

Conjuring the Weird

Weird Women

Eirini Kartsaki

An open mouth, a devilish grin, two horns located near the eyebrows; enlarged, protruding breasts, signs of leaves, of blood, of scalp, bleeding petals enveloping the body, tendrils threatening to take the self in; an image that takes over, swallowing itself, a monster perhaps, an insistent dance, close to the floor, an opening of the legs, the arms, the mouth; two mouths, one on the head, one on the groin, grinning concurrently, a body whose skin is tattooed, illustrated with signs of leaves, of blood, of scalp, bleeding petals. Violet Rose or Violent Rose, or someone who does not yet have a name, not for all of it, anyway. Not for the weird spectacle that this creature conjures, the unfamiliar territory that it ventures from. The weird spectacle does more than one thing; it distracts, inhabits, and intervenes. It opens up a hole, an egress and asks us to look through it. The monster demonstrates, demarcates the border, and transcends it; it exposes our blind spots, the things we do not know about the self or the things we won't admit. Its hybrid self is a placeholder for what is uncertain and unknowable. It proposes a new configuration of things to come.

The weird, Mark Fisher proposes, is a 'particular kind of perturbation. It involves a sensation of *wrongness*', something that exceeds what we already know, or we are able to represent (2016: 15). It is a fascination with a thing that overwhelms and cannot be contained, '*that which does not belong*', a thing that causes a rupture into the familiar (2016: 10, emphasis in the original). The weird can be thought of as something uncanny or absurd, or an experience that involves a sense of alterity, 'a feeling that the enigma might involve forms of knowledge, subjectivity and sensation that lie beyond common experience' (2016: 62). But also, the weird 'opens up an *egress*, between this world and others' (2016: 19). This irruption turns the familiar into something strange, allows one to look again, to wonder. It is an exercise in learning a new language, in looking at

ourselves as if we belong to a foreign land. What we may encounter in this new land through this egress has to do with the inscrutability or unintelligibility of the weird, which points to the inscrutability or unintelligibility of the self (2016: 63). Ursula Le Guin writes about visiting new places: 'I will go to Abbenay, and unbuild walls' (1974: 11). Unbuilding walls, rupturing the familiar or learning to speak a foreign language, are all functions of the weird. The hole, or egress, that Fisher discusses, is also an attempt 'to radically leave the system altogether', rather than simply go against it (Colquhoun 2020: 46). There is some breakage going on here, a rupture into the skin of normality. Weirdness is a tool for rupturing dominant categories, a visual or aesthetic tool, but also a conceptual one (Colquhoun 2020: 47). The dominant categories we use to understand our identity, desire and sexuality are too limited at times and falter in the face of the weird, which, 'in its probing of the innate instability of subjectivity, as well as the world around us, has a tendency to uncover our blind spots and our unknowns' (Colquhoun 2020: 9). The weird entity, Fisher suggests, 'is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist' (2016: 15). But

if the entity or object is here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate (15).

Encountering the weird is slippery, there is nowhere precisely we may locate it, as it does not consist of a singular thing. Describing the weird or its affect always feels inadequate. Weird women, I propose, are artists who challenge boundaries and are uneasy within neat, already existing categories of art, sex, identity, and desire. Their existence is emphatic; yet the categories we already have cannot account for the complexity of who they are. Weird women seem to suggest that a new language is necessary, one that will point towards our unnamed desires, blind spots, and unknowns. The weird not only points to something we do not yet have the language for but also demands a reconsideration of its articulation. The weird could be thought of as another category, but more accurately as a fascination with the uncategorized. This chapter is an attempt to navigate what Fisher identifies as an urgent need to rethink the names and categories available to us and their inadequacy. The weird women I discuss here make a mark on the fabric of experience, stretch out the ways we think about ourselves, our bodies, desires, identities, and propose a new space, place or territory for that which does not belong. Timothy Morton suggests that the weird can be thought of as 'a place for potentially radical disarticulations and reformulations of

traditional binaries, starting with self and other' (Morton in Luckhurst 2017: 1041), a space where ideas around the unusual or the odd are unpacked. The weird appears as a placeholder for articulating what does not quite fit into the names, categories, and labels we have access to, what seems wrong in our perception of it or does not belong. The weird points towards what is spilling out of these categories or cannot be pinned down. The spillage, or disarticulation, starts to formulate a different territory, space for, or fascination with the weird. I locate Carnesky's work within this territory. My claim is that Carnesky, amongst other women artists, inhabits a space that refuses to be defined clearly. The work is more concerned with identity and desire that remains fluid and incomplete. Weird women, in my conceptualization, embody a plurality that borrows from different languages, disciplines and creative modes to celebrate hybridity, or what Halberstam calls 'a slippage between language and experience' (2014: 147). Who we are or what we want is always in process and the ways we inhabit the space of weirdness is not necessarily based on a language of names but develops in the process of living and imagining. Weird women continuously evolve and refuse categories, embracing mutation and hybridization as ways of being. Their weirdness creates a rupture into the familiar through which a new understanding of who we are and how we perceive ourselves emerges. This new, weird understanding or conceptualization embraces the unfamiliar, the uncategorized, the inscrutable or unintelligible as tools for unbuilding walls and building forms of belonging. In what follows, I discuss Carnesky's work as well as other women artists that, like Carnesky, have been preoccupied with the task of disarticulating identity. I primarily focus on how artists such as Rocio Boliver, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Narcissister, Lydia Lunch, and Kathy Acker have chosen to offer an account of themselves through interviews or writing, and how these, rather than specific examples of creative practice, might lead to a collective, weird 'I'. These artists' collective illegibility and refusal to fit in forms part of the space of the weird.

