenges which can feel both restrictive and performative. A manifolded approach offers scope for numerous possibilities to emerge and showcases how such pluralities intersect. In the PaR that follows, my neurodiversity has implicitly worked alongside my practice and informed how I see the world. The initial starting point of this research – as discussed in the introduction – was the exploration of my body and its positioning within patriarchal culture. As such, my research seeks to further unfold this understanding to investigate lived experiences as well as the ways in which bodies have had meaning ascribed to them. Chapter 2 examines the implementation of vulvaplicity as a methodology in my PaR performance, *Obscene to be Seen*, in order to examine the significance of this research topic and address my research questions.

1.4 Vulvaplicity Manifesto

The vulvaplicity manifesto was curated with careful consideration of my created term's values and aims. As a newly conceptualised idea, I was keen to articulate its interconnected political and artistic nature. These values and aims significantly informed my practice:

*

Vulvaplicity functions
as an epistemological intervention in
unlearning internalised misogyny that has
been invoked by imperialism, capitalism and the
patriarchy, through rethinking and restaging performative
interventions within contemporary performance. **Vulvaplicity**
unfolds normative, constricting perceptions of gender and sexuality
and refolds them into new ways of thinking. **Vulvaplicity** mutates, probes,
folds and unfolds, analysing how artists intentionally frame their vulvas in order to
resignify the social, political and cultural context of their bodies in contemporary
performance. **Vulvaplicity** seeks to unfold and refold how bodies are perceived in a world
in which women, gender non-conformists, trans and queer people take centre stage. Louder
for the people at the back! **Vulvaplicity** undoes narratives of repressive power that exist and
have existed for centuries against bodies in relation to their genitals. **Vulvaplicity** requires
individuals to disidentify with institutionalised forms of gender and sexual identity along
with other contemporary narratives that are binary, linear and stringent. **Vulvaplicity** is the
refusal to distort our bodies into narratives that do not serve us as individuals and
refocuses our attention on alternative modes of being. It does not function as a
mode of transgression but allows us to consider how to take up space
freely and openly. **Vulvaplicity** analyses how bodies became
obscene, monstrous and categorised through multiple fractured
identities. We must consider ways to reside in those
fractures. If those structural inequalities are formed by
heteronormative and patriarchal culture, then
we must find a way to take pleasure in
those cracks, for structures of
permanence have nothing
to offer us.

*

2 Obscene to be Seen

Obscene to be Seen (*OTBS*), was a curated performance that sought to analyse the representation of vulvas through themes of gender, sexuality and identity, combining myths and real-life stories to dismantle taboos around bodies. The creation of *OTBS* was developed through my facilitation of the vulvaplicity workshops (discussed in Chapter 4), which culminated in a performance formed by previous attendees, the Vulvaplicity Collective.[13] In this chapter, artist participants shift into the role of a collaborator through the construction of *OTBS*; however, it is important to distinguish that collaborators, participants and audience members share differences and similarities within my PaR outputs and the ways they interact with the aims of vulvaplicity. A detailed breakdown of these positions can be found in Appendix three.

The collective comprises four artists: myself, Dan Memory (he/they), Orlanda (Orla) Forrest (she/her) and Anna Armitage (they/them). Each artist participant had their own distinct politics, identity and performance practice which intertwined with this project. Dan is a queer performance artist and drag artist whose work explores spirituality, love and life in relation to transness, queerness and fatness. Their work celebrates queerness by putting shame in the spotlight. Dan felt particularly drawn to the ways in which transness was represented within the work they created. Orla is a visual artist who has extensive training in Circus Arts, specialising in aerial. Her practice is concerned with the body's connection to nature as well as themes of gender, erotica and sex work. Orla was raised as a witch by her mother, who practised herbalism and explored the healing properties of nature. Orla's practice explored pagan

[13] *OTBS* was the final PaR output of my project, however, is placed in Chapter 2 to situate my main practice more centrally within my thesis and demonstrate how vulvaplicity and research questions were put into practice.

witchcraft and its vilification within patriarchal constructs. Anna is a non-binary queer creative, storyteller, performer and artist. Anna's practice was concerned with using their voice to explore complex themes surrounding gender identity.[14] The collective sought to further explore the manifolded narratives that come into play when analysing the vulva, vagina and gynaecological anatomy and to articulate how performances of the vulva can provoke audiences to reflect upon social inequalities created by patriarchal frameworks.

This chapter examines my PaR project, *OTBS* to explore the strategies employed in practically realising vulvaplicity as a methodology. It also examines performance as a tool to challenge taboos, stigma and myths within the heteronormative and patriarchal contexts that continue to affect bodies that may lie outside of the binary. At its core, *OTBS* was created by combining vulvaplicity's fundamental methods of theory, body-based practices and applied theatre. This project further developed and evolved through collaborative exploration, utilising autoethnography, re-imagined fiction and histories.[15] Returning to my research questions as an initial basis of inquiry, I hope 'to bring out practical methods in the frame of the PaR methodology and to document and share the approaches which produced both the artwork and the research findings' (Nelson, 2013, p. 37). More specifically, this chapter integrates my written theory explored throughout this thesis on performances of the vulva as a distinctive practice and the mani*folded* methodology of vulvaplicity explored within my PaR work.

[14] Whilst Anna is very much a part of the project, they had to leave the process early due to personal circumstances. Their voice is still within the work produced; however, some rehearsals did not include them for this reason. Additionally, although Anna was not physically present within the final performance, the work they produced was still presented.

[15] Applied theatre conventions are explored in greater depth in Chapter 4, which focuses on my PaR study of the vulvaplicity workshops. Chapter 4 discusses my workshops developments that preceded *OTBS*.

2.1 OTBS Research and Development

In the research and development (R&D) phase of *OTBS*, I sought to further explore the socio-cultural positioning of bodies and the wider intersections of vulvas, vaginas and gynaecology, investigating my research questions through modes of performance. It is important to note that my research did not aim to define people by their anatomy but to acknowledge that vulvas and vaginas exist unashamedly, and that for many people their vulvas constitute a significant part of their identity, both implicitly and explicitly.

The memory placed at the beginning of my thesis served as the initial prompt for this research and underscored the importance of reflexive and autoethnographic methods within my own work. As such, my PaR sought to use autoethnography as an invitation to empower individuals to make personal connections with this research through performance. The incorporation of individual lived experiences was integral to understanding the work's impact and outputs, which also facilitated examination of how these experiences are shaped by broader societal influences. Influenced by Elizabeth Ettorre's book *Autoethnography as Feminist Method: Sensitising the feminist 'I',* I employ the method of autoethnography in the curation of *OTBS* through a feminist lens. As Ettorre discusses, autoethnography enables:

> … narrative shifts or pushes us from notions that there is a single cultural perspective revealing an irrefutable set of truths; and through narrative, any scholar can achieve an understanding of personal experiences "beyond specific historical contexts or shifting relations of power and inequalities" (Bell, 2000: 139) (Ettorre, 2017, p. 1).[16]

[16] Narrative enquiries can be defined as 'the premise that, as human beings, we come to understand and give meaning to our lives through story' (Trahar, 2009).

I hoped to employ narrative-based methods to facilitate a collective praxis that supported an opening of ideas, visibility, agency, resistance and new understandings which deviated from the patriarchal 'cultural perspective'. That is to say, autoethnography has the potential to challenge dominant discourses within socio-cultural contexts and provide alternative perspectives toward individual experiences and identities that have been traditionally disregarded or marginalised. An aim for *OBTS* was to also employ narrative based techniques as a means of conveying stories and experiences accessibly for audiences, as well as demonstrate that topics surrounding vulvas, vaginas and gynaecology intersect and impact a multitude of discourses. Similarly, autoethnographic approaches can 'generate useful ways of creating knowledge about individuals, collective agency and the interior language of emotional vulnerability' (Ettorre, 2017, p. 1). Autoethnography enables both researcher and artist participants autonomy to reflect upon ethical considerations, such as informed consent and awareness, ensuring that individuals remain in control of what they disclose. Utilising this method in what follows, I hope to demonstrate three specific moments within the R&D sessions that informed the curation of *OTBS*, as well as analyse how vulvaplicity served as a critical tool for addressing and enriching my research (see Figure 3 for a Venn diagram of vulvaplicity's methods and approaches). These moments do not describe the finished product, nor do they explore each session, but they illuminate the fundamental moments behind the development of *OTBS*. In total, the collective took part in a series of ten 90-minute sessions that sought to discover topics that felt important to them.

Example: 1

Date: 19th April 2022

Description: In the first session, artist participants were introduced to my research inquiry and aims in greater detail. As they had attended my workshop previously, they already had an understanding of my research, but were shown further examples of works and themes that I engaged with. For example, each artist participant was shown the works of feminist artists from the 1960s–70s who pioneered vulvic art. We extended the conversation to include contemporary artists that they had previously engaged with through the prompt cards such as The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein, Del LaGrace Volcano and Nicola Canavan, amongst others (see Chapter 4). In this session, I was interested in finding ways for the artists to 'reflect autoethnographically upon their positions' (Ettorre, 2006, p. 24), identities and practices. Therefore, I designed three exercises that encouraged them to consider the kind of topics they felt drawn to. The first exercise individually asked them to reflect more broadly on the following questions:

- What is it that you would like to create work about?
- What types of questions would you like to pose within your work?
- Are you ready to discuss it?

The final question was posed as a safeguarding measure to ensure that participants did not choose a topic that felt particularly difficult for them or would reveal elements of their identity that they were not ready to discuss. The second exercise sought to draw out their own interests. I created a series of spider diagrams and asked them to expand on one of the following lists: 'topics that make up my identity', 'topics that consume me or I feel frustrated at', 'topics that I feel passionate towards, love or enjoy' and 'topics that my practice relates to or focuses on'. At this point, Dan, Orla and Anna were not asked to share anything with me, as the focus of these exercises was to build and gather material. Lastly, the group was asked to engage in an automatic writing exercise around some of the responses they had written. When I asked for their responses, each person had produced a unique focus of interest which intersected with their own experiences and vulvic perspectives. For example, Orla discussed themes around 'validation', 'mothering', 'loving' and 'sexism within witchcraft'. Dan discussed his frustrations around 'sex' as well as his passions for 'queerness', 'club night culture' and 'genderbending as a joyful practice'. Anna spoke about their interests in 'rituals', 'tattooing', 'gender identity' and the 'spoken word'. As each person disclosed their responses, other ideas emerged through reflective conversation, which enriched our understanding and collaborative process.

The central aim of the session was not just to allow artist participants to start considering their positionality within the work but also, where possible, to disseminate my 'research outcomes and where appropriate, to facilitate the knowledge transfer of those outcomes' (Kälvemark, 2011, p. 16). I hoped to lay out the foundations of my research and expand the collectives' knowledge of how contemporary performance artists have engaged with themes intersecting my research in interesting ways and forms. My research focuses on performance art's profound ability to raise awareness and provoke questions about the wider social and political world. Professor Charles R. Garoian, in his book *Performing Pedagogy: Towards an Art of Politics* (1999), provides a useful framework for analysing performance art, stating how 'performance art repositions artists, teachers, and students to critique cultural discourses and practises that inhibit, restrict, or silence their identity formation, agency, and creative production' (Garioian, 1999, p. 5). Performance art was the central convention used in creating work within *OTBS*, both on stage and in rehearsal, due to its political nature and focus on identity politics which can pull underrepresented voices in from the fringes. It also provides an open framework wherein different conventions of performance can merge into one.

A good example of how performance art can engage in socio-cultural discourses can be seen in Lois Weaver's performance project *Public Address Systems,* which reflects on socially engaged and participatory performance processes. Examples include 'Long Table' (2003), which follows dinner-table etiquette and encourages engaged conversation and 'Commit an Act of Domestic Terrorism: Hang Your Laundry in Public' (2011), a public installation piece originally installed on the streets of New York City which involved hanging out laundry and creating a space for discussions with passers-by. Weaver employs contemporary performance as a means to encourage public conversation around a wide range of discourses; this is a key context for my own PaR research. Although Weaver's project *Public Address Systems* and

OTBS differed in their outputs and methodologies, they both aimed to facilitate conversation and foster creative expression through performance. Furthermore, through the lens of contemporary performance and by utilising narrative-based methods inherent in autoethnography, *OTBS* stemmed from an urgent need to generate conversations. By asking each artist participant to reflexively think about and respond to the questions through autoethnographic methods, it enabled a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives of interest. The use of autoethnography later became a both *process* and *product* for creativity and performance-making, which I will go onto explore in example 2.

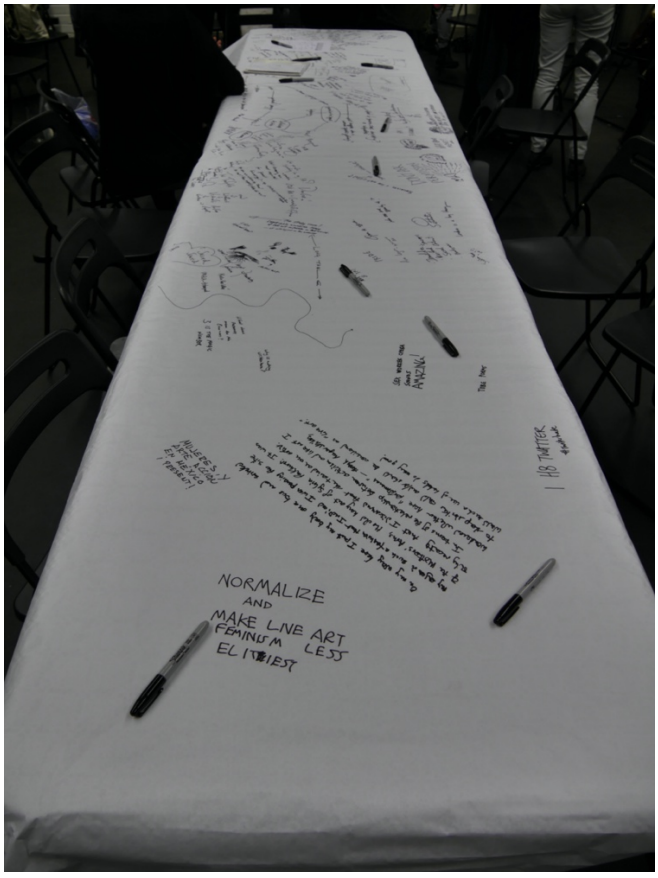

Figure 4. Lois Weaver's Long Table on Live Art and Feminism
Creative Commons Licenses. (Source: Edwardx, 2014) CC BY-SA 3.0.

Example: 2

Date: 16th May 2023

Description: After the first session, each person was encouraged to consider a topic they felt connected to and explore their ideas in greater depth through research. They were asked to bring along their research and, optionally, an object that held a personal memory or revealed something about their identity. The aim was to use this material as a stimulus to consider creating images with meaning.

Orla had researched information around hair, witchcraft, myths and sexuality and had investigated how the state had governed certain pagan practices within history. She discovered a link between witchcraft and pubic hair. The object that she chose to bring in was a matted bundle of hair. Dan's research led to Catholicism, spirituality, rituals and Greek mythology and its links to gender identity and transformation. He chose to bring in tarot cards and his own poetic writings. Anna's research looked at purification rituals and their connections to gender identity and chose to bring in a spoken word piece that they had created as an outcome of their research and their feelings towards their identity. Using this material, the participants were asked to construct a series of images and moving tableaux that represented key themes from their research. Orla explored movement using hair; Dan created body prints and Anna looked at how they could use ritualistic movements to move around space in a body encasement sac, similar to the one I used for the alien. The aim was to be as explorative as possible and see what emerged within these moments.

Image Description: Body prints created by Dan using paint and canvas. These prints were significant to Dan's process and relationship to the work. Not long before engaging with this project, Dan had undergone top surgery. For Dan, his identity as a trans man and his 'identity as someone with a vulva' have always been separate (Memory, 2022). This moment of creation enabled him to 'reconcile' these aspects of themselves, describing it as 'like stepping into my new man body', which was an affirming process for him (Memory, 2022). The interview discussing this particular moment can be found at the end of Chapter 4.

The session used a series of stimuli that aimed to develop the participants' ideas and interests. Research proved a useful strategy for each person to gain an understanding of the socio-cultural contexts surrounding their topic of interest. This understanding also encouraged them to reflect on how their identities may align within these socio-cultural contexts. As a researcher, I recognise that research can become subjective through how its gathered and analysed, which are shaped by individual perspectives, and values. While I carefully guided and facilitated each session, allowing artist participants autonomy to explore topics specific to their identities, ensured that any research they conducted was grounded in their lived experiences and contextual understandings, rather than solely reflecting my own. This approach was significant to the values and aims of vulvaplicity and aligned with my research questions.

As discussed in my methodology, theory fosters analytical thinking as well as serves as a means to share knowledge and encourage diverse perspectives. Additionally, for those who brought in objects, incorporating these items also helped to reveal how their personal experiences and research interests were interconnected. Moreover, as each person explained their object to me, they began to engage with autoethnographic approaches to storytelling, utilising not only research but also lived experiences to understand and articulate their wider socio-cultural experiences. For example, Orla explained how she was raised a witch, and that hair is significant both in witchcraft and her Roma heritage. Similarly, Dan's tarot cards and research on Greek mythology helped me, as a facilitator, to notice particular connections around spirituality and invention that may not have been obvious to him at the time. It felt necessary to further develop the performance around identity politics to discover what might emerge. In this context, Carnesky's performance of *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman* (2016) is a relevant example. In creating the performance, Carnesky employed an ethnographic approach to facilitate individual and personal responses to menstruation. Quoting Ettore's reading of

political philosopher Hannah Arendt's work, Carnesky's performance used autoethnographic practices to transform 'personal stories into political realities by revealing power inequalities inherent in human relationships and the complex cultures of emotions embedded in these unequal relationships' (Ettore, 2017, p. 2). Within her PhD, Carnesky also discusses how she situates her work within an autoethnographic framework and has implicitly embodied this as a practice since the 1990s (2019, p. 1). What I encountered within Carnesky's performance was an intimate exchange of trust and empathy; a revealing of something personal and permission to look inwards at my own relationship and view of menstrual blood. An often-taboo topic was transformed into a site of power and reclamation.

In this sense, autoethnography differs as a qualitative method from other forms of data collection in its ability to produce 'collective understanding' (Freeman, 2015, p. 167). This sense of collective understanding was something that I too wanted to reflect within the work of *OTBS*. Looking at the importance of illuminating my performers' identities within the work allowed the exploration of diverse themes. Autoethnography in *OTBS* sought to draw out 'knowledge [that] comes from political understandings of one's social positioning as well as experiences of the cultural freedoms and constraints one encounters' (Ettore, 2017, p. 2). In adopting this approach, we were also able to negotiate between the kinds of stories that we, as individuals, were able to tell and which did not appropriate other identities. Asking participants to develop images from their stimulus enabled them to reflect on how we might convey such ideas through performance. It also enabled the participants to visualise how their identities fit into the work itself, as demonstrated in Dan's body prints. As each person engaged with the research by developing, responding to, and curating material through autoethnography, they shifted to collaborators within the project. This shift allowed them to contribute unique perspectives rooted in their identities, emphasising the value of their voice and contributions.

Example: 3

Date: 30th May 2022

Note: Anna was unable to be a part of this session. Additionally, some concepts and theories discussed in this section are further explored in later chapters of my research. While this written research preceded *OTBS*, elements are positioned here to as it influenced the performance.

Description: As we curated material that focused on both our individual and collective identities, I could see clear intersections between mythology and our positionalities within the world. For example, Dan's interest in Greek mythology often intersected with ideologies of rebirth and the transformation of self, intertwined with transness, and Orla's interest in mythology and witchcraft was rooted in rebellion, rituals and healing. Each member of the collective identifies as LGBTQI+, and I came to realise that all the topics that we explored are inherent to queer culture. That is to say, each individual had, perhaps both consciously and unconsciously, begun to 'reflect autoethnographically upon their positions vis-à-vis heteronormativity' (Ettore, 2017, p. 24). Myths hold relevance in many different cultures and have historically acted as tales that shape patriarchal socio-cultural perspectives. As such, it felt appropriate to analyse the queering of myths and the retelling of it through a lens that deviates from hetero-patriarchal norms.

One myth that was explored, detailed further in Chapter 3, involved philosopher Albertus Magnus's ideas suggesting that a menstruating woman could conjure a serpent by burying her hair in the earth (Magnus 1992: 96, official translation). This myth is one that Orla connected to and was interested in exploring further. The relationship between snake and witch felt particularly poignant as the snake became a reoccurring symbol within many of the myths I researched in this PhD. I posed this question to the participants: How might we go about using our identities to queer mythology? This question helped to frame the curation of *OTBS* and informed the ways in which we retold narrative-based information. We began staging how this myth may be retold, with Dan representing the snake and Orla embodying her identity as a witch. Rather than the snake being a site of terror, as described within many myths, I asked Dan to visualise the snake as a symbol of rebirth, metaphorically shedding its skin and offering a space for transformation and healing. Employing movement-based practices, I asked each performer to re-enact the myth through their bodies, instructing them to interact with one another as well as to imagine what this interaction may feel like.

This moment saw the emergence of a poignant scene within the work and an exploration of the ways in which we might be able to retell stories that challenge classifications of ontological inscription. As Babbage posits, mythology is 'far from being "timeless" entities outside the processes of human development – [they] are reflections of the symbolic order through which cultures are produced' (Babbage 2011, 22). Mythology is intrinsic to the analysis of vulvic discourse and has helped inform many social understandings today. Perhaps this is why each person also connected with a particular myth within their research. This moment helped outline a clear agenda in terms of how *OTBS* might explore a subject matter, by seeking to reframe, dismantle or retell it through our own lived experiences and queer identities. In his book *Contemporary British Queer Performance* (2012), Stephen Greer discusses how queer performance practices can facilitate a 'deconstructive critique of sex, gender and sexuality' (2012, p. 3). However, as Catherine Silverstone observes, Greer also raises 'awareness of the limitations of "queer" in relation to claims for radical action, and an appreciation of how the designation "queer" has the potential to homogenise difference' (2014, p. 127). In this view, the term queer, in my practice, 'operate[d] as the call to interrogate and articulate the historical and material specificity of sex and gender practices' (Greer, 2012, p. 6). That is to say that the aim was to reveal the imbalances within historical, cultural and societal politics of gender and sexual difference. Attempting to restage the myth above helped us visualise the work and discover how narrative-based strategies enabled research to be relayed in accessible ways to audiences. This research does not seek to provide a scientific evaluation or to definitively prove facts. Rather, the narrative is polemic against current patriarchal discourses, employing performance as a method for learning and unlearning.

2.2 The Performance

Figure 5. Performance Lecture

OTBS as a performance explores vulvic discourses through the broader themes of gender, sexuality and identity, unearthing a historical trajectory of oppressed bodies within patriarchal systems. Unconventional gallery art meets abject performance art and comedy in this critique of sexual politics. *OTBS* sought to challenge the absurd lengths to which the patriarchy has gone to put identities of women, gender non-conformists, trans and queer people in a catastrophic state of fragility (Photos of the performance available at).

OTBS took the form of a performative lecture where I outlined the key theoretical ideas informing the concepts examined within my research (see Appendix four for script breakdown). Dressed in a vulva costume, I discussed ideas in distinct narrative arches throughout the performance, sometimes using projections to provide examples. At the beginning of the performance, I discussed how the vulva has been positioned within different discourses, including how it has been interpreted through mythology, history, contemporary understandings and the intersections with gender and sexual identity. For example, many myths and common folklores promote misogynist practices on bodies with vulvas, such as the myth of Medusa. I look at art and culture through Charles Eisen's illustration for the poem 'The Devil of Pope Fig Island' by Jean de la Fontaine, in order to consider how the vulva has been positioned in relation to the devil. I analyse Sheela-na-gigs and their exaggerated vulvas on cathedrals, castles and other buildings, and their patriarchal erasure from history. Finally, I discuss the vulva in a more contemporary setting and its relation to taboo, obscenity and the law through Rokudenashiko's *Vulva Canoe* artwork (discussed in Chapter 3). I hoped to provide the audience with an understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of the work, which moves beyond the materiality of the vulva. *OTBS* sought to spotlight each performer's individual voice, perspectives, identity, passion and lived experience, whilst all our topics and themes simultaneously merge. The subchapters that follow mirror the sequence of the scenes within the performance.[17]

[17] For the sake of clarity, I described my performance lectures first to provide a clear trajectory of the performance. However, the scene that follows opened the show before the introduction to my performative lecture. Additionally, performance descriptions within this thesis are italicised to separate them from my main text. I also use italics at times for emphasis.

Hairy Witches

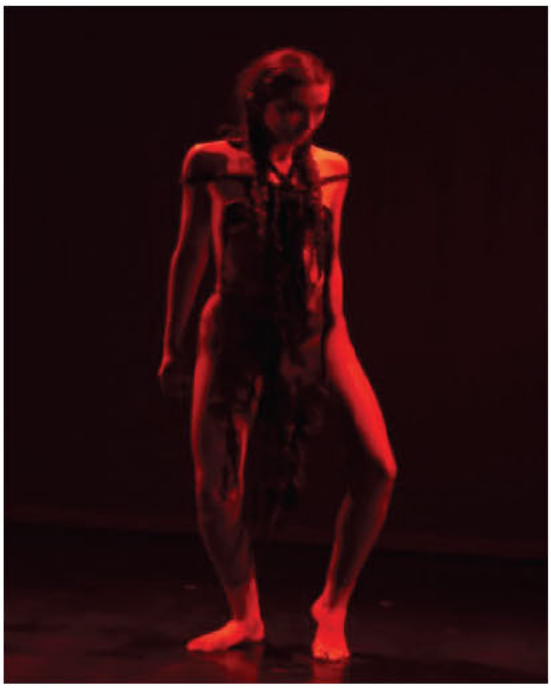

Figure 6. The Witch

The house lights fade and the stage lights turn to red. The sound of a crackling fire is heard. Orla crouches with her back to the audience with one leg bent and the other outstretched. She places her hands in front of her body and begins moving animalistically to face the audience. Each movement is calculated, slow and fluid. As her body faces forward, she sits on her knees and moves into an upright position. Orla is wearing translucent tights with a mound of matted hair placed over her vulva and some braided nipple covers that come down to her belly button. Dan enters the stage and approaches Orla, holding hair that has multiple braids interwoven into one another. He places the hair over her head and gently places another two sets of braids around her shoulders. Dan exits the stage and Orla rises to her feet. The hair drops down her body and swings with each step she takes. Legs bent and shoulders pushed back, Orla exits the stage.

Orla has Romany heritage and was also taught paganism from a young age by her mother, who identified as a witch. During the making of this production, Orla became interested in linking her heritage to the work. Lisa Mari Tallis, analysing Romany women and witchcraft in their article 'Which Craft? Witches, Gypsies, and the Fenyw Hysbys in Eighteenth-Century Wales' (2019), discusses documented beliefs of witchcraft present within Romany culture, such as fortune-telling and having the power to bewitch, noting, however, that 'despite the magical activities … very little attempt has been made to integrate them within the historiography of witchcraft' (2019, p. 232). Similarly, accounts of 'Gypsy witchcraft' come into contention with gender politics, often suggesting that it is women, predominantly, who possess magical powers, some of which could bewitch men.[18] Romany people were executed by the state during the 1500s for being immigrants and were vilified in a similar way to witches. We decided to represent this correlation by having fire crackling in the background, with red gels bouncing off the contours of Orla's body. In analysing marginalised ethnographies, connections between the persecution of the witch and the dislocations of Romany people through neoliberal ideologies that discriminate against their culture were revealed.[19] Anti-Roma racial hatred has a long history within European culture, linked in part to socio-economic influences and a list of 'legislative assaults' (Dawsey, 2021). During World War II, Roma people were once more persecuted 'as a direct result of racial policies adopted by Nazi Germany', (Donert, 2022) initiating the genocide of hundreds of thousands of people.

Drawn to Albertus Magnus's myth surrounding witchcraft and menstruation, Orla went on a journey exploring hair and the correlation between witchcraft and Romany culture. The

[18] It is important to recognise that the term 'Gypsy' is oppressive and has historically been used as a racial slur. The term employed within Tallis's writing addresses how Roma people were referred to during the eighteenth century.
[19] Witchcraft and neoliberalism are discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3.

costume she wears in the photo above is rows of plaited hair tied around her shoulders, torso and legs. In creating the costume, Orla stated:

> I was very drawn to hair and myth surrounding that and witches and their hair and the way that it is always usually in long plaits. Then, I started researching if in Romany culture, there is any significance within that because again, the women are usually seen with these kinds of long plaits ... I realised that these things all merged (Forrest, 2023).

Hair is thought in common folklore to hold magical properties for witches. During the witch hunts, those who were accused of witchcraft may have had their head and whole body shaved in the hope that it would render them powerless and obtain a confession of witchery. According to Sue James (2022), 'In the Middle Ages, all traces of fallen hair were burned to prevent witches from taking the strands and transforming them into snakes'. For many witches in contemporary culture, hair still holds magical powers, and plaited hair is particularly significant. For some, plaiting or braiding their hair can be a symbol of power or cleansing, amongst other spiritual meanings. Plaits are a large part of a woman's identity within Romany culture, a form of ritual passed down through many generations. As Rosaleen McDonagh writes, 'The long hair echoed our grandmothers and female forebears. It was part of tradition. Oiling and plaiting your hair for an occasion is similar to what hair straighteners and extensions are today' (McDonagh, 2020). As such, whilst this moment within the performance represents the trauma of the ancestral past, the plaits provide a provocation for shifting politics, power and a reclamation of agency.

The Serpent and the Witch

Figure 7. Reimagined Myths. Photo by Dani Surname.

The stage is dimly lit, and the sound of clanging metal can be heard through the speakers. A small mound of earth is placed in the centre of the stage. Orla enters slowly, looking up at the two strops that hang above the mound of earth and takes one in each hand. She wears nipple covers that have hair braided onto them and a braided merkin that swings past her knees. Looking at the audience, she squats, letting the strops hold the weight of her body as she sways side to side. With one swift motion, she brings her knees into her chest and swings around in a circle. She places her legs on the ground and then kicks them back up, allowing the strops to hold her body in the air. Elevated in the air, she contorts her body into various positions and poses, until she places both legs into the loop of the strops and pulls her body up. Her legs are outspread and the hair from the merkin dangles down past her feet. She pulls the merkin hair away from her vulva, so it detaches itself and proceeds to hold it tenderly, pulling it inwards

and allowing the hair to momentarily caress her face. She drops the hair into the mound of earth that lies beneath her. The lights fade to green, and a crouched figure can be seen at the back of the stage. Dan slides and slithers towards Orla, who flips her body the other way up, using the back of her knee cavity to hold her. As he reaches her, he pushes her right shoulder, so her body twists. Dan's body momentarily recoils. Orla places her hands on his shoulders and their eyes connect as they face each other. Orla kicks her legs back, so she reaches the ground and they both move towards the earth. Both bury the hair further into the earth and Orla very gently sprinkles some over Dan's head. They begin echoing each other's movements, swaying from side to side until they finally embrace. The lights fade to black.

As discussed above, we sought to represent the myth accredited to the philosopher Albertus Magnus.[20] Whilst the translation of Magnus' philosophies does not specify where the hair is taken from, some accounts suggest that his book on women's bodies, *De Secretis Mulerium* – as later discussed in Chapter 3 – also examines the fearful magical properties of pubic hair (Machlus, 2019). Similarly, in *The Encyclopedia of Witches, Witchcraft and Wicca* (2010), Rosemary Guiley writes how pubic hair was 'considered a potent ingredient in many love charms' within some witchcraft practices (2010, p. 153). This was particularly interesting within the scope of this project as it further strengthens the interpretation of the vulva as a site of patriarchal fear within myths and common folklore. In some mythologies, snakes represent evil and are often perceived as inciting castration, such as in the myth of Medusa. Drawing comparisons with Orla's costume in Figure 6, I created the merkin that sought to emulate braided pubic hair which dangled between her legs whilst hanging from the strops.[21] There was also something particularly poignant in representing pubic hair within the costume. Although

[20] As outlined in the R&D, the myth suggests that if a menstruating woman buries their hair in the earth, a serpent will appear.
[21] A merkin is otherwise known as a pubic wig.

pubic hair is perfectly normal, it has connotations of disgust or uncleanliness, in the West particularly. For example, a 'Belgian survey found that 80.3 percent of women had [in 2019] partially or totally removed their pubic hair' (Enzlin *et al*., 2019, cited in Schechter, 2023, p. 253). In her one-to-one performance, *Pube* (2016), Eugénie Pastor explores the relationship people have with their pubic hair through creating pubic portraits. In her performance, Pastor discusses pubic hair with the audience member whilst drawing a portrait of them. She later invites the audience member to donate some of their pubic hair to be incorporated in the image. For Pastor, it was important to create an open dialogue about pubic hair, stating how the hair 'transforms it into a "noble" material worth of artistic attention (and of conversation), often in contradiction with the way it is perceived – as something that is dirty, disgusting, shameful' (Pastor, no date).

The pubic hair within this scene of *OTBS* was intended to symbolise both power and a connection to the earth. Orla was brought up as pagan which, as she explains, has 'a lot to do with connecting with nature, but also a respecting nature as if it was like yourself' (Forrest, 2022). The snake, in this instance, was the emergence of transformation, rebirth and healing which are also properties liked with LGBTQI+ culture. In considering witches and queer identities, the writer Kristen J. Sollée states that 'early modern depictions of witches cavorting naked with limbs entwined are unquestionably queer' (2017, p. 97). Further, in analysing patriarchal fears situated around women's sexuality, Sollée claims that 'The witch has always embodied the sexual fears of men, whether they be of women finding sexual pleasure without them, emasculating them, or castrating them' (2017, p. 98). The image presented sought to retell the story of the witch and reclaim the multiple fractured identities that have been dislocated by patriarchal frameworks.

Love Thy Labia

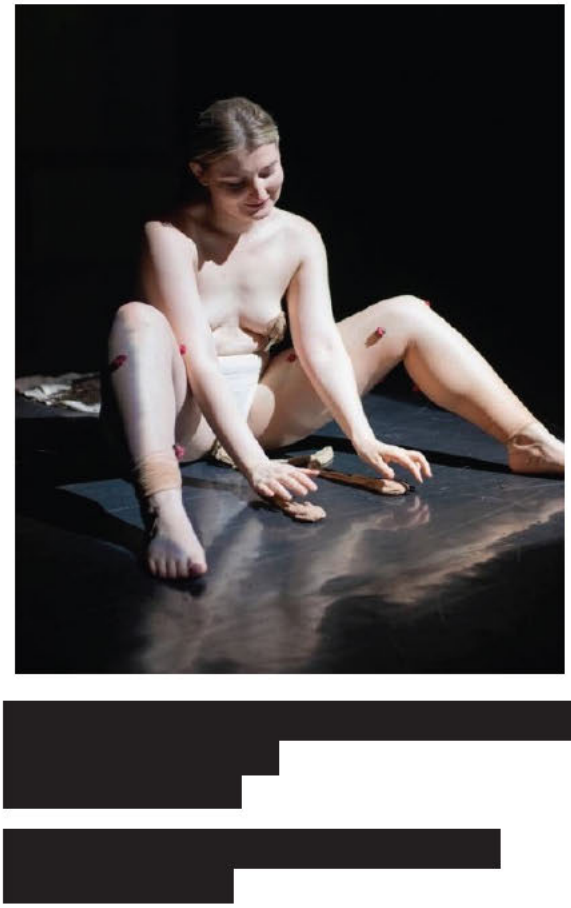

Figure 8. Labial Openings. Photo by Dani Surname

From the blackness, a lit square box comes into focus near the front of the stage. Alex sits within it wearing tights with small, moulded vulvas sewn into them. She wears underwear that resembles a vulva made from tights with two long hosiery-formed labia emerging from it. Alex begins to retell the story of her relationship with her vulva and protruding labia in her teenage years.

