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**AC⚡DC**

**: A STUDY IN ART, GENDER AND POPULAR CULTURE.**

**AN EXEGESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF**

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IN  
FINE ARTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis began as an artistic investigation into the politics of identity and sex/sexuality. The main ideas that run throughout this exegesis position themselves within Nicolas Bourriaud's ideas in the book *Postproduction*, and also around a parafeminist ideology. Within this I focus on popular music culture, the body, video and performance art, and visual representations of the body. I pay particular attention to the female body, and look into ideas of conventional social norms and how people challenge these.

I look into the work of several female artists who deal with the visual representation, and also look at figures within popular music culture. Within band culture I look into how the band can be used as a vehicle to disseminate ideas wider audience. Art and music culture have fed off of each other for generations and can provide valuable strategies within each context for thinking beyond social norms.

The remix can be used as a tactic to decode forms and narratives in popular culture. This can be used to investigate representations of identity within a space that is in a constant state of flux. This is particularly useful as a parafeminist strategy because it allows a context in which to question, rather than answer.

As a result of this study I have found that there are no concrete answers when it comes to identity and sexuality, but can conclude that conventional gender representations and signifiers of identity can be remixed into different scenarios and narratives that can challenge social norms.

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## FOREWORD

'AC/DC' is a term that Clare Hemmings uses to describe the "dual current"<sup>1</sup> of bisexuality. While this exegesis is not a study in bisexuality in art and popular culture, the term AC/DC indicates a lack of stability, inconsistency or unpredictability within the idea of gender roles. Hemming argues that "...bisexual identity is not only a question of displacement or substitution of one meaning for another..."<sup>2</sup> and my work vacillates between ideas surrounding the female and sexual identity. My work is not bisexual in nature, but prefers to challenge gender representations by employing a sort of 'dual current' in regards to the issues that surround it. I am not androgenous in this sense, but rather feel that a binary distinction between the male and female sexuality is destructive when it comes to furthering representations of identity. It is a complex issue, and I will look into questions of gender representation throughout my thesis.

AC/DC also links to the popular Australian rock band of the same name. AC/DC are 'manly' men, who epitomise certain stereotypes of masculinity. I love AC/DC, and even though they might be seen as sexist, I feel that you have to take them for what they are. Even though context should not be an excuse for sexism, the context of popular music is a space in which the stereotyped gender roles are commonly performed. Instead of producing a closed idea of gender representation, I try to insert my own narratives into this context that challenge and broaden ideas surrounding representation. The idea of stereotypes in popular music culture is something I talk about within this exegesis, and how artists challenge and decode these stereotypes by providing alternate narratives.

The title also suggests a cheeky attitude when dealing with issues involving gender. I use humour in my work as a strategy for disarming and/or disguising serious topics. Humour "... thumb[s] its nose at pigeonholes,"<sup>3</sup> which allows it to throw stereotypes and social narratives into a state of confusion. Humour is a tactic that is readily accepted by a wider public, making it a cunning tool for disrupting conventions. Gender representation is still an important issue to me, but I like to deal with it in a way that is entertaining and seriously funny.

I feel the idea of the "AC/DC" can act as a suitable title and representation of what I am talking about in this exegesis.

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<sup>1</sup> Hemmings, 2002, p 23.

<sup>2</sup> Hemmings, 2002, p 24.

<sup>3</sup> Higgie, 2007, p 12



## INTRODUCTION

This thesis began as an artistic investigation into the politics of identity and sex/sexuality. I sought to look at the conventions of the live music event, popular music and performance art - all of which are sexually charged and identity driven. I also sought to examine the digital manifestation of this through video art and performance for video.

In shaping the trajectory however, I have sought to develop a research question that links feminist thematics and the remix, and also to nurture the irreverent attitude that I have for high and pop culture. Within these discourses and genres I look to challenge preconceived ideas of identity and sexuality and highlight grey areas within them. Using an undogmatic and playful approach to these subjects, I try to both utilise and 'mess' with specific theories rather than illustrate their ideas.

In my examination of popular culture, particularly music-based culture, I have focused more on the structural elements within these cultures rather than working in a context of sound art or music making. What I am interested in is investigating how and why bands use art forms and why artists use band forms in their work.

By using tactics such as detournement and the remix I have found that I want to create a space in which conventional perceptions of identity and gender are challenged, rather than try to undermine the narratives around them.

The first two chapters outline two separate theories that run throughout my work. The first of these is Bourriaud's ideas surround *Postproduction*,<sup>4</sup> which deals with the remix and detournement of culture. Secondly I try to find a position within or in alignment with feminism that does not prescribe me to certain stereotypes that come with the title of 'feminist'. Parafeminism seemed to me to be the best title for me because it allows an ambivalent attitude towards feminism without discrediting it.

The following section looks at the use of the female body in art and popular culture. I will look at this in regards to artists Cindy Sherman and Meg Cranston, popular musician Lil Kim and performance art. When looking at Cranston and Lil Kim, I will use Judith Butler's theories surrounding gender performativity and gender trouble to also examine their work.

Music culture lends itself easily to performance art. The playing out and breaking out of societal roles is prevalent in music culture, and I use these forms to juxtapose with my ideas. Within this chapter I will look at how the band format helps to easily disseminate ideas to people in an identifiable way.