The opening image of this chapter describes an instance from the 1997 'The Ballad of Violet Rose' from Carnesky's show *The Grotesque Burlesque Revue* (as part of The Dragon Ladies) at the Raymond Revue Bar in Soho (Figure 39). In this, Carnesky uses specific female stereotypes, such as Dolly Blue, a Victorian showgirl, who transforms into a Tattooed Woman that has taken the skins of sailors to create her own skin, resembling Kali, the Goddess of Death. Carnesky uses these stereotypes in order to inhabit them and, to an extent, reclaim and undo them. She occupies them as examples of the

Figure 39: Marisa Carnesky, *The Grotesque Burlesque Revue*, 1996. London. Costume and photo by Amanda Moss. © Amanda Moss





ways in which social or cultural narratives can inhibit women and create limitations as to how we account for ourselves. Focusing on these limitations and disregarding all other complexity eliminates our plurality and places restrictions on who we are. Justifying one's existence or role through a singular name eliminates the imagining of who we can be. Carnesky knows this; she knows that we are not one thing, a singular identity. In her one-woman show *Jewess Tattooes* (1999–2002), Carnesky inhabits all of her characters: the Rabbi, the macabre fairy-tale aunt, the sexualized, disgraced Jew, the Tattooed Woman. Her characters are sexual, grotesque, monstrous, human, and animal. Her emphasis is on embodying women that have been oppressed by culture, society, and religion. Carnesky, herself, is not afraid to shift focus, experiment with different modes and media. She starts as a stripper in the West End, where she devises weird acts that merge genres and mess up with categories. She is not singular, as a maker, and this shape-shifting process, from her earlier work with *The Dragon Ladies*, to *Carnesky's Ghost Train*, *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman* to *Showwomen* embodies a political indecision that embraces multiplicity, and plurality. Carnesky's political indecision is deliberate and shows a commitment to renewal and metamorphosis. Carnesky also changes her identity by changing her name:

Figure 40: Marisa Carnesky, *Portraits of Anarchists*, 1994. © Casey Orr

I've changed my name. I've changed it to the name of my grandmother: Carnesky [...] It's kind of a political thing in that all the Jews tended to Westernize their names. I'm now de-Westernizing it, going back to my Eastern European name that is my real name.

(Carnesky in Bayley 2000: 348)

This transformation is clearly depicted early on in her work. It becomes evident not only within individual shows, as her characters transform from one shape to the next, but also in her body of work as a whole. Most characteristic of this process of metamorphosis is her character Dolly Blue, devised with her then company The Dragon Ladies. In this work, we encounter Dolly Blue, who after being married to Bluebeard, has her legs chopped off and becomes his ship's mast. Her tears fall into the ocean, become oysters and she herself transforms into a diabolical creature of the sea, when the ship crashes; Dolly Blue takes the tattooed sailors' skins and creates her own skin, an elaborate latex skin with fake tattoos, designed in collaboration with and painted by the late visual artist Amanda Moss; Dolly Blue now appears as Kali, Mother of Death and all living beings. She is also now a murdering, avenging woman, Violet Rose, a 'street-walking-carnavalesque whore', who embodies all of the other characters, Kali, Mother of Universe and Dolly Blue (Carnesky in Bayley 2000: 245). The grotesque, transgressive sexuality of these characters seems to spill over and take up space in Carnesky's earlier work. The grotesque element connects to something cavernous, earthy, or hidden. It embodies sexual deviance, but also a sense of liberation, which always exceeds the norm (Russo 1994: 3). The grotesque to do with the monstrous, the strange, the remarkable, but also the hilarious and comic. This is where the grotesque connects with the carnivalesque, 'the suspension and mockery of everyday law and order', a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin (in Prior 2000: n.pag.). Carnesky's grotesque body is multiple and ever-changing. It 'makes strange the categories of beauty, humanity and identity' and offers a reconsideration of these categories that are based on transcending what we already know (Halberstam 1995: 6). Carnesky's performance seeks ambiguity in her satirical and experimental approach. She is not interested in making finalized statements with her practice, but rather allowing the work to pose 'a series of interrelated questions' (Carnesky in Mock 2020: 46). Her practice encompasses elements of popular entertainment, live art, and sex activism. Bringing together all these distinct genres develops a form of hybridization. The monster, or the outsider, exists in this hybridized space and unsettles the norm, as it destroys and transcends the boundary that separates the here from the elsewhere (Cohen 1996: ix).