In creating *OTBS*, it felt important to retell the formative memory of my desire to remove my labia, as narrated at the beginning of this thesis. This moment in my life has strongly influenced my practice and research but, before I was ready to discuss it, had a huge effect on my self-

esteem and how I viewed my body.[22] Through many conversations with friends, family and people within the Vagina Museum network, I have found that people's relationship to their labia varies hugely. In her book *My Vulva and I* (2021), Lydia Reeves led 'The Vulva Diversity Project' initiative that made plaster casts of 200 people's vulvas and featured the individual stories and experiences that people have towards their vulva. One participant from the project wrote:

> I've found it really hard to apply … acceptance and love to my own body and vulva. I found this especially hard as a teenager as my own looks so different to what I saw in porn and I so wanted to live up to those "standards", often tucking my inner labia inside my outer lips to try and hide them. I've spent years worrying that mine wasn't pretty. My biggest hang-ups have been about my inner labia hanging out and being different sizes (Rees, 2021, p. 109).

Whilst all labia differ in colour and size, longer labia often prompt shame or disgust. There are many theories as to where this shame originates: some people suggest that it comes from mainstream porn, medical textbooks or the removal of pubic hair making labia more visible, whilst others, as noted in the introduction, suggest that it 'can be traced back to scientific racism' (Schechter, 2023, p. 257). The myths that surround women's vulvas are arguably the reason why many people have a complex relationship with them and may choose to alter the appearance of their labia. In the last ten years, labiaplasty surgery has increased by 500% on

[22] In this scene, I wore underwear featuring a vulva with long labia made from stockings (see figure 8). Its skin-like elasticity provided us the means to explore with its materiality and socio-political contexts. The aesthetics of hosieries in this performance borrows from a lineage of artists, such as Julia Bardsley, Eirini Kartsaki, Senga Nengudi and Louise Bourgeois, who use this material to address concepts of gender, race, bodily morphology, abjection and culture. It is important to recognise that tights have a racist history due to colourism in their production and marketing practices. Additionally, tights, through their use, function and form, provoke connotations of fetishism, due to their associations with femininity, sexuality, domesticity and the male gaze. Considering this, we remained conscious of the ways tights were used and position in the performance. Utilising stockings, I hoped to challenge audiences to explore their alternative perspectives and associations, as well as highlight their shifting subtexts and dialogues.

the NHS alone and ‘many women (including 250 girls under the age of 14) are having the operation’ (Better2Know, 2013). Labiaplasty surgery is a cosmetic procedure aimed at reducing the size of the inner labia (labia minora).[23] The founder of *This is a Vulva*, Jo Corrall, notes that ‘Labiaplasty is the world’s fastest-growing plastic surgery procedure’ (2023, p. 34). Corrall notes the risks carried by labiaplasty surgery due to the gender health gap within medical discourse, stating that there are ‘pages and pages of information in medical textbooks dedicated to the penis and all its nerves, helping surgeons to perform operations without damaging anything’, but relatively little information on the vulva (2023, p. 34). As a result, there have been cases of patients who have lost all sensation in their vulva (Corrall, 2023, p. 34). Whilst the choice to undergo labiaplasty surgery is valid and individual, I wonder if I would have felt the same about my own vulva as a teenager if these types of discourses had been present then.

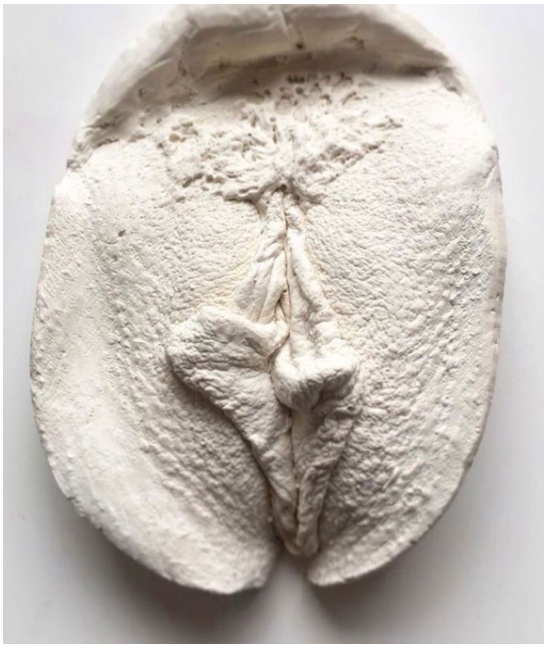

Figure 9. Plaster Cast of Vulva

[23] It is important to note that some individuals may also choose to have labiaplasty surgery for medical reasons, such as tears, FGM repairs or labia that painfully rub. What you do with your body is your choice.

In an article entitled ‘Young women’s genital self-image and effects of exposure to pictures of natural vulvas’ (2017), the Department of Sexology and Psychosomatic Gynecology discusses a study conducted to see whether exposing women to pictures of natural vulvas would influence their self-esteem. The results indicated that ‘even in young women with a relatively positive genital self-image, exposure to pictures of a large variety of natural vulvas positively affects genital self-image’ (Laan *et al.*, 2017, p. 253). Figure 9 shows a cast of my vulva which was displayed within the foyer of the theatre as part of an exhibition of work we had created in our rehearsals prior to the performance (see Appendix five for exhibition information). I hoped that it might have positive effect on the viewer’s self-image as it clearly shows my asymmetrical and elongated labia. Similarly, my reflections on my personal story in the performance opened up a dialogue for education. Echoing Corrall, ‘It all comes back to education. Education is the superpower that could teach us our vulvas are absolutely fine the way they are – that we don’t have to spend thousands of pounds on creams and steams and surgeries to make them look acceptable’ (2023, p. 35). Performance not only enables these conversations to be held openly and on a large scale but also provides an accessible forum for the audience to learn, understand or question what is being discussed. The strength of autoethnographic methods, as Ettorre acknowledges, stems from their authenticity ‘of emotional life, allowing interpretations of personal “truths” and speaking about oneself to transform into narrative representations of political responsibility’ (2017, p. 3). My protruding labia became a site of empowerment, steering away from patriarchal constructs that limit female sexuality, and I finished this scene with the phrase ‘*and my longer labia helps me come’.*

'Identity Crisis. Identity Exploration. Identity Realisation.'

Figure 10. Reimagined Aliens

The sound of metal clanging against metal is heard, reverberating and chiming again, steadily and continuously. The stage lighting is dark red, offering just enough visibility to see the contours of bodies emerging. The audio recording of Anna's spoken word poem begins and continues over the top of the clanging metal. One body enters the stage. They have tights over their head and the legs of the tights are tied onto their toes. The tights outline their face and create the shape of something alien, unknown, and indeterminate, as the red light bounces off the sheen of the material. A second body enters. Both bodies crouch on the floor and begin to distort their limbs into unfamiliar shapes. They slowly start to approach each other. They move the stretched material of the tights into elongated positions, some of which collide, whilst other positions do not. Their bodies begin to move as one, slipping across the stage until they reach the table that looks as if it is covered in stretched-out flesh. One figure removes the tights from the other's head and then dissolves into the darkness.

Anna identifies as non-binary. Their work was ‘inspired by purification rituals and the concept of destroying everything to start anew’, even if that meant pushing past ‘familiar structures in order to be reborn’ (Armitage, 2022). Further, the implicit inspiration from purification rituals within this work was deployed to cleanse one of their old identities and discover what it means to be ‘content in your skin’ (Armitage, 2022). Anna was unable to be physically present during the performance itself but had recorded a spoken word piece they had created in our workshops, entitled ‘Welcome to the Land of the Roaring Sun’. In creating this scene, I combined elements from my previous PaR work, the alien (detailed in Chapter 3), with Anna’s interest in the body encasement sac I brought into rehearsals as a prop for exploration. The way in which Anna moved within the sac and peeled it off their body was as if they were shedding skin. This is not only linked to the metaphor of the snake but also the metaphorical staging of my own rebirth in my PaR exploration, *Alienating Identity* in Chapter 3, where I focused on deconstructing gender and sexuality within patriarchal concepts. As Anna was unable to be present for the performance and some rehearsals, Dan, Orla and I collectively considered ways to create imagery for the audio, ensuring that the work we presented was still representative of Anna’s themes. We were unable to purchase any more body-stocking sacs, so we began experimenting with hosieries. Orla placed a pair of tights on her head and held the legs of the tights between her toes. The shapes that this created were strange, unfamiliar and skin-like.

When exploring the politics of skin, a correlation emerged, recognising ‘skin as the site of personal identity and individuality’ (Bouchard, 2012, p. 7). However, skin also raises its own set of subjectivities that display ‘vastly different meanings and values across a variety of social, cultural, political, religious and economic structures’ (2012, p. 7). Skin’s relation to gender, and sexual identity in particular, raises complex questions around how we may read a body on stage. For example, writer and philosopher Paul B. Preciado argues that, in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries, 'skin became the surface of the inscription on which the signs of sexual deviation were written' (2000, p. 85). In the context of sexuality, Preciado discusses how masturbation was considered an illness, both medically and institutionally, during this period. In analysing the theories of the Swiss physician Samuel Auguste Tissot, Preciado states that, for Tissot, 'masturbation is first and foremost a form of gâchis—that is, a needless waste of bodily energy that inexorably leads to illness and even to death' (Preciado, 2000, p. 82).[25] For Tissot, this waste was not only found in the act itself but also in the use of the genitals for anything less than procreation (Preciado, 2000, p. 82). From such theories, Preciado observes that skin became a politically loaded interface of 'venereal contamination', acting 'as the physiological tissue for a certain pornocartography that allowed the eye to see—that is, to know—a person's sexual history through a decoding glance' (2000, p. 85). That is to say, skin became a site through which a person's sexual identity was decoded and determined by another. While my focus is not on the politics of masturbation, Preciado argues that these processes of 'determining' individuals still continue in the modern-day.

Similarly, skin is also a place where gender identity is encountered, especially in relation to anatomy. Furthermore, skin is both socially and politically inscribed, with stigma attached to those who steer away from heterocentric social contracts. We wanted to make explicit how bodies have been categorised as alienable. Echoing Gianna Bouchard's reading of Carnesky's performance *Jewess Tattooess* (1999), we explored the 'confluences of debates and understandings and perceptions of the status of the body' (2012, p. 14).[26] Within the scene, we were conscious of how we identified in relation to Anna's intervention and did not want to

[25] *Gâchis* is French for 'waste'

[26] *Jewess Tattooess* was a performance created by Marisa Carnesky and performed at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, in 1999. The performance explored Jewish taboos and their correlations to tattooing the flesh.

appropriate an identity that was not our own. As such, we considered Anna's words within the voice recording, 'identity crisis, identity exploration and identity realisation' (Armitage, 2022), in relation to our own skin. Through identity exploration, we explored our skin as something undefined and mutable, metaphorically linking our thoughts and actions to a perceived future away from the archaic constructs of patriarchal control, ridding ourselves of familiar structures in order to look anew and find identity realisation. Our skin within this scene became a site of agency and personal autonomy.

The One-Eyed Snake

Figure 11. The Snake Looks Back

Alex emerges from the darkness, wearing tights on her head that stretch down to her toes. She gets onto the table and removes the tights from her head. The music stops. Alex takes a paintbrush and begins to paint a long green line running up her leg to her vulva. The underwear she wears has a snake's head painted on it, transforming her leg into the long body of the snake. Orla holds a camera and positions it in front of Alex's vulva. A live video is projected onto the stage's backdrop, focusing on the snake's face. Alex moves her fingers to the snake's painted mouth and tears it open, revealing her vulva. An eye begins to emerge from Alex's vagina and a fake snake's tongue pushes itself out with the eye. The eye within her vagina pulsates in and out. She stands on the table and after a beat, the light slowly dims.

As my PaR inherently analyses exposed vulvas in performance, my intervention sought to represent the research within my thesis and also to act as a method of representing vulva diversity, inviting the audience to unashamedly look at an often-hidden body part. Sitting on a table, I extend my legs to one side in order to remove the tights from my body, emulating the position adopted by female nudes portrayed in art galleries, such as *Venus of Urbino* (1536–38) by Titian or *Danaë* (1750–70) by François Boucher. I hold this position for a brief moment, before disrupting the scenic imagery of the female nude by splaying my legs wide with my knees bent upwards, crotch exposed. In this moment, I am wearing tights with a snake's head painted on the crotch; however, the tights' translucency reveals part of my vulva, which is frequently hidden in paintings of women in fine art. Paintbrush in hand, I paint a green line from my foot to the top of my thigh, stopping as I reach the head of the snake. While the female nude is acceptable in art galleries, Emma Rees reframes Rebecca Schneider's ideas, stating that 'by contrast, a woman using *her own body* in performance is "transgressive." A "woman *with* [paintbrush] was in some way [a] woman *with* phallus and thus unnatural, monstrous, threatening"' (2013, p. 222, original emphasis; Schneider, 1997, p. 38). In this moment, I lean

into this 'unnatural' and 'monstrous' imagery, provoking the audience to contemplate the transgressive nature of using my body in performance and the subverted symbolism of the paintbrush, challenging conventional gender norms by exploring how such acts can be interpreted as disruptive and threatening. As the paintbrush reaches the top of my thigh, the audience sees the figure of the snake take form. I rip open the tights, leaving the snake's painted mouth to hang slack, and revealing my exposed vulva. I slowly squeezed my pelvic floor muscles, pushing a small resin eyeball and forked material snakes' tongue out from my vagina.

Artists working with the materiality of the vagina often explore connected themes as a means of re-contextualising the history of vulvic iconography in art, as well as to challenge prevailing narratives that marginalise their bodies. In the revealing of the eye, my research draws upon The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein's performance, *Notorious* (2017) and Annie Sprinkle's performance *A Public Cervix Announcement* (1990), both of whom expose the opening of their vaginas to hold the gaze of their audiences.[28] In *Notorious,* Holstein expels a hardboiled egg adorned with a painted eyeball out from within her vagina. The gaze of the eyeball explicitly shown within Holstein's vagina feels incongruous, revealing the complexities of how women's bodies have been rendered monstrous, abject and dangerous. This performance inadvertently works in tandem with Sprinkle's performance as she sought to jokingly prove that there were no teeth within her vagina and cervix; both performances require the audience's gaze to analyse what they are confronted with.

In this scene, I re-contextualised Sprinkle's and Holstein's work through the concept of the gaze and monstrous vulva. By re-contextualising the existing image of the eye within Holstein's work, I sought to recognise the pre-existing socio-cultural meanings associated with

[28] The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein's work is analysed in greater depth in Chapter 3.

the male gaze and the reclamation of female agency. The eye's symbolism of moral conscience served as a powerful image to challenge traditional narratives that assert control over a person's autonomy and sex. This image was re-contextualised to build upon its existing significance, and within the context of *OTBS*, it was interpreted to critique the historical patriarchal narratives that attaches serpents to women's sex and sexual identity, encouraging audiences to become morally conscious of the snake's symbolism within my work. In her book, *The Second Sex* (1949), French writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir discusses the symbolism of the serpent. For example, in the story of Adam and Eve, the serpent represents the devil that tempts Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. The serpent also recurs in many myths, suggesting that 'there is a devil raging in her womb, a serpent lurks in her vagina, eager to devour the male's sperm' (Beauvoir, 2015, p. 699). Such myths and ideologies use the symbol of the serpent to legitimise misogynist practices against individuals with vulvas by evoking notions of revulsion, danger and castration. Furthermore, the snake has become a recurring figure within my work, interpreted through multiple vulvic narratives.[29]

In contemporary art, serpents have also been used and re-contextualised by numerous feminist artists. In her performance *Dragon Heads* (1990-1994), Marina Abramović sat motionless while a snake moved around her body. Similarly, in Carolee Schneemann's performance *Eye/Body* (1963), she laid nude while photographs were taken of her with living snakes placed across her body. Schneemann's images present her as Goddess-like, evoking portrayals of Ancient Goddess statues that feature snakes, similar to the *Minoan Snake Goddesses of Crete* (1600 BC), figurines that have been widely associated with fertility and sexuality. According to art historian, Suzanne Wegh, Schneemann used the symbol of the snake 'as a primitive way to symbolise the uterus and vagina', challenging 'Freudian ideas of penis envy' (Wegh, 2016).

[29] Snakes and monstrous creatures living within the vagina are examined in Chapter 3.

In considering this, serpents also share connotations to the phallus, as alluded to in the Ancient Greek story about Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus (born as Gaius Octavius). According to the historian Suetonius, Caesar Augustus was conceived when a snake penetrated his sleeping mother, Atia, highlighting the symbolic connection between snakes and phallic portrayals (Witecombe, 2000). Similarly, contemporary euphemisms such as the 'one-eyed snake' draw upon metaphorical and visual comparisons between the snake and the penis. As I slowly push the serpent's resin eye and forked tongue out of my vagina, I reframe these elements into that of a metaphorical phallus, or rather, one-eyed snake. This image sought to compel the audience to not only question the male gaze, which now gazes back upon them, but also critique ideas surrounding patriarchal narratives and dominance that objectify bodies. The metaphorical phallus also served to reposition and dismantle stereotypical iconography of women's bodies in art, re-contextualising phallocentric imagery through my vagina. This approach aligns with Rees' comparison of how a woman who uses her body within performance, is likened to a 'woman *with* phallus' which is perceived as both threatening and monstrous (2013, p. 222, original emphasis; Schneider, 1997, p. 38).

However, in her essay 'After Us the Savage Goddess: Feminist Performance Art of the Explicit Body Staged, Uneasily, across Modernist Dreamscapes' (1996), Schneider discusses how imagery that surpasses normative viewing frameworks can lead a person to literalise what they are seeing:

> This (blinding) point of excess coagulates in matter and becomes not a site of spirit, but rather a site at which dream or symbol defecates, is literalized. Looking back at the viewer, the blind spot made literal disallows perspectival removal and "castrates the eye" (1996, p. 169).

Therefore, it could be argued that the explicitness of my vulva also invites the audience to deconstruct or 'literalise' the myths that surround it as just that – *myths* – castrating a perspective that once succumbed to fear and taboo. In addition, the female nude – whose vulva is often concealed in high art – is now presented in excess, presenting the 'female lack [by] radically disenfranchis[ing] normative conditions of viewing' (Case et al., 2000, p. 193). Yet the revealing of my vulva was also designed also to give others the space to look, to 'literalise' it away from being a symbol of patriarchal disgust, mystery or otherwise. To see the vulva's fleshiness was to remove it from the 'blind spot' of being overtly hidden and bring it into the audience's viewing perceptions and eye line. As I get to my feet, I stand for a beat looking at the audience, inviting them to return my own gaze once more before I exit the stage. The re-contextualisation of both Sprinkle and Holstein's work was imperative in reframing the audience's moral conscience surrounding the perceptions of bodies and the male gaze. By linking these concepts to the metaphor of the eye and the monstrous vulva, my work builds upon a lineage of feminist artists, and expands upon the discourse surrounding vulvic representation, agency and identity.

'We Birth Ourselves as we Truly are'

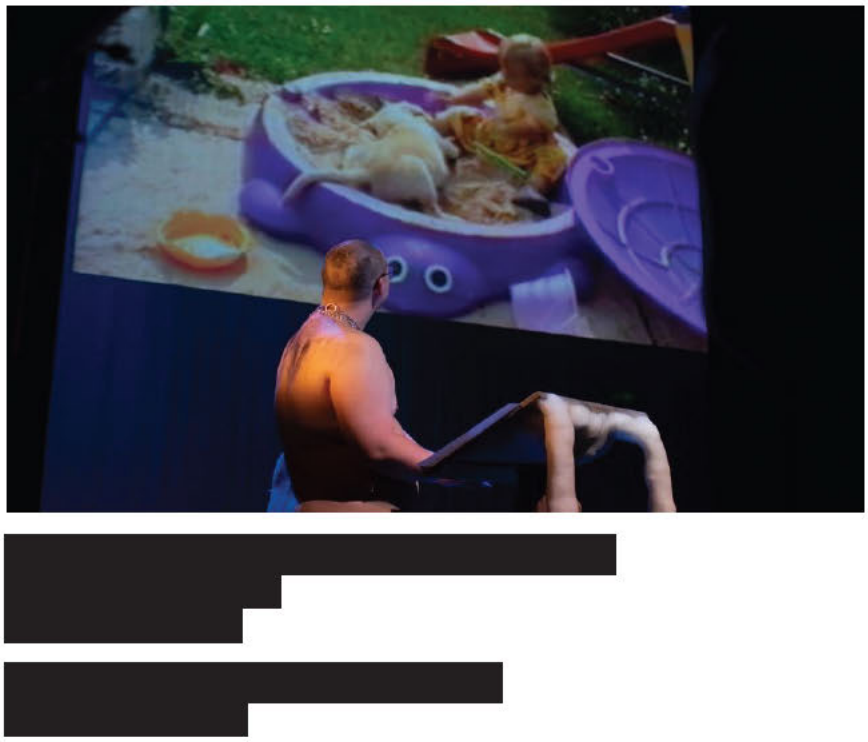

Figure 12. On Transition

Dan enters the stage and stands by the lectern. A soft spotlight focuses on them. Dan begins to discuss Greek mythology and the blurring of masculinity and femininity within the stories of Dionysus and Hermaphroditus. He continues to introduce the poetry he is about to read and how it was written across the several years of his transition. As he begins to read his poem, a compilation of home videos of him as a child starts to play on the backdrop. The video later presents him in water with flowers.

Dan's intervention was influenced by rituals, Greek mythology and his identity as a trans man. He was particularly interested in how, in ancient Greek mythology, the gods Dionysus and Hermaphroditus blurred the lines between masculine and feminine identities. Dionysus is the child of Zeus and Semele, a mortal princess pregnant with Zeus' child who was tricked by Hera into asking 'Zeus to appear before her in all his divine glory' (Fuente, 2022). Unable to break

his oath, he reveals his divine being and immolates her. Zeus ‘save[s] their unborn son and sews him onto his leg’; after the gestation period, Dionysus emerges from Zeus’ thigh (Fuente, 2022). Dionysus is, therefore, known as being ‘twice-born’ and is thus associated with rebirth. Dionysus also arguably blurs the lines of the binaries of birth, queering the myth once more. Dan was interested in analysing the ritual of rebirth through the idea of ‘birth[ing] ourselves as we truly are’ (Memory, 2022).

Another Greek myth that Dan investigated was that of Hermaphroditus, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite. Hermaphroditus is depicted within Greek mythology as both male and female. In one interpretation of the myth, Hermaphroditus comes across the nymph Salmacis, who makes several advances on him, which he rejects. As Hermaphoditus was bathing in a pool, Salmacis jumped in and held onto him, crying out to the gods to ‘join the two together forever’. The gods responded by fusing their sexes: Hermaphoditus grew breasts and ‘feminine’ features while preserving his penis. The notion of metamorphism within Dan’s work was presented through his poem’s expression of fluidity as well as a video that juxtaposed home video footage of himself as a child pre-transition with images of himself floating in water after transitioning. In re-presenting the myth of Hermaphoditus, it was important to examine the binaries that surround sex whilst offering a space that also transcends them. As Jay Prosser suggests in the chapter ‘Judith Butler: Queer Feminism, Transgender, and the Transubstantiation of Sex’, ‘Heterosexuality operates by attempting to literalise sex in the body; queer transgender reveals this depth as surface’ (Prosser, 2006, p. 271). Dan’s intervention works further to shift understandings of sex binaries that are intrinsic to dominant culture, offering layers of video and text material of him ‘in transition’.

Dan's poetry piece was also written across 'several years of transition', and he spoke of it as a 'divine act of self-creation' (Memory, 2022). In the audio recording, Dan used fragments of his voice pre-testosterone layered over the top of his speaking voice within the performance. Dan acknowledged how, in using videos of himself as a child and his voice pre-testosterone, he 'was thinking of it as a love letter to my child self and like a thank you' (Memory, 2022). The duality between his written poetry and childhood videos also acts as an interesting point of analysis. In their article 'Facing Gender Performativity: How Transgender Performances and Performativity Trouble Facework Research', Julie Wight discusses how during 'infancy, and up until at least their first year, a person does not have the capacity to either understand gender or to even begin to have a gender identity. Yet, infants are intelligible and are gendered' (2011, p. 75). Wight goes on to explain that 'the power and agency to begin the gendering process is with another. We do not begin our lives as gendered beings with any agency or power – only with (an arguably questionable) biology' (2011, p. 76). The revisiting of childhood videos brings about its own particular agency and reframing of identity, one which enabled Dan to return to moments of infancy and vulnerability in order to project a vocalised message to both himself and the wider trans community: 'We birth ourselves as we truly are' (Memory, 2022). For Dan, it was important not to display trans pain but, rather, to show gender transition as an act of self-care, empowerment and queer joy.

A Spectacle of Vulvic Celebration

Figure 13. The Vulvaplicity Collectives' Vulvic Spectacle.

The stage is softly lit. Gentle music begins to play in the background and the voices of Orla, Alex and Dan can be heard speaking over the top of the audio. Each person speaks individually and responds to questions about their identity. Orla's voice is heard first: 'I haven't always felt at home in my body or my identity. When I was a child, my sense of owning my body was taken away from me and I think ever since I have been trying to feel at home in my body again' (see Appendix six for a transcription of the audio). *As the audio continues, Orla brings on two small buckets with paintbrushes in them and places them on the floor. Taking the strops in her hand, she pulls up her body and gets herself into a seated position, elevated in the air. Alex and Dan carry on a white piece of material and place it underneath Orla. Orla moves her legs as if she is walking on air. Alex and Dan bring on a large circular object. Placing Orla's legs inside it, they give Orla shoulder straps. The circular object unfurls and reveals a large skirt with bulbous tights placed on it. Alex and Dan take the paint brushes from the buckets and begin to paint on the skirt. As the painting continues, the shape of a vulva begins to emerge. The lights fade to black out.*

In understanding the complex relationship people have with their bodies and, more specifically, their vulvas, I wanted to create a performance that was honest and that unashamedly opened up discourses around vulvas, vaginas and the gynaecological anatomy. It was important also to showcase a plurality of identities, each of which has different lived experiences and relationships to their vulvas. In our final scene, we decided to record our raw response to the question, 'When was the first time you felt at home in your body?' In this context, 'home' was initially interpreted as feeling comfortable within one's skin. However, it was then autoethnographically interpreted through a multitude of ideas and responses which helped articulate the wider meanings of the work, inherently intertwined with gender, sexuality and body politics (see Appendix six for transcription of audio).

Since vulvas are all too often censored and tabooed, we also felt it necessary to create a spectacle within this scene.[30] A good example of censorship can be shown in the reactions to the Vagina Museum's social media pages. The museum has frequently been shadow-banned for displaying illustrations of vulvas and even for using anatomical words such as 'vulva' and 'vagina' (Beecham, 2022). According to Baz Kershaw, spectacles can touch upon 'highly sensitive spots of the human psyche by dealing directly with extremities of power' (2007, p. 208). Through this analysis, our spectacle sought to directly dismantle predominant extremities of power that are present within phallocentric constructs. We suspended a large skirt in the air and painted a vulva onto it, giving further weight to vulva validity. The skirt had a series of large bulbous protrusions emerging from it which looked like skin. For us, this 'skin' somewhat resembled guts, symbolising the 'gutsy' approach of the show. Through this large vulvic painting and the audio recordings, we hoped to directly challenge and reframe the extremities

[30] Vulvic spectacles are examined thoroughly in Chapter 4.

of power, aiming to provoke audiences into considering alternative narratives of social, cultural and political value.

In *Theatre & the Visual*, Dominic Johnson writes about spectacles and the effects that theatrical images create. Johnson observes that 'what we see, in the theatre and elsewhere, is conditioned by the act of looking, where we look from, how we look, and why we look away (2012, p. 1). By creating our vulvic spectacle and inviting the audience to actively watch the vulva being painted, we hoped to, as Johnson states, 'revise the values we ascribe to objects of vision' (Johnson, 2012, p. 52). In directing the audience's gaze to the creation of this vulva, we sought to unshame and celebrate a part of the body that is shrouded in taboo. Similarly, discussing the spectacle of Annie Spinkle's performance *A Public Cervix Announcement,* Johnson writes, 'Sprinkle reveals a part of her body (the cervix) that almost always escapes everyday, cinematic, or theatrical vision. By revealing a concealed image, Sprinkle appropriates and overturns a traumatic social relation, namely the dynamics of power that objectify and denigrate women' (2012, p. 62). In positioning spectacle alongside our autoethnographic responses, I hoped to prompt the audience to reflect on what they had encountered and create a lasting impression on the audience from seeing the image *unfold,* demystifying topics around vulvas, vaginas and the gynaecological anatomy.[31] With this, the research and PaR that follows was conducted prior to the curation of *OTBS* which ultimately informed its development. Through this research, my thesis engages with socio-cultural discourses and subtexts that surround vulvic narratives, underscoring their influences on contemporary understandings of bodies.

[31] Audience and artist participants responses to OTBS are partly discussed at the end of Chapter 4.

3 Monstrous Identities and Witchy Acts

In 2017 at The Barbican, I watch The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein perform her show Notorious. Notorious *opens with three witch corpses hanging in a row, just their silhouettes visible through the haze. The 'corpses' are formed from bundles of matted hair which are hard to distinguish on the dimly lit stage. The crackling sound of a fire slowly fills the room as the three witches remain perfectly still. After a short time, the lights dim to red. The red-light frames only the side silhouette of their bodies, as if the embers of a fire remain on what once was. Later, I observe Holstein take a small circular object and insert it into her vagina. A camera is placed between Holstein's legs and an enlarged live recording projects onto the stage's back screen, revealing her exposed vulva. As her hairless labia slowly part, a small egg is seen through her vulva with a luminous green eye and constricted black pupil drawn onto it. The eye squints back at the camera. 'Vaginas are hilarious', Holstein exclaims! Holding an additional egg/eye in her hand, Holstein removes the eye from her vagina and places them both in her mouth. Suddenly, she bites down. Her teeth tear through the eyes as you see them congeal inside her mouth from each bite. She spits the coagulated remains onto the floor* (Holstein, 2017).

This description refers to The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein's performance of *Notorious* (2017).[32] Holstein is a cis-gendered, American-born Jewish woman and performance artist, who uses 'The Famous' as part of her popstar stage persona. Her practice is concerned with the female body within popular culture and with historical female narratives around collective trauma, exploring the messy, grotesque and sexualised body from which she reclaims agency.

[32] Holstein has two other performance collaborators on stage with her throughout the performance, performing various tasks she asks of them – Krista Vuori and Brogan Davison.

Holstein's major performance works – *Splat!* and *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous's Adaptation of Frankenstein* (2013) – are well-known, as Kim Solga notes, for taking 'place in the space feminism's loss opens up; they stage post-feminism's vaunted "girl power" as gloriously messy, physically draining and ultimately deeply dissatisfying' (Solga, 2016, p. 67). Holstein states in her analysis of *Splat!* that she explores 'a more "messy" or "disintegrated" model of female subjectivity, which, despite the subject's "failures", resists the fate of the pop-feminist affirmed-via-trauma subject' (Holstein, 2014, p. 99). Holstein's performances often recognise the female subject as having an ever-changing identity, never settling into a role, allowing her to find a space that attempts to resist victimhood. *Notorious* explicitly unravels and embraces an embedded history of traumatic female narratives in the witch and the monstrous feminine, such as Medusa. The term 'monstrous' indicates something grotesque, abnormal and unnatural, implicitly not from this world. For the art theorist Amelia Jones, 'monstrous' is an umbrella term for the 'unnatural' as it shares similar characteristics. These characteristics are not, however, innate or based on truth; rather, it 'is by an act of judgement that a person, animal, or plant is understood to be "unnatural" (monstrous, inhumane, etc)' (Jones, 2000, p. 11). In other words, 'monstrous' is a subjective concept, determined by the observer, and may embody other characteristics and forms, such as the hideous, strange and so on. These embodied tropes between which Holstein pinballs raise questions around the genealogy of violence against women that has engrossed Western thought, many forms of which have been manipulated into misogynist narratives and spectacles of persecution.

The vulva, in particular, is presented as a site of fear within many myths and common folklores. For example, in the late thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, a book accredited to the philosopher Albertus Magnus, *De Secretis Mulerium* (*The Secrets of Women*), suggested that if the hair of a menstruating woman was buried in the earth, a serpent would appear (Magnus, 1992, p. 96, official translation). Another example is found in an illustration created by Charles Eisen

(1896) for the poem *The Devil of Pope Fig Island* (1762) by Jean de la Fontaine, in which a woman scares the devil away by revealing her exposed vulva. The devil supposedly mistakes her vulva for a wound and quickly departs, horrified (Vagina Museum, 2021). Throughout history, the vulva has been depicted within many narratives and commonly placed in monstrous female figures. The explicit nature in which Holstein's vulva is revealed to the audience therefore grasps my attention. Echoing Dominic Johnson's reading of Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta's *Moffitt Building Piece* (1973), 'the spectacle at hand demands itself to be seen, experienced and properly known – even, paradoxically, when some refuse to look' (Johnson, 2019, p. 3). Mendieta's performance film, created after the murder of Sara Ann Otten in March 1973 at the University of Iowa, responded to sexual violence against women. In her film, Mendieta placed animal blood on a pavement in Iowa and filmed the reactions to and observations of the blood by passers-by. Whilst Mendieta's film presents the spectacle as the 'afterimage of violence' upon women, Holstein presents her vulva as a spectacle of monstrosity and perverse witchery, creating its own perceptions and preconceptions of shock and obscenity (Osterweil, 2015). In explicitly framing her vulva, Holstein analyses problematic constructions of women whilst offering a space that allows for other cultural narratives to play out. This chapter examines the ways in which Holstein's exposed vulva explores socio-political themes of mythology, history and obscenity in order to challenge dominant structures of patriarchal power and re-think how bodies are viewed in contemporary Western culture. I posit the following questions: Have historical events been embedded within current cultural attitudes towards women's bodies and, more specifically, the vulva? What effects do the many constructions of female subjectivity postulate in analysis? What can be produced and understood by performances of the vulva?

3.1 The Witch

According to Kristen J. Sollée, 'the witch is a shapeshifter. She transforms from vixen to hag, healer to hellion, adversary to advocate based on who seeks her' (2017, p. 14). When observing the tropes of a witch within *Notorious*, Holstein plays into many of these dichotomies: she presents herself as visually hideous, precariously sexualised and activist in her approach. Through playing into many differing dichotomies, Holstein destabilises patriarchal authority and re-politicises the witch. The witch has been subjugated throughout history through a host of rationales: her womb, vulva, age, sexuality, appearance and even livelihood. The notion of the witch created an epidemic of violence against women from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, resulting in tens of thousands of women being burnt, hanged or drowned. Although some men were also persecuted as witches, women made up 'approximately 90%' of those accused in England (Midena and Millar, 2017). Whilst there are numerous accounts of what constituted witchcraft, the feminist writer Silvia Federici wrote, in *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004), that the epidemic 'formed back to the dislocations caused by the development of capitalism' (2004, p. 20). For Federici, the construction of capitalism caused many women to lose their livelihoods and the foundations of their social influence. This initiated the domestication of women and the creation of a binary culture and gender hierarchies (Fedirici, 2018, p. 20). Furthermore, many women were left jobless as a new morality swept through society, criminalising any job held by women that may have carried influence within the community. This influence became tied to witchcraft and included jobs connected to healing, midwifery or magical practices. Women were left with less money and became perceived as a lower class. Federici suggests that it is here that class stratification and patriarchal structures began to form. She argues that women fell victim to the evolving New World, where 'sexual identity became the carrier of specific work-functions'

and women were confined to ‘reproductive work’ (2004, p. 219). As such, witch hunts were instrumental in the building of patriarchal landscapes in which women, their bodies, livelihoods, and sexual and reproductive functions were placed under the authority of the state. According to Federici, the witch-hunt established a terror for women, who ‘had to conform to be socially accepted in the developing capitalist society: sexless, obedient, submissive, resigned to subordination to the male world’ (2004, p. 23). These governances fuelled further anecdotes of women’s sexuality and bodies as unnatural and repulsive.