The next section outlines performances that I have done for this project. In this section I take a less formal tone, and do so because I feel that in writing on my own performance I can only hold a subjective view. Each audience member would have had a different experience to the one I had, but I feel that I need to explain it in this way because I only have my direct experience with the piece as a source from which to examine it. In my performances I was trying to examine the conventions of live music event, and how that crosses over into a gallery context. However, I found that the gallery space closed down many aspects of the work, and I decided to instead focus

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<sup>4</sup> Bourriaud, 2005.

on performance in video.

The next section focuses on Video art and can be a context in which linear and non-linear narratives can be created to expand the possible narratives that surround them. I also explain how internet sites such as Youtube influence my work.

The remix, and how I use it in my work, is detailed in the next section. Bourriaud's 'culture of activity' and the writings from DJ and theorist Paul D. Miller (A.K.A DJ Spooky, the subliminal kid) are used as references to explain cultural theory surrounding the remix, and I look at how parafeminists could use the remix as a tactic in which to confuse gender and feminist narratives.

I finish with a review of my final video work *I'm the King of the Castle, You're the Dirty Rascal*, and conclude what I found within my research this year.

## POSTPRODUCTION

In his book *Postproduction*,<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud argues that "... the artwork functions as the temporary terminal of a network of interconnected elements, like a narrative that extends and reinterprets preceding narratives."<sup>6</sup> Bourriaud calls this the "culture of activity", where artists and the wider public alike are becoming users of forms.

What is a 'form'? Citing *Relational Aesthetics*<sup>7</sup> as one way of understanding it, Bourriaud suggests a form is:

" A coherent unit, a structure (*independent entity of inner dependencies*) which shows the typical features of a world... Art *keeps together* moments of subjectivity associated with singular experiences, be it Cezanne's apples or Buren's striped structures."<sup>8</sup>

Many contemporary artists have responded to this by remixing these 'typical features' into other work. Stemming from the theory of detournement, artists who might be seen to work in the *Postproduction* mode do not try to abolish art like the Situationists (or see art as a sign of lack), but rather capitalise on a communism of forms by detourning cultural products to make their work.

According to Guy Debord:

"[t]he two fundamental laws of detournement are the loss of importance of each detourned autonomous element - which may go as far as to lose its original sense completely - and at the same time the organisation of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect."<sup>9</sup>

The remix, a form of detournement, is used by Bourriaud to explain how artists actively use cultural forms to produce their own narratives, and he uses the DJ as an analogy for his discussion. Artist and author Mark Amerika<sup>10</sup> has criticised Bourriaud's use of the DJ as an analogy for *Postproduction*.

"One would be disappointed if they expected to find in this book that champions the DJ-Programmer any serious discussions of real DJs who actually identify themselves as conceptual artists... Bourriaud's book is still somehow bound by the "industry ideology" of the commercial gallery system and the successful artists it employs ... [T]here is an opportunity to use some of the ideas discussed in *Postproduction* in a more elaborate and contemporary sense, especially in relation to the work of many net artists or someone like DJ Spooky, not to mention any number of VJs who are blurring the boundaries between art and life."<sup>11</sup>

While there is a vast and interesting area of critical theory surrounding DJing and net art I have not been using either of these as tools for making art. I am interested in using Bourriaud's analogy set out in *Postproduction* because I utilise cultural forms to convolute ideas surrounding gender and sexuality, and the remix is a

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<sup>5</sup> Bourriaud, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Bourriaud, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Debord, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Amerika is an American artist and author who uses VJing at an art making tool. He is also a prominent net artist.

<sup>11</sup> Amerika, 2007.

tactic from which this is easily achieved. My work is not 'net art' (although it has associations with the internet and forums such as Youtube), nor am I an artist who uses DJing/VJing as a conceptual tool, and although I do use these two areas as inspiration for my work I would not consider myself either of these things. The ideas from Postproduction that really permeate my work are the idea of the remix, and the 'culture of activity', and they will be the ideas that run through this exegesis.

**FUCK YOU FEMINISM.**

**FUCK YOU! FEMINISM.**

**FUCK YOU, FEMINISM.**

**FUCK YOU: FEMINISM.**

**FUCK YOU – FEMINISM...**

Having resisted it for a long time, I finally came to realise that feminism provides me with a critical context to extend my research into aspects regarding identity and gender politics. My work has always had a self-confidence that might crassly be described as 'Fuck you', and because of this people viewing it, to my mind, have quickly associated that with feminist thematics, pigeonholed my work and closed off potential readings.

This 'Fuck you' was also read as an attack against male views of the female, rather than as a challenge towards gender and femininity. I would suggest that the subtle difference between 'attack' and 'challenge' in this circumstance is that the former suggests I am against a certain way of thinking on the subject, while the latter leaves it as an open ended question. Extreme first- and second-wave feminists, such as ones that labeled sperm a 'virulent poison' and advocated sexual abstinence as a political goal<sup>12</sup> have tainted feminism with a radicalist tang.<sup>13</sup> While I believe that radicals often present ideas and positions that are perceived as ridiculous (due to the extreme nature of them), it is these positions that allow moderates room to operate effectively. While I feel that a feminist context is necessary and can be quite positive place to explore my ideas, I still find the term problematic as it aligns me with thinking around the dualism of the male/female. How do I associate myself with feminism without refuting the work of feminist artists and pigeonholing my work completely?