Carnesky locates this weird, monstrous, hybrid woman in certain female figures in her production *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman*:

One of these witches is Medusa, secluded in darkness, red-eyed and snake-haired, her moonlit gaze so powerful that it must be deflected by a mirror. [...] The Whore of Babylon is another, riding her hydra headed serpent, stealing sperm by night in her decorative attire. [...] Kali is here too, the archetypal goddess destroyer, scythe in one hand, severed head in the other, snakes entwined around her limbs, with multiple arms she presides over a sea of blood harkening the violent end of one cycle and the bloody beginning of another.
(*DCIBW* Script 2018)

All weird women have something in common: they are unfamiliar, hybrid creatures, desiring bodies who transcend the familiar, demanding a new language and threatening the social order:

There seems to be a need to bind and contain her polluting, risqué, sexual, seeping, uncontrollable and provocative body. The witch is enslaved in what was once her own domain, the magic world. How then can we use magic to reverse the curse?
(*DCIBW* Script 2018)

Female figures that won't conform or obey within mainstream culture have been persecuted and demonized. Women with no children, families, or support systems, women who are able to escape the control of the patriarchy and deviate from the norm, will always be seen suspiciously and be perceived as dangerous or risky. These women have been 'othered' by patriarchal systems and their bodies have been thought of as 'foreign bodies' that need to be expelled from the land. The shamanic or magic powers that some of these women possessed as healers, folk doctors, herbalists, and midwives were a threat to capitalist society that promoted a new kind of individually centred work (Federici 2018: 27–28). These weird women's sexuality was also seen as uncontrollable or unacceptable and needed to be domesticated or muzzled. In her 2001 performance *Blowzabellas, Drabs, Mawksa and Trogmoldies*, a contribution to Duckie's East London promenade performance, Carnesky converts the Museum of Immigration

Figure 41: Rocio Boliver, *Needle Striptease*, curator Benjamin Sebastian,]performance space[, 2012. London.

© Marco Berandi

Delivered by Intellect to:

Guest (guest)

IP: 86.30.115.167

On: Wed, 09 Oct 2024 11:13:37





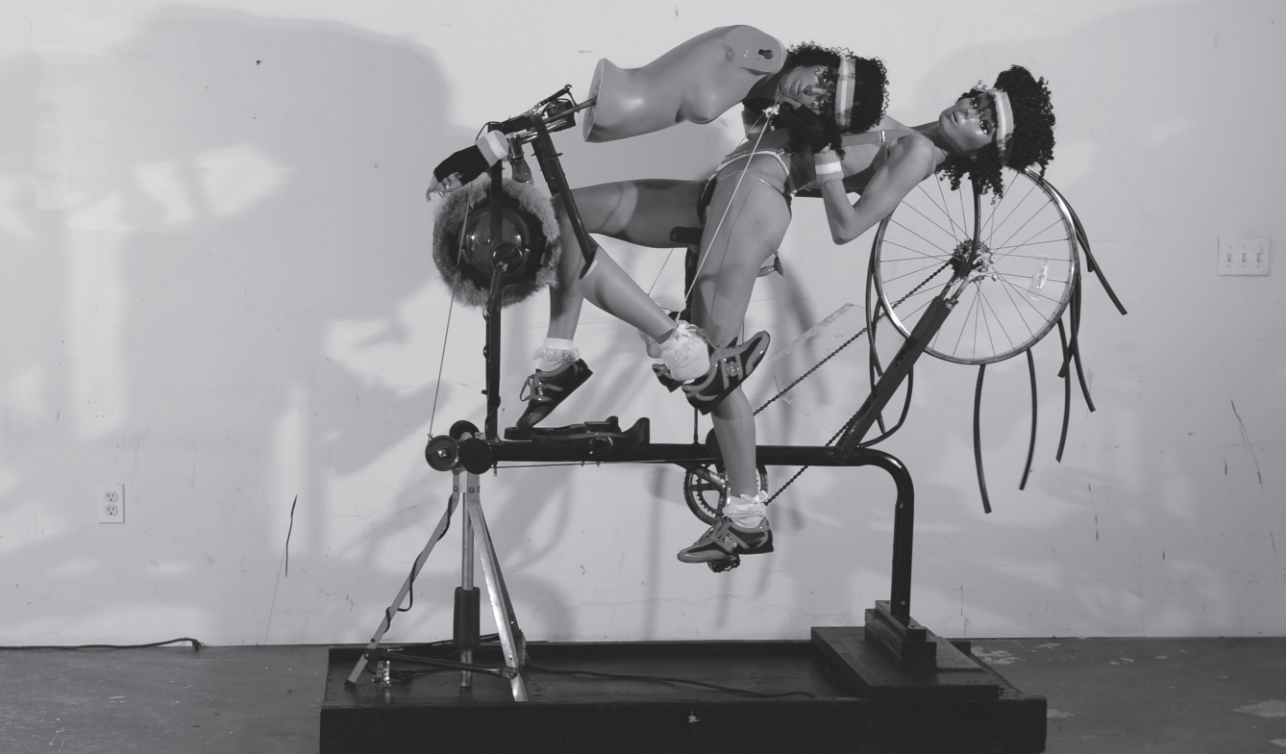
and Diversity, once a synagogue, into the Museum of Strange Women: 'here audiences discovered women whose bodies had fused with their trades: a street-seller covered with bagels, a tailor festooned with metal instruments, and a weaver who is enveloped by her long hair that merges into a loom' (Mock 2020: 55). All of Carnesky's work is a museum of strange women: women who are shape-shifting into comedic phantoms or strange apparitions, women who swallow swords that correspond in length to the day of their menstrual cycle, women who become serpents, snake women, part-human, and part-animal; women who refuse to have their sexual, seeping, uncontrollable bodies contained. These women carry within them the weight of others, who have been captured, stifled, tortured, and destroyed. Women who have been oppressed by the multitude of bodily taboos, phobic messages, misogyny, coercion, racism, and narratives of shame. What unites them is a sense of transgression in wanting to be who they are, envisioning new terms of living. These strange women, like Dolly Blue or Lady Muck, or the Incredible Bleeding Woman, radically reclaim their space, identity, and sexuality. They are called different names, which are new and appropriate to the occasion: menstruants, strange women, and Showwomen. The earlier suffocating terms shuffle about, stretch out, and make space for the kinds of things they want to be, allowing for oxygen to burst flooding in.