Adopting Sylvia Bovenshen’s annotation of witchcraft, Rebecca Schneider writes of ‘the “unnatural” state of witchery as inherently imbedded in the “nature” of female sexuality, which is to say paradoxically that female nature contains within it an inherent crime against nature’ (Bovenshen, 1978, cited in Schneider, 1997, p. 50). Schneider looks at the natural vs unnatural paradox in witchery, arguing that female sexuality is considered an unnatural crime in itself. In fact, patriarchal control over female sexuality was clearly evidenced in historical accounts such as the infamous witch-hunting book *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches,* 1486) by the Catholic clergyman Heinrich Kramer and the theologian Jacob Sprenger, which suggests that ‘All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is, in women, insatiable’ (Kramer and Sprenger, 1486, cited in Sollée, 2017, p. 23). Moreover, the clitoris itself was the ‘devil's teat’, and would evidence a woman’s status as a witch. The author Liv Stormquist reinforces this idea by writing that one way to identify a witch was to examine the vulva. If any hidden skin, wart or ‘teat’ was found, it was deemed to be ‘the mark of the beast, or the devil’s stamp’ (2018, p. 18). Furthermore, Stormquist gives an example of ‘a 1692 examination of five witches in New England, [where] three of the women were noted as having “a preternatural excrescence of flesh… much like a teat”’ (2018, p. 20). Although vulvas are of different shapes, sizes and colours, their appearance has been the subject of misogynist scrutiny throughout

history. As the author of *Femininity* (1984), Susan Brownmiller, states, 'the female body often reduced to isolated parts, has been mankind's most popular subject for adoration and myth, and also for judgement, ridicule, aesthetic alteration, and violent abuse' (1984, p. 58). These misogynist attitudes perpetuated in witchery gave way to a model that attempted to legitimise control over women's bodies.

According to Jane Schuyler, the *Malleus Maleficarum* had a significant influence on the Church's attitude and 'witches of the Renaissance were held to be heretics in league with the devil opposed to rule of God on earth; they were seductive and immoral, and received their powers as gifts from Satan' (1987, p. 21). It was also theorised that witches would participate in demonic orgies where 'women and men smeared brooms with hallucinogenic ointments that were then inserted into the vagina or rectum to induce trance' (Hatsis, 2015, p. 355). Other accounts of witchcraft depicted how 'the devil functioned as her owner and master, pimp and husband at once. … He stamped her with his mark, [and] had sexual intercourse with her' (Federici, 2004, p. 187). In this view, the woman became the devil's servant, accepting the subservience inflicted on her through her lack of autonomy. In *Notorious,* Holstein addresses underlying female anxieties around autonomy and victimisation through her overuse of apologies: 'I know that I can be a whore, sometimes. And, also, I'm really sorry for being such a slut. And I'm also really sorry for like sucking all of those dicks' (Holstein, 2017). Holstein delivers her apologies in a deliberately childlike voice, referencing how she has been 'resurrected as a sexy baby' (Holstein, 2017). These associations with babyhood contrast with a portrayal of witches as either childless or actively child-hating, such as in the myths of Baba Yaga or Hansel and Gretal.[33]

[33] The meaning of 'Baba' in Old Russian was 'midwife' which, as discussed earlier, was considered to be the devil's work.

Holstein uses the witch to provide a contemporary reading of the 'whore'; the two share similarities in their vilification as a result of cultural fallacies (Holstein, 2016, p. 26), echoing feminist writer Jessica Valenti's phrase, 'what makes a slut? The only rule, it seems, is being female' (Valenti, 2014). Similarly, in acknowledging the term 'slut', Sollée writes that 'The names and punishments may have changed, but many of the same oppressive attitudes and behaviours toward women that were prevalent during the early modern witch hunts persist' (2017, p. 13). A contemporary example of this can be seen in a male audience member's letter to Holstein about her performance of *How to Become a Cupcake/The Famous' Adaptation of Frankenstein* (2013). Holstein writes that the 'spectator implies that I am "like a whore", or a "celebrity-whore", by suggesting that I trade my body for success, notoriety, or material gain' (Holstein, 2016, p. 28). The spectator's letter suggested that Holstein must have 'now turned to these "shameful" and "desperate" attempts to gain attention' (Holstein, 2016, p. 28). Holstein's analysis of the letter is that its intent was to scold and slut-shame her for her actions –similar to the historical treatment of the witch. Holstein acknowledges that there are often attempts to prove the whore's 'unsavoury ways, and, historically, [condemn] her to death. Whether through redemption or punishment, her agency is stripped, reducing her to the powerless figure misogynist culture requires her to be' (Holstein, 2021). Through *Notorious,* Holstein provides a genealogy of a woman who remains governed and shamed through a contemporary cultural setting. Likewise, in her performance *My Stories, Your Emails* (2010), Ursula Martinez discusses how an audience member filmed her performance of *Hanky Panky* without her consent and published it online, leading her to ask 'what happens when your private parts go public!' (Martinez, 2023). *Hanky Panky* combined magic tricks with a re-imagined striptease, and the leaked footage soon went viral. *My Stories, Your Emails* (2010) consists of personal and family stories, alongside the most intrusive emails Martinez received after *Hanky*

Panky went viral. The leaking of the footage attempted to strip away Martinez's bodily autonomy, allowing it to be consumed and commented on by anyone. *My Stories, Your Emails* (2010) sought to reclaim agency of the lost footage and curate a new narrative for the ways in which the work was consumed.

Spectacles of persecution during the witch hunts were conducted as public events for various reasons: some saw it as a form of entertainment whilst others believed that the witch might change upon death or that something spectacular might happen. For example, my father used to tell the tale of a woman named Margaret Read, who was burnt at the stake for witchcraft in 1590 in my birthplace of Kings Lynn. The story details how, upon Read's death, her heart burst out from her chest and hit a nearby building. The heart then proceeded to wriggle to a nearby river, where it sank beneath the surface of the water (Briggs, 2017). These stories still exist, perhaps as a means to consummate Read's lack of autonomy or act as a reminder that women's bodies are still a site of control. Equally, if we return to Holstein's theories of the 'whore', Schneider explains that 'as any "whore" is given to be in this culture, she is a mistake, an aberration, a criminal, and a hoax' (1997, p. 58). These stories highlight that the witch is perceived as deserving her treatment for straying from the patriarchal regime. What also becomes interesting within the retelling of Read's story is the symbolism of the heart, usually associated with love, compassion and care, juxtaposed with the figure of the witch, who supposedly shares none of these qualities. Interestingly, in the story of Macbeth, some theories suggest that Lady Macbeth may have been the fourth witch as her famous 'Unsex Me' soliloquy strips away her femininity to maintain a more merciless nature and influence her husband to kill King Duncan, similarly suggesting her lack of heart. Arguably, Holstein attempts to restage such spectacles of persecution, challenging the audience to draw comparisons with past and present readings of women's bodies.

In history, globalisation brought neoliberal views to bear on the emblematic figure of the witch, implicitly influencing attitudes and creating a subtext within modern cultural views. In contemporary readings of the witch, she is represented as both unsightly and sexualised, one the antithesis of the other. The witch as a fictional character is sometimes characterised as a hideous woman with a crooked nose and warty features, wearing a pointed hat and holding a broomstick, like the three witches in Jacobean theatre productions of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, who are referred to as the 'weird sisters'. In other characterisations, she is young, beautiful and naive, as seen in *Bewitched* (1964) or, most recently, the Netflix remake of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (2018). Ironically, the witch remains at the mercy of capitalism, and this time also commercialism, sparing no remorse for the hundreds of women who lost their lives. Nonetheless, in more recent years, many feminists have used the identity of the witch as a form of solidarity and activism. In 1968, W.I.T.C.H. (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) led a protest down Wall Street against capitalism, dressed entirely in witch costumes, and today continue to protest on political issues. Additionally, many practising witches within contemporary society follow Pagan or Wiccan teachings, while others utilise the symbol of the witch to help embrace their body, sexuality and culture. These include Dr LUX ATL – the founder of StripCraft, a course which helps women reclaim their sexual agency through philosophy and dance – and the Hood Witch, who reclaims and embraces African, Indigenous and Mexican traditions that are separate from predominantly white Eurocentric witchcraft.

3.2 The Monster

Holstein's re-representation of the myth of Medusa is particularly poignant in the analysis of sexual identity. Medusa is distinguished as a fearful creature with snakes for hair, whose eyes can turn men to stone. Medusa was raped by Poseidon and her vow of celibacy was thus seen as broken, which critiques the many harmful connotations associated with female sexuality; the curse can be understood as a means of containing her sexuality and placing her body within the boundaries of patriarchal institutions. In one scene, Holstein refers to this myth by wearing a real octopus on her head in place of her hair; each tentacle is representative of a snake. Yet the eye placed within Holstein's vagina becomes significant in debunking the threat of petrification, by forcing viewers to hold the eye's gaze as the vulva looks back at them. In this moment, I am reminded of Mark Fisher's analysis of the weird, where he argues that the 'dimensions of the weird' produce 'a sensation of wrongness: a weird entity or object [that] is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here' (Fisher, 2016, pp. 15, 32). As we engage with the eye in Holstein's vagina, we are introduced to an image that presents itself as obscene, unusual and monstrous. A recurring pattern within many myths and common folklores is that the vulva/vagina is monstrous, equipped with teeth, or that something dangerous lives within it; a fact that Holstein alludes to through placing the eye inside her vagina.

In an attempt to understand the history of monstrous female narratives, Sarah Miller examines *De Secretis Mulierum* and notes how many of Pseudo-Albertus' secrets 'warn of the dangerous and unsavoury nature of the female body whose orifices, exudations and emanations can infect the penis or disorder a man's internal organs' (Miller, 2010, p. 137). These theories evoked a fear surrounding women's bodies, suggesting that the male's genitals might be harmed in some

capacity. Similarly, Sigmund Freud's well-known essay 'Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes' describes the horror of the male child upon discovering a female child's lack of penis. According to Freud, this male child feels 'a horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her' (Freud, 1925, cited in Burke, 1998, p. 22). In Freud's view, due to this 'lack', the adolescent male sees the female as abnormal and submissive, establishing the supposed gender hierarchies. Paradoxically, however, Freud's ideas of castration complex present women as being castrated, not castrating. Yet myth and common folklore often portray the vagina as 'equipped with teeth' (Rees, 2013, p. 20) and suggest that a monstrous entity lives inside a woman's corpus, which Holstein alludes to by placing the eye inside her vagina. In fact, some European readings of the vagina dentata are associated with Freudian theories of castration anxiety, as acknowledged by the film theorist Barbara Creed. In another short essay, 'Medusa's Head' (1922), Freud interprets Medusa's head as representative of the 'female genitals' (Freud, 1922, cited in Creed, 1993, p. 2). Creed notes how Medusa's head 'with its hair of withering snakes is a symbol of the castrated female genitals' according to Freud (1993, p. 110). However, Creed argues that Freud has overlooked a critical aspect of the myth: 'With her head of writhing snakes, huge mouth, lolling tongue, and boar's tucks, Medusa is also regarded by historians of myth as a particularly nasty version of the vagina dentata' (1993, p. 111). Creed also makes apparent how contradictory the constructions of the female body become; for example, she is castrated but the myth of her vagina dentata has become a castrating device. Creed further acknowledges that the snake and its fangs could be interpreted as a woman's imaginary phallus which also has castrating capabilities.

Snakes have become a recurring emblem within many myths, legends and stories from around the world (as mentioned in Chapter 2). For example, in Christianity and Judaism, the story of

Eve connects the serpent to the devil, tempting Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, whereas Creed establishes that snakes are not only representative of phallic imagery, but the snake's mouth can also be seen as a *vagina with teeth*. Female sexuality embodied the anxieties of men, and many legends, myths and folklores 'explicitly articulate male fears of castration in the act of normal sexual intercourse and warn of the necessity of removing the teeth from women's vaginas, in order to transform her into a nonthreatening and marriageable sexual partner' (Angel, 2013). In his article 'The Vagina Dentata Legend' (1943), Verrier Elwin discusses how vagina dentata has been recorded in various parts of the world with many instances incorporating the figure of the snake (Elwin 1943, p. 29). As gender studies theorist Emma Rees notes, one story from Chhattisgarh describes how:

> A snake enters a woman via her vagina (her head is in a furnace at the time, so she fails to notice), and bites off the penis of a young man who attempts to rape her. Three of his brothers meet the same fate; it is up to the youngest one to extract the snake with a stick, on condition that it magically reinstate his brothers' penises as the young woman kicks each bereft young man in turn. (2013, p. 24)

The mythology of the vagina dentata attempts to attribute insidious acts to the woman and 'render the potentially dangerous sexuality of women nonthreatening to patriarchal power, through heroic acts of "pulling the teeth"' (Angel, 2013). Yet even within contemporary conversations, Rees identifies how the 'vagina dentata – the toothed vagina – still functions to legitimise, or even promote misogynist practices such as female genital mutilation' (FGM), in order to remove the threat of castration (Rees, 2013, p. 42). The performance artist Jess Dobkins sought in her performance *Fee for Service* (2006) to both challenge and emulate the vagina dentata by inviting audiences 'to have a pencil sharpened by the artist's vagina dentata for a nominal fee' (Dobkins, 2006). The pencil symbolically represented a penis, and the sharpener her vaginal teeth. Despite attempts to demystify such stories, these myths remain

embedded in attitudes towards women's bodies and continue to expose women to physical and psychological harm through misogynist abuse. Although the octopus that Holstein wears as hair acts as metaphorical snakes which do not have fangs, Holstein herself invokes notions of castration by later physically removing the eye from her vagina and destroying it with her teeth. This act allows the anxieties of castration to play out and, in turn, challenge the ideologies that inform it. Conversely, Holstein presents the myth of Medusa once again, debunking the threat of petrification by physically destroying the eye, rendering it redundant.

The uncanny gaze from Holstein's vagina pulls the spectator in with its never-blinking stare and elicits a feeling of being watched, a clairvoyant sensation of looking inwards and being challenged by one's own social awareness.[34] This returned gaze reminds me of Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1928), a story of two teenagers' sexual perversions narrated by an anonymous male character. In one instance, the eyeball of a raped and killed priest is placed within the vagina of one character. The narrator comments:

> Simone lay on her side, I drew her thighs apart, and found myself facing something I imagine I had been waiting for in the same way that a guillotine waits for a neck to slice.

[34] In his essay, 'The Uncanny', Freud explores the etymology of the word uncanny - 'unheimlich' and 'heimlich' in German, the relationship of the words and how they work in opposition to the other (Freud, 1974). For example, Freud's first translation of 'heimlich' can mean something familiar or homely whereas 'unheimlich' can mean unhomely, strange, uncanny even (Ruers, 2019). Interestingly, a secondary translation that emerges for 'heimlich' implies something secret or concealed. Freud goes onto explore the semantics of the two terms and how the uncanny emerges when something familiar (heimlich) becomes strange or unhomely (unheimlich). Freud discusses E.T.A. Hoffmann's story of *The Sandman* as an example. The story goes that a child must sleep in order for the Sandman to place sand in the child's eyes. If the child is not asleep, the Sandman will remove the child's eyes. However, the story's complexity lies in the character, Coppelius, who is perceived by the child as both a father figure and the Sandman. With the conflated identity of Coppelius, the story becomes uncanny as he embodies two different identities, one that is familiar and the other that is unsettling. Interestingly, Freud also asserts that the removal of the eyes also links to the child's fear of being castrated (the unconscious fear of losing an important organ) (Ruers, 2019). As we view the eye within Holstein's vagina, we are introduced to a familiar object (an eye) *within* an unfamiliar setting (a body part that is often concealed). Similarly, the vulva/vagina not only symbolises the concept of castration, but Holstein's later removal of the eye from her vagina, can also be connected to the child's fear of castration depicted in the story of *The Sandman.*

> I even felt as if my eyes were bulging from my head, erectile with horror; in Simone's hairy vagina, I saw the wan blue eye of *Marcelle*, gazing at me through tears of urine (Bataille, 2013, [1928], p. 67).

The eye that is removed from the priest's socket, placed in Simone's vagina and urinated on as she climaxes, arguably acts as a metaphor for the returned male gaze that invoked horror in the narrator. For the first time in the novel, the young male narrator sees himself under the microscope, not only as the perpetrator but as the antagonist, with the aforementioned male gaze looking back on him. The eye placed within Holstein's vagina provokes the reader to profoundly register the spectacle they are witnessing. The returned gaze may evoke the possibility of a reembodied horror that, as Rebecca Schneider states, 'has the potential to be replaced by acknowledgement – acknowledgement of the historical terms and tangled terrain of horror, … and the marked body' (Schneider, 1996, p. 172). Furthermore, Holstein's spectacle may be perceived as a performance that transgresses the 'terrain of horror' venturing into the space of relearning perceptions around 'marked' female bodies.

In his article 'Lacan, Barthes, Bataille, and the Meaning of the Eye—or Gaze' (2016) Tim Themi examines the metaphor of the eye in Bataille's novel and notes how, within the story's preface, Bataille metaphorises the eye as 'the eye of the conscience' (Bataille, 2013, [1928], p. 76). Themi writes that 'Bataille felt our taboos had become unreflectively ossified over the course of time, meaning our erotic transgressions of such taboos today were condemned to degradation in a way that eschewed the sacred-erotic festive sites of our communal past' (Themi, 2016, p. 93). Further, Themi notes that the priest's eye also functions to resist sexual taboos established under the influence of Christianity. However, this story does not only analyse sexual perversions; it also attempts to uncover the unconscious mind. In his essay 'The Metaphor of the Eye' (1963), Roland Barthes responds to Bataille's novel, writing how the

‘metaphorical dependence [of the] eye, sun, and egg are closely bound up with the genital; by virtue of their metonymic freedom, they endlessly exchange meanings and usages’ (Barthes, 1963, cited in Bataille, 2013 [1928], p. 125). Barthes discusses how objects within the novel interchange, from eggs and eyes to milk and urine, representing the unconscious as they appear in a metonymic chain that is both ungoverned and fluid (Themi, 2016, p. 94). Barthes observes that these metaphors are ‘closely bound’ to the vagina, noting how the genitals endlessly take on new meanings within the novel. As such, it could be argued that *Story of the Eye* also comments on the multifaceted and tabooed representations of the vagina. As Virginia Braun and Sue Wilkinson acknowledge, ‘The vagina is a contested object where meaning is neither singular nor fixed’ (Braun and Wilkinson, 2001, p. 26). Furthermore, Holstein’s exposed vulva becomes a paradox in all aspects, never settling into a role.

The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein’s performance *Notorious* acts as a site of deconstructing mythology and its embedded influence on society, using explicitness and shock to challenge the patriarchal constructs placed upon bodies. *Notorious* adopts tropes of female narratives such as the witch and Medusa to represent and re-politicise them. Holstein intentionally frames her vulva as spectacle in order to resignify the social, political and cultural context of women’s bodies in contemporary performance. This agency is derived from the messy body, problematically convoluted and tangled in multiple narratives and representations of female subjectivity (Holstein, 2014, pp. 98–102). Performance provides a space which allows these intricate and overlapping constructs to be exposed and finds new grounds to rise from. In considering the female body as a cultural continuum of representation in what follows, I am interested in understanding how both history and mythology have inspired principles of law and morality as well how *Notorious* as a performance can challenge the framework of obscenity.

3.3 Thrilling Acts: Performing Obscenity

The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein is presented in front of me as a piercing-eyed witch, wearing a bald cap and with a long white straggly wig wrapped around her torso. Holstein pours popping candy into a mound on the floor and hoists her legs on either side of her two 'sisters'' shoulders. A harness keeps her stable. They lean her forwards, ensuring that her urethra is hovering over the candy's mass. Holstein begins to piss. Holstein's witchy fluids hit the candy and a crackling sound begins, echoing the sound of a fire. She plunges her body into the substance and assumes a 'dead' pose, leg cocked, exposing her vulva. The crackles continue into the silence. Britney Spears' song 'Work Bitch' begins to play (Holstein, 2017).

Obscenity is a 'legal concept used to characterise certain material as offensive to the public sense of decency' (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). Allen Walker Read argues that the nature of obscenity 'lies not in words or things, but in the attitudes that people have towards these words and things' (Read, 1934, p. 264). In short, words have no meaning except that which we bring to them. Yet it is these attitudes that have brought 'taboo' into the proximity of obscenity. If we were to hazard a definition for the obscene, Read proposes that 'obscenity is any reference to the bodily functions that give to anyone a certain emotional reaction, that of a "fearful thrill" in seeing, doing or speaking the forbidden' (Read, 1934, p. 264). However, in terms of legislation, Professor Kathleen E. Mahoney acknowledges in her article 'Obscenity, Morals and the Law: A Feminist Critique' (1984), that 'obscenity, morals and the role of the law [have] been debated for hundreds of years, largely by men. Women have been conspicuous by their absence in decisions regarding the definition of obscenity and the characterization of its harms' (Mahoney, 1984, p. 33). For Mahoney, the absence of women's voices in legislation further deepens the disparity of sexual inequality as 'the definition of a woman's role as submissive

and domestic was reflected in legal constructs that both assumed and guaranteed her dependence on men' (1984, p. 34). Mahoney notes that men and women have 'different moral perceptions' and that 'approaches to obscenity can be traced to a male-defined concept of justice and individual rights' (Mahoney, 1984, pp. 34–41). In this respect, the feminist writer Germaine Greer states that 'femininity is still compulsory for women and has become an option for men, while genuine femaleness remains grotesque to the point of obscenity' (1999, p. 2).[36] Therefore, as a sequence of events that *often* attempts to elicit reactions through the exposure of the artist's body, feminist performance art is appropriate for the consideration of obscenity. In particular, certain instances of feminist performance art may reveal profound insights into how we consider the obscene in relation to the female body. The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein not only exposes her nude body on stage within *Notorious* (2017), she also (literally) pisses on hyper-sexualised representations of the female body as if it were a satanic ritual. Further, I will explore Lynda Nead's theories on the social and legal framing of the female body in her book *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (1992), as well as the ways in which artists use their bodies for activism through Lisa Tickner's ideas of 'Vaginal Iconology' in her article 'The Body Politic: Female Sexuality & Women Artists since 1970' (1978) and Julia Kristeva's ideas of 'abjection' in her book *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). Although this section continues from the monstrous female, it focuses on obscenity and feminine morality which arguably take their own form of perceived horror within a patriarchal context. From this perspective, how can obscenity be employed to disseminate new thinking? How does Holstein's performance define obscenity? What struggles do artists encounter when using their explicit bodies in performance?

[36] It is important to note that Greer's views are both problematic and exclusionary. I use this reference specifically to draw out how women's bodies have been defined as obscene throughout history.

Obscenity was first defined in legal terms in 1868 by the Lord Chief Justice, Sir Alexander Cockburn (in *R. v Hicklin*) as 'the tendency to deprave and corrupt' (Cockburn, 1868, cited in Nead, 1992, p. 90). However, Donia Mounsef argues that 'it was after the 1789 French Revolution that the term *obscene* acquired its modern reference as a non-political crime concerned with offending public morality and decency' (Mounsef, 2005, p. 247, original emphasis). Performance art's interest in staging the obscene is often designed to elicit a reaction, as expressed by John Freeman, 'The obscene body placed centre stage subverts the very form that frames it, forcing us into a relationship with the forbidden and the unspoken' (Freeman, 2007, p. 15). In this sense, obscenity is revealed to be a politically charged and highly contested concept in performance art; it engages with the 'taboo' by forcing the obscene to be seen in the realms of art. A good example of this political tension is found in *Vulva Canoe* (2014), a work by the Japanese artist Megumi Igarashi, otherwise known as Rokudenashiko. Rokudenashiko was indicted for the crime of 'obscenity display' after making a canoe from a 3D scan of her vulva and sailing it down a river. In court, Rokudenashiko stated that neither the 'female genitals nor my artworks shaped like female genitals are obscene. … I was very surprised to see how people get upset to see my works or even to hear me say *manko*' (Rokudenashiko, cited in McCurry, 2016).[37] Rokudenashiko also noted that she did not know what a vulva should look like since it was '"overly hidden" in Japanese society' (Rokudenashiko, cited in McCurry 2016). Often, nudity aims to be transgressive, and in performance 'not at least as audiences, we are often intimately aware of our own contingent and evolving limits – be they physiological, emotional, ethical or moral' (Johnson, 2019, p. 10). Therefore, performance may place audiences into a position that requires them to confront notions of the obscene. Not only does Rokudenashiko's work illustrate how patriarchal

[37] *Manko* is a slang word for vagina in Japanese.

influence has created an accepted narrative which excludes and shames vulvas and vaginas, it also explores how nudity can evoke censorship based upon morality.

Figure 14. Photo of the "Manko kayak" sculpture by Megumi Igarashi (Rokudenashiko's Vulva Canoe) (Source: *Rokudenashiko,* 2023), *Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 4.0*

In his analysis of the obscene, Read states that 'Our feeling of the fearful thrill is the result of experiences during the impressionable age – the hushed awe that surround these words, the refusal of information concerning them, or the punishment meted out for an inadvertent use of them' (Read, 1934, p. 266). Holstein certainly stages *thrilling* acts of obscenity by using nudity extensively as a political framework, inserting a fake eyeball into her vagina or pissing on the stage at various theatrical institutions. These acts also offer an interpretation that analyses the complexities of women's bodies and highlights the issues of how obscenity may be read. Therefore, when analysing the obscene in relation to the women's bodies, it is important first

to understand the framing of the body and the discourses that surround the female nude. In examining nudity and obscenity, the art historian Lynda Nead interrogates representations of female nudity and refocuses nudity in an analysis of feminist art in Western culture, surveying the legal and social regulation of obscenity. Nead argues that 'anything that resists classification or refuses to belong to one category or another emulates danger' (1992, p. 6). Nead gives examples of how female nudes that we may see in art galleries are acceptable and seen as *credible* art, such as Giorgione and Titian's *Sleeping Venus* (1510), a visual icon in the history of Western patriarchal culture. However, Nead continues, this can also be 'understood as a means of containing femininity and female sexuality', as high art acts as 'one way of controlling this unruly body and placing it within the securing boundaries of aesthetic discourse' (Nead, 1992, p. 2). In this sense, the female body is placed in a highly codified and institutionalised setting where her *unruly* femininity must be viewed as permanently contained. Conversely, if the female body is displaced and refuses to be contained, her sexuality and femaleness become polluted, dangerous and obscene. Holstein's displacement and refusal to be contained sanction the view of her body as obscene as she challenges narratives that have marked and contained the female body throughout history to the present day.

Pornography offers another example of where the policing of bodies becomes blurred around female nudity. As pornography is still a highly disputed subject, it is important first to acknowledge the discourse around the feminist sex wars which began in the 1970s. Differences of opinion around pornography are often based on the anti-pornography feminism versus sex-positive feminism divide. Anti-pornography rhetoric argues that pornography debases, exploits and objectifies the female body. For example, Andrea Dworkin observes that the word 'porn' originates from the Greek word 'porné' which means 'the graphic depiction of vile whores, or, in our language, sluts, cows (as in sexual cattle, sexual chattel), cunts' (Dworkin, 1981, p. 200).

Furthermore, Dworkin argues that 'the idea that pornography is "dirty" originates in the conviction that the sexuality of women is dirty and … that women's bodies (especially women's genitals) are dirty and lewd in themselves' (Dworkin, 1999, p. 201). Anti-porn feminists suggest that pornography perpetuates sexual inequity through its encouragement of 'violent, coercive and exploitative acts against women' (Mahoney, 1984, p. 51). Whilst pornography is consumed by many people of different genders, in an article entitled 'The Porn Gap: Gender Differences in Pornography Use in Couples Relationships' (2017), Jason S. Carroll and Brian J. Willoughby found that 'men are more likely than women to view pornography, and this is particularly true of viewing pornography regularly on a daily or weekly basis' (Carroll and Brian, 2017). In this view, it could be argued that, within patriarchal realms, the female nude in pornography is 'credible', as porn videos predominantly appease the male gaze. Furthermore, Nead explains that adult bookshops have their own viewing protocols that deliberately hide images of the female nude from others and allow them to be consumed for the purpose of titillation (Nead, 1992, pp. 2–3). Whilst not strictly governed by an institution, the reading of erotic female literature comes with its own political difficulties; it becomes either *obscene, objectified* or both, having to deliberately titillate in privatised areas.

In his book *Unlimited Action: The Performance of Extremity in the 1970s* (2019), Dominic Johnson analyses the work of Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, who was part of COUM Transmissions, a UK music and performance art collective that included artists such as Cosey Fanni Tutti. Johnson writes how 'the theme or strategy of obscenity – or, more precisely, indecency – is a defining force in COUM's scandalous performances of extremity in the 1970s' (2019, p. 90). This method was translated to their exhibition entitled *Prostitution* (1976), held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London. The exhibition, alongside pornographic images, exhibited 'props from COUM's performances ranging from a rusted knife to a jar of

Vaseline to bloodied objects such as bandages, tampons and bottles of blood' (Coles, 2016). Its opening night attracted national attention from the tabloids, art press and the House of Commons alike, causing huge debate around moral values in the arts and society. Further, 'Questions were raised about the use of the body, representation and exploitation within the media and art world' (Coles, 2016). The exhibition created a mass media frenzy in terms of obscenity, body politics and anti-porn debates, incited conversations around public funding between the ICA and the Arts Council and sparked further debate around the perception of permissible art.[38]

Anti-porn ideologies are widely debated within sex work and are often used decisively by the media and other governing institutions. Whilst not all sex workers are women or heterosexual, sex work provides an interesting debate around legislation and morality laws. In their book *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers Rights* (2018), Molly Smith and Juno Mac comment on the global sex worker movement which advocates for the decriminalisation of sex work.[39] They state that 'perhaps the most difficult questions raised by prostitution involve what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society' (Smith and Mac, 2018, p. 2). Smith and Mac open up a debate around the feminist sex wars, noting the sex-positive feminists' position that porn and prostitution could not only be educational but could also overturn patriarchal institutions. Further, 'the sex industry was sticking two fingers up at the institution of marriage, highlighting the hypocrisy of conservative, monogamous heteronormativity' (Smith and Mac, 2018, p. 10). However, within this debate were two perceived moralistic approaches where

[38] In 2022, the ICA mounted another exhibition entitled *Decriminalising Futures,* which involved artists who spoke about their experiences of sex work. The exhibition was led by SWARM (Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement) who advocate for the decriminalisation of sex work to alleviate the socio-cultural and economic struggles that intersect with it.

[39] Smith and Mac also comment that 'Sex worker is a political term, and therefore not all people in the sex trade may use it to openly identify themselves' (Smith and Mac, 2018, p. 1). The contention is around whether selling sex is seen as work.

'both pro-sex feminists and anti-prostitution feminists concerned themselves with *sex as symbol*' (Smith and Mac, 2018, pp. 10–11). Debates regarding sex work often exclude any discussion of criminal law and sex workers' rights within it.

The moral value of the female body is regulated and entwined in social and cultural boundaries. As sex work activists Meena Saraswathi Seshu and Aarthi Pai write, the "chaste womanhood" is centred on monogamous heterosexual relationships within marriage for the sole purpose of reproduction. Such reproduction is held sacred in order to preserve the purity of descent and ensure continuity through male lineage' (Seshu and Pai, 2014, p. 50). If the body resists these ties, then it poses a threat, as in the traumatic female narratives previously discussed. Nead goes on to adopt Mary Douglas's theories in her book *Purity and Danger* (1966) and argues that 'Douglas examines the cultural links between dirt and disorder or formlessness and analyses the rituals of cleansing and purification that control this threat' (Nead, 1992, p. 6). Douglas's theories examine 'dirt' as a cultural matter that is determined and controlled by hierarchical structures. If we apply this to the female body, her very being remains controlled; if, however, she drifts from these categories, her body then becomes dirty or impure, a point to which I will later return. These attitudes are depicted in James Gillray's painting *The Whore's Last Shift* (1779), which portrays the female nude not as Venus but as a 'woman [who] stands in a sordid and poverty-stricken room. She is naked except for her shoes and ragged stockings, and is washing a garment, her "last shift", in a broken chamber-pot supported on a broken chair' (The British Museum, no date). The metaphor of her attempting to wash her dirty white garment is sordidly shown. The concept of purity becomes problematic when analysed in relation to women's bodies as it shares connotations with 'the virgin', also a contentious subject that enforces patriarchal social constructions. As Schechter writes, before DNA tests 'men wanted reassurance that any babies their wives gave birth to were definitely theirs in order to

prevent them potentially giving their wealth to somebody else's kid' (2023, p. 91). The concept of virginity is embedded within capitalism, ensuring that women remain restricted, monogamous and dependent on men.

Figure 15. The Whore's Last Shift by James Gillray (Source: British Museum, 2020). Wikimedia, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

The body's connection to erotica and capitalism is discussed by Eirini Kartsaki and Rachel Zerihan in *Slots, Slaps, Sluts and Other Cheap Thrills: Promiscuity, Desire and Labour in one-to-one Performance* (2012), in which they consider the artist ORLAN'S one-to-one performance *Le Baiser de l'artiste/Kiss the Artist* (1977) as a form of contract, with ethical and economic ties. ORLAN's performance consisted of a costume that represented a saint which was placed to one side of the stage alongside a life-sized image of her torso which 'turned into

a slot machine. When the artist chose, she would place herself behind the board, activating the armoured sculpture's liveness, inviting participants to put money into the slot in exchange for a kiss' (Kartsaki and Zerihan, 2012, p. 158). The participant was asked to slot five francs into the costume which collected in a Yoni-shaped tray in front of her vulva, initiating the 'erotic exchange' between artist and spectator. In describing her work, ORLAN states how 'there was my physical artistic presence from whom one could buy a kiss, a real kiss, a French kiss for five francs, with the tongue – it was sex' (ORLAN, as cited in Kartsaki and Zerihan, 2012, p. 163). ORLAN discussed how the intimacy of the work opened interesting discourses around objectivity, commodification and sex work. Due to the legal and moral judgements that intersect with sex, the spectators' ethical encounter with ORLAN's work enabled her to challenge its socio-political connection to impurity and obscenity. Below, I study how artists resignify their vulvas in performance to challenge socio-cultural themes of gender politics by analysing Holstein's act of urination on stage which may be viscerally processed by the spectator as either pornographic, erotic or *disgusting*.

3.4 Liberation vs Terror: Vaginal Iconology and Abjection

The art historian Lisa Tickner's essay 'The Body Politic: Female Sexuality & Women Artists since 1970' analyses how artists have incorporated their bodies in their work to unapologetically challenge the dichotomies of obscenity and objectification. Tickner discusses four categories within her research describing feminist art in the 1970s: 'The male as motif, "vaginal iconology", transformations and processes, and parody' (1978, p. 240). Each of these categories works to dissect the ways in which feminist artists challenge the appropriation of phallic fantasies through their bodies. 'Vaginal Iconology' is a term borrowed from Barbara Rose, who discusses the vulva within art as eroticised due to its explicit nature. In her article

'Vaginal Iconology' (1974), Rose describes the use of the vulva in art as an 'assault on the Freudian doctrine of penis envy, which posits that all little girls must feel that they are missing something' (1974, p. 59). For Rose, 'vaginal iconology' within performance art refutes ideas surrounding bodily shame, proposing instead that its eroticism 'arouse[s] women but not sexually', promoting the genitals as iconic (1974, p. 59). Through this lens, Tickner examines how feminist artists specifically used the aesthetics of the vulva as a political terrain. Tickner examines vaginal imagery through the works of Judy Chicago, Shelley Lowell, Betty Dodson and Susanne Santoro, stating that the 'acceptance and re-integration of the female genitals into art has thus been a political, rather than a directly erotic gesture. Like the association violation of the menstrual taboo, it celebrates … and replaces the connotations of inferiority with those of pride' (Tickner 1978, pp. 241–242). In this sense, Tickner explains the female body as a vessel of liberation and authority. A good example of this can be seen in Nicola Canavan's performance *Raising the Skirt*, which seeks to 'reclaim the cunt as a powerful tool in assertion' (Canavan, 2014, cited in LADA 2014). The gesture of raising a skirt has various meanings globally and culturally. For example, in some folklores, revealing the vulva can ward off the devil. In European churches, small stone carvings of figures holding open their exaggerated vulvas – known as Sheela-na-gigs – represent protection from evil spirits and in 'Madras (India) women were known to subdue storms by exposing themselves' (Canavan, 2014, cited in LADA, 2014).

Figure 16. Sheela Na Gig at Kilpeck Chuch.
(Source: Zorba the Greek, 2022), Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 2.0

Raising the Skirt invited participants to raise their own skirt in order to 'reclaim their cunt' and share the collective beauty of their bodies through staging a series of portraits (Canavan, 2014, cited in LADA, 2014). The key points that Tickner makes in relation to the term 'vaginal iconology' is that art can indeed be de-sexualised and reclaimed. However, Tickner acknowledges that this also becomes problematic when the patriarchal gaze renders the vulva obscene under a non-sexual lens. Additionally, if we apply 'vaginal iconology' to Nead's theories, the artist invites the viewer to engage in an expanded perspective of the female body and her relation to the obscene; she may still be objectified, but she is now framing the perspective in which one looks. However, Tickner's ideas struggle to grapple with what happens when artists purposefully position themselves as subjects of disgust and objectification.