Postfeminism is a term that has been used by people<sup>14</sup> who do not identify themselves as traditional feminists, but work within a feminist canon. The 'post' has been used by some contemporary 'feminist revisionists'<sup>15</sup> to distance radical ideas based within feminism. Some of these postfeminists also believe that we have overcome the obstacles that were once a challenge for females, therefore moving above and beyond the 'old politics' surrounding feminism.

There has been a lot of discussion around whether the prefix 'post' is justifiable. Some contemporary feminist theorists<sup>16</sup> believe that the use of the 'post' suggests a complete rejection of first and second wave feminism, and that we have achieved gender equality (which, these theorists say, we have not).<sup>17</sup>

Can the term 'post' be used in a positive way by people working within a feminist canon? The term 'postfeminism' does suggest a

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<sup>12</sup> Modleski, Tania (1991), p 3.

<sup>13</sup> Such as *SCUM Manifesto* author Valerie Solanas.

<sup>14</sup> Like the interviewees of Susan Bolotin's (1982) article "Voices of the Post-Feminist Generation".

<sup>15</sup> Such as Nadine Strossen.

<sup>16</sup> Such as Susan J. Douglas who says post feminists call the ideas in feminism irrelevant.

<sup>17</sup> McRobbie, 2004.

reference and acknowledgement of feminism but, I would argue, suggests a superseding and denial of female struggles - especially those of women globally. I would say that even though society today has come a long way since first and second wave feminism, I believe that a lot of the issues these movements dealt with are not 'fixed'. Even though I do not call myself a postfeminist (due to its arrogance), I still do not want to call myself feminist because of the way it pigeonholes my work.

Amelia Jones prefers the term 'parafeminism' because it means both "side by side" and "beyond"<sup>18</sup>. This allows a certain distancing but not a complete superseding of feminist ideas. Jones has stopped using the term 'post' when referring to the contemporary thinking around feminism because it comes from a privileged position, mainly a Western one. Postfeminism, Jones says, is a rhetoric of "apparent inclusion and democracy and cannot hold up to the critique of poststructural or postmodern deconstruction"<sup>19</sup>. In using the term parafeminism, Jones wants to build a 'conceptual model of critique and exploration that is parallel and building on earlier feminisms."<sup>20</sup> Parafeminism also looks to embrace confusion surrounding gender and other social identifications, understanding that "gender" is a question and not an answer.

Parafeminism gives me a critical context to work within, allowing a slightly ambivalent attitude within my work without completely rejecting earlier feminisms. Parafeminism is aware that gender is unstable as a concept, rejecting the idea of gender binaries and accepting proliferating categories of sexual identity. My work sets out to explore ideas within feminist thematics, but does not try and reverse masculine stereotypes or offer specific critique of patriarchy or the male gaze<sup>21</sup>. Instead it proposes to encourage thought around the multiple ways in which gender can be constructed.

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<sup>18</sup> Jones, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> (most taken from

[http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=213431&Itemid=747](http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=213431&Itemid=747))

## The BODY AND GENDER PERFORMANCE

### The BODY IN ART

The body has been subject matter for art since archaic times, but until recently it was largely framed and constructed by male artists. The body has come to raise questions around what it signifies, and its usage in an art context (especially with performance art) has highlighted the fact that it is highly charged with meaning when it comes to considering identity.

There are a number of issues surrounding the female body that are intrinsically tied in with my work. However, the female body, especially its use in art, has so many readings that could be taken from it that it has become a rather convoluted area of research. One example would be that feminism, in helping to embed the body with a female perspective, added many more layers of meaning to it. Another would be the fertile history of performance that questions cultural constructions of gender, identity and the way bodies are perceived, and some of the key issues for me in this area are representation (especially of woman) and sexuality.

"Since the 1960s artists using their bodies have explored the constructed visual and linguistic identities of gender, sexuality and race, offering up these representations as hierarchies of power... [F]rom Hannah Wilke to Mary Kelly, female artists have sought to show the constructed identity of femininity. This is taken to a further extreme by artists such as Cindy Sherman, who employs costume as a disguise to stage images of feminine stereotypes. The way in which we dress or the hairstyle we adopt can reflect the controlling social norms and expectations. Artists have used their bodies to dismantle the parameters of these norms and disrupt accepted signifiers of identity."<sup>22</sup>



Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Donald Kuspit has argued that Sherman's work "... has been interpreted as a feminist demonstration of the variety of female roles - the lack of fixity of female, or for that matter any, identity..."<sup>23</sup> Even though Sherman does not call her work directly feminist, she uses her art to call attention to the stereotyping of women in films, television and magazines. Similar to concerns I have in my own work, Sherman's art engages with a feminist dialogue, even though she does not call herself a feminist. Sherman's representation of women does not bring about an aestheticised closure of femininity but rather, by using the critical discourse of art, challenges these stereotypes. Catherine

<sup>22</sup> Jones & Warr, 2000, p 13.

<sup>23</sup> Jones & Warr, 2000, p 258.