The specific preoccupations that Carnesky has engaged with around rupturing the familiar, existing as a deviation to the system, or blurring the boundaries between art, sex, identity, and desire are not singular to her project. Disarticulating one's identity and disidentifying with the norm has been the lifelong project of other weird women, amongst which Rocio Boliver, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Kathy Acker, Lydia Lunch, and Narcissister. These women are not only aware of the ways in which they may deviate from the system or appear as 'outsiders', but also make that a key point of identification. Grappling with how they are perceived in relation to the norm becomes part of their work: 'I don't catch normality', Mexican artist Rocio Boliver exclaims in our conversation about categories. Normality or normativity seems to come up a lot in the conversation around weirdness. Boliver tells me that she spent her early years bedbound with kidney disease and used incessant masturbation to amuse herself, while construction workers were perving on her through the window: 'I was in bed for years and when I came out to reality, I felt I was weird to the world' (2021). For Boliver, normality is a disease one is prone to catch, the symptoms of which have to do with

fitting too comfortably within mainstream discourse. The reversal of this paradigm is significant, as weirdness is not presented here as the parasitic and threatening other side of normality, subordinated to it, but rather as a state in its own right. Boliver struggles with categories when it comes to her own performance practice (Figures 41 & 42); having started as a model and TV presenter, she could not quite fit into the categories of cabaret or performance art: 'It was difficult for me to know what it was that I was doing. I didn't have space in any categories' (2021). Resisting classification or fitting too neatly into specific genres, styles, or schools of thought becomes part of the work. Performance artist and musician Cosy Fanni Tutti proposes that 'normativity is only useful when kicking against it' and that names and categories are to do away with (2022). Eleanor Roberts argues that Tutti's *Magazine Actions*, consisting of naked or semi-naked images often taken in pornographic contexts, resists being classified neatly into one category and that is seen as a strength, rather than a weakness; it prompts continued debate around sexuality and art experimentation and appears as an intervention into the mainstream (2020: 173). Tutti also reverses the normality/weirdness paradigm: 'I don't like acceptance, I distrust it completely, I think I've done something wrong' (Tutti in Petridis 2017: n.pag.). In my personal correspondence with her, Tutti proposes that critics calling COUM's infamous 1976 show *Prostitution* at the ICA 'weird', 'indicates a loss of words and a lack of ability to engage with [it]' (2022). Tutti with Genesis P-Orridge and COUM Transmissions in the 1970s and 1980s reveal a tendency to mess up existing categories and place themselves at the edge of culture. The work intentionally spills out from specific styles and defies convention. It resists not only classification and resolution but also acceptance from the public. COUM's art practice develops a language by drawing on a rejection of limitations and rules, while at the same time it refuses 'to see art as a category distinct from, or superior to, the broader horizon of a *life strangely lived*' (Johnson 2018: 123). In his book *Unlimited Action: The Performance of Extremity in the 1970s*, Dominic Johnson writes:

What if performance art stages the limits of what can be known, such that knowledge, rationality and the concept of conceptuality itself, are so tortured in the event and thus reconstituted by the baffling, bizarre, deranged actions that often characterise its practice, that the common knowledge of what we thought we knew – the categories of art, life, sex, crime – might seem as new unto itself?

(122–23)



Johnson's argument connects to Fisher's assertion that weirdness produces new forms of knowledge, subjectivity, and sensation, beyond common experience. Johnson proposes that actions of extremity in performance mess up with the categories we are familiar with. This results in a reconfiguration of the familiar, a rethinking of the recognized and accepted, and a re-imagining perhaps of how we connect to the world. Extremity is one of the strategies that weird women use, but not the only one. Tutti and Carnesky's commitment to invent a new vocabulary, alongside Fisher's contention of the inadequacy of language, re-emphasizes the need to 're-learn how to name things for ourselves' (Preciado 2020: 52). This commitment to a language that does not yet exist highlights the need to suspend our ways of thinking in order to allow for weird forms of knowledge and subjectivity, through the egress that the weird opens up. Through that egress, weird instability and the unknown may enter. These are the ingredients for a new way of connecting to that which is wrong, unfamiliar, or does not belong.

Using instability, weird subjectivities and the unknown as political strategies forms part of the weird's function. Performance artist Narcissister never shows her real face to the world and always wears a mask to perform her fascination with the uncategorized: 'I am definitely interested in resisting categorisation, and that is just part of who I am.