The academic and artist Maria Pinaka creates work that explores notions of dirtiness and inappropriateness through discussing artists who use 'sexual and artistic subjectivities in their works' (2017, p. 134). What Pinaka defines as 'dirty' 'does not depend on the extremity of sexual representation but on the artists' processes of self-objectifying themselves as being or doing something "dirty"'(2017, p. 131). Porno-graphing methodologies within her work discuss how artists employ 'sexual situations' to both 'self-objectify' and 'self-submit'. Pinaka argues that 'The broader research question … is what sex and sexuality, and in particular various manifestations of 'dirty,' 'wrong' and 'improper' sex and sexual subjectivity do to art: to the artist, to the image/s, to the viewer' (2017, p.15). Further Pinaka elicits what is considered either 'normative' or 'antinormative' in the realms of art and how this challenges 'the viewer's meaning-making patterns, complicating the relationship between sex and resolution, and by extension between image and meaning' (Pinaka, 2017, p. 17). A good example of this concept can arguably be seen in the work of Deborah de Robertis, who sat on the floor at the Musée d'Orsay and exposed her vulva in front of Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866). Courbet's painting of a vulva and abdomen is known as 'a provocative icon of modern art' (Jones, 2013) whereas Robertis' work was perceived as shocking, obscene and inappropriate. In an interview conducted with *Luxemburger Wort*, Robertis stated:

> There is a gap in art history, the absent point of view of the object of the gaze. In [Courbet's] realist painting, the painter shows the open legs, but the vagina remains closed. He does not reveal the hole, that is to say, the eye. I am not showing my vagina, but I am revealing what we do not see in the painting, the eye of the vagina, the black hole, this concealed eye, this chasm, which, beyond the flesh, refers to infinity, to the origin of the origin. (Robertis, cited in Nelson, 2014)

In viewing Courbet's painting, the spectator remains a voyeur, disconnected from the work they see. Similar to the eye placed in Holstein's vagina, the 'eye' of Robertis' vagina gazes

back at the spectator. Although Courbet and Robertis present similar images, Robertis was escorted away by police, which raises the question of limitations in relation to Pinaka's ideas around 'normative' and 'antinormative' art. Furthermore, the notion of the performer as both 'artist and object' returns to Pinaka's ideas of self-objectification and how the body is read within certain frameworks. In her practice, Pinaka also analyses the difference between the performer and the self through questioning everyday 'truths'. She writes that 'by "true" I mean for example that the story I am narrating has actually occurred, … or that I would have gone to the toilet to pee even if I hadn't decided to record myself peeing' (Pinaka, 2017, p. 124). In her porno-graphing methodologies, her work became concerned with exploring 'relations between languages of representation and the enduring of not knowing if there is a boundary or a difference between the self and the performance of this self' (Pinaka, 2017, p. 124). I am reminded by this idea of how Holstein's act of urinating on stage may also cross a boundary. Whilst urination is a biological function, the act of urinating on stage displaces itself, leading it to become 'dirty'. For example, the idea of pissing in a theatre feels like a violation of the space which Holstein makes explicit in Kartsaki's edited book *On Repetition* (2016): '"the signifying space", is threatened by an object's separation from its context and its inevitable displacement, particularly when that object comes from the exterior of the symbolic space that it enters' (Holstein, 2016, p. 126). In this view, the space is the theatre and the object is Holstein's urine. Further, the urination can be seen exiting from the exterior of her symbolic space, or vulva. Holstein employs Judith Butler's assertion of symbolic spaces in discussing her urination as the object of study, analysing it as abject, threatening and displaced due to the space it enters. The obscene act of Holstein's urination becomes political because of its displacement, activating the audience's engagement, which is evident in how the act was received by others.

Similarly, within the context of a seminar, Holstein introduced her work *Splat* (2013) to a group of students at Queen Mary University. The story was picked up by several newspapers and reported negatively, in terms of how it was obscene for Holstein to be urinating and 'showing her vagina' (Agency, 2015). Here, another displacement occurs with the act of urination being shown within the context of education. This displacement provoked widespread misogyny in the tabloids, with a disproportionate number of comments made by men. Returning to Douglas's theories of dirt as determined and controlled by hierarchical structures, it is widely known that men are more likely to urinate in public spaces (Dodge 2014). Although it is a public order offence to urinate in public spaces in many countries, this displacement is deemed common and socially acceptable within patriarchal parameters. Holstein breaks the social constructions of purity through self-objectifying her body which does not conform either to social or to legal regulations. Additionally, whilst the theatre in which Holstein performed may accept the act of pissing on stage (despite being classified as a public space) it still stirs up a sense of obscenity and violating regulations.

I am also interested in why feminist performances such as Chicago's *Red Flag* may evoke unease around bodily functions such as menstruation, and what makes this political in the realms of obscenity. In *Powers of Horror* (1980), Julia Kristeva's theories of abjection seem to offer an explanation of why some may consider that these works breach obscenity limits. It is not the mere sight of the vulva that is obscene, it is also the process of the de-sexualised vulva revealing its natural functions that violates societal morality. Kristeva's research focuses on what evokes people to feel horror or disgust through psychoanalysis and literature, stating that 'the abject refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other' (1982, p. 2). The central example that Kristeva uses to explain such a reaction is the

sight of a corpse, but she also mentions blood, an open wound, pus, faeces, urine or even food; certain objects that remind us of our own corporeality and materiality. These objects are all separate from the body but remain, in some capacity, bound. Barbara Creed states that the 'womb represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination – blood, afterbirth, faeces' (1993, p. 47). It is a person's own abject fear that causes them to perceive a baby crowning from a vagina as horrifying. In this view, the gynaecological anatomy encompasses not only menstrual blood but discharge, urine and new life, all of which become visible on the outside of the body. Adopting Kristeva's theories, the feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz states that the reason why we feel disgust towards these objects has to do with viscosity: 'The viscous, the fluids, the flows which infiltrate and seep, are horrifying in themselves: there is something inherently disgusting about the incorporative, immersing properties of fluid' (1994, p. 194). Grosz provides a visual account of the properties of viscosity which pervade our senses in response to the abject. If we rationalise this, Holstein's piss seeping its way through the sticky popping candy is an impactful example of viscosity or, perhaps, an accumulation of the viscosity of Holstein's urination as well as its displacement within a theatrical space.

In the Uncensored Festival (2019) that took place at The Yard Theatre in Hackney Wick, the performance artist Mouse presented *50 Shades of Trash,* in which she ejaculated water out of her vagina. Her work was described as 'aquatic madness, all garnished with debauched shock value tricks' (Uncensored, no date). Although it is not urine, female ejaculation also invites analyses of obscenity and abjection. In 2014, The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) banned female ejaculation from porn produced in the UK. Its justification for 'censoring female ejaculat[ion] [was] on the basis that it is urine, not prostatic fluid, and therefore contravenes the "no urolagnia" policy of the Obscene Publications Act 1959' (Talks 2015). The

pornographic film producer and director Ann Span argued that 'the speed, volume, viscosity, smell and sight [are] all very different from urine' (Span, 2009, cited in Talks, 2015). As a result of medical and scientific misogyny, what female ejaculation consists of is still contended. Equally, misogyny in science, culture, history, mythology and beyond all play a role in shaping contemporary understandings of female sexuality. However, Grosz writes that female sexuality is not threatening because it resembles something inherently viscous, rather 'it is the production of an order that renders female sexuality and corporeality marginal, indeterminate, and viscous that constitutes the sticky and the viscous with their disgusting, horrifying connotations' (1994, p. 194). In performing female subjectivities, both Mouse and Holstein establish agency through embracing the messiness of their bodies which is often associated with disgust and repulsion. It is important, however, to question how we might privilege obscenity in Holstein's performance as an act of celebration, while nevertheless being conflicted by our individual attitudes towards Read's ideas of the 'forbidden and the unspoken'.

The theme that runs throughout Holstein's urination scene is that the female body never settles into a definitive construct; she is either objectified, obscene or both. If she resists the sanctioned regulations in which she is placed, the body becomes a threat, disgusting, a violation of the obscene. Grosz notes how the genitals, in particular, are imprinted with their own social protocols, stating that the 'genitals have a particular social meaning in Western patriarchal cultures that the individual alone – or even in groups – is unable to transform insofar as these meanings have been so deeply etched into and lived as part of the body image' (1994, p. 82). If we adopt this approach in relation to *Notorious*, Holstein presents her body as a tool for unveiling the complexities it beholds in patriarchal contexts, whilst also employing obscenity to challenge them. In this sense, the body in its totality offers no singular reading in its consumption. These etched 'meanings' also translate into wider socio-political issues

surrounding bodies and our relationship with them, an aspect which I will now investigate within my own PaR.

3.5 Alienation: Selfhood, (M)othering and Abjection

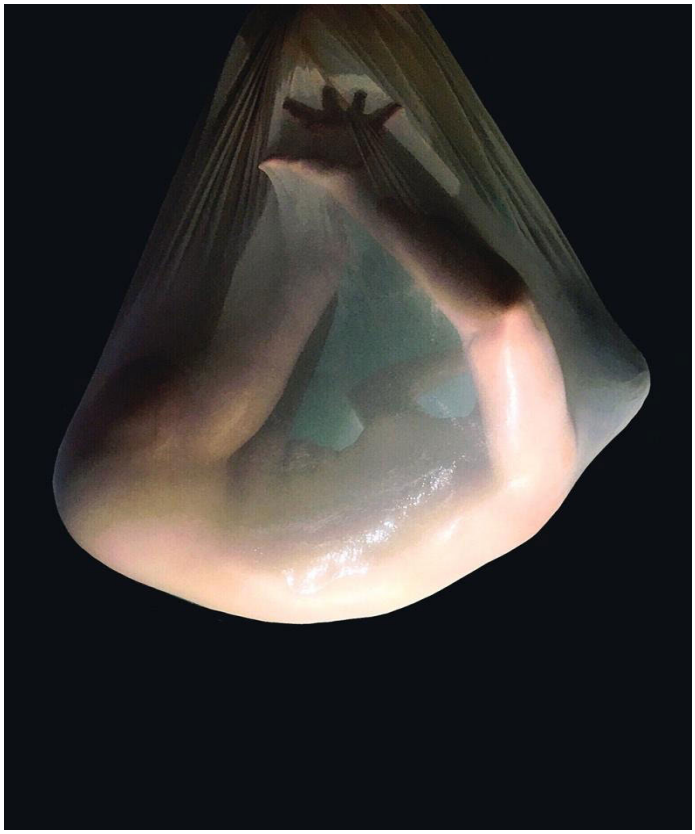

Figure 17. PaR - The Alien

The alien I enflesh is gestating in its amniotic sac. The sac is smooth, shiny and gooey like dough. The sac clings to the alien, emphasising its curvatures. The alien moves, pulls, pushes and swirls its body, taking pleasure in its messy and liminal state. It is infinite, mutable, makes space, and opposes binaries. It refuses to neatly fit into a singular identity that society has offered it.

The term ‘alienate’ means to make ‘someone feel that they are different and not part of a group’ (Cambridge Dictionary, no date). In his manuscript *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,* Karl Marx analyses capitalism through four forms of alienation: ‘alienation from the product of labour; … alienation from the activity of labour; … alienation from one’s own specific humanity; and … alienation from others, from society’ (Horowitz 2010). Marx argued that people are both alienated and objectified through commodity capitalism, stating that ‘Labor’s realization is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as *loss of realization* for workers; objectification as *loss of the object and bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement, as alienation’* (1932, p. 29, original emphasis). For Marx in the 19th century, workers were alienated from the product of their labour through not being able to afford the commodities that they created. For example, a person making an item of clothing would not be able to afford it in the shop it was sold at; thus, their labour was being exploited by the bourgeoisie. Equally, Marx suggests that labour also alienated people from one another and created socio-economic structures that became inseparable from everyday life. Further, Marx analyses the merging of culture and the economy within capitalism, which he argued formed social hierarchies.

Employing sociologist Anibal Quijano’s theories, the philosopher and activist Maria Lugones explores the formation of social hierarchies through capitalism and how dominant understandings of race, class, gender and sexuality were informed by colonial power (2008, p.1). Lugones writes that in identifying ‘capitalist Eurocentered power, “capitalism” refers to the structural articulation of all historically known forms of control of labor or exploitation, slavery, servitude, small independent mercantile production, wage labor, and reciprocity under the hegemony of the capital-wage labor relation’ (2008, p. 3). Through these historical forms of control, capitalism informed identities and the production of knowledge that established

themselves as 'naturalised' ways of being (2008, p. 4). In this view, race, gender, sexuality and class are all determined through capitalism and are, in turn, consequences of alienation. A good example can be seen in the ideology of the 'nuclear family' in the West and how, in many cases, this concept glorified particular gendered roles.

Laboria Cuboniks, in their book *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation* (2018), employs 'alienation as an impetus to generate new worlds' (2018, p. 15). The prefix Xeno signifies alien or unnatural, which is precisely what Xenofeminism (XF) attempts to encapsulate. In an interview with the Ágrafa Society, Cuboniks states that 'it is the gap between what is, and what can be understood and imagined that gives us purchase on the future' (Cuboniks cited in Ágrafa Society, 2019).[40] This manifesto is starkly anti-naturalist, arguing that 'anyone who's experienced injustices wrought in the name of natural order, will realise that the glorification of "nature" has nothing to offer us' (Cuboniks, 2018, p. 15). Within my own practice, I became interested in both the alienation of bodily autonomy and the alien as a trope for women's bodies. Using the manifolded methodology of vulvaplicity, which intersects with reflective knowledge, body-based research and performativity, the following practice explores an autoethnographic response to the alienation of my own body and uterus within patriarchal realms. Before analysing my practice, I will discuss theories of how misogyny has intervened with the discourses of medical history, policy, sexuality and gender binaries which continue to shape our understandings of bodily autonomy and reproductive rights. Additionally, my work studies Barbara Creed's analysis of the alien in *The Monstrous Feminine*: *Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* to explore queer politics and its disruptive nature to patriarchal agendas. My practice raises the following questions: How can I inhabit the alien

[40] Laboria Cuboniks is a pseudonym used for the collective of six women that wrote *Xenofeminism.*

to disrupt normative constructions of female subjectivity in order to find a space to free myself from alienation? If this space is found, does it become part of the normative?

Hysteria was a medical diagnosis that was only identified in women in the Victorian era. The term originates from the Greek word *hystera* meaning uterus. The medical diagnosis for symptoms of hysteria was associated with the uterus wandering, otherwise known as a wandering womb (Vagina Museum, 2022). Hysteria was described through a range of symptoms, such as nervousness, anxiety, loss of appetite, irritability and lack of interest in sex. One of the earliest accounts of hysteria was that of the physician Aretaeus of Cappadocia (2nd Century AD), who wrote that the womb 'delights also in fragrant smells, and advances towards them: and it has an aversion to foetid smells, and flees from them, and on the whole, it is like an animal within an animal' (Simon, 2014). Aretaeus compared the uterus to an animal and suggested that, to keep it in position, a person must place pleasing smells close to the vagina. Treatments for hysteria ranged from surgical hysterectomies to frequent sex, masturbation, smelling salts or even consigning patients to asylums. Other theories suggest that if a woman was pregnant 'as often as possible', it would keep the 'ostensibly bored womb occupied, and therefore in its rightful place' (Simon, 2014). Misogyny in medicine, once more, determined how women's bodies were viewed and treated. In his writing *Beware of the Wandering Wombs of Hysterical Women* (2019), Darren N. Wagner suggests that hysteria was thought to be the beginnings of 'a complete demonic possession, resulting in priests having to perform exorcisms and root out potential witches in the area. The belief of hysteria as a symptom continued into European medicine and was extended to encompass several more symptoms' in each consecutive century (Wagner, 2019). In this view, monstrous female archetypes often have some connection to the vulva, vagina or gynaecological anatomy whether through the 'mark of the beast', vagina dentata or wandering wombs. Within these frameworks also lies the

argument that a woman's autonomy is intrinsic to patriarchal agendas, not only within the discussion of control but also that of reproduction.

Patriarchal control is very much still an ongoing issue within current socio-political landscapes. In their report 'Institutional Misogyny is a Theatre to Reproductive Justice Everywhere' (2022), Evelyne Opondo and Caroline Harper argue how the 'policing [of] women's bodies and people's reproductive potential is back on the global agenda' (Opondo and Harper, 2022). In the Roe v. Wade lawsuit in 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favour of the constitutional right to have an abortion. However, in June 2022, Roe v. Wade was overturned by the Supreme Court and the 50 states were able to decide individually on abortion rights. By May 2023, 12 states had 'enforced a near-total ban on abortion with limited exceptions', with debate continuing in many other states (Nash and Guarnieri, 2023). The overturn has sparked widespread debate centred around 'pro-life' versus 'pro-choice' positions and fuelled by right-wing ideologies of morality and religion. In the UK, a person seeking an abortion must be 'certified by two doctors, who must each sign a Department of Health HAS 1 form to give notification that the abortion has been approved and on what grounds' (Parliament.uk, 2007). The overturning of Roe v. Wade has sparked further debate within the UK, with Tory MPs including Danny Kruger suggesting that women should not have the 'absolute right to bodily autonomy' (Kruger, 2022, cited in Giordan, 2022). Kruger further argues that 'I don't understand why we are lecturing the United States on a judgement to return the power of decision over this political question to the state' (Kruger, 2022, cited in Giordan, 2022). The notion of returning 'authority to the state' echoes the persecution of witches within capitalism. A dialogue that emerged from Roe v. Wade was how a person's bodily autonomy was both questioned and objectified, reduced to anatomy and treated as an object. As discussed above, the womb has historically been theorised through metaphorical, anatomical, physiological and

cultural perspectives, all of which have contributed to society's understandings of gynaecology today. As Wagner suggests in his thesis 'Windows to the Womb: Visualization, Metaphor and Reproduction in the Early Eighteenth Century and Today', 'metaphors pertaining to the womb referred to it in situations exterior or separate from the body. Essentially, cultural attention and figurative use conceptually positioned the womb as an entire subject, pushing the rest of the body to the periphery' (2009, p. 77). The separation of the womb from the body incites the notion of alienation – a topic my practice seeks to expand upon.

Figure 18. Tit Burger

When beginning my practice of the alien, I considered how theories surrounding authority, objectification, mythology and obscenity are all related to monstrous female subjectivities. Rees writes that 'to "unfold" the female body *should* mean a renunciation of such fears, but women continue to be punished for the mysteriousness of their bodies' (Rees 2013, p. 221, original emphasis). I contemplated what it would mean to play on these themes of fear and purposely self-objectify my body through images. I began to experiment with a series of

images, such as placing my breast into a burger bun (as seen in Figure 18), wrapping hair around my tongue, placing fractured eggshells on my body, putting a fake screw through my nipple and illustrating an image of Medusa's head between thighs, looking up at the viewer (Appendix seven). Each image intentionally signalled something strange, abject or obscene. Within this strangeness lies a refusal to be categorised or understood. In her analysis of the weird, Eirini Kartsaki writes that the weird woman 'creates a rupture into the familiar through which a new understanding of who we are and how we perceive ourselves emerges' (2023: unpublished). I was interested in what these images made space for and how they may inform performances of the vulva. The images sought to unfold the body as both object and subject under the male gaze, a familiar body 'ruptured' through its reframing. I considered how, in creating these images, I too felt alien to my body and estranged from the work I was creating. This sense of alienation became central to the work going forward. Without being fully conscious of it – performatively perhaps – my images were largely influenced by the relation between women's bodies and commodity capitalism. My breast in the bun commented on the consumption and sexualisation of women's bodies, the idiom of being tongue-tied signalled the restriction of women's voice and autonomy, the fractured eggshells symbolised gender inequalities that perpetuate fragility, and the screw within my nipple represented the *structural* gender violence reproduced by capitalism. In the analysis of Marx's theories, patriarchal capitalism naturalised society's modes and ways of being. In adopting Cuboniks' definition of alienation as being anti-natural and generative of new worlds, I began to consider whether my own work could detach itself from the capitalist political economy and start looking beyond. From here, the image of the alien in the sac emerged (Figure 17 above).

The alien as a trope gives way to a model in which the excluded and the estranged entwine. It is simulated within a strange continuum of space: the alien is neither here nor there; it is an

outcast – not belonging, and foreign in its being. The threat of the alien comes from its very refusal to belong within the space of social normative frameworks and, by extension, that of the patriarchal institutions that seek to bind it. The alien's abjection invites one to look in, analyse and question dominant understandings. Creed's analysis of the alien within science-fiction films is particularly concerned with the ways in which the alien's 'procreation and birth take place without the agency of the opposite sex' (1993, p. 17). An example given is that of the science-fiction film *The Brood* (1979), which is based on the character Nola, a woman who was a patient under Dr Raglan. The doctor teaches his patients to express their psychological turmoil through physiologically changing their bodies, creating open wounds and lesions. However, Nola's physiological change produces the incarnation of an alien womb sac protruding from her body that produces murderous creatures. In this sense, the alien sac becomes its own form of abjection as it explicitly expresses Kristeva's violent image of birth. Kristeva argues that childbirth evokes the utmost abjection, as it 'induces the image of birth as a violent act of expulsion through which the nascent body tears itself away from the matter of maternal insides' (1982, p. 101). The alien also functions as a useful framework for assessing the political and social abjection that surrounds women's bodies, as *The Brood* clearly 'presents woman's womb sac as a disgusting growth' (Creed, 1993, p. 50). Here we encounter a paradox: patriarchal narratives insist that women's purpose is reproduction whilst also insinuating that their womb is the source of disgust. Further, the female archetype in *The Brood* is presented as unstable, producing offspring who murder people in response to her expulsion of her anger, as her emotions trigger those of her brood. *The Brood*, directed by David Cronenberg, could be read as an indirect response to the threat the female poses: the alien too disavows the phallus to create life and, in turn, threatens patriarchal values; the film's response to this threat is to alienate her being. The alien also defies patriarchal constructs through its ability to avoid heterosexual frameworks. As mentioned by Creed above, the alien has full autonomous control

in relation to reproduction and does not require the opposite sex to spawn offspring. Perhaps this is why 'female aliens' in science-fiction films such as *The Alien* (1979) and *The Tomorrow War* (2021), are perceived as the most dangerous and uncontrollable of all.

The alien's autonomous control over procreation distorts dominant structures of heteronormativity. Here, I am reminded of Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* (2013, p. 73), in which she discusses how 'sexed positions' in binary normativity depict homosexuality as abject. Butler argues that 'heterosexuality and homosexuality are mutually exclusive phenomena, that they can only be made to coincide through rendering the one culturally viable and the other a transient and imaginary affair' (2013, p. 74). That is to say, abjection takes form through identities that deviate from 'normative subject-positions' (2013, p. 74). Similarly, alien subjectivities are seen as abject through their rejection of binary 'sexed positions', 'open[ing] up anatomy—and sexual difference itself—as a site of proliferative resignifications' (1993, p. 56). The alien unweds itself from an imagined body and becomes a theoretical possibility that destabilises binary morphologies, with the ability to disavow and resignify the phallus. In returning to it through the analyses of both Creed and Kristeva, the alien is not reliant on heteronormative frameworks and evokes its own 'threatening spectres' in patriarchal discourses. Furthermore, queerness ruptures and destabilises the logics of heteronormativity through disavowing notions of reproductive futurity that have been bound – both symbolically and anatomically – to the phallus. The denial of the phallus intervenes with a complex discourse, creating a shift in heteronormative values and allowing new spaces of queerness to be considered.

Queering the Womb

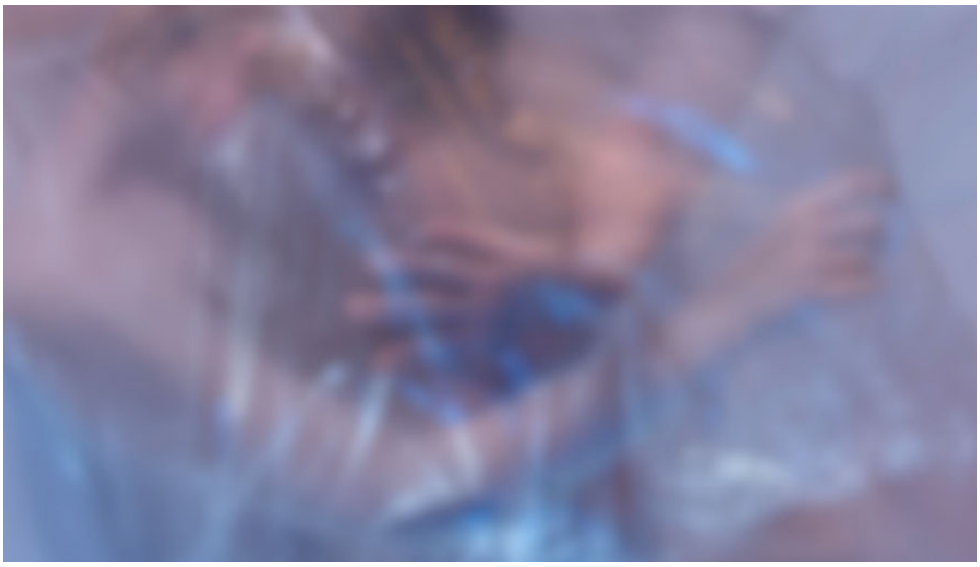

Figure 19. Queering the Womb

In returning to Wagner's theories of the womb as positioned both culturally and figuratively peripherally to the body, my practice sought to examine alternative readings of the body as a spatial metaphor. More specifically, it sought to understand what this displacement may allow space for and its potential mutability for new meanings. The development of the alien started with an image and led to a performance that was informed by a self-reflexive and autoethnographic research process.[41] The performance was curated during lockdown, when isolation became normal and the world felt heavy, both personally and politically.[42] It was a time that revealed and exacerbated social and economic inequalities within the world and the need to hold political systems to account. It was also a time for reflection. In early 2019, I

[41] The alien was developed into a performance art piece which was shown at three different performance events: Cheeseburger & Friends, Marisa Carnesky's Radical Cabaret School and then developed into a video to be presented at the Decadent Bodies conference at Goldsmiths University.
[42] During this period, there were debates around reproductive rights (predominantly in America due to Roe v. Wade, but also in the UK), lgbtqi+ rights, overt misogyny within our political systems and the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM), which caused many to re-examine racism both personally and institutionally. In medicine and science, the debate over reproductive rights also prompted discussion on the impact on people of colour.

identified as heterosexual. It was an identity that felt safe to me and one that I was taught from childhood, yet it was also an identity that I could never quite make fit. As I reflect on my research to that point, queer politics had implicitly informed much of my work and thinking around Western socio-cultural frameworks. The stillness of Covid and the experimental methods of PaR formed a space where any excess that fell outside the mould could be explored. As Jack Halberstam questions, 'What if you begin life as a queer mix of desires and impulses, and then are trained to be heterosexual but might relapse into queerness once the training wears off?' (Halberstam, 2012, p. 8). Simultaneously, as the Roe v. Wade debates persisted, I reflected upon overt misogyny and the alienation of bodily autonomy. As a person who does not want children, is unmarried and identifies as queer, I found a notable abjection that emerged around identities that deviated from normative frameworks. Performance and the abject body, according to Colleen Walker, produces 'validity as social-political vehicle in expressing and communicating its message in the cultural melange that is life in the 21st century' (2005). If the abjection of identity produced discomfort for patriarchal ideals, then it was this discomfort that my work was interested in exploring further.

My performance of the alien began much like my image (Figure 17) – with me inside the wet elasticated sac. Inside the sac, I gently moved and extended parts of my body outwards, stretching the fabric taut and feeling my way around the material until I could find its opening.[43] The development of the alien sought to disrupt normative constructions of gendered subjectivity through *queering* the womb by challenging notions of its reproductive function in the cis-hetero-patriarchy. Before eventually 'coming out' as bisexual, I had written a manifesto for the alien which spoke of non-normativity and the fostering of a world in which society

[43] As this performance was constructed during Covid-19 lockdowns, it was performed on Zoom within my flat.

could live outside the binary. This spoken manifesto was played alongside my movements within the sac. When reflecting on my autoethnographic process, I felt a deep sense of trying to carve out a space for myself within the world, one in which I could articulate the internal knowledge of who I am that I had always found difficult to describe to others. The manifesto began as a declaration of hope and care for the future but soon descended into a critique of the cis-hetero-patriarchy that informs the West's modes of knowing. Echoing the words of the performance and video artist Dayna McLeod, queerness can be approached 'as a generative tool for alternative forms of sociality and collectivity' (2022, p. 2). The term 'queering' emerged from queer theory as a technique that challenges heteronormativity and identity binaries and questions constructions of gender and sexuality. In her performance *Intimate Karaoke: Live at Uterine Concert Hall* (2018), McLeod employs queerness as a method to 'critique compulsory heterosexuality's mandate to reproduce and the evaluative gaze cast on female bodies that cannot, will not, and do not comply' (2022, p. 2). McLeod's performance explored the topic of ageing as a middle-aged queer woman and the discourse of nonreproductive bodies by inviting audience members to sing a karaoke song of their choice into her uterus, whilst another audience member listened to her flesh through a stethoscope (2022, p. 1). For McLeod, 'this performance "focus[es] the audience's attention on the often cisheteronormative and reproductive expectations" of bodies marked female and the reasons "why we feel entitled to make demands on these bodies in the first place"' (2022, p. 2). Audiences were able to engage with McLeod's body and uterus in a way that deviated from reproduction as a destination. This deviation from how we may understand bodies particularly inspired the project of the alien.

In the next scene of the alien, I contorted and moved my body into positions that made the sac appear to bubble as if ready to explode from the skin encapsulating it, eventually emerging

from it naked and wet. As Anthony Howell suggests in *The Analysis of Performance Art: A Guide to Its Theory and Practice,* 'nudity can imply a rebirth' (1999, p. 19), but similarly objectification, sexualisation, obscenity and abjection can all be read into it, especially when applied within the connotations of gynaecology. Jacques Lacan's theories of desire also arguably intersect with the politics of the naked body through his concept of the 'lack' or, rather, 'objet a' (an unattainable object of desire). The Lacanian theory of 'lack' discusses how desire may be experienced through the gaze:

> In so far as the gaze, qua objet a, may come to symbolize this central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration, and in so far as it is an objet a reduced, of its nature, to a punctiform, evanescent function, it leaves the subject in ignorance as to what there is beyond the appearance. (Lacan, 1979, p. 77)

Drawing on Freud, Lacan compares a subject's gaze to that of 'castration', in that the gaze represents something missing which, in turn, produces a desire that cannot be fulfilled. However, 'if we look directly at the "central lack," the blank void will defy our comprehension' (Wang, 2021, p. 315). This process is what Lacan described as anamorphosis, a method which distorts an image and challenges a 'perspective that is centred [on] a privileged interest for the domain of vision' (Lacan, 1979, p. 86). As the audience gaze upon my nude body and exposed vulva, they may encounter the process of anamorphosis as the image of the womb is distorted, turned inside out (an alien womb giving rise to an exposed vulva). Similarly, Amelia Jones states how 'queer is anamorphosis, the disorienting of the subject in space and time' (2012, p. 174–175). In queering the womb, a liminal space of ambiguity occurs. According to Colleen Walker (2005), bodies can be viewed as liminal spaces as they are 'endowed with the physical thresholds of ears, eyes, mouth, anus and vagina, parts of the body where insides and outsides merge, all qualify as liminal spaces'. The womb can be considered as a liminal space. As previously discussed, the womb has been seen as a space of great mystery, an unknown terrain

for patriarchal fear. It can also be understood as a space between two destinations or worlds. My practice inquired how queering the womb can enact liminality and where identity can be both unlearnt and rethought to interrogate the normalising of the cis-hetero-patriarchy and the body's ascribed meanings. Whilst considering these ideas, I used my body to create imagery of the alien, exploring the liminality of the womb through the concept of queer anamorphism (a video of my performative work of this is available at https://youtu.be/iWzdv56VLhU).

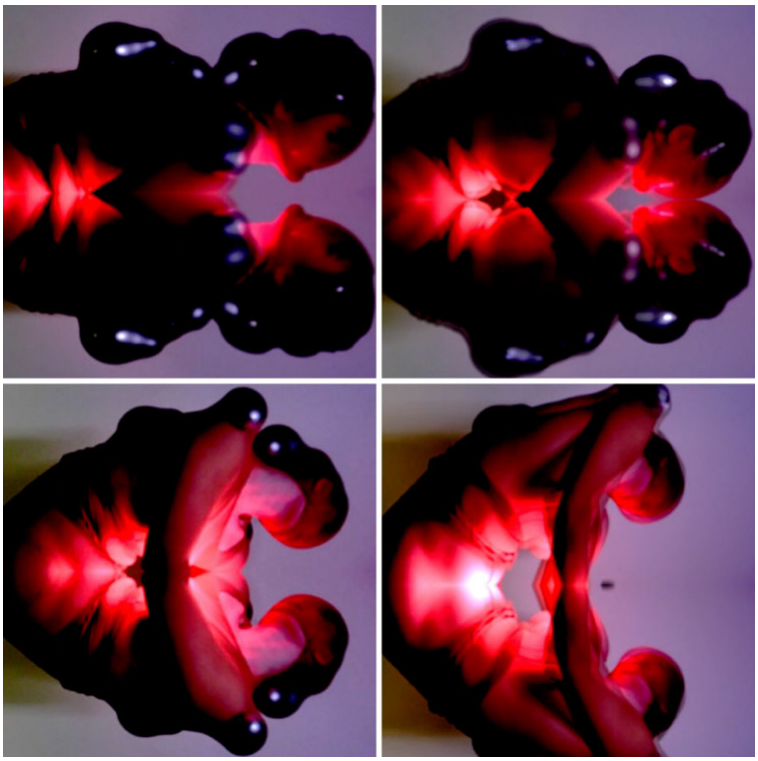

Figure 20. Rebirth.

Through queering the womb, the concept of rebirth was also informed by alternative modes of motherhood, or 'm-othering', as used by the transfeminist artist Niya B. In her performance *Umbilical* (2018), B examines the post-reproductive body by placing a small seeding plant within her navel as a means to 'reconnect with the m-other' (B, no date). In this performance, B 'explored intimacy with plants, desires for the more-than-human, and possibilities of an eco-gender, [exploring] her reproductive instincts and m-othering desires within the context of

climate change, overpopulation, and the requirement of sterilization for transgender people' (B, no date).[44] B's performance approached m-otherhood through alternative frameworks, exploring intimate relationships, love and care through queer ecology. M-othering has an emphasis on 'othering' due to the way that the dominant culture is positioned in opposition to queer identities and provides different approaches to how mothering is defined. In my practice, the fostering of alternative modes of being and the sharing of knowledge and body were positioned as moments of m-othering in my own practice, questioning what m-otherhood meant if not the act of giving birth, rather, metaphorically birthing oneself.

As discussed in this chapter, women's bodies are seen as both shapeshifters and mutable, depending on the narrative proposed by patriarchal ideals. Through performance, I decided to use this mutability to transform myself into Donald Trump. In some regards, the alien signified a desire for a reawakening or rebirth – a reckoning of sorts. When analysing how Western society relates to and reads bodies through a patriarchal lens, I was reminded of Donald Trump's leaked voice recording where he spoke about a woman in a highly derogative manner.[45] This reckoning therefore took the form of Trump painted on my buttocks, mimicking the leaked voice recording bragging about 'grabbing pussy', eventually exposing my anus as if it were his lips. On the voice recording, Trump ended the conversation by stating that 'when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything' (Trump, 2005, cited in Nelson, 2016). My performance ended with the abject image of Trump defecating through his mouth.[46] This performance's abject nature and critique of dominant culture provided a sense of reclaimed autonomy. Drawing on a book by the

[44] Sterilization for transgender people was abolished by the European Court of Human Rights in 2017; however, it is still practised in other countries.
[45] In 2016, a 2005 video of Trump was leaked. The video featured him discussing his attempts to sexually seduce a woman.
[46] This comprised Weetabix, grapes and water.

performance artist Karen Finley about gender inequality, *Grabbing Pussy,* 'It's my body, it is not Trump's body. … Legislated, it's not, it's not the court's body, … you will not own my body, I will not be punished (2018, pp. 78–79).