Elwes writes that Sherman's true identity, if there is one, is made up of a hybridized, shifting amalgam of them all. She says the performative with its implications of self-invention seem to suggest a core equality that is not upheld by social or physical reality. The 'performative', in this sense, suggests an identity that is not oppressed because it is just a masquerade anyway.<sup>24</sup>

Another artist who uses her body (and sometimes other peoples' bodies) to explore identity is Meg Cranston. In one performance titled *Women Who Would Play Me If I Paid Them* (2001), Cranston went through the process of finding actors to audition for the role of playing her in an autobiographical film. These actors do not answer Cranston's identity, rather they play out attributes within her identity. Watching the various videos of this performance,<sup>25</sup> one sees Cranston describing aspects of herself, and then asks the actors to play this role out. What the actresses are doing is reflected her identity back to her, constituting a "mise-en-scene of representation."<sup>26</sup>

Theorist Judith Butler suggests that "... gender identities are not natural or fixed - rather, they are only given meaning when acted out or performed."<sup>27</sup> Cranston's work may look like it is literally acting out Butlers ideas of gender performativity, but what it is doing is looking at how these other women portray these ideas from her personality. Even though gender is acted out and not being it is nevertheless subject to social norms and conditions that restrict the range of gender performances it is feasible to act.<sup>28</sup> Cranston is not directly attacking these norms, but rather highlighting what these norms are.



Fig. 5

Cranston and Sherman are two artists that examine representations of women in popular culture. Through the use of the body they highlight the constructed identity of women by acting out ideas of gender that are prevalent in society, and in doing so expose conventional understandings of the roles. Social narratives are apparent in popular culture and are reproduced through such things as movies, television and magazines. These mostly offer stereotyped versions of females, presenting the viewer with an aestheticised closure of identity. Artists set out to broaden ideas of identity and challenge these representations, and through my work I hope to also disrupt these signifiers.

### **I WANNA ROCK YOUR BODY**

I work with the culture of popular music in my work. Like art, this culture is filled with a complex myriad of personas and identities that both challenge and reinforce the norms of femininity and

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<sup>24</sup> Elwes, 2005, p 163.

<sup>25</sup> available at <http://www.uniteddivas.com/megcranston/megpartyslap.html>

<sup>26</sup> Cranston & Daniel, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Laughey, 2007, p 113.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p 114.



identity, and within this confront societal roles of females. In this case it is interesting to bring up female musician Lil Kim, whose identity has been uber-sexualised by the culture industry. Is Lil Kim, with her bizarre, polished and highly sexualised persona, stereotyping females or highlighting the grey areas of femininity and disrupting the signifiers of identity? Lil Kim has caused many a debate on what she is achieving for women. Listening to her explicitly sexual lyrics makes even *my* jaw drop (but it is always with a slight smirk of admiration and respect). She is fiercely debated about and tends to polarise feelings and attitudes towards her. Some people criticise her for becoming a sexual object for men while many applaud her for standing out in a masculine field (hip hop). In an online discussion, New Zealand musician/artist Jessica Hansell (a.k.a. Coco Solid) debated the effect of Lil Kim's representation of women, and debated whether it was a positive or negative image.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

All these quotes were taken from a blog post *The Miseducation of Lil Kim* by Hansell.

"Punk rock feminists and rappers like Lil Kim operate outside female music traditions by virtue of their masculine genres, their unbeautiful aural presentations, and the use of dirty and sexuality explicit words." - *Art Theory in Music*<sup>29</sup>

This is in contrast to what was said by blogger *afrobella.com* who said:

"People might say she's empowered, but really she's just recreating male fantasies by getting her nose and her boobs surgically altered. Lil Kim is not even known so much for her songs as she is for her hypersexual persona."<sup>30</sup>

Hansell, on the other hand says:

"She's so controversial it's embarrassing to say so, duh. She's offensively creative with her image plus she gets people arguing about the grey areas of power, sex, image, race, success and what they call "third-wave feminism"... The fact is pop-culture created this couture monster and she has inspired feminist thesis and femcees since Biggie introduced her to the rap world. Plus at the end of the day it's just fucked up show biz right?

Lil Kim: somehow inspiring non-stop intellectual fist-fights

<sup>29</sup> Hansell, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

for over 10 years."<sup>31</sup>

This is what Judith Butler might call 'gender trouble'. "What [Butler] means by this," Dan Laughey writes, "... is that traditional lines of division between masculine and feminine identity are capable of being blurred and eroded by gender playing that subverts conventional sex differences; that amounts to troublesome gender performativity in the eyes of traditionalists."<sup>32</sup> The 'grey areas' of power, as Hansell puts it, are what I find interesting, as this is the area in which representation is challenged. Lil Kim certainly performs her identity outside that of traditional representations of women, and the reaction this provokes ranges everywhere between admiration and disgust. Lil Kim is confusing social narrative surrounding sexuality and identity, opening it up for further dissection and allowing for the grey areas to present themselves. What some would call objectification, others would call empowerment, and these sorts of issues are what I am interested in looking at within my work.

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<sup>31</sup> Hansell, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Laughey, 2007, p 114.

## BANDS IN ART

Music culture has always been a fertile ground for transgression. It has a promise of the forbidden, where societal norms are questioned, kicked about and challenged. Using the band format to disseminate ideas that are prevalent in art provides a format that can reach a wider public, providing a space in which conventional narratives and lines of thinking are examined and contested.

Coming out of art school in the 1960s, Malcolm McLaren<sup>33</sup> became attracted to Situationist theories of social change.<sup>34</sup> Taking inspiration from the writings of the Situationist Internationale, McLaren saw popular music culture as the most accessible way to reach out to the people who could supposedly revolutionise the world - "the kids", the people who were dissatisfied with the life they were living, the people itching to be rebellious. Punk became a vibrant context to bring these Situationist ideals into fruition<sup>35</sup> and they crossed paths many times, in everything from imagery to ideas.