Figure 43: Narcissister, *Self-Gratifier*, photographed in her studio, 2008. Brooklyn, New York.
© Kristy Leibowitz

Delivered by Intellect to:

Guest (guest)

IP: 86.30.115.167

On: Wed, 09 Oct 2024 11:13:37



I am multiracial, my parents come from different backgrounds and different countries [...]. I understand how complicated and messy and unpredictable identity can be' (2022: n.pag.). Narcissister explores gender, racial identity, and sexuality. Her background cannot be easily captured by a singular identity. She works with subverting racial and gender stereotypes while using explicit sexual imagery:

When I am making work, I have a sort of internal meter; when something feels too hetero or too vanilla or too predictable or too close to something that I have seen before, my internal meter wants to direct ideas towards territory that feels more courageous, more daring, more unknown and sort of stranger. I aim for that; I aim to make work that will satisfy my ideas around strangeness and weirdness or abjectness.
(2022)

Moving away from the normative and engaging with weirdness or abjectness seems to position the two on the opposite side of the spectrum. However, Narcissister finds that even the categories of conformity and nonconformity do not work in a predictable way and spill into one another. She extends her argument to sexuality and race:

People that are gay or queer, thank god, don't behave in any predictable manner, or people that are black, thank god, don't behave in any predictable manner; we are all so complex and we have, each of us, so much depth and richness and so many contradictions in us; I feel the same applies to me, to my racial identity, how I embody womanhood, and my ideas around sexuality.

(2022)

Similarly to Carnesky, Narcissister embodies her identity, sexuality, and desires in ways that are complex and nuanced; her bizarre imagery or her choice to never show her face and to always perform in her Narcissister masked persona reveals a commitment to re-invent how we appear to the world (Figures 43 & 44). When considering the binary weirdness/normality, Narcissister goes a step further to argue that there is nothing weird about being unconventional or nonconforming; that at times there is much more weirdness in the conventional or traditional options, and that there is nothing weird about the life we are choosing to lead, even when our choices are perceived as weird by some (2022). At times, naming something 'weird' shifts its sensibility, the gesture of naming renders it part of language and therefore something that can be consumed within the context of mainstream culture. Kathy Acker finds a solution to this problem by committing to a desire to remain in the space of the 'fabulous not knowing' (2015: 97). Like the other women artists in this chapter, Acker also refuses to identify with given categories:

I ask them to whip me and they call me Satan. [...] Me, straight queer gay whatever and where do nut cakes like me fit in who like getting fist fucked, whacked and told what to do? – the only thing that appals me is babies.

(2015: 32)

When writing to McKenzie Wark drunk one night, she admits that she suffers from some 'weird disease' (46). In contrast to Boliver, who sees normality as a disease, Acker seems to pathologize weirdness; yet, in her work, she strives for it. There is a tension here between, on the one hand, wanting to fit in, being understood, becoming part of a lineage of artists or writers of a certain type, and on the other, allowing oneself to exceed the ordinary parameters of creative existence. Being recognized as an artist requires to an extent being part of a canon, having the ability to be read alongside others. Exceeding that canon sometimes is also recognizable as a key part of it; placing oneself on the edge of culture is only perceived as such *in relationship* to that culture.

Delivered by Intellect to:

Guest (guest)

IP: 86.30.115.167

On: Wed, 09 Oct 2024 11:13:37

Weirdness does not function in a vacuum; something is weird *in relation* to something else; convention, normality, a canonical sense of self (though such thing often only exists as a construct). Pushing against existing categories is only possible because these categories already exist. The paradigm can only be reversed once it exists as a paradigm.

Lydia Lunch names this problem clearly. With her band Teenage Jesus and the Jerks in the 1970s, she calls herself 'No Wave': 'We were angry, ugly, snotty and goddamn vile. [...] We were howling with fucking delight, laughing like lunatics at the brink of the apocalypse in a mad house the size of all of New York City', she suggests in an interview with Dominic Johnson (2016: 29). She identifies not as an artist, but rather as a confrontationalist, an apocalyptician, a refusenik, a hysteric, and an experiential journalist. Like Carnesky who names her collaborators different names, including menstruants and Showwomen, Lunch invents her own language to address herself: 'I document my own hysteria, or political hysteria, or the sexual hysteria of the times. "Artist" seems so fragile. The concept feels so frail' (Lunch in Johnson 2016: 40). Johnson argues that performance art may stage the limits of what can be known. In a similar gesture, Lunch finds the categories of 'artist' and 'post punk' constricting, overwhelming and suffocating. But how can we then allow these categories to open up, stretch out, and become new unto themselves? It is through the rupture that the weird creates; through that rupture we come in contact with weird knowledge and weird subjectivities; through it, we may encounter our blind spots: the unknown, the unknowable, the unnameable, what might remain fluid in the fabulous not knowing. Within the premise of the weird, what we already know is shown in a different light, through the illuminated egress that the weird creates. Weird women make possible this discovery, but also a looking anew at the things we know, the categories we use to denote who we are in this world. Even the category of being a woman seems problematic for some (and indeed there is a question around the restrictions of the word 'Showwoman' that Carnesky herself raises in various points throughout this book or the use of 'women' in the title of this chapter). On the restrictions of this category, Lunch exclaims: '[D]on't let the tits fool you baby, I am a faggot truck driver and you know it. [...] These look like my tits, but they're my balls' (2016: 47, 41). And later on: 'Some of us feel. Those of us that haven't been sexually segregated into being nice fucking girls that smile a lot and act pretty' (Lunch in Johnson 2016: 41). Lunch, Acker, or Boliver use their bodies, identities, and sexualities to explore weirdness. Carnesky does so both within the logic of theatre and through body art. Like Tutti, Lunch, Acker, and Narcissister, Carnesky questions how her sexuality is perceived. Her work can be positioned closer to the work of Narcissister, in that regard, who also uses excess,