Figure 21. First rendition of my performance via Zoom.

Through PaR, I discovered that vulvaplicity extends much further than the physical presence of the vulva, in that this study intersects with many different discourses, including monstrous female subjectivities, witches, capitalism, medical discourse, patriarchal control and violence, autonomy, morality, obscenity, liberation, abortion, m-otherhood and queerness. This chapter set out to provide a feminist reading of monstrous female identities in mythology and how such myths have helped shape cultural understandings of our bodies. As the scholar Frances Babbage suggests:

> Feminist thinking has recognized the vital function of myth in transmitting and shaping cultural beliefs, often in forms that make these accessible to the minds of the youngest children and has repeatedly argued that any claims made for myths as embodiment of

> unchanging or universal truths must be treated with profound suspicion. (Babbage, 2011, p. 22)

Performances of the vulva, as discussed in Chapter 3, may expose and reinterpret socio-cultural beliefs about women's bodies. Through autoethnographic reflections and reflexive thinking, I have come to understand that multiple types of identity, including gender and sexual orientation, are inseparable from the body. In an analysis of PaR, Nelson states that it is 'driven by a desire to address a problem, find things out, establish new insights' (Nelson, 2013, p. 3). The connections between queer theory and feminism in my PaR have drawn together interesting modes of relating to and seeing the world.

While feminist thought is sometimes placed in opposition to queer theory, there are clear intersections between them. For example, feminism is often regarded as a discourse and movement that predominantly focuses on gender, whereas queer theory explores sexuality. For some feminist theorists, placing such weighting on sexuality 'fails to capture the structural presence of gender as a social division that shapes [people's] lives and ultimately shapes sexuality' (McLaughlin *et al*. 2006 pp. 2–3). Yet, for queer theorists, this understanding 'fails to capture the significance of sexuality, in particular homosexuality' (McLaughlin *et al*. 2006, p. 3) that has challenged the frameworks of Western patriarchal culture. As Diane Richardson, Janice McLaughlin and Mark E. Casey suggest, 'We need to consider queer theory's potential to challenge ways of thinking about sexuality and gender, and the possible new directions that may emerge out of and at the interface of queer/feminist theory' (2006, p. 6). Both queer and feminist theory are deeply impacted by patriarchal institutions and 'how the activities of capitalism and labour relations [have] become entangled with gendered and sexual identities in forms that enhance the exploitation, marginalisation and political challenge[s]' (McLaughlin *et al*. 2006, pp. 1–2). In the chapter that follows, I examine queerness in contemporary art, drag

and porn and the ways in which artists perform vulvic spectacles to tell a story, challenge binary frameworks of gender, sex and sexuality, and provoke audiences' understandings of identity. This contextualisation of theory informed the creation of my vulvaplicity workshops and prompt cards, through which I examine how applied theatre conventions can facilitate and inform 'new insights' surrounding gender, sexuality and identity politics.

4 Performing Vulvic Spectacles

The philosopher Guy Debord argues in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) that 'the spectacle is an affirmation of appearances and an identification of all human social life with appearances' (2005, p. 9, official translation). For Debord, spectacle operates through the socio-economic systems that fuel capitalist agendas of materialist appearance and was theorised as a Marxist critique with the emergence of capitalism after the war (Nicholas, 2019). Debord discusses how 'the spectacle keeps people in a state of unconsciousness as they pass through practical changes in their conditions of existence' (2005, p. 14, official translation). It becomes a device that reinforces dominant structures of power which Debord exhorts the public to challenge, not simply to be passive spectators. Furthermore, Debord argues that politics may be stripped away from art as its 'radical or subversive' nature is subsumed by the spectacle (Nicholas 2019). Yet the spectacle is contradictory: on the one hand, it reinforces structures of power but, on the other, it invites a second look and challenges dominant understandings. This paradox was acknowledged in an essay by Debord and the artist Gil J. Wolman entitled 'A User's Guide to Détournement' (1956) in which they introduce their theories on détournement – a method adapted by the Situationist International organisation that challenged capitalism and advocated for social revolution – which considers the demise of spectacle. Détournement is a method of refuting the spectacle and fostering radical politics in order to interrogate the everyday. Debord and Wolman state that *'Détournement* not only leads to the discovery of new aspects of talent; in addition, clashing head-on with all social and legal conventions, it cannot fail to be a powerful cultural weapon in the service of real class struggle' (2006, p. 18, official translation). The work of détournement seeks to disrupt the everyday, thereby subverting the socio-economic power of the spectacle.

Interestingly, Baz Kershaw explores the Society of the Spectacle, arguing that 'economics, politics, science, technology and more have … added new urgency to gaining fresh understandings of spectacle as an element of performance ecology (2007, p. 206). Spectacles in performance, according to Kershaw, produce a certain kind of sensationalised cultural force when engaged with activism. Using Guy Fawkes as an example, Kershaw states how 'at its most effective it touches highly sensitive spots of the human psyche by dealing directly with extremities of power' (2007, p. 208). He notes that, historically, spectacles have often problematically been defined under the category of 'disgust' or 'disapproval' or, more significantly, they 'tend to expel the merely human, to objectify it, to replace it with emblems, ciphers, symbols and other types of abstraction: the sacrificial effigy, the idealised' (2007, p. 209). Using this logic, I propose that 'extremities of power', which are both present in Debord's and Kershaw's work, are often strategised to maintain boundaries, to objectify, numb and restrict anything that may move beyond them and, as such, are comparable to patriarchal and heteronormative thinking. Contemporary performance may seek to stage a spectacle by directly challenging and reframing these extremities of power with the aim of provoking audiences to consider alternative narratives of social, cultural and political value. Phallocentric coding presumes normative structures that render alternative social frameworks mere subcultures. Like Debord's theories of the spectacle, the vulva too has been subsumed by the everyday: patriarchal influence has created and constructed narratives around gender, sex and sexuality. This chapter examines spectacles produced by the artist and photographer Del LaGrace Volcano, the trans drag artist Prinx Chiyo and the pornographic film actor and sex educator Buck Angel, all of whom expose their vulvas to find pleasure in the liminal space between shock and unlearning. Prinx Chiyo reveals his vulva on stage in *The Sound of the Underground* (2022) to raise awareness and visibility of trans safety and identity. Angel uses porn as a mode for queering desire in *Cirque Noir* (2005) and as a means of disrupting normative thinking. Del

LaGrace Volcano's gender-variant body in Jenny Saville's painting *Matrix* (1999) moves beyond inscriptions of binarist subjectivities that have categorised bodies into inaccurate and insufficient placeholders of gender, i.e. men and women. This unveils an epistemic threat to patriarchal norms, as Volcano's body provokes a slippage within these constructs and quantifies a gap in the knowledge surrounding bodies.[47]

Vulvic spectacles within this chapter are defined as the act of exposing one's vulva within performance as a means of challenging dominant structures of patriarchal power. These structures of power have shaped heteronormative assumptions around bodies in Western culture. In *Queer Time and Space: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), Halberstam analyses 'Western human subjects' – in particular, subjects that follow cisnormative and heteronormative behaviours – in order to speak about the universal experience of heteronormativity. For Halberstam, 'queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction' (2005, p. 1). Halberstam uses the term queer in *opposition* to such institutions, as queerness offers an alternative mode of being and 'open[s] up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space' (2005, p. 2). However, Halberstam acknowledges that not all queer people live their lives in an alternative way and merely discusses queerness as an approach that offers potential differentiations, a concept I adopt within this writing. Additionally, Dominic Johnson suggests that the term 'queer' may produce its own political and academic difficulties as '"queer" tends to become a catch-all for a nonspecific and virtually limitless conception of transgression, a byword for any practice that resists categorisation or troubles neoliberal pride' (2012, p. 28). This thesis considers certain practices as transgressive; it is distinctively queer because it

[47] In June 2023, my research on vulvic spectacles was published with intellect, as part of the Northern Lights: Film and Media Studies Yearbook. The issue was entitled 'Transforming Genitals in Culture and Media'. More information is available at: https://intellectdiscover.com/content/journals/nl/browse

situates performance as a place to re-think and reform heterosexual and normative narratives that are concerned with bodily binary aesthetics, reproduction, sexual practices and intimacy.

In this chapter, I will consider José Muñoz's concept of disidentification, as presented in the book *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), Oyèrónké Oyěwùmi's call for the decolonisation of gender binaries in her book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997), and Paul B. Preciado's ideas on how pornography challenges biological structures in his books *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (2013) and *Counter-Sexual Manifesto* (2000). Such works seek to deconstruct capitalist identity and gender binaries, proposing a 'field for experimentation, a place for the production of new subjectivities, and, as a result, a true alternative to traditional ways of doing politics that surpasses resignifying or resisting normalization' (Preciado, 2013, pp. 369–370). Whilst 'spectacle' is employed as a lens to re-think paradoxes that surround the vulva, I am aware of how the term may be problematically negotiated around marginalised groups and bodies who have been impacted within kyriarchal systems. Therefore, the artists discussed within this writing are those who intentionally frame their vulvas as spectacles in order to resignify the social, political and cultural context of their bodies in contemporary performance. This chapter asks how such spectacles of the vulva in performance might be comprehended following a long history of taboo, what can be produced and understood by spectacles of the vulva and how an artist's exposed vulva might illuminate, challenge, confront or expose patriarchal, binary understandings of identity. Further, this chapter seeks to analyse how artists negotiate these complex and multifaceted interpretations of the vulva in contemporary performance.

Halberstam suggests that heteronormative assumptions manifest and articulate themselves in everyday time and space. In his book, *Queer Time and Space,* he examines queerness through two key contexts – the social and familial – both of which contribute to examples of heteronormativity. For Halberstam, the social 'may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality' (2005, p. 4). This temporality presumes normative structures that leave alternative social frameworks as mere subcultures. Heteronormative relations, bodies, sexuality and lifestyles are all upheld and fetishised within the narrative of reproductive temporality. Familial time corresponds to child-rearing and the inheritance of 'morals', 'values' and 'wealth' inherited over generations (Halberstam, 2005, p. 4). According to Halberstam, 'it also connects the family to the historical past of the nation, and glances ahead to connect the family to the future of both familial and national stability' (2005, p. 4). This temporality within capitalist constructions proposes, as Halberstam makes explicit, a type of protection associated with stability, futurity and identification. Notions of stability and futurity become intrinsic to capitalist frameworks, as family structures allow inherited wealth and class divides to become passively accepted within a person's identity. However, in an attempt to disrupt heteronormative structures, Halberstam argues:

> If we destabilize the meaning of capitalism using poststructuralist critiques of identity and signification, then we can begin to see the multiplicity of non-capitalist forms that constitute, supplement, and abridge global capitalism, but we can also begin to imagine, by beginning to see, the alternatives to capitalism that already exist and are presently under construction (2005, p. 12).

Through queering capitalist identity and rejecting heteronormative structures, we can begin to reimagine alternative modes of being that go beyond narratives of permanence and binarism. However, I pose the question of how to consider other modes of being when heteronormative identification is the default, specifically in terms of sexuality, gender and desire? More

importantly, echoing the words of Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 'How do these assumptions inform the discourses on "gender identity"?' (1990, p. 17). Butler raises this question as a means to discuss how identity politics are only intelligible once they have been processed and recognised through gender, a recognisable model tangible within heteronormative discourses. The recognisable model that I discuss connects to the 'assumptions' to which Butler refers – the 'agreed-upon identities or agreed-upon dialogic structures' that exist within Western normative narratives (1990, p. 15). In order for the process of resignification to take place, I argue that the linked intersections of sexuality, desire, gender, sex and identity can be challenged through representations of gender-variant bodies, which capture ambiguous – or, rather, opposite – states of being and disrupt binary frameworks. For clarity, gender-variant bodies do not merely translate to transgender or intersex people; rather, the phrase is used broadly to cover all bodies that do not conform to gender normativity which includes classifications of 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. Similarly, the term 'queer' may also function as a term in which gender, sex, desire and sexuality also work in opposition to normativity.

4.1 Looking Twice, Thinking Anew

Del LaGrace Volcano's painted portrait, Matrix *(1999) by Jenny Saville, captivates my attention. Volcano's body fills the canvas. The painting ascends, primarily focusing on herm's waist down as herm lie on their back, legs apart. My eyes flicker between the different shades of painted pinks and settle on the darker tones of Volcano's vulva, which appears off-centre within the frame, yet is the focal point of the painting. My eyes trace the curvatures of Volcano's body, over herm's splayed breasts and face. My gaze hesitates around herm's moustache, pursed lips and goatee, finally connecting with Volcano's eyes that stare back at me with*

intensity. My eyes flicker between Volcano's vulva and face, observing the contours of the body that lies before me.

Del LaGrace Volcano is an artist, activist, photographer and academic from California who uses their body as a site of institutional and political review and as a tool to increase the visibility of intersex bodies. Volcano was born intersex, raised as female at birth and now moves fluidly between genders, referring to hermself as 'a part-time gender terrorist' (Volcano, no date). In an attempt to disrupt gendered pronouns, Volcano prefers the prefix of 'herm', which I employ within this writing. When discussing gender politics, the binary system –with its categories of male and female – is widely recognised as the default in Western culture, perhaps because the gendered and sex binary is imposed within the medical discourse that defines our bodies even before birth. For example, a person who is pregnant may be monitored with an ultrasound, amniocentesis or chromosomal mapping, all of which can also determine the sex of the child before birth. Parents can ask to know the sex of their unborn child and occasions such as baby showers have become popular in the West. Although in Western medical terms, a person's sex can be male, female or intersex, and within other cultures and 'throughout history, there have been different ways of defining sex' (Vagina Museum, no date), bodies that do not fit within this binary often become othered. Dominic Johnson, in his essay 'Transition pieces: the photography of Del LaGrace Volcano', acknowledges how 'transgender and transexual body narratives and their representations are unquestionably marginalized in histories of art, and are also contested in feminist theory' (2016, p. 340). Johnson notes how within feminist theory, gender variation has been questioned and disregarded. A good example of this can be seen in the comments of the academic Germain Greer in a BBC interview (2015), observing, 'I don't think post-operative trans gender men, i.e. MTF transgender people are women' (BBC, 2015). Similarly, in relation to an article titled 'Opinion: Creating a more equal

post-COVID-19 world for people who menstruate' (2020), the author J.K. Rowling tweeted, '"people who menstruate." I'm sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?' (Shennan, 2020).[48] These exclusionary ideologies are fostered within capitalist and patriarchal agendas that promote and rely on gender roles for control.

Historical accounts show that the two-gendered binary was pioneered by the medical psychologist Professor John Money in 1955. Although 'around 1–2% of all babies are born with sex organs that can't be categorised as "male" or "female"', Money believed that these babies should undergo surgery on their genitals in order to determine their sex (Stormquist, 2018, p. 15). The removal of sensitive genital parts at birth may, however, affect a person in later life, evoke trauma and make them feel trapped in a body that does not feel like their own. Medical and cultural researcher Bernice L. Hausman, in their article 'Do Boys Have to Be Boys?' (2000), discusses the academic work of Milton Diamond and H. Keith Sigmundson who analysed cases of people who had their sex 'reassigned' at birth. This research concluded that 'the evidence seems overwhelming that normal humans are not psychosexually neutral at birth but are, in keeping with their mammalian heritage, predisposed and biased to interact with environmental, familial, and social forces in either a male or female mode' (Diamond and Sigmundson, 1997, cited in Hausman, p. 115).[49] Both Diamond and Sigmundson claimed that gender identity cannot be fully determined until a specific age, and that this is later affirmed by a person's chromosomal and hormonal sex characteristics and not merely by their genitals, as Money had originally asserted.

[48] TERF, short for trans-exclusionary radical feminist.
[49] The term 'normal' is problematically negotiated in this quote and raises questions around what is deemed as normal. In this quote, I infer 'normal' to mean the problematic binaries which act as the default in Western culture.

Yet surgical procedures on intersex infants are still legal in some countries, including the UK, today which opens up problematic views around which bodies are 'accepted' within the binary as well as which bodies are not (Drover, 2020). Additionally, it sets precedents for the manner in which colonialism established a model for how genitals are seen within Western culture and assumed as categories. In her book *Glitch Feminism*, Legacy Russel discusses how 'the binary body confuses and disorients, pitting our interests against one another across modalities of otherness' (2020, p. 92). Russel provides an intersectional approach towards race, gender and sexuality, stating that binaries of gender are so embedded in our geopolitical frameworks that 'in order to reimagine the body, one must reimagine space' (2020, p. 84). However, in a discussion between Russel and the scholar McKenzie Wark, Wark acknowledges that, as a trans woman, binaries do matter – as they do to other individuals – and states that the abolition of gender means to her 'the abolition of the compulsory nature of the [gender] you were assigned' (Wark 2020, as cited in Verso). Through this lens, this writing discusses the assumptions made based on the two-gender binary system when confronted with identities that rupture 'normative' frameworks, using the spectacle as a means of navigation. In Saville's painting *Matrix* (1999), Volcano provides an intervention on binarist assumptions of gender, which includes an analysis of Western societies' perceptions of bodies. This idea is aptly presented through Jack Halberstam's reading of Saville's painting of Volcano:

> First you see the genitals, splayed out like a slab of meat on the butcher's block, and then, as your eye travels up the scary and distorted landscape of an ostensibly female body, you come face-to-face with the ruddy and bearded visage of the model, and inevitably, you must now travel back down the pink slopes of breast and belly to see if this head belongs to this vagina (2005, p. 111).

Halberstam's reading of Volcano's body offers an insight into the problematics of viewing bodies within the realms of presumed normativity: the vulva in this image works in opposition

to the face and the eyes require a second look at the body for confirmation. This second look implies that the viewer has not grasped the significance of what they have encountered, or perhaps that something appears strange or out of place. The action of taking a second look challenges normative assumptions of bodies, as within that moment – consciously or not – the preconceptions of the binary are shattered. The spectacle of Volcano's vulva within the painting becomes the focus, gazing back at the viewer as they begin to process the perspective presented to them; yet the 'mutant maleness' of Volcano's face remains pivotal to the juxtaposition of herm's body (Volcano, 1999, cited in Halberstam, 2005, p. 111). As the body is not fixed to a presumed male or female physiology, Volcano's gender variance disorders both our perspective gaze and the linguistic model that attempts to impose the constructed binary.

In the patriarchal culture that upholds the binary sex-gender-sexuality logic, Volcano's framing of the spectacle offers an invitation to take a second look and, in doing so, invents the semantics of thinking anew, subverting the norm by considering alternative ways of being and of viewing gender. In the act of taking a second look and becoming entwined with Volcano's eyes, it can be argued that a shift of consciousness occurs. The returned gaze opens a possibility to allow the viewer to become conscious of Volcano's agency and as a result, aware of their own consciousness. The visual connections that Volcano's vulva offers are not only distorted perceptions of the male gaze but also a returned gaze of a realised gap of knowledge; the assumptions made about bodies challenge the viewer to acknowledge and re-render what they see. As Halberstam writes, Volcano's body – as well as other photographs herm creates – offer the viewer 'gorgeous glossy photographs of bodies in transition – from male to female, female to male, female to female, male to who knows what … and so on' (2012, p. 224), making space for the fluidity of gender orientation.

The notion of re-rendering knowledge reminds me of the academic José Muñoz's concept of disidentification in his book *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). Muñoz analyses queer racialised bodies through performance and uses disidentification as a means to discuss the reclaiming of a person's cultural and identity politics, creating their own life narrative rather than conforming to a socially assumed construction. For Muñoz 'The lens of disidentification allows us to discern seams and contradictions and ultimately understand the need for a war of positions' (1999, p. 115). The framing of disidentification allows the recognition of perspectives that differ from the many contradictions of Western culture, which often excludes marginalised bodies. While the experiences of white bodies are not the same as those of Black and Brown bodies, Volcano arguably sits within a reading of disidentification by challenging gendered and sexual norms within the dominant culture.

Volcano's body triggers a shift in perspective, a subjective experience of disidentification as one gazes upon herm's body. This disidentification is produced through the realisation of one's own encoded assumptions of bodies – *what I expected to see.* Muñoz posits that:

> [the] process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. (1999, p. 31)

Muñoz's definition of disidentification challenges mainstream identity politics and brings inconceivable subjectivities perceived within the dominant culture into actuality. Volcano's spectacle presents a crisis within binarity and offers agency to queer people who have experienced losses of cultural and social authority within the realms of gender, desire, sex and

sexuality. In acknowledging this loss of social authority and the ways in which Muñoz's work analyses queer Black and Brown bodies within this discourse, it is important to understand the differences in racial representations of the vulva and how these representations manifest, especially in relation to Black trans bodies. This writing will go onto explore the work of the drag artist Prinx Chiyo and how his vulvic spectacle highlights the realities of trans existence, safety and racial oppression in a dominant binary culture.

4.2 A Site of Tension: Trans Safety and Body Politics

At the Royal Court Theatre in December 2022, I watched Travis Alabanza's play The Sound of the Underground. *In the final act, the drag king Prinx Chiyo enters the stage, wearing a low-cut pink silk shirt, pink wide-leg trousers and black shoes. Music begins to play. Chiyo dances erotically, swishing his hips and running his hands up and down his torso. He beckons the audience to cheer. To each move Chiyo performs, the audience responds with applause. He then removes his shirt, revealing his sculpted body. The music abruptly stops. Chiyo looks confused but continues to dance. Uncertainly, the audience begins to cheer more, encouraging Chiyo to continue. It is unclear whether the music's abrupt end is deliberate or the result of a technical fault. Chiyo slowly stops dancing, and the cheering slowly fades away. He suddenly removes a patch of material from the front crotch part of his trousers, revealing his vulva. In a pained and emotional voice, Chiyo discloses his experiences and the dichotomy between being applauded in performance but assaulted in the street as bystanders watch. He continues to discuss the lack of support for trans safety in the public domain. Silence fills the room.*

The Sound of the Underground (2022), a play written by the performance artist and theatre maker Travis Alabanza, is about the underground drag culture and the critique of drag within

mainstream media. Centring the voices of eight queer underground drag performers, the production is part play and part-raucous cabaret, merging spectacle, comedy and discourses around the artists' livelihoods within the industry (Royal Court Theatre, 2022).[50] In the second half of the play, each artist showcases their individual craft, from singing and dancing to lip-syncing and burlesque. Prinx Chiyo (he/they) closes the show with his hard-hitting act, silencing the auditorium and leaving the audience deep in thought. Chiyo is an Afro-Latinx gender-non-conforming trans drag artist, activist and model who uses his platform to raise awareness of subjects surrounding trans safety, queer liberation and identity politics. Chiyo's unexpected vulvic spectacle is presented to the audience as a site of tension in the discourse of trans safety and body politics.

In the current Western political climate, trans safety and identity are being widely debated. In the U.S., countless states have passed laws limiting transgender rights, targeting 'everything from gender-affirming care for youth and access to public spaces to drag performances' (Jazeera, 2023). Similarly, ministers in the UK have proposed changes to the 2010 Equality Act which seeks to redefine sex and make it legal for transgender people 'to be banned from single-sex spaces and events' (Allegretti, 2023). At the 2023 Conservative Party conference, the former Home Secretary Suella Braverman stated that 'trans women have no place in women's wards or indeed any safe space relating to biological women' (Braverman, 2023, cited in Billson, 2023). In that same month, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced that 'we shouldn't get bullied into believing that people can be any sex they want to be. They can't, a man is a man and a woman is a woman. That's just common sense' (Sunak, 2023, cited in McKeon, 2023). This transphobic rhetoric has led to troubling data, as released by the Office

[50] Performers include Chiyo, Lilly SnatchDragon, Ms Sharon Le Grand, Mwice Kavindele as Sadie Sinner the Songbird, Rhys Hollis as Rhys' Pieces, Sue Gives A F*ck, Tammy Reynolds as Midgette Bardot and Wet Mess.

of National Statistics which reports an 'increase in hate crimes against trans people by 11% in a year, and by 186% in the last five years, [which] comes against a backdrop of the UK Government drawing back its support for trans people' (Stonewall, 2023). It also highlights how 'political and media narratives around trans people may have led to an increase in hate crime incidents', with disproportionate rates of violence and discrimination being experienced by trans people of colour (Stonewall, 2023; Castagnaro, 2023).

These debates often seek to invalidate trans peoples' identities and lived experiences and attempt to define trans people's identity exclusively by their genitals. As the writer Ray Filar observes, 'The history of the "sex change" is not just one of cis power over trans lives, but of cis prurience, reducing a gamut of differing trans experiences and embodiments to a set of sexualised assessments' (Filar, 2015). That is to say that compulsory heteronormativity and cisnormativity attempt to view, control and categorise a trans person by their genital capacity, only granting legitimacy for a differing gender status if a person undergoes genital surgery (Burns, 2023).[51] Amid ongoing debate as to whether trans people must undergo gender reassignment surgery in order to legally change their gender, Chiyo's vulvic spectacle demonstrates a refusal to abide by such binary conditioning. In one interview, Chiyo stated, 'I am not on hormones and I have no intention of getting any procedures done that may impact my WAP' (Chiyo in Stichbury, 2020).[52] The visibility of Chiyo's vulva destabilises cisnormative patriarchal structures while simultaneously enhancing the collective freedoms and liberation of other queer, trans and gender-non-conforming people.

[51] Genital surgery is also widely known as bottom surgery.
[52] WAP is an acronym for wet-ass pussy made popular by hip hop artist Cardi B in 2020.

Chiyo's advocacy for trans rights and safety stems from his own experiences of 'racism and marginalization' (Stokoe, 2019, p 160). In their book *Reframing Drag: Beyond Subversion and The Status Quo,* Kayte Stokoe refers to Chiyo's openness when discussing his experiences of racism, and writes how the 'public exposure of racism and its diverse manifestations is, in my view, essential; performers, audience members, and event organizers need to be aware of the workings of oppression, from microaggressions to systemic violence, in order to begin tackling it' (2020, p. 160). In a recent protest (2023), Chiyo, alongside fifty trans and queer people, displayed a 30-metre banner over the Thames on Vauxhall Bridge, London, which read 'We Exist: We will Resist'. This act was 'in protest of recent anti-trans and anti-migrant comments made by the Conservative Party … [and] was accompanied by a cloud of smoke as participants let off flares in the colours of the trans flag' (Gauci, 2023). Both Chiyo's performance work and his personal politics publicly address systemic inequalities of oppression within the West's socio-cultural climate, stating that 'The liberation of queer and trans people means the liberation of all oppressed people' (Chiyo, 2023). Chiyo's vulvic spectacle, in this instance, not only advocates for queer and trans liberation as a means of resistance and existence but also publicly exposes the gut-wrenching experiences faced by both marginalised and racially oppressed bodies. Moreover, the provocative nature of Chiyo's vulvic spectacles can arguably 'jolt people out of their taken-for-granted ways of seeing reality, thereby making space for a critique that undermines dominant ideology' (Flyverbom and Reinecke, 2017 p. 7). Such spectacles or, as Stokoe suggests, public exposures, can formulate new understandings and begin to challenge the workings of oppression in order to combat audiences' unconscious or conscious biases surrounding sex and gender identity, sexuality and race.

The queer performer, playwright and researcher Mojisola Adebayo discusses how, for them, the intersections of 'Blackness, queerness and performance are inseparable' (2022, p. 131). In

their book chapter ‘Everything You Know About Queerness You Learnt from Blackness: The Afri-Quia Theatre of Black Dykes, Crips and Kids’, Adebayo discusses how ‘critical and creative Black queerness is about unboxing binaries, blurring boundaries, exposing the “mythical norm”, messing with form, being in the process, playful, political and, most of all, performative’ (2022, p. 131). For Adebayo, the intersections of Blackness and queerness are inherently intertwined, not only through the blurring of binaries and boundaries, but also through their use of performativity. Adebayo cites Butler’s concept of gender and queer performativity (1990) –that gendered binary behaviours are both learnt and performed – stating how this concept can also ‘be instrumentalised as a frame through which to view Blackness and queer experience together’ (2022, p. 134). For example, in their book *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion* (2001), Maria Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg discuss the notion of ‘passing’, which can be defined as ‘seeking or allowing oneself to be identified with a race, class, or other social groups to which one does not genuinely belong’ (Gianoulis, 2015). The practice of passing is both socially complex and nuanced, especially when considering the prejudices that may surround a person’s race, religion, sexual orientation, and so on. Sanchez and Scholossberg position that ‘performing white and playing straight in everyday life is a phenomenon practised by both black and queer peoples’ (Sanchez and Schlossberg, cited in Adebayo, 2022, p. 134). This practised phenomenon can be linked to colonialism and Eurocentrism, where its dominance permeated ‘every area of social existence’ including the subjectivity of race, sexuality and gender binaries. Furthermore, although many individuals engage in passing for legitimacy and safety, the concept also carries many social anxieties that reflect the structures of white social privilege.

In understanding the dominance of colonialism and how the concept of passing links with it, it is important first to discuss theories surrounding sex and gender binaries, especially when trans

identities often conflict with them. The Nigerian post-colonial scholar Oyèrónké Oyěwùmi argues for the decolonisation of gender binaries in her book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997). Oyěwùmi investigates how Western gender binaries impacted the Yorùbá communities and their society. In particular, Oyěwùmi 'realize[d] that the fundamental category "woman" — which is foundational in Western gender discourses — simply did not exist in Yorubaland prior to its sustained contact with the West' (1997, p. ix).[53] That is to say, in the Yorùbá communities, what the West regards, characterises and defines as 'woman' only came into being through the formation of colonialism. Further, Oyěwùmi argues that 'the cultural logic of Western social categories is based on an ideology of biological determinism: the conception that biology provides the rationale for the organization of the social world. Thus, this cultural logic is actually a "bio-logic"' (1997, p. ix). In colonial practices, the purpose of such gendered categories was based on body type, with individuals organised into patriarchal hierarchies and binary oppositions (Oyěwùmi, 1997, p. 31). Interestingly, Oyěwùmi not only questions gender binaries but also the concept of bio-*logical* sex. Similar to the social construction of gender binaries, 'bio-logic' defines sex as deriving from social and cultural constructs.

The coloniality of sex and gender was established by those in power who imposed social hierarchies and attempted to make spectacles out of those who deviated. Colonial scientists – as mentioned in the introduction – used biology and physical attributes to suggest racial inferiority and imply that 'non-Europeans were bestial and could be treated as such' (Hill, 2019). Conceptually, sex is understood as fixed and unmoving and is usually defined through particular physical attributes, such as the aesthetics of the genitals. Yet, biology is not binary. To assume that every person living in the world fits neatly into the categories of male and

[53] Please note, Oyěwùmi uses both the terms 'sex' and 'gender' synonymously.

female is simply fallacious. As discussed previously, intersex people prove such binary models to be insufficient. As further studies are conducted on bodies, biologists are finding a much wider spectrum of sex development (Ainsworth, 2018). Additionally, 'new technologies in DNA sequencing and cell biology are revealing that almost everyone is, to varying degrees, a patchwork of genetically distinct cells, some with a sex that might not match that of the rest of their body' (Ainsworth, 2018).[54] Therefore, when returning to the concept of passing, 'white racial anxieties about black people "passing" – both in the past and present – are generally understood as symptomatic of the desire to maintain white social privilege and a sense of inherent (supposedly biological) superiority' (Pfeffer, 2014, p. 5). Similarly, '"passing" is often held as the gold standard of "successful" transsexualism – particularly by medical establishments; as such, "passing" is often conceptualized as emblematic of normativity or a desire to be normative' (Pfeffer, 2014, p. 11). As a mixed-race trans man, Chiyo's vulvic spectacle refutes such normative frameworks and turns the ideology of passing in on itself. It could be argued that by making his body visible, he refuses to subscribe to white social anxieties that attempt to maintain European standards of gender fixity and racial inferiority.

The audience participation preceding Chiyo's vulvic spectacle also invites analysis. Debord believed that spectacle numbs and pacifies society, evoking the notion of the passive spectator. Yet Chiyo's spectacle negates this theory. As Chiyo performs his provocative strip tease, he invites the audience to engage with his body as he moves and dances across the stage. As the audience is called upon to applaud, the performance abruptly stops. In that moment, audiences question whether this is accidental or intentional. The sudden change in tone and the revealing

[54] For clarity, I am not stating that binaries are not important for some people. This thesis advocates for all bodies, whether they be cis, trans, queer, non-binary, intersex, etc. However, what I am stating is that how we view bodies should not be fixed and assumed, and how we may have come to understand sex and gender binaries should be, at the very least, questioned.

of the performer's vulva shift the energy in the room. He demands to be seen and, as the scholars Mikkel Flyverbom and Julianne Reinecke suggest, 'One way to resist the domination of the spectacle is to expose the brute reality that it hides' (2017, p. 15). Thus, Chiyo's vulvic spectacle may provoke spectators to reflect on socio-political issues affecting marginalised groups. However, the paradox between being applauded and fetishised on stage, yet spectacularised and assaulted in the street is something that 'resonates, represents even, a queer subjectivity in a way that it cannot do for a heterosexual' (Liu, 2016). In that moment – irrespective of whether it transcends theatre – Chiyo's vulvic spectacle invites audiences to become critically conscious, reminding them that trans people exist, have always existed and will continue to exist.

4.3 Shocking Revelations: Porn as a Mode of Inquiry

> Man and woman, masculine and feminine, and also homosexual and heterosexual seem to be insufficient codes and identity locations for describing the contemporary production of the queer, trans, and crip body. – Paul B. Preciado

I am presented with the set of a circus, in which queer naked bodies and theatrics take centre stage. After six minutes, Buck Angel appears in a blue-tinted spotlight and stands to the left of the stage. He is topless, wearing only a pair of jeans. Taking centre stage, he stands in front of a long-barred weight which rests on the floor. He squats and leans forwards to lift the weight. He picks the weight up; firstly, bringing it to his waist, then to his chest and finally above his head. The weight bows at either end. After demonstrating his strength, he then calls out to the stagehands, played by Logan Steele and Tober Brandt. Soon after, Brandt is lying on a table, sucking on Steele's penis as Angel penetrates him. We see Angel's penis from underneath, thrusting in and out of the anus. The camera moves back to all three men with Angel holding open Brandt's legs as he penetrates him. Angel's denim jeans are slightly pulled down, crotch

zip fully undone; his penis hangs over his underwear. Angel's underwear falls down further, and he holds onto the top of his penis as he guides it into the anus. Angel instructs Brandt to 'squeeze' his anus, as Angel steps backwards. The penis remains inside Brandt's arsehole which Angel is fully detached from, revealing his vulva and enlarged clitoris protruding from his labia. 'It's a fucking pussy', Brandt exclaims as the dildo remains within his anus. Now Angel is being penetrated vaginally by Brandt as Steele holds Angel's arms. They finish with Angel arousing his clit as both Steele and Brandt work the shafts of their penises (Titan Media, 2005).

Buck Angel, or self-proclaimed 'man with a pussy', is a transexual activist, feminist porn star and performer (Coldwell, 2015).[56] The description detailed above has been recalled from Angel's appearance in the porn performance *Cirque Noir* (2005), created by Titan Media Production. The performative aspect of Angel's vulvic spectacle presents itself as a political act by interrupting heteronormative thinking within the realms of aesthetics, desire and gender identity. Like the painting of Volcano's body, Angel's performance within *Cirque Noir* exposes how Western cultures' expectations of the body's 'binary anatomical cartography' may be challenged (Preciado, 2000, p. 5).[57] Whilst Western culture is fixated on creating gendered categories through the analysis of genitals, Angel rebuttals this position, stating, 'I am totally male. Just because I don't have a cock, doesn't mean I'm not a man' (Angel, 2013). In his documentary film *Mr Angel* (2013), Angel discusses how he exploits his vulva in porn to challenge perceptions around bodies. As the author and academic Terri Kapsalis argues in *Public Privates: Performing Gynecology From Both End of the Speculum* (1997), 'Far from static or given, gynaecology is continuously negotiated by performers who are simultaneously agents actively making choices and subjects directed by institutional and other cultural forces'

[56] Brandt's terminology within the scene described above ironically links to fucking being perceived as an active performance of penetration. The term 'pussy' is also used to refer to a person's vagina.
[57] It is also important to acknowledge that Buck himself identifies as and lives his life by binaries.