Moving forward in history, Post-punk bands "... saw the systematic ransacking of twentieth century modernist art and literature. The entire period looks like an attempt to replay virtually every major modernist theme and technique via the medium of pop music."<sup>36</sup> In using these techniques they wanted to explore other ideas opposing the conventional lines of thinking within society.

Lucky Dragons are artists who use the band form to easily structure their activities around. In an online interview for the Creative Commons website<sup>37</sup> they were asked:

"... Your works explore much more than just music and you are self-described "artists who use music" - can you expand upon this?

*Luke Fischbeck (from Lucky Dragons):* I've been thinking about the shift in how music is made, distributed, and appreciated as analogous to the evolution of photography as an art form, for example - as a technology, as a fine art, and as a popular and easily accessible medium for communication. We'd like to contribute to the idea that music exists as all of these things at once, to celebrate the idea that music can serve not only as an end in itself, but also as a means towards greater social connection, and something that is immediately open to everyone. Mostly it has been a matter of identifying which barriers (in terms of ownership, context, genre, or even terms like "expert" or "professional") are artificial and unnecessary, and ignoring them! Art can sometimes provide the viewpoint that removes these barriers."

I am part of a performance art band called *Trimasterbate*<sup>38</sup>. Using the band format we propose to convolute representations of gender, especially in popular music contexts. *Trimasterbate* is a way to 'expose ourselves in public', meaning the band format is used as an avenue for us to play out confusing ideas of sex and sexuality in a public space, rather than our bedrooms. It has always been positive and humourous in nature, and nurtures ideas that question gender

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<sup>33</sup> Manager of the Sex Pistols and other Punk bands.

<sup>34</sup> Marcus, 1989.

<sup>35</sup> And although they managed to create a lasting impression on society, they did not completely upturn it.

<sup>36</sup> Reynolds, 2005, p xviii.

<sup>37</sup> PArkins, 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Of which I will explain more about in my performance case studies.

rather try to tie ideas down. Although we have no such manifesto proclaiming our goals, I feel that *Trimasterbate* is an interesting experiment in challenging and 'messing with' gender performativity, which capitalises on the band format as a way to disseminate out ideas to a wider audience.

## PERFORMANCE CASE STUDIES

### ENJOY PERFORMANCE SERIES



Fig. 8

*I was invited to be a part of a performance series at Enjoy gallery. The project was set up so that we would workshop our performances for a couple of weeks, and in the end there would be a series of performances to show.*

*In the brief that we received, Siv Fjærestad from Enjoy wrote that:*

*"... performance varies from other forms of art making because it has a different sort of connection with the audience than other sorts of art work. [I] feel that the background to this project is an assumption that performance has a rather unique quality, it can capitalise on aspects of failure and empathy more than any other art form".<sup>39</sup>*

*I decided to take this idea into consideration. For a performance that I did at the gallery, I dressed up as my character 'Feline Groovy' and tried to play the New Zealand national anthem (even though I don't know how to play the guitar that well). I got the crowd to clap along and cheer me on. If the clapping waned I stopped playing and shouted enthusiastically for the crowd to keep clapping.*



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

*I did a horrible job of playing the song, but the crowd of people watching became more and more enthusiastic over time. By then end of it I even got a call from a few people to do an encore, which I tried to do and failed to complete. The reason I dressed up in the costumes was to make people think that the performance was going to be*

<sup>39</sup> Enjoy Gallery, 2008.

*incredible. Most people would have probably assumed that I would have been really good since there was a two week build up period and practice space available for all of us.*

*One of the things I should have considered was holding the performance somewhere like a bar or other venue that holds gigs, rather than in the art gallery. Because it was in an art gallery people weren't as resistant to my performance as they would have been if it was somewhere like a bar. I was interested in exploring the art space as a place for this kind of performance, but looking back I feel that this kind of performance would be best suited to a gig space.*

## **SECOND FELINE GROOVY PERFORMANCE**



Fig. 11

*Carrying on my investigation into performing in an art space, I used the Feline Groovy character in my second performance at Massey University. The performance was confusing in this space because on the one hand I was trying to create a character, but also play loud intense music, and get the audience excited by making them clap their hands, and there were videos playing, and it was 8 in the morning and, and, and... PHEW! In the end it was all rather confusing. Was I trying to make a connection with the audience through the music? Or was I trying to do that with the character Feline Groovy? What were the visuals doing for the performance? Initially I wanted there to be an overload of things for people to try and digest (like there would be in a club environment), and looking back I don't think that there were enough things in the room to get to that point of overload, as it was all very easily digestible. I had set up everything in one corner of the room and that ultimately cut me off from the audience. I was on a stage and the audience wasn't implicated in the performance at all.*

*Some people were fine with standing back and watching and that is how they wanted to engage. Some suggested that I needed to freak people out more, that I should have played around with the audience and given them an "experience".*

*The performance also didn't reach its potential because it failed to implicate the crowd in any way. Not all performance art has to do this but I was trying to create an experience for the audience to be involved in. People were just watching me and didn't invest any of themselves in it. I didn't achieve what I wanted from the performance because I didn't use the tactics of performance art. I was trying to let the music and the other visual components of the work try to give the audience an experience but rather it isolated them so they*

couldn't take part in it.

Because I was trying to do this work in a gallery type context I feel that it closed off the work. In exploring this type of performance in a gallery space I have found that it would best suit somewhere outside of the gallery.