Delivered by Intellect to:

Guest (guest)

IP: 86.30.115.167

On: Wed, 09 Oct 2024 11:13:37

spectacle, and performance personae to embody weirdness. Whether through fictional characters, performance personae, art experimentation, art writing, or music, these weird women experiment with self-definition and thus transcend oppression, radically positioning themselves against the expected or the norm. The category of 'woman' can indeed be constricting, especially in a time when gender fluidity and nonconformity have become part of the vernacular, at least in some (western, liberal, artistic) contexts. This problem has been discussed by many artists in this book. Tai Shani explains her struggles with the term 'woman'; she interrogates gender categories and differentiates womanhood from femininity and considers feminized subjects as part of a patriarchal order and its libidinous economy. Shani reflects on how certain women-only spaces have been used to exclude trans women and therefore her goal is to think beyond gendered language. I am interested in considering whether terms like 'Showwomen' or 'weird women' become exclusionary of certain experiences that extend beyond the binary. The trans activist and artist Rhyannon Styles describes her approach to those terms in this book; she discusses how even the problematic term 'showgirl' appeals to her, as she came into womanhood in her 30s and therefore missed out on girlhood. In her interview with Carnesky, Styles discusses her experience as follows:

being a 40-year-old trans person who has a different perspective on womanhood, than maybe as a cis identifying woman, I wish to, in some ways, hang on to the term showgirl, because I never was a showgirl, and I always wanted to be.

(Styles, in this volume)

The nuance of individual experience cannot be captured by a singular term, as I have shown in this chapter. However, making sure that addressing the complexity of such experiences and making space for everyone to inhabit the space of showwomanry or weirdness is important. My conceptualization of weird women does not only include cis-gendered artists. In fact, it does not only include female-identifying subjects either. Anyone who wants to be part of weirdness is welcome. I focus on specific artists in this chapter because they seem to belong to a space that challenges categories. Women, myself included, that don't necessarily identify with certain categories, such as heterosexual or queer, seem to have no other place to exist. I open weirdness then as a space, rather than a category, for those individuals that find such categories of sexuality, identity, or creativity constricting and suffocating. Like Acker, 'I don't dig het shit for myself'. Like Boliver, 'I don't catch normality'. I do not have to translate my specific experience into one that fits neatly into a single category and therefore I

Delivered by Intellect to:

Guest (guest)

IP: 86.30.115.167

On: Wed, 09 Oct 2024 11:13:37



push against categorization. Queerness could be such a space of transgression, which challenges the expected or the norm, but its particular histories of oppression and marginality do not quite work for subjects that have not occupied these experiences. Weirdness is proposed here more broadly as an alternative space, place, territory with no specific remit or membership. I recognize weirdness as a place of refuge, of openness, and fluidity, where we do not have to make any kind of finite decisions or label ourselves. This writing advocates for weird, unfixed, uncertain ways to relate to ourselves and others, strange terms we can use to discuss and examine our strange desires. Weirdness finds inspiration in opening up categories, stretching them out, widening them, and whacking the shit out of them. Weirdness finds inspiration in inventing new ways of thinking about sex and writing and creative practice, in being utterly outrageous and drunk, like Acker, in masturbating on lit candles, like Tutti, in escaping the kids, the dog, the car and the mortgage, like Lunch, in becoming a hybrid, tattooed, bleeding Medusa or Kali, like Carnesky, in being a refusenik and a self-fashioning apocalyptician, like Lunch, in eating raw eggs and puking, like Tutti, in remaining with that fabulous not knowing, like Acker.

So far, I have identified how Carnesky amongst other women artists has struggled with definition and categorization. Fisher and Johnson have clearly shown how the problem of language is key when thinking about the limit of what can be known. Whether working within the logic of theatre, body art, music, or writing, the artists I have discussed in this chapter refuse to be defined neatly; their weirdness introduces new forms of knowledge and subjectivity; these artists use weirdness in order to undo fixity and reclaim the space of unknowing, find belonging through unbelonging. In her most recent show, Carnesky articulates the discomfort of being named by turning to the problematic term 'showgirl' and undoing its power. She refuses to adopt the names available to her, names that often objectify or diminish women in the entertainment industry. She rejects the term 'showgirl' and invites us to re-think who the showgirl would be, should she be allowed to graduate into adulthood. This is how 'Showwoman' is born to denote all artists who are in charge and do not depend on others, least of all, the showman. Carnesky's proposition is a coven or collective of Showwomen, who use their extraordinary skill to go against the system, transcend dominant categories, and invent new ways of life formation. From their hybridization, or mutation, which is the only way to arrive to oneself, according to Preciado, emerges a new vocabulary and thus

Figure 45: Cosey Fanni Tutti, *Marcel Duchamp's Next Work*, COUM Transmissions, 1974. London.