(1997, p. 5).[58] In this view, Angel's choice to frame the spectacle of his vulva as a 'shocking' reveal is motivated by his desire to rupture patriarchal institutions of heterosexuality that problematically view transexual and transgender bodies as an 'oddity' (Angel, 2013). Angel argued that 'it was important for me to show the world that it's okay not to fit in the box and it was very important for me to represent myself in a positive healthy, sexual way' (Angel, 2013). Further, Angel's spectacle becomes a catalyst for shock, due to our inability to look beyond a 'heteronormative and colonial epistemology of the body' (Preciado, 2000, p. 5).[59]

Within the revelation of Angel's spectacle, the use of the dildo also raises questions around the stability of heterosexuality within the sex and gender role system. In his book *Counter-Sexual Manifesto* (2000), Paul B. Preciado discusses dildos, prostheses and plastic genitals as objects that re-think and overthrow current understandings of gender, sexuality and desire. Preciado examines the dildo as an intervention of constructs that regard the penis as superior in the realms of gender and sexual difference, arguing that '"extracting" the organ that establishes the body as "naturally male" and calling it a dildo is a decisive political act in the deconstruction of heterosexuality' (2000, p. 65). For Preciado, the dildo denies the penis the authority to be the root cause of sexual difference; it is an inanimate object that disrupts the naturalised gender constructs and makes them obsolete; 'Transforming any body (organic or inorganic, human or not) into a possible pleasure center defers the origin, troubles the center. The genitals must be deterritorialized. Therefore, all is dildo. And all becomes orifice' (Preciado, 2000, p. 71).

[58] Both the spellings 'gynecology' and 'gynaecology' are used.
[59] Whilst I analyse *Cirque Noir* through the object of performance, it is first and foremost produced as a porn production which serves to titillate and give self-gratification. I am aware that using porn as a tool for analysis brings about its own contentions within feminist discourses around the objectification and subjugation of bodies. I am also conscious that Titan Media productions are known for their graphic depictions of the 'money shot' which, as academic Marcel Barriault states in recognition of Angel's participation, 'problematizes constructed assumptions around gender identity, gender performance, gender binarism, sexual orientation … and sexual politics' (Barriault, 2016, p. 135). However, within the contentious aspect of this performance lies a challenge to Western cultures' perceptions of the anatomical binary.

Adopting the logic that ‘all is dildo’, the penis ceases to be the epitome of sexual difference, for the dildo can intertwine with all sexual practices and all bodies. Moreover, Preciado discusses that when ‘all becomes orifice’, then the anus becomes a universal site of pleasure which is not limited by heterocentred relationships. The dildo exposes systems such as male/female or feminine/masculine as constructed – for Preciado, the process of counter-sexualising. However, Angel’s extraction of the dildo offers additional modes of counter-sexualising. Angel’s vulvic spectacle not only dismantles the sight of a body which was once perceived as ‘naturally male’ but also disrupts viewers’ ideas around sex and its ‘authenticity’, corrupting expectations of binary anatomy (Preciado, 2000, p. 71). As the writer Lux Alptraum states in Angel’s documentary, ‘If you want to talk about genitals, it’s the penis that we are all obsessed with, so you have this masculine body with a vagina that kind of blows everybody’s minds, because it’s not supposed to be that way’ (Alptraum, 2013, cited in Angel, 2013). As such, Angel’s vulvic spectacle creates a crisis for the viewer within heteronormative frameworks by superseding regularised gender norms, roles and expectations of performing sex.

In encountering Angel’s vulvic spectacle, I was reminded of Professor Eve Oishi’s psychoanalytic understanding of the ‘visual encounter’ in cinematic spectatorship. In her article ‘Visual Perversions: Race, Sex and Cinematic Pleasure’ (2006), Oishi draws on Laura Mulvey’s essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975), recognising that ‘Mulvey introduced the provocative notion that classical Hollywood cinema activates and organizes psychic formations and drives according to gendered divisions of power within patriarchy’ (2006, p. 642). Mulvey argued that Hollywood cinema output is structured towards the male gaze, focusing on female subjects as a means of making space for visual pleasure and ultimately rendering female pleasure redundant. However, Oishi goes on to acknowledge that the essayist James Baldwin revises Mulvey’s essay, which focuses solely on gender, to consider ‘other

socially determined categories of identity (most significantly race but also including class and sexuality)' (2006, p. 643). In acknowledging these accounts, Oishi suggests further 'potential' for visual encounters, but also the politics of *perversity* through 'highlight[ing] the layered realities of race, gender, and sexuality in the "perverse" pleasure of the cinematic encounter' (Oishi, 2006, p. 644). For Oishi, perversity stems from 'one who finds herself outside of socially designated categories of identity' (2006, p. 650). Adapting Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of 'perverse readers' and Janet Staiger's ideas of 'perverse spectatorship', Oishi proposes that visual perversions:

> [P]rovide a view to the ways in which all identity is founded on the failure of identification, but they also comment on the ways in which the desire for identification is tied to social relations of power and to the dissymmetry of subjects' positioning in relation to dynamics of looking. (2006, p. 662)

For Oishi, the politics of the perverse do not align with socially selected categories of identity; perversity derives from the realisation that we cannot find ourselves in others. In realising the lack of symmetry in identity, new possibilities in the dynamics of looking become available. Angel's spectacle arguably spins the viewers' own experiences of sexuality, identity and pleasure into ambiguous terrains, further rupturing the categories of heteronormativity and patriarchy through opening up new spaces of gender, sexuality and desire.

In her article 'Rehearsals of the Weird: Julia Bardsley's *Almost the Same (Feral Rehearsals for Violent Acts of Culture)*', Eirini Kartsaki examines Oishi's ideas on the politics of the perverse through the lens of performance, in order to 'address the ways in which an audience member may discover oneself outside of the socially accepted categories of identity' (2020, p. 70). Kartsaki engages with how performances of the weird can allow a person's capacity to be stretched beyond the norm. To be clear, for Kartsaki, the weird moves beyond etymological connotations and is employed to re-think and reshape normative life narratives. Soon after

Angel's vulva is revealed, a director's cut is tactfully placed on his vagina being penetrated. Where Preciado may discuss the orifice of the anus, Angel's vagina introduces a new orifice for the performers to explore as the sex play continues. Perverse spectatorship comes into being through the acknowledgement of a new orifice that deviates from heteronormative sex and desire, deliberately deviating from the expected body and ways of performing sex. Additionally, Angel arguably takes up the idea of perverse identification by becoming the first trans man to feature in a Titan Media Production. This production was the first on-screen porn production to feature a trans man which was aimed at a specifically gay audience, even working outside the particular realms of homonormative narratives (top/bottom, submissive/dominant) (Barriault, 2016, p. 136). Although a literal reading of this scene may describe it as adhering to a heteronormative sex model, (i.e. penis penetrates vagina), Angel blurs these lines by being a man with a vagina. Furthermore, he subverts notions of the subjugated vagina by being vocally dominant in his pleasure and actively challenging his sexual partners to fulfil his needs. All three performers in *Cirque Noir* (Angel, Steele and Brandt) continually slip in and out of power structures, never truly settling into a role but experimenting and acknowledging each other's needs.

When considering perverse spectatorship in relation to pornography's viewing conventions, it is important to recognise that *Cirque Noir* uses circus tropes to set the scene. According to the academic Marcel Barriault, 'the trope of the circus has been established to reinforce the idea that the viewer is about to engage in a side show of sexual freaks appearing in a depraved circus environment' (2016, p. 135). *Cirque Noir's* casting of Angel provides a shock factor, as he is the first trans man to feature in an all-male porn production specialising in gay porn (Binlot, 2020). Barriault notes that Angel's acceptance of this role showed his willingness to be cast as

the ‘sexual freak’ within the production.[60] Freakery and perversity share similar connotations, mainly in terms of their tendency to deviate from recognised norms. However, Angel himself refutes notions of freakery and asserts that his porn is ‘totally normal’ (Angel, 2013). Whilst he capitalises on the exploitation of his vulva and a desire to eroticise the unknown, he argues that ‘there are a lot of people like me. I consider myself very normal. … I don’t want the world to go around thinking that people like us aren’t normal’ (Angel, 2013). Angel acknowledges that he does not fit the norms created by patriarchal regimes but is ‘trying to change that’ (Angel, 2013).

In his book *Testo Junkie* (2008), Paul B. Preciado discusses his experience of taking testogel (a hormonal drug that releases testosterone) as a way of dismantling gender and ‘the dimorphism epistemology of sexual difference’ (2008, p. 104). Preciado offers a history of reproductive technologies and questions the fixity of gender since the production of pharmaceuticals such as birth control pills, erectile dysfunction treatments and hormone replacement therapy (HRT). For Preciado, the ‘matrix of gender, [is] noticing that men and women are performative and somatic fictions, convinced of their natural reality’ (Preciado, 2008, p. 371). Preciado argues that a person’s biology does not bring about a *truth* in gender identity but, rather, is a continuum of learned performative codes. In his writing, Preciado employs the term pharmacopornographic, which ‘refers to the processes of a biomolecular (pharmaco) and semiotic-technical (pornographic) government of sexual subjectivity’ (2008, p. 33). Preciado argues that bodies are controlled by the state and, by extension, commodity capitalism, which has ultimately shaped Western contemporary understandings of gender, sex

[60] Whilst the concept of the freak offers a space of desire, has the potential to seduce and allows for other considerations, such as ways of being and doing, I also am aware that this encounter is problematic. The etymology of the term ‘freak’ often derives from the abnormal or strange. It is imperative to point out that not all bodies can choose to be considered as freakish or othered. As such, to desire these possibilities can come from a place of privilege. I recognise my own privilege as a cis woman within this reading.

and sexuality. Using the pill as an example, Preciado discusses how it was tested on women of colour by White American doctors as a means of 'controlling the reproduction rates of the "racialised other"' (Bianco, 2013). Later, the pill was promoted as a means for women to have autonomy and control over their *free* reproductive bodies. Through taking testosterone, acquired from friends and the black market, Preciado attempts to reimagine and reappropriate pharmaceuticals through bodily control.

Similarly, Angel challenges the pharmaceutical industry by openly discussing the complications he had after taking testosterone which caused vaginal atrophy. In a YouTube video, Angel describes how, 'I almost died from testosterone. Because the medical world refuses to do studies on us!' (Angel, 2020). Employing the platform he curated through porn, Angel discusses the medical prejudice he experienced as a trans man with a vagina. Angel was diagnosed with vaginal atrophy as a result of taking testosterone which caused a lack of oestrogen within his vagina. As the vagina was no longer able to self-clean itself, Angel contracted sepsis and had to undergo a hysterectomy. He discusses how this risk was never discussed with him and frequently uses his platform for education. Angel curates videos, entitled 'Transpa', in the hope of spreading awareness of sexual health issues within the trans community. This desire can also be seen through his advocacy work in highlighting the experiences of other trans people through his platform, opening up conversations around 'their change, how hormones have affected sexuality, themselves and their body' (Angel, 2015). Angel aptly states that '[m]y work is really, I think, helping people to feel comfortable in their body. I didn't really purposely do that in the beginning. I just wanted to make hot sex, but I think … it kind of became sex ed' (Angel, 2015). Whilst this work does not solely focus on the spectacle of Angel's vulva, it does raise further provocations around how the visibility of his vulva created further dynamics for learning and challenging the pharmaceutical industry that has benefited from the existence of marginalised groups.

The performance of vulvic spectacles, as I understand it, aims to challenge 'extremities of power' that seek to uphold patriarchal logics, in the hope of producing a developmental shift in new knowledge in the areas of sex, gender and sexuality. My focus here has been not only on vulvic spectacles but also bodies that lie beyond normative identities of heteronormativity, cisnormativity and patriarchy. As we have discussed within the pages of this thesis, gender and sexual orientation are politically charged with their own set of cultural codes entrenched in a continuum of meaning. These cultural codes bring about expectations of conditioned gender that are unconsciously maintained through aesthetics, gestures, actions and repetitive behaviours which ultimately shape how gender is spectated. To quote the academic B.J Wray's writing on Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan's performance *We're Talking Vulva* (1990), 'Dempsey's spectacle may facilitate an act of insubordination to normative phallic codings that is not external to those conventions but, rather, inhabits and inhibits their normative articulation' (Wray, 2000, p. 193). Similarly, spectacles of the vulva within the work of Del LaGrace Volcano, Prinx Chiyo and Buck Angel function as a site of relearning, using methodologies of shock and uncertainty as a space for challenging the patriarchal normativity placed upon bodies. The bodily transgressions within these examples of performance work create a space of uncertainty and unknowing, offering the possibility to relearn and permitting space for ambiguity to transcend borders of the norm. To find ourselves in the territories of the unknown is to cross from the boundaries of the known into a space of ambiguity. For Preciado, 'the crossing is a place of uncertainty, of the unobvious, of strangeness. It is not a weakness, but a power' (Preciado, 2019, p. 33). Whilst Preciado discusses the crossing in reference to his sexual and gender transition, his words are significant in rethinking normativity. Performance provides a space of transformation through conjuring dialogue around an often-tabooed body part, allowing the spectator to call into question the very core of their beliefs, internalised biases, knowledge, identities and practices – to look twice and to think anew.

4.4 Creative Expression and Collective Action

In performance art, artists often stage their bodies as a method of expression to critique socio-cultural climates as well as to 'enact possibilities of future representations' (Striff, 1997, p. 2). Consistent with the notion of spectacle, performance artists seek to generate new or alternative meanings by 'making one's body conscious to oneself and to one's audience' (Howell, 1999, p. 219). In terms of vulvic spectacles, audiences are not merely passive spectators but, rather, 'are made to physically experience them' through their ability to induce shock, excitement and new understandings (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 40). As such, the processes of unlearning and relearning provided a critical frame for my PaR. My research thus far questions whether performance can facilitate thoughtful interactions with audiences and, in doing so, foster new modes of knowing. Therefore, as performance art can facilitate modes of expression, my PaR sought to consider how audiences can become participants within the work or active collaborators through modes of autoethnography (see Appendix three).

Through theory, my PaR became a two-fold gesture in considering how I might disseminate knowledge while inviting others to autoethnographically reflect on their own lives, practices and understandings. When working at the Vagina Museum, I found that individuals often desired to discuss their bodies and experiences openly. Additionally, when discussing my research with friends, family and strangers in social settings, I was often met unexpectedly with stories of people's lived experiences that included childbirth, sex, menstruation, menopause and anatomy. Perhaps this eagerness to share stems from a newfound permission to discuss an often tabooed, secreted and hushed topic within the patriarchal culture. Echoing Nelson's thoughts, PaR can have 'particular relevance to a widespread political concern on the part of governments for research to be seen to be of broader social benefit' (2013, p. 21). In view of

this, I posed the following questions: Why is it important to facilitate open conversations around perceived taboo discourses? What can performance make space for? Can applied theatre and autoethnographic conventions encourage learning and inform understandings? The desire to generate conversation and understanding led me to create vulvaplicity prompt cards – a deck of cards with performative prompts – and hold workshops.

In considering applied theatre conventions, this section explores Petra Kuppers' *Community Performance: An Introduction* (2007), which offers dynamic approaches to community work that 'involve different people, facilitate communication, and encourage new thinking and experience[s]' (Kuppers, 2007, p. 2), prompting thoughtful ethical reflections inherent to working within community and applied theatre practices. Kuppers acknowledges that, 'one of the challenges of working with personal stories and small, gesture-based movement work is sharing' (2007, p. 156). More precisely, Kuppers questions how facilitators can utilise intimate material without compromising participants' trust or privacy (2007, p. 156). In my own workshops, I questioned how I might share the work of participants accurately and respectfully, especially when taboo may be inherently intertwined with 'deeply ingrained, often necessary, life-long habits of privacy and concealment' (Wilkens, 2017, p. 100). In designing the workshops, I aimed to foster trust and openness, while also allowing participants the space to share as much or as little as they wished.[61] The workshops were also contextualised through the influence of Caoimhe McAvinchey, Lucy Richardson and Fabio Santos and the concept of 'cultural sharing', described in their book *Phakama* (2018). Phakama, a participatory arts organisation, was established in 1996 to create and facilitate participatory performance. Phakama's project acknowledges the importance of cultural sharing and offers an insightful

[61] My workshops included in their structure 'check ins' with individuals and I remained continually aware of my own positionally throughout the work.

frame through which to approach participatory theatre. Phakama's employment of "'sharing" is used because it holds the understanding that individuals are empowered to "share" as much or as little as they choose' (McAvinchey *et al*., 2018, p. 85). When designing my workshops, this became an integral ethical consideration and a necessary 'housekeeping' measure for participants. Phakama recognises that facilitators must be 'mindful of the politics of epistemology at play in any project that aims to frame and share new understandings, particularly in practise that is as collaborative' (McAvinchey *et al*., 2018, pp. 23–24). Phakama documents how 'post-colonial histories and legacies' occupied the space of the project and offered thoughtful considerations on the process of creating performance. This embodied knowledge and felt tensions are at the political heart of vulvaplicity, which derives from people's experiences of marginalisation and their refusal to conform to societal and political norms. Employing the methodology of vulvaplicity, my PaR analyses body-based practices and applied theatre conventions as a possible scope to explore identity politics. More specifically, this practice sought to unfold, challenge and encourage understandings of vulvas, vaginas and the gynaecological anatomy and the intersecting discourses that surround them.[62] I hope to demonstrate that the vulvaplicity workshops and prompt cards gave voice to people who had felt restricted when discussing their identity, as well as allowing participants to explore unknown terrains, creating an open space to investigate and share through engagement and performance-making.

A total of six separate workshops took place, aimed predominantly at any person identifying as female, non-binary, gender non-conforming, trans or polygendered and over the age of 18. The first two workshops were independently facilitated online through an open call via social

[62] In this, I refer to all characteristics that may make up a person's identity, including gender, sexuality, policy, history, mythology and so on.

media, and a further two workshops were held with undergraduate students at East 15 Acting School, the University of Essex and the University of Northampton by invitation. The next workshop was held at a postgraduate research conference at East 15 Acting School, University of Essex, followed by my largest workshop, organised in collaboration with the Vagina Museum. The Vagina Museum has a platform of 214k followers and assisted in the sharing and advertisement of my workshops through its network. Each workshop involved a different set of participants. In the true nature of vulvaplicity, the work that follows sought to unfold prescribed normative narratives and refold in new understandings.

Prompt Cards

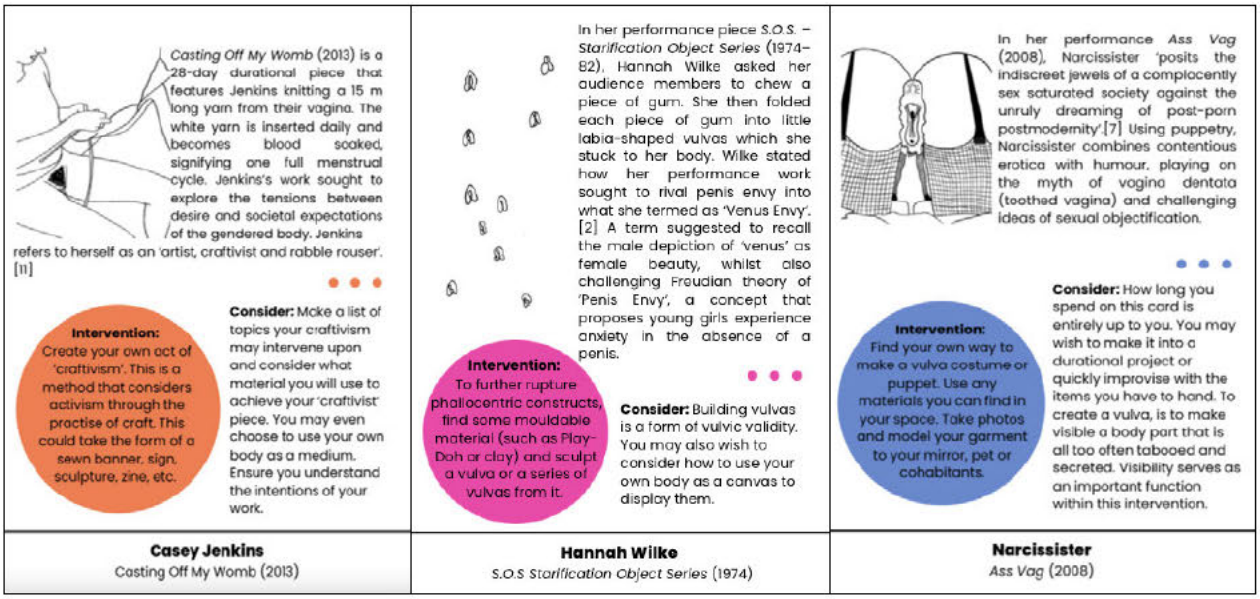

Figure 22. Example of Prompt Cards

The vulvaplicity prompt cards are a game that I conceptualised and designed, consisting of 24 playing cards aimed to facilitate the making and sharing of art and ideas (prompt cards available at: http://tinyurl.com/vulvaplicitypromptcards). The cards provided participants with a theoretical and artistic toolkit of discourses that intersect with my research. Each card presents

information about an artist or author, a performative instruction for the participant to interpret and an illustration. In addition, the card includes a 'consideration', offering the player further stimulus or inspiration, as shown in the image above.[63] A booklet was also created to explain the concept and methodology of vulvaplicity and to provide instructions on how to use the cards (for a digital copy of the booklet and prompt cards, see Appendix eight). The cards utilise performance art as a method for participants to interrogate the socio-political and cultural concepts surrounding identity politics in an approach that is informative, accessible and fun.

The performative instruction on each card is labelled under the guise of an 'intervention', which gives an instruction for the participant to respond to. Performance art often becomes a device for 'political protest[s]', attempting to uncover understandings surrounding one's socio-political climate' (Lesso, 2022). The term 'intervention' is often defined as having either involvement with or the confronting of an individual or situation. However, the term was coined in the 1960s as a form of activism and has been predominantly employed within performance art to mean 'to radically transform the role of the artist in society, and thereby society itself' (Tate, no date). As the characteristics of performance art involve questioning the social and political world, employing the term 'intervention' felt appropriate in the framework of the cards. Lois Weaver offers a good context of how interventional practices can be used in her Live Art card game, *Action Recipes: A Toolkit of Methodologies on Live Art and Ageing* (2017). Through a series of 'action recipe' playing cards, Weaver aims to engage with participants in Live Art and provide a methodology for working with older people (LADA 2017). Whilst interventionist methods are subversive in nature, they can also offer a lens of alternative understanding within performance practices. Moreover, the interventions aimed not

[63] It was imperative that the cards were accessible in terms of layout, language and creative freedom.

only to disrupt patriarchal constructs but to also encourage types of implicit knowledge and new understandings to form.

The cards locate themselves at the heart of my practice for my workshops (discussed in greater detail below) and were curated to be used within an applied practice setting. While the prompt cards intersect within a linage of influences – such as the one detailed above – each intervention is offered as an approach towards performance-making, through which I carefully conceptualised in line with my research.[64] That is to say, the function of the cards sought to make my research topic more accessible in order to facilitate creativity as well as inform new understandings surrounding gender, sexuality, identity and body politics. Similarly, as an object, cards are a familiar tool for many individuals. Due to the taboo nature that often intersects with these topics, cards provided a means to potentially undo particular barriers, thus adding more accessibility and appeal to them. The cards are colour-coded and separated into categories that link with the core ideas and key words used within the research of my thesis, including:

- Artists, Activists and Agitators
- Alternative Modes of Being
- Medical Discourses and the Body
- Rethinking and Reimagining

These categories aimed to provide a lens through which to analyse the cards as well as a framework for my research. Each category focuses on a different theme within my research of

[64] Other cards that facilitate performance-making include, *Playing Up* by Sibylle Peters and *The Performance Pack* by Joshua Sofaer.

vulvas, vaginas and gynaecology, such as bodily taboo, medical discourses, mythology, queer futurity, gender and so on. The works that feature within this deck of cards are those that I believe converse with my wider project of vulvaplicity, such as Annie Sprinkle's *A Public Cervix Announcement* (1990), The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein's *Notorious,* (2017), Del LaGrace Volcano's project *Self Portraits* (2007–2017) and Marisa Carnesky's *Incredible Bleeding Woman* (2018). These works fed into the project of vulvaplicity through their provocation of transformational politics and analysis of socio-biological discourses. It also felt important to showcase the plurality of works within the field. The creation of these cards then informed the direction of my work through their inclusion in my public workshops, to create connections and generate conversation.

Workshops

Figure 23. A Sharing in the Vulvaplicity Workshop

In the vulvaplicity workshops, participants were asked to interrogate the taboos, experiences and perceptions we have of our bodies, and to discuss how we understand and identify with them. In particular, the workshops considered my overarching research question of how socio-

cultural contexts have shaped perspectives and understandings towards vulvas and bodies, inviting participants to reflect and respond autoethnographically to specific exercises. As such, the workshops aimed to cultivate a sense of community, create reflective conversations, empower individuals and disrupt patriarchal norms through applied theatre conventions. In my analysis of community theatre conventions, Kuppers' book offered a useful resource for understanding the application of community art practices. In planning the vulvaplicity workshops, my aspiration was to facilitate 'creative expression … to newly analyze and understand life situations, and to empower people to value themselves and shape a more egalitarian and diverse future' (Kuppers, 2007, p. 6). As in the design and curation of my prompt cards, my research supported the provision of a framework of strategic concepts for participants to engage with. The aims behind sharing my theoretical and artistic research were to provide participants with a 'deeper understanding of a concept through seeing it in the context of understanding the why behind it' (Ramnani, 2023). Subsequently, such knowledge can, as Nelson describes, inform the participant's outlook and practices within the world. The model of the prompt cards and workshops enabled participants to create their own short performance intervention which I had described to them as a means of challenging patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies. The output was that participants should employ performance as a mode of learning through doing and experiencing the work. Thus, performance-informed reflexive knowledge allowed the participants to embody and critique necessary issues surrounding identity. As Nelson describes it, 'Reflexivity is particularly necessary in today's relativist intellectual context in which the lack of universal knowledge and limited consensus opens up the field of interpretation' (2013, p. 45). Therefore, performance-making and collective sharing can open space for participants to learn from an identity other than their own.

The structure of the workshops ensured that we not only engaged with a range of topics but also gave participants time to find their creative voice. The workshop design consisted of four research stages: an open discussion on gender, sexuality and other modes of identity, the creating of manifesto lines, the use of prompt cards as a stimulus and the creating and showcasing of participants' performance interventions. The table below gives an example of the structure used in my workshops:

TIME FRAME	SNAPSHOT	START 14:00
10 minutes	Welcome & Introductions	1400-1410
2 minutes	Housekeeping	1410-1412
8 minutes	What is Vulvaplicity?	1412-1420
10 minutes	What is Performance Art?	1420-1430
5 minutes	How do we make art that is anti-patriarchal and anti-heteronormative?	1430-1435
15 minutes	Discussion of gender, sexuality, body politics and identity in contemporary culture.	1435-1450
10 minutes	Create your own manifesto lines on vulvaplicity (Create your own demands)	1450-1500
10 minutes	Break	1500-1510
10 minutes	Present manifesto lines (5–6 lines)	1510-1520
15 minutes	Writing exercise	1520-1535
5 minutes	Explaining prompt cards	1535-1540
15 minutes	Engaging with the prompt cards	1540-1555
10 minutes	Break	1555-1605
20 minutes	Create/respond to writing exercise, prompt cards and manifesto lines.	1605-1625
25 minutes	Perform	1625-1650
10 minutes	Close and Q&A (Care Café)	1650-1700

The first group activity facilitated a group conversation on the topics of gender, sexuality and body politics, as a person's identity significantly informs these discourses. This activity opened a dialogue through which people could listen, relate, discuss and share experiences. I found that the conversations naturally developed into individuals sharing their lived experiences, developing into a form of collaborative autoethnography. In the sharing of stories, a sense of community always seemed to form, and personal stories from one person often connected with those of another. As Daniel Shaw, Fran Ackermann and Colin Eden note in their study of shared knowledge in workshops, 'Participants might construct stories by linking together other peoples' contribution … The links might pull together contributions from different streams of thought to provide additional detail to their story on a topic' (2003, p. 943). Further, these links may demonstrate that participants 'have thought in a more in-depth fashion about a particular issue' which may lead to 'prolonged thinking about the issue' itself (Shaw *et al*., 2003, p. 944). In this sense, collaborative autoethnography became a powerful tool for individuals to have agency of their personal experiences, understand the value of their voice within the conversation and discover connections with others.

Discussions ranged from bodily dysmorphia and labia shame to menstruation, childbirth, non-gendered parenting, queerness, surgery and more. All the contributions shared the common link of being outside the normative social discourse, covering topics that the contributors may have felt uncomfortable discussing in their usual social circles. In these moments, I was confronted by several topics that intersected with my research, and the desire that participants felt to discuss them. For the participants, the methods that Nelson describes may assist in 'making the tacit more explicit and in establishing resonances between "know-what" and "know-that"' (Nelson, 2013, p. 52). Making the tacit explicit was later crucial in the development of their performance work, in which they employed embodied experiences to

challenge and reclaim agency against the dominant structures of patriarchal power within contemporary culture.

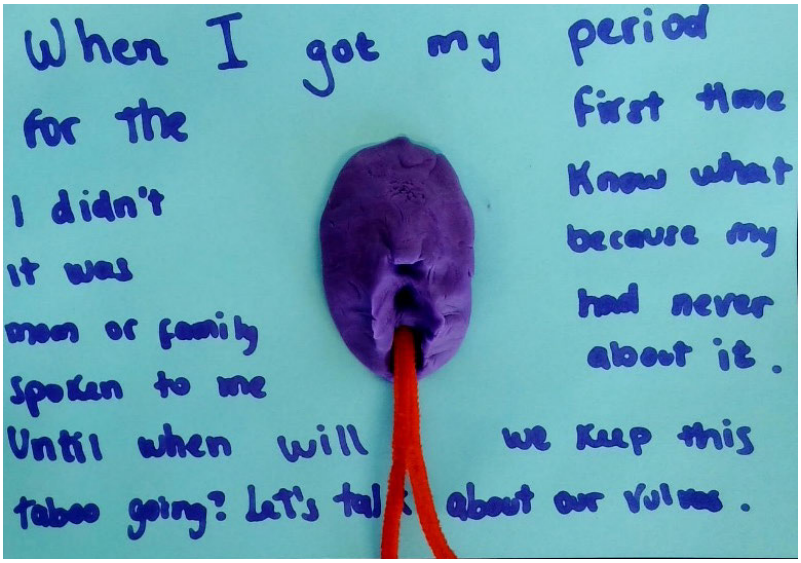

Figure 24. Response by participant. Caption reads: 'When I got my period for the first time, I didn't know what it was because my mom or family had never spoken to me about it. Until when will we keep this taboo going? Let's talk about our vulvas.'

When considering the model of vulvaplicity, the manifesto (as detailed in Chapter 1), helped flesh out my research aims and intentions. Following the example of the manifesto, each participant was asked to create their own manifesto lines. The interventional nature of the manifesto provided a space for participants to think more critically about their lived experiences and the collective discussions shared from the previous exercise. The participants were instructed to write down a series of demands on how they want to (or want the world to) defy normative patriarchal frameworks. The manifestos did not have to mention vulvaplicity but the participants were prompted to use a framework that sought to declare, consider or demand a world without binaries. I read out my own manifesto lines as an example and asked participants to consider how they might speak or perform these lines to each other with power and authority. Below are some examples of manifestos that were created and read to the group:

Participant 1: *Vulvaplicity sees you when you aren't seeing yourself. It is the all-seeing eye. Vulvaplicity is asking the question and demanding the answer as to why when we see vulvas, our insides do a little dance. An awkward should I look, can I look, shameful moment. Like, they have seen Bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster or Santa Claus. But, when seeing a penis, you see it. Empirical and tangible. As though it has more atoms, more reality than anything else. It allows joy and ferocity, encourages it even.*

Participant 2: *Vulvaplicity to me is [the] expression of authenticity and the simple existence of people regardless of their biology. What I want? I want for those I love [to] not be questioned, not to be categorised, not to be expected to explain the way that they exist. I want vulvaplicity to grow to be openly and publicly encouraged to the point that it becomes invisible, because it is so mainstream that nobody thinks to point it out anymore. Or nobody thinks to laugh about it or to make a spectacle out of it, because it is so accepted and engrained. God, if it became as engrained as patriarchy, could we imagine?*

Participant 3: *I want everyone to stop asking for tampons in hushed tones in public spaces and to feel free to shout, 'Has anybody got a fucking tampon?' to everybody in the fucking office. I want for young menstruators to be able to claim they've started their period on the P.E. bench rather than what my best friend did at school when she said she had pissed herself instead. I want sex ed to stop going on about the fact that when a male ejaculates, we will get pregnant and die. And talk instead about the female ejaculation and squirting and the percentage of piss that squirt does include, and to teach that there is a difference between squirting and an orgasm. I want them to teach about pleasure in sex ed. Why do they always put a condom on a cucumber, yet I still have no idea how to put a fucking femidom on. I want them to publish the statistics of the long-term effects of the coil that's inside of me and to*

compare that rate of blood clot to that caused by the fucking vaccine. Then see if the BBC will still be talking about fucking blood clots. And fucking please, please, please, make the disparity between male and female contraception, fucking smaller.

Participant 4: *Stop teaching people to accept passive harassment. Let everyone talk about their fluids, like bodily fluids. The patriarchy really did a number on us. Stop giving bodily appendages so much weight, [for example]: penis, boobs, butt. Give me a day off, I'm literally bleeding. Tell more people you shit yourself during childbirth. Let everyone find their active yes. Stop talking about my ask (unless I've asked you to). Wear what you like. Fuck whomever. Take up space.*

Participant 5: *I feel lost. Why? Because my whole life I've only been told about two genders. I feel lost. Why? Is it a shame that I love pleasure just as much as men do, but probably get it better than men do? I feel lost. Why? Because society has forced my mind to believe that I should have children. Is it either toxic propaganda or is it actually a natural urge [that] I want to do? I feel lost. Why? Because I want to create solace for people who don't know where to go and when everything is all tangled and torn, where the fuck do we start?*

Participant 6: *It should be normal that people scratch their vulva when it itches, just as it is normal for people to scratch their penis. No woman should be ashamed for having their pants stuck between her butt cheeks. When men, [play a] 'stereotypical woman', the actor's voice should go high and low and pitch for both. In fact, the teachers should stay away from this exercise completely and ask to perform stereotypical fruits.*

Each manifesto was the articulation of a problem that needed addressing within contemporary society, stemming from a place of resistance. The exercise gave permission for the participants to create a dialogue around tabooed and forbidden conversations, allowing the forbidden to become part of the discourse. Each manifesto line discussed generated further conversations to which others related, which provided my research with important insights to the significance of autoethnographic methods. I felt particularly drawn to a moment in Participant 5's manifesto, which discussed the idea of feeling lost. In this manifesto, a tension was revealed between 'knowledge traditions' and 'substantial new insights' (Nelson, 2013, pp. 44–45). As Nelson proposes, critical thinking opens up the 'scope for fundamentally interrogating canonical traditions' (2013, p. 66). These moments reminded me of the women's consciousness-raising groups – a group set up in the 1960s also known as New York Radical women – due to the conversations generated by the exercise. The consciousness-raising groups 'allowed women to discuss their feelings, needs and desires. These included feelings perceived as private, taboo, or shameful. In these spaces, women explored experiences of sex, abortion, relationships, and families, often for the first time' (Barber *et al*., 2013). Whilst the media has provided a platform for others to gain a further understanding of such topics, many prejudices and taboos still need a space to be discussed. Additionally, discourses around abortion (especially in the current political landscape), miscarriages, menopause, and bodies in general are still entrenched in misogyny. These exercises developed a space for collective autoethnography that fostered an environment conducive to reflexivity and the sharing of lived experiences. Through the exchange of diverse experiences, my research, once more, gained a deeper understanding of the discourses surrounding vulvas, vaginas and gynaecology, which extended beyond the anatomical interpretations.