## TRIMASTERBATE: A CLASS-Y ACT A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF BEING A WANKER IN PUBLIC



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

*Trimasterbate, like the result of a romp in the back seat of a car, was accidentally conceived. Three feisty girls vs. a couple of bottles of wine will always end with something interesting. We had collaborated together on several occasions Sasha Rainbow and I would help out Nicola Higham with her fashion shows. One night after a show we decided to dance the night away (in leotards and headbands I must add). After dancing down the road<sup>40</sup> and drinking in a church, decided we were called Trimasterbate and that we were also a band. After letting it 'casually' slip to a few friends, we were suddenly being*

<sup>40</sup> With, I must add, with our friend Wai. Although she was not directly part of the band she was definitely a supporter. Many people have performed with us as Trimasterbate because we do not mind the instability of our form. Newest member Emily Jolliffe is pictured above and we now perform as a duo.

*asked to play shows. Confident that we could, we decided on a medley of some funny or popular songs using only our mighty performance skills and a Casio keyboard. Crassness ensued and we ended up changing the words of the songs into humourous, sexual lyrics. One such example was when we used George Michael and the Wham! Song 'Last Christmas'. We changed the lyrics to "Last Christmas I gave you my ass, but the very next day you said you weren't gay. Next year, to save me from tears, I'll give it to Brian Tamaki."*

*We worked on a few performances with band So So Modern, as they saw Trimasterbate as a way to try and break down the band/audience dynamic, getting us to roam the crowd and also perform with them on stage. We use Trimasterbate as a way to engage with people and to provide a positive space in which to mix up ideas surrounding gender and sexuality.*

### **CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM CASE STUDIES PERFORMANCE**

What I learnt from doing these performances is that I am not interested in exploring relationships with the audience for this thesis, nor did I want to continue to try and cross over the gig space into the gallery space in this way. As I found out with my Feline Groovy performances, the gallery space was a stale environment for me to experiment with this sort of performance. The Trimasterbate performances were more successful in this sense because I was performing outside the galley, but I concluded that I instead wanted to focus on performance for video, and to utilise this in an art gallery context.



## PERFORMANCE FOR VIDEO GIRLS ON FILM

I started doing video performances by accident. Whilst using a projector to view photos I had taken of myself at a larger scale, my hand passed through the light and activated the image, making me realise that I could perform in this space. While performance can capitalise on the direct relationship to the audience (and as seen earlier the sense of empathy from them), video art can utilise the viewer's suspension of disbelief.

Video art has been associated with the television, a hub of popular culture, from which artists freely draw inspiration. There have always been strong narratives running through society and culture, and many of these can be found in film and television. Artists have used video, from its inception, to expand on the possibilities of these narratives, producing linear and non-linear autobiographies and futuristic fantasies.<sup>41</sup>



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

A collection of Pipilotti Rist's early single channel video works centers around the television as a medium "... each exercis[ing] a commentary on the medium, taking up its own unique subject,"<sup>42</sup> and videos such as *You Call Me Jacky* and *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much* have been associated with the music video and the MTV generation<sup>43</sup>. These two videos have been associated with the complex questions of the visual (self-) representation of women<sup>44</sup> and use the format of the music video to address this. Rist believes that some of her other videos, like *Open my Glade (Flatten)*, are "... advertisements for feelings... [and feels that] her trapped body as a site of empathy and potential identification."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Rush, 2007, p 9.

<sup>42</sup> Pg 25, Soll

<sup>43</sup> Söll, 2005

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p 25.

<sup>45</sup> Jones, 2006.



Fig. 17

Video art provides a space to critique stereotypes and narratives of the female because it provides a space in which the viewer suspends their disbelief, allowing an in-road for new narratives to be expressed to viewers, who may even identify with the artists position.

In writing on Rist's work, Amelia Jones argues that Rist performs a new sexed subjectivity altogether - not held through the eyes of lingering binarisms of much dominant female theory - pointing to her ideas in parafeminism.<sup>46</sup> Jones says that Rist's viewpoint is not attacking male viewpoints on women, but performs the anatomically female body beyond femaleness, disengaging the question of the subject identified via codes of sexual difference (from the apparent anatomical attributes of the subjects body), which challenges the audience to think about normal narratives of identity and sexuality. The challenge presents an open-ended question, and that is something that I am interested in using within my work.

### **SHOWING OFF - BANDS, VIDEO ART AND IDENTITY**

As with Pipilotti Rist's videos dealing with visual representation in areas of popular culture, music culture is ripe with narratives and forms to be utilised in art. In keeping with my concerns surrounding identity, sexuality and sex, popular music culture provides a context and forms from which I can further investigate gender and identity, and within this representations of females.



Fig. 18

In Cheryl Donegan's video *Head*, she uses the form of the music video to "... confront sex, fantasy, and voyeurism in an autoerotic workout

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, Pg 212-213

performed to pop music... In this image of sexual "pleasure" and fantasy, Donegan is both subject and object, directing the action and performing for the camera without acknowledging its presence. When she exits the frame, the empty container and splattered wall look less like a scene of passion than the scene of a crime."<sup>47</sup>

Within these themes of sex, fantasy and voyeurism, Donegan is challenging the stereotypical female music video persona by performing the female between a fine line of objectification, and empowerment. The nature in which she performs is quite sexual, but because she never acknowledges the camera there is a confusing power play that is set up between the viewer and performer.