© Courtesy COUM Transmissions and Cabinet

Delivered by Intellect to:

Guest (guest)

IP: 86.30.115.167

On: Wed, 09 Oct 2024 11:13:37

space to inhabit. As a response to the inadequacy of existing language and the scarcity of terms to denote more than one thing, Carnesky arrives at the term 'Showwoman'. The term encompasses a number of things: a departure from the reductive 'showgirl', a desire to radically differentiate oneself from the showman, as well as an emphatic gesture towards acknowledging that we are not one thing. Carnesky, the Showwoman, performs the imperative of transcending normative language and dominant categories and invents 'a new grammar that allows us to imagine another social organisation of forms of life' (Preciado 2020: 51). The Showwoman's job is that of disidentifying with traditional models of thinking and existing in the world and unearthing weird knowledge and subjectivities. The Showwoman proposes that 'we need to re-learn how to name things for ourselves' (Preciado 2020: 52). The women discussed in this chapter are Showwomen, in that sense. They have refused to be defined by others and have pushed against the inadequacy of language. In this place, this new language or landscape, the Showwoman prevails:

The whore of Babylon is sick today, she won't be coming to work. The whore of Babylon will not be entertaining you tonight. The whore of Babylon is tired of taking all the blame. She is tired of being a demon.

(Jewess Tattoos 2002)

Showwomanry is an attempt to find space, to find air, to breathe, to resist categories, to imagine a world with a multiplicity of stories and places from which to contemplate living.

There is a tension, however, that emerges from this writing. On the one hand, there is a clear and urgent refusal to fit into categories readily available: the showgirl, the good girl, the bad girl, the slut, the devil, and the deviant. On the other hand, giving a name to ourselves, though it appears as a necessity, it perpetuates the problem of fixity. All artists discussed in this chapter address the issue of language, self-definition, and fixity. They respond to the imperative of not wanting to be named by others that Audre Lorde warns against: 'If we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment' (Lorde in Goddard: 1984: 45). The space of weirdness urges towards the imperative of keeping identity and difference fluid, allowing ourselves to keep changing, rather than creating more fixed categories. A solution to the problem of fixity could emerge through committing to a perpetual space of transition or mutation, moving 'from one language to another, from one theme to another, from one city to another, from one gender to another – transitions are your home' (Despentes

Delivered by Intellect to:

Guest (guest)

IP: 86.30.115.167

On: Wed, 09 Oct 2024 11:13:37

in Preciado 2020: 25). The artists in this chapter re-imagine a landscape, where women can co-exist, work with and support one another: categories, in this case, 'are the map imposed by authority, not the territory of life', Preciado contests (37). His transition is not only one of gender, but also one of place, and language. He finds inspiration in a dream-like world, where we can move from place to place and even conceptualize our own planet, space, or language: 'It's not a matter of thinking that life is a dream, but rather realising that dreams are also a form of life' (37). He dreams of renting an apartment on each planet and moving between them frequently. 'But I'd get rid of the Uranus apartment, it's much too far away' (30–32). His desire is to move from category to category, and never quite settle anywhere. Because living in transition, or at crossroads, allows for a 'radical multiplicity of life and the desire to change the names of all things' (39). Because 'intersection is the only place that exists. There are no opposite shores. We are always at the crossing of paths' (49). From this crossing, it is that Preciado speaks. From this crossing, between the *Incredible Bleeding Woman*, the *Showwomen*, Lilith the Demon, the Tattooed Woman, Dolly Blue, or the Whore of Babylon, it is that Carnesky speaks too. From the intersection of a life's work that never ceases. From this crossing, which is 'a place of uncertainty, of the unobvious, of strangeness' (42), it is that Carnesky speaks, a place not of weakness, but of power. And from this crossing, the artists in this chapter show us a new landscape, where subjectivity 'cannot be reduced to a single identity, a single language, a single culture or a single name' (49). Subjectivity, instead, is plural, fluid, ever-changing, and weird.

Carnesky's creative experimentation has led to this place, this world, this crossing, where the exploitative figure of the showman, who takes advantage and capitalizes on difference, does not have a place. His power is exhausted amidst the multiplicity of new practices of being and imagining that emerge from the crossroads. Because the crossroads emphatically acknowledge the shape-shifting nature of who we are, the desire to oscillate between identities, imagine other ways of living, and exist beyond fixity. In this world, women do not have to give into a singular role, or way of being. They escape from oppressive regimes of sameness; in this world, not having the answer and oscillating between places, human-animal, artist-non-artist, creates a different kind of belonging. Carnesky embodies Preciado's strive against categories in the multitude of communities she invents: 'They say man–woman, Black–White, human–animal, homosexual–heterosexual, Israel–Palestine. We say you know very well that your truth-production apparatus has stopped working. How many Galilees will we need this time to re-learn how to name things ourselves?' (52). Carnesky does just that; while embracing some of these categories, she transcends beyond them.