Performing Interventions: 'My Body is not Wrong or Broken'

Figure 25. Prompt cards and instruction manuals laid out for workshop attendees.

The inclusion of the prompt cards was essential to the workshops: they not only provided a stimulus for participants to engage with but also offered participants information about artists and thinkers within the field. Further, the prompt cards were curated as an approach to creating work within an applied practice setting, providing participants a means to produce their performative intervention. In her analysis of community practices, Kuppers writes how 'the outcome is (relatively) open, maybe within a thematic field opened up by the facilitator, but full of spaces and times for people to create their own expressive material' (2007, p. 4). Having previously facilitated exercises that enabled participants to critically reflect upon social and cultural landscapes as well as their lived experiences, this activity sought to offer participants the means to create their own subjective and expressive response. The participants were given 25-minutes to create a performance and were provided with a range of materials and props.[65]

[65] Due to Covid restrictions, some workshops were held online whilst others were held in person once restrictions were lifted.

Each workshop stimulated a plurality of responses, all of which were urgent and political (please see Appendix nine for further images). The three detailed below illustrate the breadth of topics covered and demonstrate how each individual contributed to the creation and development of this research through performance. By fostering autoethnography and autonomous creativity within the workshop, the participants below not only engaged deeply with the practice but also actively collaborated in the research process.

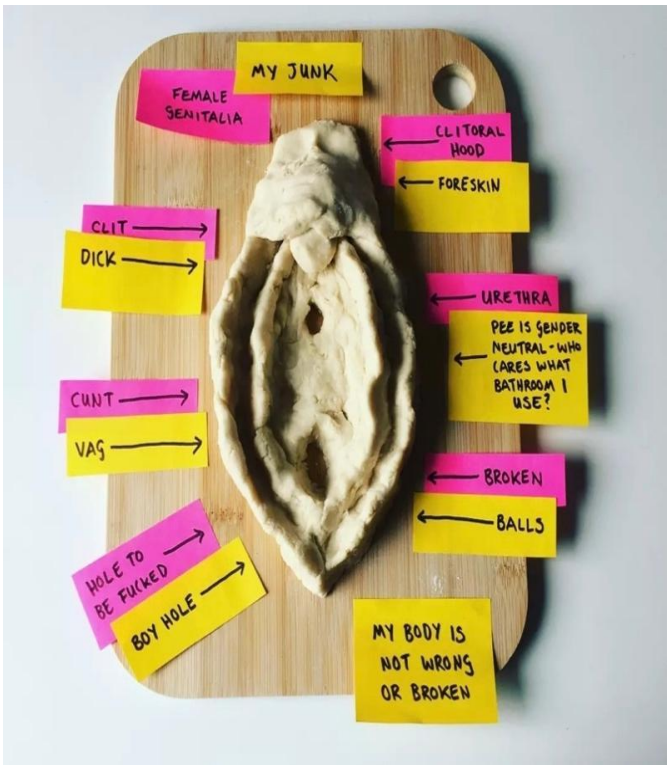

Figure 26. Response by participant

The above image is taken from a visual arts piece created by one participant which displays a salt dough sculpture of his vulva that he made in response to a prompt card. The card featured the work of Hannah Wilke and asked the participant to find mouldable material (such as Play-Doh or clay) and sculpt a vulva or a series of vulvas from it to further rupture phallocentric constructs. This participant – a trans man – explained how the pink labels (as shown in the

image above) show words frequently used within society for naming parts of the vulva, whilst the yellow labels feature the words that he uses to reclaim his body:

The participant explained that he felt empowered in creating this work. His intervention represents not only the validity and reclamation of his own body but also of queer and trans identity. The yellow labels he includes critique the West's binary linguistics, which attempt to regulate bodies within the context of biological determinism. In labelling the clit as his dick and the clitoral hood as his foreskin, his work within this project emphasises body mutability and challenges the cis-gaze. Amid the pathologisation and marginalisation of trans identities and constant threats to trans rights, this intervention not only opens up important dialogues around the ways in which non-cis bodies are viewed and treated in Western culture – with one label reading, 'My body is not wrong or broken' – but also examines the need for inclusive spaces, with another label reading, 'Pee is gender neutral – who cares what bathroom I use?'

In recent years, public bathrooms have become highly politicised, with policing of which gendered toilets trans and gender-non-conforming people can occupy. In her book *Queering Bathrooms: Gender, Sexuality, and the Hygienic Imagination* (2010), Sheila L. Cavanagh writes how bathrooms act as an institution for genital categorisation, stating that 'Each room is preoccupied with the spectacle of sex. A heterosexually specific and reproductive morality is employed to set parameters on how, when, where and in what manner body fluids are

evacuated, by whom and into which orifice' (2010, p. 30). Cavanagh notes how even the toilet receptacle itself (the urinal or oval toilet bowl) has been designed based on ideas 'about the sex of the body, regardless of one's gender or sexual orientation' (2010, pp. 6–8). Furthermore, gendered public toilets have always been a space in which a person's genitals are both problematically assumed and regulated into normative binaries. This intervention not only had a universal meaning but also focused on one participant's subjective experience, which he was able to reframe and give a voice to in an empowering way. After the workshops, the participant told me how the workshop had inspired him to facilitate his own workshop encouraging other people to sculpt their genitals out of salt dough to empower others, the legacy of this workshop thus continues beyond this research.

In another performance intervention, one participant created their own menstrual ritual, inspired by the prompt card on Marisa Carnesky's performance *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman* (2016). This prompt card asked the participant to think about what menstruation means to them, detailing how not all women menstruate, and not all people who menstruate identify as women. The intervention did not require participants to incorporate the materiality of period blood itself. In Carnesky's performance, she and her assembled group of radical cabaret artists perform a series of menstrual rituals, tracing menstrual journeys of gender identity, feminism, loss, life, activism and kinship. Rhyannon Styles presents a video of her own menstrual ritual on Southend beach, as she tells audiences that 'as a transwoman, she may not bleed monthly, but she certainly experiences a cycle' (Prior, 2017). The card details how bleeding is personal for everyone and symbolises different subjectivities. From this prompt, one participant performed a menstrual ritual as a movement piece to the song *Ave Maria* (1825) by Franz Schubert. In the intervention, the participant created a pregnant stomach from fabric hidden underneath their clothing. As they moved their body to the song, they

reached between their legs and began to reveal and unravel metres of long purple cloth, as if it were an umbilical cord. The speed with which they unravelled and pulled the cloth from between their legs increased. Once all the cloth was removed, the pace of the performance changed. They held the cloth tenderly, swaying with it for a short time. Taking the cloth, they then bunched it and cradled it, as if rocking a baby in their arms. Eventually, they unravelled the cloth in front of their body, stretching it width-wise, and took a bow. The participant explained how the intervention was inspired by their relationship to menstruation and motherhood as a non-binary person. As the scholar Sarah E. Frank writes in her article 'Queering Menstruation: Trans and Non-Binary Identity and Body Politics', menstruation has long historical associations with the female body. It is due to this 'deep history and presumed "naturalness" of the gender/sex binary, [that] non-normative bodies are marginalized for their state of "otherness".' (Frank, 2020, p. 373). This participant's intervention sought to reject the binary notion of gender in parenting that is both created and sustained by social norms (Dey, 2017, p. 122) as well as more broadly opening alternative perspectives on the topic.

In the prompt card deck, one card was left blank for participants to create their own performative intervention as a means to further expand the field of knowledge. From this, one participant asked whether they could use their body explicitly in their performance.[66] In the intervention, they sat on the bedcovers wearing just a t-shirt. Classical music began to play. A mirror was propped against the wall and the reflection of their body could be seen. On the bed lay a gold plastic masculine mannequin torso which had a hole in the top of its neck. Holding a long fluffy cane in one hand, they stroked the torso tenderly for some time. They placed the cane to one side and then took a hammer from underneath the bed covers and slowly inserted

[66] Safeguarding and intimacy checks were conducted within the group before this performative intervention went ahead.

the hammer's handle into their vagina. Taking hold of the torso, they began to insert the hammer head into the hole at the torso's neck. They then dragged the hammer down the mannequin's torso and then removed it from their vagina. This participant explored how women's bodies are controlled by patriarchal authority as well as how the vulva/vagina is perceived as politically contentious. This intervention intersected with much of my theory work surrounding performances of the vulva and, once more, illustrated how the specificity of the vulva in performance can showcase the manifolded interplay of identity and meaning-making.

Figure 27. Participants getting creative

The manifolded methodology of vulvaplicity offers participants multiple methods of articulating stories and disseminating new understandings, whilst also allowing for voices to occupy space and be heard. For example, through reflexivity and autoethnography, participants brought different experiences, attitudes, knowledge, beliefs, identities, social, political, cultural and economic backgrounds and understandings to each workshop. The work they produced was informed by their epistemological endeavours and offers important insights into the work of vulvaplicity and the urgent need for it. Echoing Frank's words, 'Bodies belong to social categories of gender, race, class, ability, etc., and are largely stereotyped accordingly. Thus,

bodies are accompanied by expectations and norms of behaviour and appearance' (2020, p. 372). Utilising the conventions of sharing and collective action inherent in community and applied theatre approaches, my PaR revealed a tangible urgency and impact, which can be measured through the participants' discussions, performances and feedback (For feedback, see Appendix ten). Moreover, through collaborative sharing and creation, unique topics emerged, which revealed new insights as well as interesting overlaps within individual identities.

In many cases, I found that my PaR provided a pedagogical framework for raising awareness of anatomical terms. For example, many of my participants were not aware of the differences between the vulva and the vagina, having only ever used the term vagina, or an alternative nickname, such as mini or fanny. This was a factor I addressed early on within my workshops, often discussing the socio-political discourses that inform such understandings; in these moments, my research involved small but significant teachings. However, due to the lack of public discussion and the taboo nature of my field in Western society, some participants confided in me about much larger issues which, at times, were difficult to navigate due either to my lack of knowledge of the subject (such as medically related topics) or the emotional labour invoked. Taking inspiration from Lois Weaver's *Care Café* (2017), 'a real or virtual, public or domestic place for people to gather- their wits, thoughts and comrades in action' (Split Britches, 2015), the close of each workshop provided a space for individuals to reflect and converse. Participants were also given a list of resources for them to consult if needed. Such moments demonstrated the need for and importance of these spaces but also revealed the individual struggles caused by gender inequalities, lack of education, secrecy, generational norms and more. Performance became a tool where self-expression, freedom and new understandings could be explored. The vulva became a symbol of empowerment and reclamation, as well as a device to facilitate conversations around issues that are taboo or

deemed difficult. Echoing the words of the feminist theorist Jennifer Doyle, the ‘vulvic is not a biology but a culture’ (Doyle 2023). Furthermore, the methodology of vulvaplicity helped my research establish how vulvic politics deeply impact and intersect with identity politics in complex and nuanced ways.

4.5 Critically Reflecting: Unfolding and Refolding Knowledge

Figure 28. Alex giving conference on research at East 15 Acting School, University of Essex

In the development of this PhD, I realised that my research had progressed much further than originally anticipated. Whilst the work focused on representations of vulvas in performance, I was continually surprised by the plurality of topics that would intersect with the work itself. In this sense, the manifolded lens of vulvaplicity provided a good frame within which to situate my methods. This was particularly poignant when negotiating how people's identities were embedded in their relationship with their bodies.

Due to the project’s subject matter and personal nature, participants and audiences alike developed individual and unique ties to the research and in acknowledging this, I was aware of

how their roles may shift and change throughout the project. For example, following the performance of *OTBS*, many audiences expressed how they had learnt more about the experiences of people with vulvas. They commented how they were now aware of the difference between the vulva and vagina, shared their personal stories, and stated how the openness of the work made them feel more accepting of their own bodies. I also received a 30-minute voice note from two audience members a week later, discussing how the performance had made an impact on them. In these moments, audiences' roles shifted from being passive spectators to active participants due to their engagement with the work, prompting them to reflect upon the research itself. The fluidity of these roles enabled this practice to continually acknowledge power dynamics and individual relationships with the research, enabling perspective to the evolving narratives and stake of my research field.

After the show itself, I asked audience members to fill out a questionnaire providing feedback on the show with the intention of using the feedback in the future development of *OTBS*. I received 24 feedback forms and, having read through each one, realised the extent of my project's impact.[67] One example highlighted how *OTBS* helped them understand the experiences of people with vulvas, encouraging their use of inclusive language. This demonstrated a reflection upon what they had learned by putting it into practice. Similarly, nearly two years after my first vulvaplicity workshop, a participant reached out to tell me how they still often think about the workshop. As Nelson suggests, 'Artistic research does not only produce knowledge; it also changes us as individual and collective beings – artists, pedagogues, spectators, citizens, and consumers' (2013, p. 160). Both the workshops and *OTBS* not only

[67] Sadly, the feedback forms were a last-minute addition in the hope of extending and developing the work. As such, they were not included within my ethical approval application and cannot therefore be directly quoted or used. I refer to the example above in a general sense to provide an overview.

helped to disseminate new and alternative understandings around the representation of vulvas but also had a lasting impression on how people may see themselves and others.

Returning to one of my main research aims, this project sought to question whether performance can serve as a tool to enable new understandings or unlearning to emerge. As an additional means of documenting the impact of my PaR, qualitative data were collected from performers within *OTBS* through a series of questions. The accounts from the Vulvaplicity Collective experience can be read in full in Appendix eleven.[68] The questions asked the performers to reflect on their experience of the workshops and rehearsals, their personal research and the project's potential impact. The questions asked were:

1) How did you feel making the work?
2) Did you learn anything within the process?
3) Did anything emerge within both the workshops and rehearsals for you?
4) Can you open up more about your work and research within the performance?

In discussion with Orla, I discovered that her work around witchcraft and her Romany heritage were significant in her learning, as well as 'the work that we would … bring in every week, right up until we started putting the show together' (Forrest, 2022). She noted how she was hesitant to share or discuss her Romany heritage, as she felt it was taboo in Western socio-cultural views. However, she commented, 'I felt very comfortable and supported in sharing that kind of Romany side of me, which ties into the witches and magic and the kind of witchcraft as well, which I think a lot of people would have been scared of' (Forrest, 2022). Orla spoke about how the work helped her to understand how she felt towards her own body,

[68] Anna was unable to take part in the discussion, so the interview below is between Dan and Orla.

noting, ‘I also learned a lot about myself through it and about my own feelings towards my own body, and how they are shared collectively with all different bodies, and how … we are taught to feel about them’ (Forrest, 2022). Here, I could see how Orla’s embodied knowledge and understandings of the work had been informed through autoethnography, in that the work was not only personal to her but was also situated ‘within a cultural context and all that implies’ (Ettore, 2017, p. 2).

Similarly, Dan discussed how the project had affected him, more personally than creatively. When he initially started working on the project, he struggled to understand his place within it, stating, ‘I could not figure out [whether] it undermined my identity or if my identity undermines the work’ (Memory, 2022). Dan stated that there was a ‘lot of shame either about having a vulva or about feeling guilty about how I feel about my vulva, in a space that is … to celebrate the vulva’ (Memory, 2022). While one of my research aims was to shift taboo understandings of the vulva into a place of agency and reclamation, the project as a whole welcomed multiple identities and embodied experiences, perspectives and opinions. Just before *OTBS* started, Dan had undergone top surgery which, he says, ‘made me think about bottom surgery as well and like I have never really wanted bottom surgery, but, I have also never reconciled that’ (Memory, 2022). For Dan, his identity as a trans man and his ‘identity as someone with a vulva’ have always been separate; he commented, ‘I have not really thought … of that as part of me and like welcome it in, in that way’ (Memory, 2022). When beginning the process, Dan mentioned that he had a clear sense of the project and the kind of work that we would make. However, as mentioned previously, the intention of this work was to never define someone by their anatomy but, rather, to acknowledge how we may think about bodies in relation to their socio-cultural positioning. As such, Dan discussed how the process of *OTBS* ‘actually unravelled all of everything’ he thought (Memory, 2022). In particular, during the R&D phase

of the project, Dan noted how the free-writing aspects of the project helped him to find a way to articulate his ideas. However, the creation of his body print (see R&D example 2 in Chapter 2), was particularly significant for him:

> When we did the body painting, I do not know what happened in me, something like shifted. I think that was the point where I was able to properly reconcile. Like stepping into my new man body. There was something about it that was just so like affirming (Memory, 2023).

Dan comments on how the print of his body, especially of his chest, gave him a sense of relief, as his hesitancy around the work was in part due to a fear that he might lose his sense of identity or be feigning an identity. This process opened up a space where he realised that his identity was not only welcome, but essential within it. Through the creation of these images, he could visualise his body within the work which was essential in shattering any preconceived binaries stemming from colonial or Eurocentric ideals. Dan stated that 'this project has really, I think shaped the way that I am in the world now, like very deeply. I do not think I would be as comfortable with myself as I am now without it. Like, it really grounded me' (Memory, 2022). The responses of both Orla and Dan to the work demonstrated the significance of vulvic practices within contemporary performance and the *need* for them.

Through the manifolded lens of vulvaplicity, my PaR argued for the necessity of multiple formats through which to present my artistic research. Employing Dani Abulhawa's ideas in 'Knowledgeable Artefacts: The role of performance documentation in PaR', I understood that artistic modes of research 'offer multiple opportunities for audiences outside of the established hegemonic knowledge economy of the academy to engage with research' (2016, p. 15). The dissemination of my PaR beyond academia felt particularly important in this project due to the

taboo nature of the subject matter. In the course of my practice, I found that there was a real need and urgency for people to discuss their bodies. Within my workshops, participants shared very intimate stories with me or asked me about my own experiences, unprompted, due to my facilitation of a stigma-free environment of reflexivity around the topics of vulvas and vaginas. Further, performance can provide a framework that generates conversation and offers both agency and perspective to a person's identity, politics and practices. As such, the vulvaplicity prompt cards act as a legacy of this research project and are a method through which vulvic practices can continue to facilitate meaningful conversations. The culmination of my PaR documentation, as described in this chapter, can be found in Appendix eight.

Conclusion: Vulvic Practices and Politics in Performance

In this research, I have established the effects of vulvic practices within performance as both a political and artistic-based movement, and have introduced the term "vulvaplicity" to describe a methodology that investigates themes surrounding the vulva in a way that is individual to each participant's identity. The introduction discussed the position of vulva politics in culture in order to provide the context of its historical breadth and embedded significance within contemporary socio-political frameworks. The cultural significance of vulvas, vaginas and the gynaecological anatomy is discussed in great depth in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. My introduction also set forth to define the approaches and boundaries of my research, acknowledging why particular topics are positioned more prominently in my thesis. I analysed the genealogy of early feminist artists, including the works of Hannah Wilke, Annie Sprinkle, Carolee Schneemann, VALIE EXPORT, Judy Chicago, Marina Abramović and V (formerly Eve Ensler), who have engaged with vulvic practices, drawing on second-wave feminism to challenge patriarchal structures.

In situating the specificity of the vulva as a point of analysis, I contextualised my practice through vulvaplicity as both a conceptual framework and methodology in Chapter 1. Through my analysis of Emma Rees' and Rebecca Schneider's explanation and relationship between 'plicare' and 'explicate' – both terms reflecting a form of 'unfolding' – I framed vulvaplicity as a means to explore a plurality of vulvic narratives with scope for revealing or looking anew. In particular, my research indicated that the genitals are ascribed with their own particular inscriptions and considered how identity may be performed through them. The conceptualisation of vulvaplicity's PaR methods was informed by Robin Nelson's 'multi-mode approach'. In particular, the ways in which Nelson's framework explored the relationship

between practice and scholarly inquiry. However, vulvaplicity's originality and deviation from Nelson lies in its awareness of socio-cultural contexts, power dynamics and identity, as well as understanding the broader implications surrounding the genitals. Vulvaplicity as a methodology thoughtfully and inclusively considered how its methods engaged individuals with this topic and research. While my core methodology involves applied theatre conventions, body-based practices and theory, it also incorporates the methods of autoethnography, reflexivity, performativity, and the intersections between practice and theory. My mani*folded* approach utilised qualitative methods as means of facilitating reflection which informed new knowledge and understandings around vulvic discourses in the fields of contemporary performance, applied theatre and PaR.

My second chapter demonstrated vulvaplicity as a methodology through my PaR performance of *OTBS.* Utilising Elizabeth Ettorre's ideas of autoethnography and the influence of my own experiences, I emphasised the significance of reflexivity and autoethnographic methods when collaborating with others on topics that are personal or difficult. My aim for my practice was to use autoethnography as an invitation to empower individuals to make personal connections with the research, which was successfully achieved through the scope of discourses analysed. Through applying my methodology, I established how performance can serve as a tool to evoke unique perspectives and reflections for participants as well as provide a space for collective agency to be formed. *OTBS* looked at how performances of the vulva may be impactful not only for the performers involved, but also audiences. Through qualitative methods, such as performer interviews and audience feedback forms (positioned at the end of chapter 4), I demonstrated that the practices of vulvaplicity aligned effectively with research that is focused on identity politics and taboo topics. The integration of personal experiences and scholarly inquiry provided vulvaplicity a nuanced approach that not only addressed both the complexities

of identity and individuals lived experiences, but also challenged, deconstructed and reframed socio-cultural understandings surrounding vulvas, vaginas and gynaecology. Furthermore, the breadth of my PaR demonstrated how vulvic art can be read as its own distinct practice, offering meaningful perspectives and understandings of the ways in which bodies relate to the world.

In the third chapter, I provided a historical and philosophical analysis of the ways women's bodies have been read as monstrous, unnatural and grotesque within patriarchal frameworks. Drawing on The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein's performance *Notorious,* I unpicked her embodiment of monstrous female subjectivities, such as the witch or the myth of Medusa, and their contemporary relevance. I illustrated how the women's bodies are entangled with and manipulated by numerous misogynist narratives and spectacles of persecution through exploring the discourses of mythology, history, morality and policy. In so doing, I offered a framework for how such discourses have helped shape modern-day understandings of vulvas, vaginas and gynaecology. The chapter examined how contemporary feminist artists have built on the legacy of vulvic practices to both extend and complicate how we think about bodily autonomy through self-objectification, pornography and obscenity as a means of challenging dominant culture. I established these works as a precursor to discussing my own PaR, which demonstrated the ever-evolving landscapes of vulva politics and the historic recurrence of patriarchal domination over women's bodies, creating work that is relevant to its historical moment. *Alienating identity* was curated during the pandemic which provided a space for reflexivity – an inwards look into my own desires, sexuality, frustrations and politics. Through body-based research and practice, as well as elements of autoethnography, my PaR demonstrated a thoughtful understanding of how embodied practices, personal experiences and an understanding of theory can contribute to scholarly research. As this practice preceded the work created for both *OTBS* and the workshops, I was able to understand how vulvaplicity as

a methodology enabled a deep exploration of the complex intersections between identity, culture and societal taboos. Similarly, my research illuminated clear overlaps between feminist and queer discourses. These understandings ultimately informed and enriched my approach to working with others.

In the final chapter, I examined vulvic spectacles as a means of exploring the expanding landscapes of feminism and its intersection with queer politics, which has given rise to an urgent debate around non-cis bodies and fluid sexuality. Through vulvic spectacles, I argued that artists have created a framework for unlearning and relearning through subverting the cis-gaze and challenging heteronormative ideologies by exposing their vulvas. I outlined how theorists such as Jack Halberstam, José Muñoz, Paul B. Preciado and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmi call into question Western culture's understandings of race, gender, sex and sexuality, allowing alternative readings of bodies. Through the ability of spectacle to provoke conscious thought and facilitate interactions with audiences, my PaR workshops and prompt cards examined how 'audiences', 'participants' and 'collaborators' can interchangeably engage with the research.

Employing Petra Kuppers' understanding of applied/community practices, I argued that my vulvaplicity workshops expanded the field of vulvic politics by including a plurality of identities, each of whom brought different experiences, attitudes, knowledge, beliefs, identities, social, political, cultural and economic backgrounds, and understandings. Further, I argued for the importance of facilitating conversations around topics that are often tabooed or deemed difficult 'in order to produce new understandings of why some things are difficult to reveal. Difficulties are, as ever, pedagogic' (Ahmed, 2010, p. xvii). In providing this space, moments of collaborative autoethnography formed with many individuals wanting to share their experiences as well as hear about those of others. Such moments fostered a space for

reflexivity and collectivity to form, demonstrating a real urgency for individuals to have a space in which they can discuss marginalised or tabooed subjects. Through open discussions and the work created through the prompt cards, new insights into the discourses surrounding vulvas, vaginas and gynaecology were revealed. The curation of the prompt cards facilitated an approach to generating material and became an accessible tool for self-exploration and creation.

Vulvaplicity developed into a written thesis, a PaR practice, a series of workshops and a methodology for contemporary performance. My theory also addressed the complex and nuanced ways that bodies have been ascribed meaning through patriarchal culture. When beginning this research, I sought to explore the physical presence of the vulva but was met with many intersecting discourses, including monstrosity, capitalism, obscenities, morality, violence and queerness. Through these understandings, my PaR recognised how performance can be used as a tool to inform, destigmatise, educate or liberate performers and audiences alike around the intersections of gender, sexuality, body and identity politics. This aligns with Kartsaki's observation on Julia Bardsley's performance, that she 'encountered a process of unlearning and unthinking [of] the social, a process perhaps of unlearning culture and rehearsing an alternative' (Kartsaki, 2020, p. 89). My methodology provided participants and audiences alike a sense of agency, reclamation and autonomy, which became a strength in addressing ethical considerations that accompany the taboo nature of my research. Through these aspects, I also argued for redefining 'audiences', 'participants and 'collaborators' in the creation of the PaR, in order to develop and enrich my research scope.

Contemporary performance is used within this research as an accessible tool that gives permission for new understandings to play out. In this view, my PaR provided an environment

for ‘unlearning culture’ rather than seeking its approval, celebrating those socially abject or tabooed spaces, where new insights may take up space within them. This development underscored the versatility of vulvaplicity as a methodological framework, demonstrating its value in research and performance studies that seek to engage with marginalised subjects and discourses. Vulvaplicity offers valuable insights and opens new pathways for dialogue and understandings of discourses surrounding vulvas, vaginas and the internal gynaecological anatomy. Vulvic narratives in performance has not been widely discussed, and their integration with community and applied practices remain unexplored. This research not only advances knowledge within the field of vulvic performances, but also offers a paradigm shift in thinking, discussing and creating practice around this subject matter through its collaborative focus on identity and agency. Vulvaplicity delivers tangible applications that opens the possibilities for integrating scholarly inquiry and creative practices, but more significantly, has demonstrated meaningful impact on the people it has worked with. When considering the future of vulvaplicity, Nelson acknowledges that ‘evidence may emerge beyond the practice itself (if conceived as a final showing, the product of the research). Many insights emerge in the processes of making and doing’ (2013, pp. 27–28) and particularly important are the power and necessity of sharing. Indeed, after *OTBS*, there was a desire to expand the collective to make further ‘communal efforts for change’ (Carr, 2019, p. 142), which resulted in the formation of Vulvaplicity as an event.

4.6 The Future of Vulvaplicity

Upon reflection, vulvaplicity – as an artistic and political framework – allowed me to consider the different kinds of work and the various identities that folded into my research. As Parker-Starbuck and Mock suggest, ‘The interdisciplinary nature of performance studies has

encouraged theatre researchers not only to analyse bodies in spaces of performance but to consider how bodies might become or produce performance spaces' (2010, p. 210). The need for, and expansion of vulvic practices emerged in the form of a regular (tri-monthly) performance event at the Vagina Museum, where artists whose work intersects with the themes of my research are invited to showcase their work. These themes include gender and sexual identity, queer joy, chosen families and the deconstruction of binaries, vulvas, vaginas and the gynaecological anatomy (which may include destigmatising bodies, myth-busting or medical discourses), spectacular bodies and bodies as an activist practice, performance as a reclamation of agency, body neutrality, sexual autonomy, consent and lived experiences, sex work and pornography. These events aim to give voice to a plurality of identities but prioritise artists who are queer, from the global majority, disabled or who have faced barriers within mainstream cultural society. Vulvaplicity is recognised as a queer-led performance space that explores feminism, gender, sexuality and body politics. It is a platform that invites artists to use creative expression as a mode of destabilising heteronormative and cis-normative behaviour and to give space to topics that are often tabooed within traditional cultural and social parameters.

Figure 29. Vulvaplicity as a Performance Event

The Vulvaplicity events to date have taken place in January and November 2023. The response to both events was exceptional – from audiences and artists alike: the first event sold out a 65-seat venue within just four days and the second event sold out a 75-seat venue on the day itself.[69] Pushing my research into the public domain has enabled Vulvaplicity to engage with further identities and modes of art, which continue to expand the future of vulvic artistry as a distinctive practice. For example, Rhubi Worth, a queer trans designer and maker, created a piece for Vulvaplicity called *Chain E-Mail* (2023) which emerged through her 'desire to make art through transition and surgery recovery'. Her piece took the form of a wearable textile and was made entirely of empty oestrogen sachets. For Worth, her work spoke to 'the discardability of the trans experience, and in the eyes of wider society, of trans lives' (Worth, 2023). Another artist who presented work was Queer as an Aro, a Black, disabled and pansexual Drag Quing.[70] Aro writes, sings and plays original songs on their guitar, including a recently created song called *Mangina* (2023) which 'is a body positive song about reclaiming their transmasculinity'. Vulvaplicity as an event follows the same ethos as my PaR, in that it fosters artists in developing their creative practice through and against the challenges of patriarchal structures. Beyond this research, I envision vulvaplicity expanding into a network that includes performances, workshops, zines, curated blog posts and more. Vulvaplicity hopes to continue producing new methodologies that may be one day used for any researcher, artist or practitioner engaging with vulvic art practices.

[69] Vulvaplicity had to take a break due to the Vagina Museum's need to find new premises. This meant that we could not hold our next event until November 2023, when the museum found its permanent home. The next event is to be held in February 2024.
[70] Quing is a gender-neutral term for royalty.

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Appendices

Appendix One: Vulvas in Biblical Iconology

(Source: Badische Landes- Bibliothek, 2006), Wikimedia Commons. PDM

The almond shape seen in religious art is also referred to as a Mandorla (Italian for an almond nut), and often frames holy figures, such as Jesus Christ or Virgin Mary. When examining images that feature the wound of Christ – as seen in the images below – religious scholars have also speculated its shape and potential reference to other bodily orifices that produces fluids and bleeds. Furthermore, this vulva-like shape has also been suggested to be representative of a womb in order to suggest rebirth and life.

Christ's Side Wound from the book Psalter of Bonne de Luxembourg (circa. 1349) by Jean Le Noir. (Source: Emerson College, 2015), Wikimedia Commons. PDM 1.0

The Measure of the Side Wound and the Body of Christ (1484-92). (Source: Yale University Art Gallery, 2011). Wikimedia Commons. PDM 1.0

Appendix Two: Robin Nelson Triangular Model

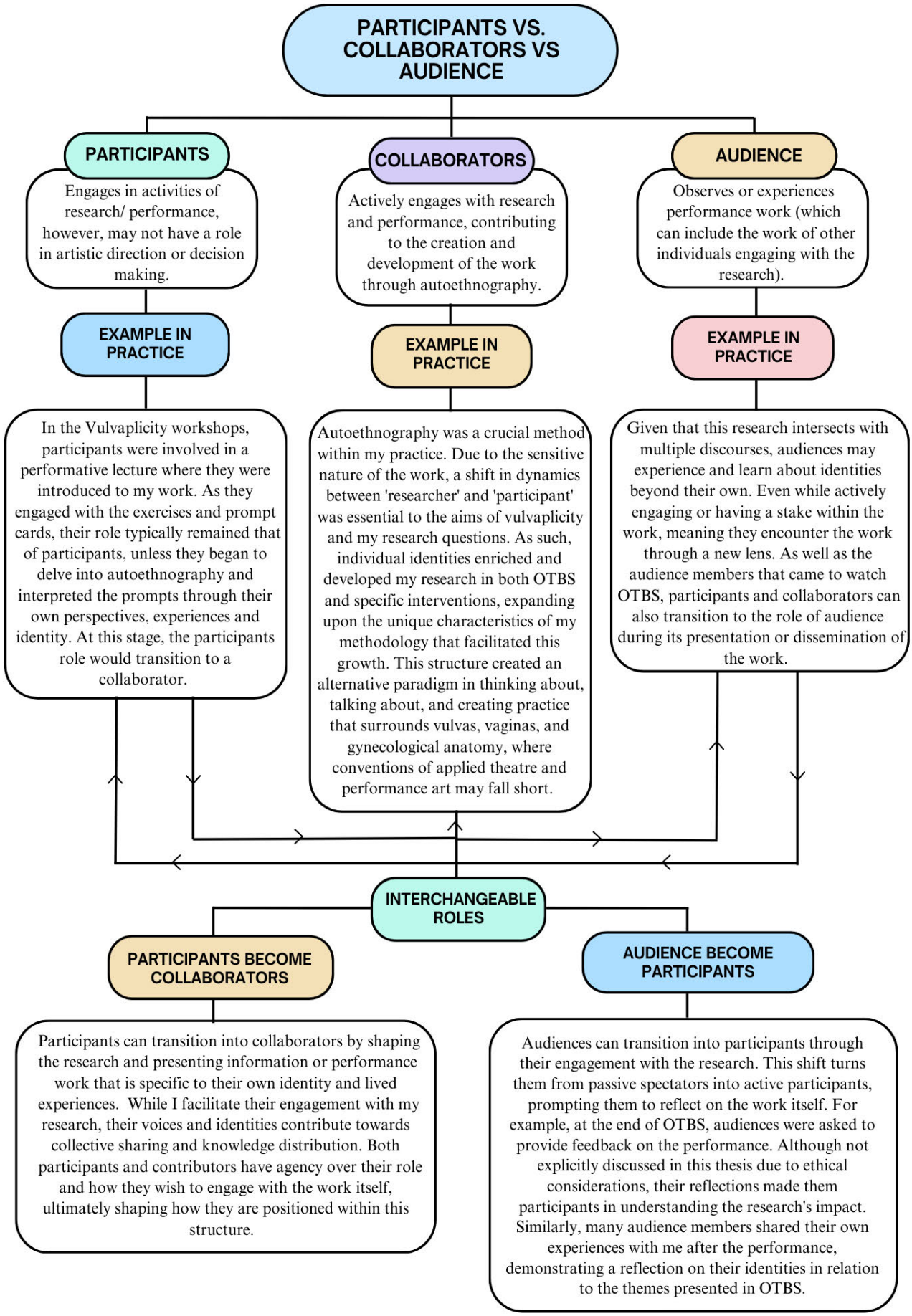
Robin Nelson's 'triangular model' aims to understand how knowledge is formed within PaR. This model incorporates ideas surrounding 'know-how; know-what and know-that' (2013, p. 38). For example, 'know-that' stems from embodied knowledge, 'know-what' requires critical reflection, and 'know-that' involves knowledge gained from specific academic research. At the heart of Nelson's model lies arts praxis, also referred to as 'theory imbricated with practice,' which sits in a dialectic relationship with each method (Nelson, 2013, p.37; Abulhawa, 2016, p. 2). This model was adopted as a frame to reflect on and refine my methodological approach of vulvaplicity. Within my PaR methodology, academic and artistic research provided a foundation for understanding artists exploring vulvic iconography within the context of their identity, and theoretical discourses that intersect with it (*know-that*). Practitioner knowledge (*know-how*) is explored through solo and group performance work, alongside participatory elements such as workshops and performative prompt cards (a practice element detailed in Chapter 4). Critical reflection within my practice is asserted through reflexivity (*know-what*), which aims to make 'tacit knowledge' explicit (2013, p. 20), thus allowing for further modes of inquiry to be realised.

Similarly, my practice sought to present artistic evidence using a range of alternate formats. Through Robin Nelson's assertion that PaR is 'comprised of multiple modes of evidence' (2013, p. 65), my methodology consists of various methods that gathered evidence in the study of vulvas, vaginas and gynaecology. For Nelson, evidence could include 'a product', such as a performance, 'documentation of process', such as photographs or 'complimentary writing which includes locating practice in a lineage of influences and conceptual framework' (2013, p. 26). These modes of evidence were followed within my PaR through performance work *(a*

product), videos and images of workshops and performance work (*documentation of process*), and theoretical analysis and writing *(complimentary writing)*.