This work is disrupting codes of visual representation that the viewer is usually complicit with by conflating ideas surrounding the identity of female characters in the space of the music video. I would argue that in a large proportion of music videos, most women are seen to be submissive and used mainly for visual stimulation. By performing a female who confuses these roles and creates a strange power play with the audience, Donegan is challenging the roles of females in that space while exploiting the tropes typical of this format.

Intentionally confusing what is being represented is something that I do when making my videos. Confusion can also function within a parafeminist model by holding an ambivalent attitude towards gender representation, without stating whether this is a good or a bad thing. Playing around with cultural narratives complicates ideas surrounding the conventional perceptions of gender and identity, and extends representations beyond cultural norms.

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<sup>47</sup> Ubuweb

## **The REMIX** **Wha~Whikky~Wha~WHAT IS The REMIX To me?**

The remix is a popular way of using forms in the culture of activity to reinvent existing narratives. For example, one can either insert ones own subjective views within these narratives, or can use tactics such as the 'mash up' to align otherwise disparate ideas. Paul D. Miller says that the remix is "The dialectical drama of object and subject... creating seamless interpolations between objects of thought to fabricate a zone of representation in which the interplay of the one and the many, the original and the double all come under question."<sup>48</sup> Ken Wark, in reviewing Millers book *Rhythm Science*, concludes that "Mixing is a practical ontology making worlds where object and subject slide into space, rather than fall into place."<sup>49</sup>

Miller also asks, "Who speaks through you?"<sup>50</sup> He is implying that in an age when so many surfaces resonate with information, how is one subjective?<sup>51</sup> The remix helps to create a personal position in regards to narratives in society. Similarly, Bourriaud proposes that the cultural forms around us are the materialisation of narratives, and artists decode these forms to offer up alternative narratives to the ones shown to us.<sup>52</sup> The remix is a tactic in which to freely explore, decode and create narratives and forms, and as Mark Amerika puts it, "[The remix] puts into practice the prophetic art of making things with and out of code, whether it be a poet's direct presentation, a programmer's hacking aesthetic, a net artist's targeted action scripting, or even a live A/V artist's generative performance."

The remix could also be used as a parafeminist strategy because it provides "... people systems to organise information outside of the European categories of "rationality" and "universal subjectivity" that drove the Enlightenment."<sup>53</sup> Parafeminism embraces confusion surrounding gender and social identification, (as well as narratives that are not just from a European, male perspective) and the remix provides a way to dually work with and outside these representations. Amelia Jones believes that "... social identifications (including sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality and so on) which can never be fixed... always take meaning in relation to each other,"<sup>54</sup> and the remix allows for a combination between any multitude of narratives, providing a context in which they can easily work in with each other. This makes it a useful tool for parafeminism, and also for me in my work, especially my video work *I'm the King of the Castle, You're the Dirty Rascal* of which I will talk about further on this exegesis.

## **POWERFUL MAGIC**

Jimmy Joe Roche is an artist who remixes video to create his works. In his video work<sup>55</sup> *Ultimate Reality*<sup>56</sup> (made in conjunction with musician Dan Deacon) Roche remixes Arnold Schwarzenegger into an *Ultimate Reality*, where all of Schwarzenegger's films amalgamate together to form Roche's idea of an ultimate Arnold identity.

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<sup>48</sup> Miller, 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Wark, 2004.

<sup>50</sup> Miller, 2004.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Bourriaud, 2005, p 46.

<sup>53</sup> Simula, 2005.

<sup>54</sup> Jones, 2006, p 213.

<sup>55</sup> Which is also performed live as a VJ set with Dan Deacon.

<sup>56</sup> Roche, 2007.

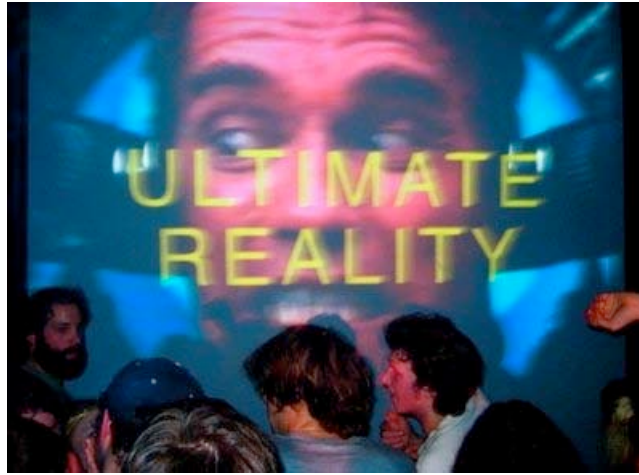


Fig. 19

In this remix space Roche can freely play around with the Arnold Schwarzenegger form. Popular culture created this form, and by remixing it Roche is creating his own narrative path through this culture. Though this may seem like an odd reality, by presenting us with this eccentric, humourous remix of Schwarzenegger films, Roche highlights that the films in their natural state are (and in some cases are even more) absurd in themselves. Because of our suspension of disbelief we can watch the original movies without challenging them. In destabilising Schwarzenegger movies, Roche not only makes us blatantly aware of the constructedness of these movies, he also opens the Schwarzenegger form as a code to speak through, presenting his own subjective reality within the Schwarzenegger canon.