As the weird refers to something with indistinct borders that remain undefinable, it is hard to locate it in certain attributes, qualities, or contexts. In other words, what may *seem* weird for some may not be for others. Certain practices, behaviours, or modes of being and performing seem strange or weird within the specific context of the neoliberal patriarchy. Because that context requires stability and fixity in order to continue to exist. Carnesky's practice transcends binaries and oscillates between categories, inhabiting a space of slippage, ambiguity, and plurality. This plurality is evident in the multiple stories narrated by Carnesky's theatre practice. The collective 'T' is narrated through stories around menstruation and reproductive struggle in *Dr Carnesky's Incredible Bleeding Woman* or stories of disappeared women between East and West and the haunted borders they had to transcend in *Carnesky's Ghost Train* (2004–14). The artists Carnesky brings together do not shy away from their individuality. Their weirdness has to do with an inability to define neatly who they are but also is read as such within the white, neoliberal patriarchal context. In this light, these artists can be seen as 'partially illegible in relation to the normative affects performed by normative citizen subjects', according to José Esteban Muñoz, embodying not an 'individualised affective particularity', but rather 'a collective mapping of self and other' (2006: 6). In entering the space of the weird, Carnesky is also entering a dialogue with other women artists: she experiments with her sexuality, like Tutti, invents new terms to define herself, like Lunch, transcends boundaries of genres and fuses them together, like Narcissister, and refuses to fit into patriarchal standards, like Acker. Weird women challenge fixed categories and open up the space to discuss art, sex, desire and identity. They mess up categories and inhabit a space that is imaginative, unfixed, and fluid. They propose strategies such as estrangement, disidentification, and disarticulation, which inherently require 'the loss of familiar habits of thought and representation' (Braidotti 2009: 527). No identity is permanent or fixed in the realms of weirdness. There are no statements to be uttered, only conversations to be had. Weirdness holds space for the conflict of always being in between, in the crossroads. It creates a feedback loop between identity, sexuality, and creative practice that is cultivated in a symbiotic way. It does not propose a hierarchical, finite epistemology, but a way of thinking that is messy, disruptive, found outside of dominant categories. A perpetual renewal, self-addressing, and self-fashioning is necessary here, a permission to shape-shift, transform, and be part of a plurality of being that may be perceived as wrong, a perturbation to the system, or that which does not belong. Belonging here takes place through unbelonging and our perceived wrongness becomes community. Through the premise of 'weird women', I envision another way to account for myself and others, inventing new structures to accommodate desire, nuanced identity, and

Delivered by Intellect to:

Guest (guest)

IP: 86.30.115.167

On: Wed, 09 Oct 2024 11:13:37

subjectivity. Weirdness as a term is an expansive place that welcomes unease and discomfort, accommodates contradiction, and does not try to resolve it. Weirdness remains undefined, to an extent, and allows for adventure, discovery, and uncertainty; within this space, we can be weirdos who won't fit in, who won't give into the pushing and shoving and squeezing and knocking and ramming and bumming and elbowing. Weirdness distances itself from all these things; it proposes loosened, untethered, untightened, unadjusted, and untailored. Things for which we do not have to crook and bend and adjust but be in any shape or size, even when we mould, out of choice, and take the shape of an artichoke.

Bibliography

- Acker, K. and Wark, M. (2015), *I'm Very into You: Correspondence, 1995–1996* (ed. and with an introduction by M. Viegner), South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e).
- Bayley, B. H. (2000), 'The queer carnival: Gender transgressive images in contemporary queer performance and their relationship to carnival and the grotesque', Ph.D. thesis, Exeter: University of Exeter.
- Boliver, R. (2021), Zoom Interview with Rocio Boliver, Interviewed by E. Kartsaki, 22 December.
- Braidotti, R. (2009), 'Animals, anomalies, and inorganic others: De-oedipalizing the animal other', *PMLA*, 24:2, pp. 526–32.
- Carnesky, M. (2002), *Jewess Tattoos*, Video documentation, Private Link.
- Goddard, L. (1984), *Staging Black Feminisms Identity, Politics, Performance*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Halberstam, J. (1995), *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Durham, London: Duke University Press.
- Halberstam, J. (2014), 'Wildness, death, loss', *Social Text*, 121, pp. 137–48.
- Johnson, D. (2016), "'Personality crisis? Honey, I was born with one": Lydia Lunch interviewed', in G. Butt, K. Eshun, and M. Fisher, (eds), *Post Punk: Then and Now*, London: Repeater Books.
- Johnson, D. (2018), *Unlimited Action: The Performance of Extremity in the 1970s*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Luckhurst, R. (2017), 'The Weird: A dis/orientation', *Textual Practice*, 31:6, pp. 1041–61.
- Max Prior. D. (2000), 'Le Freak – C'est Chic', *Total Theatre*, 12:2, available at <http://totaltheatre.org.uk/archive/features/le-freak-c'est-chic>. Accessed 31 January 2023.
- Mock, R. (2020), 'Marisa Carnesky, showwoman', in M. Chatzichristodoulou, (ed.), *Live Art in the UK: Contemporary Performances of Precarity*, London: Methuen Drama, pp. 45–67.
- Muñoz, J. E. (2006), 'Feeling brown, feeling down: Latina affect, the performativity of race, and the Depressive Position', *Signs*, 31:3, pp. 675–88.
- Narcissister (2022), Phone Interview with Narcissister, interviewed by E. Kartsaki, 21 January.
- Petridis, A. (2017), 'Cosey Fanni Tutti: "I don't like acceptance. It makes me think I've done something wrong"', *The Guardian*, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/mar/14/cosey-fanni-tutti-throbbing-gristle-coum-art-sex-music-hull-2017>. Accessed 31 January 2023.
- Preciado, P. (2020), *An Apartment on Uranus*, London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.
- Roberts, E. (2020), 'Performance and Prostitution: *The Magazine Actions* of Cosey Fanni Tutti', in M. Chatzichristodoulou (ed.), *Live Art in the UK: Contemporary Performances of Precarity*, London: Methuen Drama, pp. 172–91.
- Russo, M. (1994), *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Styles, R. (2023), 'Incredible bleeding women I: Rhyannon Styles, Veronica Thompson, Livia Kojo Alour, Marisa Carnesky' in this volume.
- Tutti, C. F. (2022), Email Correspondence with Eirini Kartsaki, 7 February.