Appendix Three: Participants vs. Collaborators vs. Audience Diagram

When creating work with others, I discovered tensions among the term's 'participants', 'collaborators' and 'audience', and how they are defined within my PaR. Therefore, the structure of how practice was created with individuals needed to change in order to meet the aims of vulvaplicity, which focusens on representing a plurality of identity and experiences related to vulvas, vaginas and the gynaecological anatomy. Additionally, it was crucial for individuals to feel a sense of agency and ownership over the work they engaged with and helped create. By granting my PaR that permission, individuals helped to develop and enrich the research. I created a diagram below to demonstrate each role and how they interchanged:


PARTICIPANTS VS. COLLABORATORS VS AUDIENCE
PARTICIPANTS
Engages in activities of research/ performance, however, may not have a role in artistic direction or decision making.
EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE
In the Vulvaplicity workshops, participants were involved in a performative lecture where they were introduced to my work. As they engaged with the exercises and prompt cards, their role typically remained that of participants, unless they began to delve into autoethnography and interpreted the prompts through their own perspectives, experiences and identity. At this stage, the participants role would transition to a collaborator.
COLLABORATORS
Actively engages with research and performance, contributing to the creation and development of the work through autoethnography.
EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE
Autoethnography was a crucial method within my practice. Due to the sensitive nature of the work, a shift in dynamics between 'researcher' and 'participant' was essential to the aims of vulvaplicity and my research questions. As such, individual identities enriched and developed my research in both OTBS and specific interventions, expanding upon the unique characteristics of my methodology that facilitated this growth. This structure created an alternative paradigm in thinking about, talking about, and creating practice that surrounds vulvas, vaginas, and gynecological anatomy, where conventions of applied theatre and performance art may fall short.
AUDIENCE
Observes or experiences performance work (which can include the work of other individuals engaging with the research).
EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE
Given that this research intersects with multiple discourses, audiences may experience and learn about identities beyond their own. Even while actively engaging or having a stake within the work, meaning they encounter the work through a new lens. As well as the audience members that came to watch OTBS, participants and collaborators can also transition to the role of audience during its presentation or dissemination of the work.
INTERCHANGEABLE ROLES
PARTICIPANTS BECOME COLLABORATORS
Participants can transition into collaborators by shaping the research and presenting information or performance work that is specific to their own identity and lived experiences. While I facilitate their engagement with my research, their voices and identities contribute towards collective sharing and knowledge distribution. Both participants and contributors have agency over their role and how they wish to engage with the work itself, ultimately shaping how they are positioned within this structure.
AUDIENCE BECOME PARTICIPANTS
Audiences can transition into participants through their engagement with the research. This shift turns them from passive spectators into active participants, prompting them to reflect on the work itself. For example, at the end of OTBS, audiences were asked to provide feedback on the performance. Although not explicitly discussed in this thesis due to ethical considerations, their reflections made them participants in understanding the research's impact. Similarly, many audience members shared their own experiences with me after the performance, demonstrating a reflection on their identities in relation to the themes presented in OTBS.

Appendix Four: Script Breakdown

Script Breakdown of Informing Concepts –

Welcome to *OTBS,* a performative lecture that has been curated as part of my PhD practise as research. This show originally came about through my interest of vulvas, vaginas, and the gynaecological anatomy, and how performance can be used as a performative intervention to destigmatise bodies, raise visibility, and give space to topics that are often tabooed or deemed as a difficult conservational matter within cultural and social parameters. Just to clarify, when I say vulva, I do not mean the Swedish company that manufactures cars; That would make for a different performance entirely! We often use the word vagina when we mean vulva. The vagina is the long tube-like canal that leads to the cervix. The vulva is essentially everything that touches the pants, and consists of the clitoral hood, the clitoris – yes, that's right, it isn't a myth – the labia majora, labia minora, urethra, and vagina opening ***[Alex to signal to costume to label body parts]***. In some cases, this work refers to 'women who have vulvas' due to the way it has been documented within historical research, however, not all women have a vulva and not all people with a vulva identify as women.

There are many myths and common folklores that promote misogynist practices against those bodies with vulvas. It is when these bodies try to push against patriarchal norms that they then get perceived as obscene and polluted.

Medusa – *An image of Medusa is presented*

In Greek mythology, Medusa was sexually violated by Poseidon and punished for his actions. Athena cursed Medusa into a monster with a head of snakes and became a target for men desiring to cut off her head.

Devil of Pope Fig Island – *An illustration from the poem is presented*

This is an illustration by Charles Eisen of the poem 'The Devil of Pope Fig Island' by Jean de la Fontaine. According to the poem, this woman **[signals to the image]**, named Perretta, literally scares the devil away with her vulva. The devil has never seen a vulva before and is horrified by this - what he deems as - an enormous wound on her body.

Sheela Na Gig - *An image of a Sheela Na Gig is presented*

Sheela Na Gigs are European stone carvings of female figures prominently displaying their exaggerated vulvas on cathedrals, castles and other buildings. In her travels to the Church of St Mary and St David in Herefordshire, Professor Emma Rees purchased the Church's 19th-century guidebook. The guidebook stated that this image **[signals to the image]**, is of a fool, and he is holding his chest open to show his foolishness (Rees, 2013, p. 3). Echoing the thoughts of Rees, I think we can all agree that this is no fool's chest (Rees, 2013, p. 3).

Rokudenashiko, Vulva Canoe - *An image of Rokudenashiko's artwork is presented*

If we look at the vulva in a more contemporary setting, Japanese artist, Rokudenashiko was indicted for the crime of 'obscenity display' in 2014 due to her *Vulva Canoe* artwork. She made

a 3D scan of her own vulva into a canoe, sailed it down a river and was shortly arrested on these charges.

In the creation of this performance, I have collaborated with 3 amazing artists. All of whom have brought their own perspective, identities, lived experiences and passions to this topic. One of our performers was unable to be here physically, but their voice still features within this work.

Orla's Intervention

An image of the Magnus' manuscript is presented

A well-known philosopher of the 15th century Pseudo-Albertus Magnus' wrote a manuscript entitled, De Secretis Mul-err-um (translated as *Women's Secrets*). This copy contained several annotations, including a phallus drawn by its owner, alongside the entry in which accuses witches of magically removing men's penises.

This manuscript also contains further references to women's pubic hair and perverse witchery. One story details that taking hair from a menstruating woman and burying it in the earth can produce a serpent.

Anna's Intervention

Transgression is produced through the act of defying institutions affiliated with patriarchal narratives. The transgressions of bodies can create a space of unknowing, offering the

possibility of relearning. The two-gendered binary system is widely recognised as the default in Western culture, but for many, it is both an inaccurate and insufficient representation of bodies. Welcome to the Land of the Roaring Sun. A piece about liberation, freedom and finding what it means to be content in your skin, even if that means the destruction of all the once familiar structures in order to be reborn.

Dan Intervention

In ancient Greek mythology, gods combining masculine and feminine identities ruled over fertility and creation. Dionysus and Hermaphroditus were such deities - one killed in the womb and reborn from his father's thigh, the other born from the union of male and female in water.

The poetry in this piece was written across several years of transition, some parts recorded pre-transition, and it forms a love letter both to and from a former self. The piece is written as an act of healing and reflection. There is nothing transgressive about displaying trans pain, and queer joy is (thankfully) becoming less and less radical. The act of transitioning is a divine act of self-creation, and this in itself is radical in a world that seeks to limit us to what we are expected to be.

We embody the fluidity inherent in all existence and the necessary formlessness that would encompass the Godhead; we are deconstructions and reconstructions all in one, self-made and interconnected via our shared unorthodoxy. We own only the parts of ourselves that we create: Out of love and joy and pain and hate, We birth ourselves as we truly are.

Video Plays: Dan's poem begins.

Appendix Five: Exhibition

Before the performance, *Obscene to be Seen*, I set up an interactive exhibition within the foyer. This exhibition included various elements of my PaR process, such as videos of *The Alien* (see chapter 3), documentation of the curation of *OTBS,* information about the participant artists, a plaster cast of my vulva, and a crafting table. At the table, audiences could engage with my prompt cards (see chapter 4) and/or create a vulva out of plasticine as a form of vulva validation. Through including these elements, I aimed to create a deeper connection between the audience and the material they were about to witness, as well as provide context and meaning about the project as a whole. Vulvaplicity's aims and intentions challenge taboo and break down barriers around sensitive conversational matters. Displaying this material in an accessible and creative manner, without stigma, was central to these intentions.

Video short of exhibition from *Obscene to be Seen*. Taken by Chloe Shirley: https://youtu.be/gf2ecGCbGCk

Appendix Six: Transcript of Final Scene

Transcript taken from the final scene in response to the question:

When was the first time you felt at home in your body?

Orla: I haven't always felt at home in my body or my identity. When I was a child, my sense of owning my body was taken away from me and I think ever since, I have been trying to feel at home in body again.

Alex: I think bodies and identities are complex and we all come from different lived experiences. I find it really hard to pinpoint a feeling of when I felt at home in my identity. I think some days I feel better than others and you know, I think that is okay.

Dan: I feel at home when I am with other queer people; when I feel safe and secure and loved for all of me, and I know we understand each other profoundly through a shared experience. I know that my identity is kind of safe to have and will be understood.

Orla: I feel like it's more like fleeting moments of feeling at home. I think as someone who has had to have chosen family because of not really having anyone there as biological family, you kind of feel at home with people that accept you for who you are, even if you've been through hell and back.

Dan: I do not know if I remember the first time I felt at home in myself, but I know that every time I see my chosen family it feels like the first time that I feel at home in myself.

Alex: What I also understand is that it is not always my fault how I feel towards my body. It is a response to patriarchal environments.

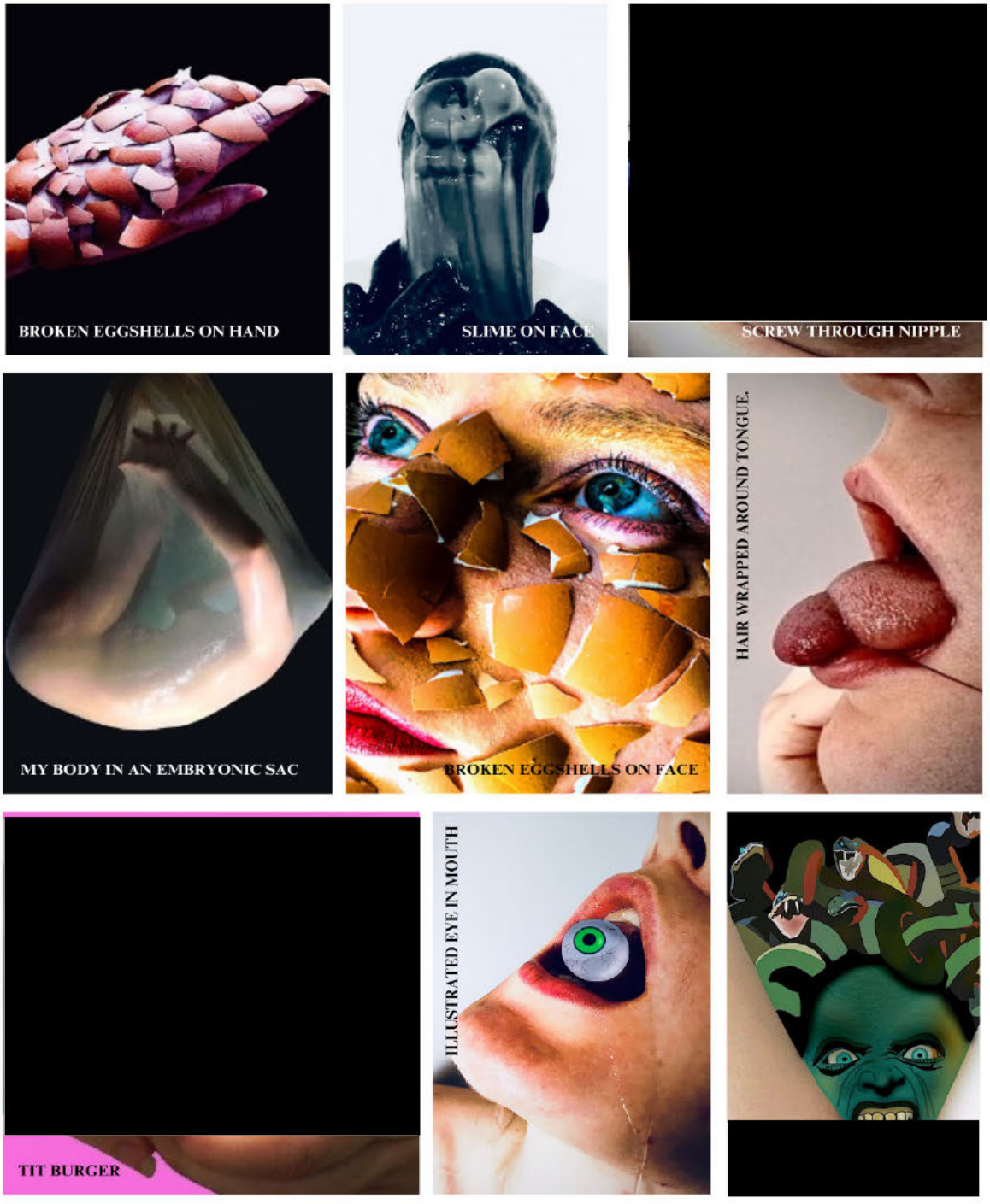
Orla: I think I also feel at home in my sexuality, and being bisexual, and being openly sexual, which can be such a taboo but for me it is more about reclaiming that; viewing sexuality as not just sex and not just like sex with two people. It could be like owning my sexuality within myself and owning that part of myself that desires others, or feeling confident in my body as a person that is sexual, or sometimes not sexual, or sometimes I feel Asexual or more bisexual.

Dan: And there's a feeling of relief that only kind of comes from the people that I call home. I think that my chosen family make me, and my identity becomes this co-morbid parasitic, lovely identity. Through other people, I feel at home with myself.

Orla: It is okay to not feel not fully solid in your identity.

Appendix Seven: Alienating the Self

ALIENATING THE SELF



A series of images created through exploring alienation and inhabiting the alien.

Appendix Eight: Documentation of Practice as Research

Video created for Alienating Identity:
https://youtu.be/iWzdv56VLhU

Digital Copy of Booklet and Prompt Cards:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tLWBgoWcuyu5IwgYmrSXMMQiWbTRHdqt/view?usp=sharing

Digital Copy of Programme for *Obscene to be Seen*:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1eva-QaVmaiF5viMIpGxsHSOjd6SS3ITX/view?usp=sharing

Video short of exhibition from *Obscene to be Seen*. Taken by Chloe Shirley:
https://youtu.be/gf2ecGCbGCk

Video of full show (edited) of *Obscene to be Seen*. Taken by Chloe Shirley:
[redacted]

Video of full show (unedited) of *Obscene to be Seen*.
[redacted]

Photos of *Obscene to be seen*. Taken by Dani Surname:
[redacted]

Compilation of all the PaR documentation listed above:
[redacted]

Appendix Nine: Workshop Images

Image 1. On blue paper there is a purple vulva in the middle of the page with two red pipe cleaners coming out of the vagina. The writing reads: 'When I got my period for the first time, I didn't know what it was because my mom or family had never spoke to me about it. Until when will we keep this taboo going? Let's talk about our vulvas.

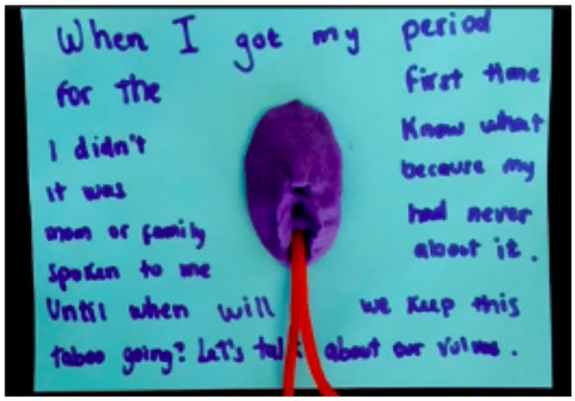
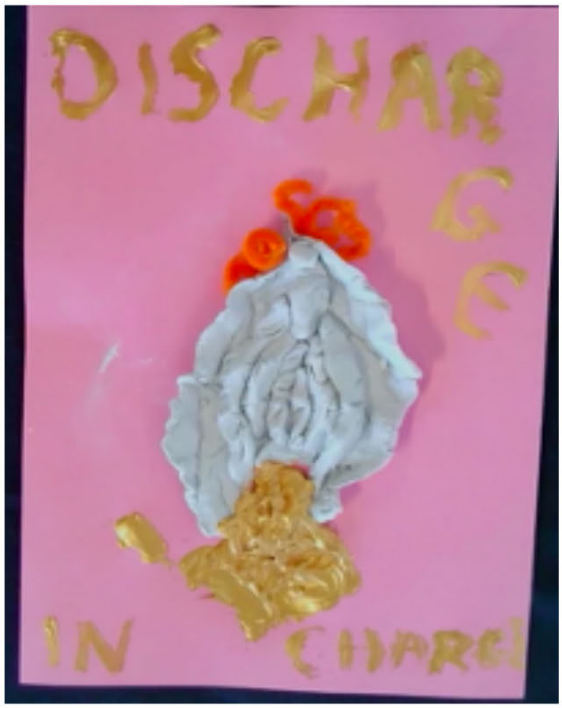


Image 2. A paper plate with an abstract vulva and slit on it. The writing reads: 'Fucking for pleasure' and also has the words 'babies' placed within a stop sign.

Image 3. On a pink page, there is gold writing that reads 'Discharge in Charge'. The image has a grey clay vulva, with orange pubic hair. There is golden discharge coming out from the vagina.



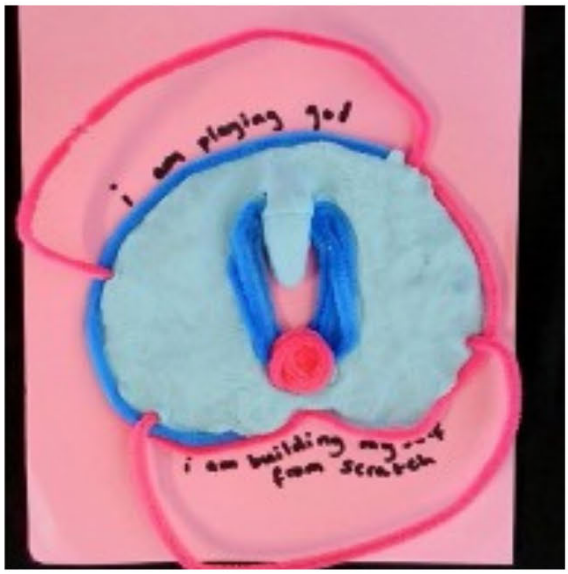


Image 4. On a pink bit of paper features a vulva with an enlarged clitoris which reads 'I am playing God. I am building myself from scratch'.

Appendix Ten: Impact Statements

As a means of measuring the success of the workshop and acquiring feedback to continually improve them, participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire. The questionnaire asked: what did you enjoy about the workshop? What would you like more of? Is there anything you would have changed about the workshop? And would you recommend this workshop to others? In the feedback received, 100% of participants stated that they would recommend the workshop to others. Participants were asked to leave a testimonial alongside these questions, as well as their consent for their testimonials to be shared publicly under anonymity:

Participant Testimonial: *'Getting to be in contact with people who I wouldn't normally be able too. Hearing their opinions and experiences.'*

Participant Testimonial: *'It was an eye-opening experience, especially being able to hear people's thoughts and opinions. A safe space to educate.'*

Participant Testimonial: *'Thank you so much for giving me space to explore a not-enough-explored side of me!'*

Participant Testimonial: *'I have found this workshop with Alex a very beneficial exploration and has allow[ed] me to explore creative avenues of openness and expression in my identity as a cis-female and I love incorporating visual art into my performance work.'*

Participant Testimonial: *'This afternoon I took part in [Alex's] Vulvaplicity workshop with the Vagina Museum! It was so much fun and we spent the last part of the workshop creating a*

piece of performance art that defied heteronormativity and was "deliciously anti-patriarchal" and let us have fun and take up space.'

Appendix Eleven: Transcript Response of Interview Questions

Transcript taken from performers reflections of the work –

Orla

How did you feel making the work?

Orla: As an individual and an artist, I felt very supported and held. I felt very free as an artist to give my own perspective on the work, and I felt like we were doing that collectively. We were able to give our own perspective on our own kind of personal history and we were all able to put that into the work equally. That felt really special and is quite rare within the industry.

Did you learn anything within the process?

Orla: I learned a lot. I learnt a lot through the research actually; the work that we would then bring in every week, right up until we started putting the show together. I learnt how ridiculous some of the myths are surrounding vulvas and how a lot of the same themes come up within different countries and different cultures surrounding vulvas. For example, the themes of snakes is [sic] one that we were talking about, and the teeth, and the ideas of the vulva being sometimes seen as scary or evil. That was the main one that was coming from a male perspective which went into ideas of power and scariness of women and their kind of mysterious ways. I also learned a lot about myself through it and about my own feelings towards my body, and how they are shared collectively with all different bodies, and how we all feel a certain way because of how we are brought up and how we are taught to feel about them.

Did anything emerge within both the workshops and rehearsals for you? Was there anything that you found particularly interesting, such as a session that stayed in your mind or a particular moment?

Yes. I think within the workshops, it was actually the conversations that we would have, kind of between the work where the real emotions would emerge. I felt we created a very safe space for each other. In the work that we were doing, when we would do more practical things that were led by you, I found that you made it really easy for us to explore when we were working with different objects.

I remember in the beginning, we were working with string sometimes and we were working with rubber and hair. There was a real sense of play, which really stuck with me. Like, we were making quite serious work, but we were never overly serious about it, which was so important and that really stuck with me.

Orla, could you discuss more on whether your research and lived experiences of witchcraft intersected with your Romany heritage?

I felt a real sense of connection to the show and the rehearsals, because of my own background and mainly that is a background in witches. My mum was a self-proclaimed witch and she followed paganism. I was essentially brought up by her and a load of other women that would refer to themselves as pagans or witches. That created a sense in me where I have always felt very connected to the earth and very connected through my body, to the earth. A lot of feelings came up in the rehearsals because of my Romany heritage, and because this is something that

is frowned upon. I feel like gypsies or Romany people are kind of vilified within most countries and because I am a White British woman with an RP accent, I don't get any hate towards me for that apart from being a woman.

I felt very comfortable and supported in sharing the Romany side of me, which ties into the witches and magic and the kind of witchcraft as well, which I think a lot of people would have been scared of. I think we collectively were not scared of doing a show about that.

Could you explain more about how the Witchcraft and Romany heritage intersected. What were the topics that you were looking at particularly?

Through the research, I was particularly interested in hair because the first myth was to do with pubic hair, cutting the pubic hair off and burying it, which, creates a serpent when a woman is menstruating. I went on this journey with hair. I was very drawn to hair and the myth surrounding that and witches and their hair and the way that it is always usually in long plaits. Then, in Romany culture, there is a significance within hair because again, the women are usually seen with these long plaits. I realised that these things all merged. Romany people have a lot of traditions to do with hair. If a woman has a certain number of plaits, it could mean she is either married or she is not married. There is a lot of significance within the way her hair looks. If she has this head scarf on, or if she doesn’t, so that is kind of the way I was looking at that. Plaiting your hair could be seen as like a ritual as well, because you are weaving your hair. The hair costume came into emergence through these myths we were looking at. I think just like the demonisation of witches and also kind of pagan people and Romany people, all of those things were kind of emerging for me. They all come into my background as a person in a way. I think that it is actually a really important aspect of myself.

The paganism that I was brought up with had a lot to do with connecting with nature, but also a respecting nature as if it were yourself. Like you are part of nature. I think a controversial side of that which I was brought up with, with my mum and others, mainly women, was that we would do rituals. We would jump over the fires; we would celebrate things such as Beltane which is May Day. We would hold ceremonies for like inviting in the elements and asking for certain things, like can there be fewer badgers this year because we are trying to grow this certain herb, just little things. One of the controversial things within all of that, was it had a lot to do with being a woman and in being a woman, you have to have a woman's body which we're discovering is not true. You do not have to be born with a certain anatomy to be a woman. But for my mum and her friends, because they are from a different time and I do not think these things were being talked about for them, it was a lot to do with, if you are a woman, you have a period and you are connected to the earth and that is sacred, and your periods are sacred. Periods are to me still sacred. But I think I have had to detach from this version that my mum taught me in that to be a woman you have to have these certain things and that is why we are special and that is why we are witches and that is why we connect to the earth. I do still feel special for having periods and being worn out of these witches. But I have had to unlearn a lot of things that are not useful to us anymore and those practices.

We would also hold full moon ceremonies that were usually to do with periods. My mum would hold groups, where all these women that she was either living with or around would sync up and then have their periods around the full moon. They would hold ceremonies for that. How in this day and age, how can we still hold those ceremonies but open them up, so they are not just for women who have certain body parts?

Dan

How did you feel making the work and did you learn anything within the process?

It was really weird for me to have a group space for that kind of thing because I think that I tend to work better on my own. This year, I am learning that I struggle to work with people, but I really actually did not feel that when we were working together. I think it is less that I struggle to work in groups, but more that people's art is not as aligned with what I want to make. It was really nice to have a space that was so specific. Like so many times in the process, me and Orla would have a conversation at home and then we would come in and then you or Anna would say it. But it was something like so specific that we were like, no one is going to have thought of that. Even the snake myth. Aside from the myths, we were talking about the idea of challenging fear and how we are both scared of snakes. A lot of things like wove together really well.

[Dan asked for me to repeat the question]

How did you feel about making work? Did you learn anything within the process?

I think it was strange for me to do something about vulvas because before this, I have never really like -- Like my identity as a trans person and my identity as someone with a vulva have been very separate. I have not really thought to like, to think of that as part of me and like welcome it in, in that way.

When I was writing stuff for it, I actually really struggled to get my head around what I wanted to say and how I belonged in this project, because I felt like I did, but I could not figure out how that -- Like if it undermined my identity or if my identity undermines the work. I think I really grew a new sense of self in that respect. It was also an interesting time in my life to be doing it because when we started it, I had only pretty recently had top surgery. It was a really interesting time for me to do it and like, I did learn a lot about the myths and the research, but I think the personal learning was so like -- I don't know. Like I had a new body, and I was discovering it in a -- Like until very recently before starting the project, I had lived with a completely female body. And like to have the, the divergence and like the, I don't know -- Like having top surgery made me think about bottom surgery as well and I have never really wanted bottom surgery, but, I have also never reconciled that. It has always been that bottom surgery is not good enough. Not that I do not want to have a penis, but now, I am kind of like, that part of me is sacred as well, but not in the same way. Like what Orla was saying about the sacredness of the female body and I actually still resonate with that but not in the same way. The body being like the earth was something that I was thinking about in the process with the idea of like constructing yourself. You are born with this thing and then you do what you want with it, but no matter how you change your body, you are still part of the earth and there is still like an inherent natural part of you.

I was thinking about how a lot of that process happened in private, like when I was writing, rather than in the room. But then I was thinking about how you know we did a lot of free writing? The free writing really opened up for me [sic] to bring it into the room, because I think attached to all of what I just said is a lot of shame either about having a vulva or about feeling guilty about how I feel about my vulva, in a space that is -- Like the point of this work is to celebrate the vulva. At the beginning, I felt quite guilty about how I felt about my body, but as

we were doing the free writing and stuff, and even just being in the same room as you when making the work, I found a way to not judge it as much as it was coming out. I think I went in with quite a strong idea of what it was about and what we were going to make, but as we did it, it actually unravelled all of everything I just said basically.

Did anything emerge within the workshop or the rehearsals for you? Anything you found particularly interesting or a session that stayed in your mind or something that you think about?

Yeah, when we did the body painting. I do not know what happened in me, something like shifted. I think that was the point where I was able to properly reconcile. Like stepping into my new man body. There was something about it that was just so like affirming. I think that there was a very strong dissonance in me between being a man and having a vulva. But I think a lot of that came from pre-surgery. Just feeling like, I had a female body and my body, not feeling like mine. So, all of it did not feel like mine. But having had top surgery and that print, especially of my chest, really just -- I stopped feeling like it might be taken away from me, if I liked my vulva, do you know what I mean? There was a real sense of ah [Dan makes a sound of relief]. I was very scared through a lot of the work about losing my identity or like feigning an identity. I had a very shifting sense of self through the work which was quite scary to work with. This project has really, I think shaped the way that I am in the world now, like very deeply. I do not think I would be as comfortable with myself as I am now without it. Like it really grounded me.

Can you open up more about your work within the performance? The reason you felt drawn to use rituals and mythology.

I actually wish I had used more. I think the research that I did, actually did not inform the end product as much as I would have liked it to. I mean I think it is a good thing. I think I got so entrenched in the personal journey that I was having, that it kind of just had to be about that. I think why I was drawn to those myths, is similar to the body being from the earth and you creating your own -- I resonate a lot with the idea of like a body coming from a body. Like souls and bodies and merging and twisting and reshaping. The Hermaphroditis myth is two people becoming one person. There is a duality in being trans, especially being not like, fully binary trans. Really strange way to say non-binary [laughing]. The sense of trans people being more than one thing or more than one. Not more than one soul but there is a -- Being two versions of yourself. There is a sense of an old gender and a new gender and a block -- Like things coming out of each other physically. The Dionysus stuff of the thigh, and the idea of being born again, because Dionysus was untimely born and then stitched back up to regestate and change. There was a gender change in there somewhere.

Can you discuss your choice in layering the music and writing with your voice pre-testosterone?

I think that was very much what we were just talking about. The younger version of me was a girl. But that child self and like the connotations of gender on the child self and giving thanks to the child. When I was writing my intervention, I was thinking of it as a love letter to my child self and like a thank you.

Dual Conversation after questions:

Dan: It was genuinely such a rich experience of making a show.

Orla: Yeah, like the richest experience of making a show.

Dan: Perhaps even more personally than artistically for me. Though, I do think that it has set me up artistically more than it showed.

Orla: It set the bar. I think because you are working in a friendship way, and it is all about feeling safe.

Glossary of Terms

Vagina: The vagina is the muscular part of the female genital tract which extends from the vulva (external anatomy) to the cervix. The term vagina is from Latin meaning “Sheath” or “Scabbard”.

Vulva: The vulva includes all of the external genitalia of the gynaecological anatomy – these include the labia majora, labia minora, glans clitoris and urethra.

Womb: The womb, also known as the uterus, is an organ that is located low in the pelvis and is also where a baby is carried during pregnancy.

Urethra: The urethra is a tube that connects the urinary bladder to the urinary meatus for the removal of urine from the body of both females and males.

Gender: Gender is what we use to identify ourselves as individuals – it leads us to use the terms boy or man, girl or woman, gender fluid or non-binary.

Gender fluid: Denoting or relating to a person who does not identify themselves as having a fixed gender.

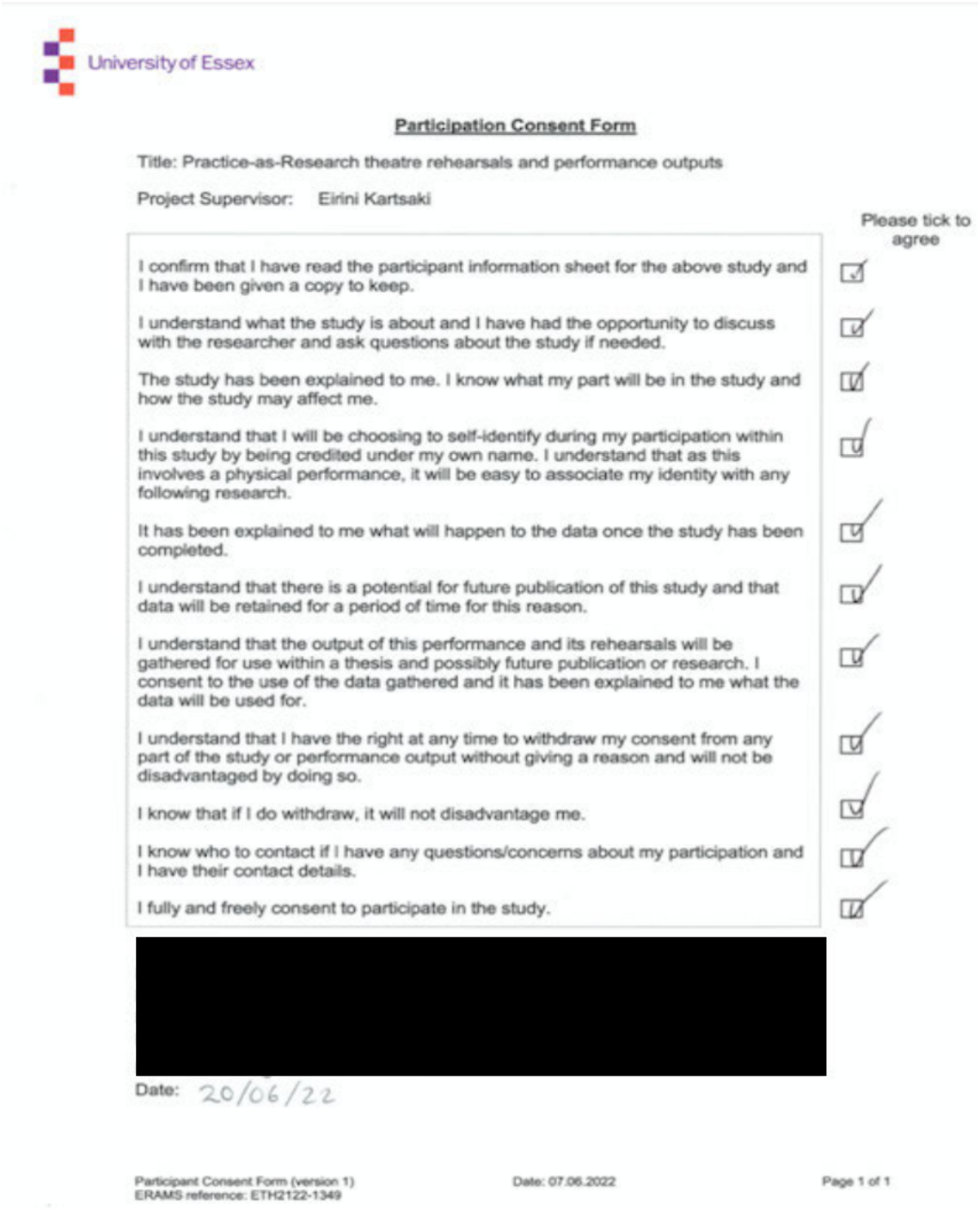
Intersex: Intersex people are individuals born with any of several variations in sex characteristics including chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones, or genitals that are not presented within typical definitions for male or female bodies.

Transgender: A person whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth.

Gynaecology: The medical practice dealing with the health of the reproductive system, such as the vagina, ovaries and breasts.

Consent Form Sample(s)

Consent form sample for the performance of *Obscene to be Seen*:



University of Essex

Participation Consent Form

Title: Practice-as-Research theatre rehearsals and performance outputs

Project Supervisor: Eirini Kartsaki

	Please tick to agree
I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet for the above study and I have been given a copy to keep.	☑
I understand what the study is about and I have had the opportunity to discuss with the researcher and ask questions about the study if needed.	☑
The study has been explained to me. I know what my part will be in the study and how the study may affect me.	☑
I understand that I will be choosing to self-identify during my participation within this study by being credited under my own name. I understand that as this involves a physical performance, it will be easy to associate my identity with any following research.	☑
It has been explained to me what will happen to the data once the study has been completed.	☑
I understand that there is a potential for future publication of this study and that data will be retained for a period of time for this reason.	☑
I understand that the output of this performance and its rehearsals will be gathered for use within a thesis and possibly future publication or research. I consent to the use of the data gathered and it has been explained to me what the data will be used for.	☑
I understand that I have the right at any time to withdraw my consent from any part of the study or performance output without giving a reason and will not be disadvantaged by doing so.	☑
I know that if I do withdraw, it will not disadvantage me.	☑
I know who to contact if I have any questions/concerns about my participation and I have their contact details.	☑
I fully and freely consent to participate in the study.	☑

[redacted]

Date: 20/06/22

Participant Consent Form (version 1) Date: 07.06.2022 Page 1 of 1
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