"Contemporary art thus presents itself as an alternative editing table that shakes up social forms, reorganises them, and inserts them into original scenarios. The artist deprograms in order to reprogram, suggesting that there are other possible uses for the techniques and tools at our disposal."<sup>57</sup>

## YOUTUBE

More recently internet sites such as Youtube have become breeding grounds for video and its investigation into popular culture. Youtube, for my artwork, is a point of inspiration. It is a 'mash up' of cultures where people are responding to the consumption of popular culture by remixing cultural forms. The advent of home computers has opened up a far wider scope for widespread participation in moving image cultures, and like the television and music video for Pipilotti Rist's generation, Youtube is popular cultures respective hub. I take inspiration from there because due to the massive scope of homemade and subjective videos, it is a context that convolutes cultural forms and creates new cultural narratives.

What I find most interesting about Youtube is the playful attitude towards popular culture. By using the remix and other video editing techniques, video makers can pick out forms from culture and complicate their meaning even more. These remixes can act as homage or critique (or maybe a bit of both), but in any case Youtube presents itself as a vibrant area of cultural activity.

But why should my work be differentiated from videos on Youtube that use similar tactics, but are not intended as art? The foremost answer would be simply that I choose to work within what is understood as the art world. Michael Bell-Smith is an artist who deals with the use

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<sup>57</sup> Bourriaud, 2005.

of the internet in his work, and on the subject he says:

" A lot of my work is inspired by "non-artist" projects. That's not to say, however, that I'm not interested in fine art and the discourse around it, or that I don't believe in the structures of the art world. You can think of it in terms of forms of distribution and the audience that comes with them. Youtube is great, but if you want something to be discussed critically, or read in relationship to movements in art, then you might be better off trying to work within the art world. I'm grateful that I have access to different outlets—galleries, the internet, the video distributor EAI—for works with different concerns that might engage different audiences."<sup>58</sup>

Youtube is a culture of activity in which subjective videos convolute cultural forms. The internet has changed the way in which we publicly present ourselves, and I am curious to explore these representations in video art by using the tropes and aesthetics of Youtube videos.

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<sup>58</sup> Gordon, (n.d.).

## VIDEO WORK

### I 'M The KING OF The CASTLE, YOU 'RE The DIRTY RASCAL

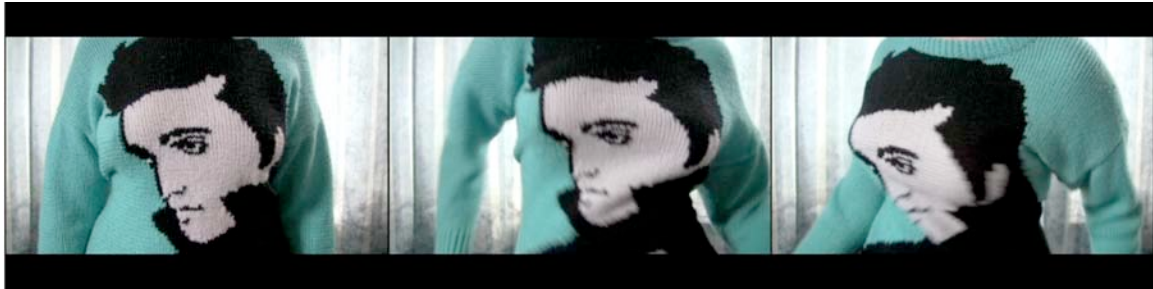


Fig. 20

As a basic description of my video *I'm the King of the Castle, You're the Dirty Rascal* whilst wearing a jersey that has Elvis on it, I start shaking my breasts as hard as possible. Cut into this footage is a Youtube video in which someone has animated (using home computer software 'Iclone') Donald Duck dancing to 'Hound Dog' by Elvis.



Fig. 21

This work is a melting pot of ideas in which values of one and many come into question. I believe it addresses issues of gender without holding onto lingering binarisms, and begins to blur lines of conventional sex differences. In my work I like to play along the fine line between objectification and empowerment, but not present any sort of closure on these issues.

I am not interested in explaining every aspect of my work, but I feel that this work is a conclusion of a lot of the ideas that I have been talking about within this exegesis.

## **CONCLUSION**

For this thesis I have considered representations of identity and sex/sexuality, and have come up with no clear answers. What I mean by this is that within these areas, especially when it comes to notions of gender representation, nothing is fixed. Judith Butler presents us with the idea that gender is performative. Even though this allows for a broad spectrum of gender identity, it is the narratives of society that still determine accepted ideas surrounding gender. Biological sex differences do not mean that gender is mutually exclusive to each side, nor is one view 'better' than the other. I am not trying to create a universal, amalgamated understanding of gender, but rather I am providing my own alternatives to conventional representations of it.

In the culture of activity, as Bourriaud calls it, people are exploring, exposing and exploiting forms that exist to create artworks and other cultural products. I am creating my own narratives within these by the use of remix and performance, and 'mess' with ideas of identity and femininity.

Parafeminism is a term that positions my work within the canon of feminism, but also distances it from stereotypes that tend to pigeonhole my work. Parafeminist ideology goes hand in hand with the culture of activity because it lends itself to the idea of the remix, allowing for the advancement and destabilising of feminist thematics, while recognising that it would not be what it is without the history of feminism.

In my research into art and popular music culture I found that crossovers occur when either party is not interested in being confined by the overarching social narratives. While this is not exclusively the way that they interact, music culture can be a way in which to communicate ideas in art to a broader culture.

Choosing to deliver my work within the critical framework of performance art allows me to engage with an audience receptive to identity and gender discussions, while granting me the freedom to maintain my interest in popular culture forms.



## PHOTOS OF FINAL INSTALLATION



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24



Fig. 25

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