

STAGING THE QUEER WOMAN'S BODY

Doubling in *Dirty Plötz*

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In February 2013 I attended *Dirty Plötz*, a cabaret night that was part of Buddies in Bad Times annual Rhubarb Festival in Ontario, Canada. I was there in the role of videographer, both for archival purposes and to capture footage for a documentary I was directing at the time entitled, *You're Not My Target Audience*.¹ Later, in June 2013, I attended a remount of the cabaret, now being staged for Buddies' Pride Festivities, and once again recorded the event on video for archival purposes. The cabaret was comprised of musical, interpretative, video, and theatrical performances by women associated with Toronto's LGBT community. While not specifically mandated to do so, the performances in the cabaret all demonstrated unique facets of queer women's subcultures through the presentation of staged queer women's bodies, with each sequence and scene employing the physical body in an unconventional and/or visceral way.

Applying Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology (Ahmed 2006) as a theoretical and methodological framework alongside Rebecca Schneider's

concept of the "explicit body performer" (Schneider 1997), in this text I reflect on my subjective experience as live spectator at *Dirty Plötz*, and explore the ways in which queer women's corporeal forms are employed as a subversive means of queering hetero/homonormative practices and expectations in three of the cabaret's performances. I argue that the women's performances in this cabaret queer "the body marked female" (Schneider 2001) by embodying the objectified and universalized image of "woman" on stage and stepping beyond the conventions and norms that historically and currently dominate her representations.

Perhaps, what makes queer subcultures so unique is the continuous act of 'queering' themselves. Unlike homonormative cultures, which increasingly seek acceptance in mainstream communities through the acquisition of rights and inclusion within the conventional state (Duggan 2003), queer subcultures keep questioning and challenging pervasive normalizing practices. As David Halperin explains, culture and subculture are in significant opposition, whereby subcultures "willfully" (Ahmed 2014) resist and defy dominant culture (Halperin 2012). In this analysis of three performances at *Dirty Plötz*, I explore such sedition, arguing that the ways

¹ *You're Not My Target Audience* (2013) is a documentary on queer women performances, which screened at festivals worldwide. It is now available for free viewing online at: <https://vimeo.com/72100181>

in which queer women's bodies are staged help to shape, and are shaped by, queer subcultural practices.

Seeing Double: The 'Woman' as Object / Expressive Performer

The queer women performers at *Dirty Plötz* have found ways in which to challenge and transcend traditional Western theatre and performance parameters through their embodied artistic creations and in so doing test the spectators ability to perceive them as merely "straight" objects. I borrow the concept of "straightness" here from Sara Ahmed and employ it not only in terms of sexual preference, but also to connote the traditional values, conventions and myths, often associated with more "linear" life courses – those lives that seem to stay within the lines. In discussing queer orientation Ahmed uses the analogy of tracing paper, where heteronormativity can be thought of as a straightening device. "Straight bodies" appear "in line" when they follow the same line that others follow (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 2006; Ahmed 2014). When traced lines align, they disappear and remain unseen, seemingly natural. In other words, we do not notice normativity, because it appears inherent: the lines that we follow do not seem to be lines at all. Ahmed explains, "Lines disappear through such processes of alignment, so that when even one thing comes 'out of line' with another thing, the 'general effect,' is 'wonky' or even 'queer'" (*Queer Phenomenology* 2006, 66). This "wonky" effect is why queer bodies might experience a kind of "disorientation" in heterosexual and homonormative spaces (Ahmed 2006, "Orientations" 562). We can apply such a theory to performance where mainstream artistic works maintain and perpetuate social norms, making them appear natural and inevitable. In the case of *Dirty Plötz*, the performance strays off-course, challenging the presentation of the woman's body and how she is perceived. Rather than straightening queer

bodies in performance, the cabaret seeks and finds pleasure in the "wonky" potentialities outside of the confines of traditional norms. Indulging and immersing themselves off-course, the performers do not attempt to play straight, but explore what might exist outside of the confines of the lines. The "wonky" effect of disorientation thereby also makes the normative lines visible to audiences and compels us to experience, and in many cases, to celebrate queerness and defiance of norms.

In considering some of the performances at *Dirty Plötz*, I apply Ahmed's concept of lines and tracing paper to Rebecca Schneider's "explicit body performer." Schneider examines how the markings of the identity category 'woman' precede feminist performance artists and become components of their work. She describes the explicit body as the corporeal surface, which, "in representation is foremost a site of social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality—all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning, markings delineating social hierarchies of privilege and deprivilege" (Schneider 1997, 2). She notes the ways in which performance can be used by feminist explicit body performers to "speak-back" to the construction of the "appropriate" and "normal" body, which is systemically perpetuated throughout Western traditions and histories. She explains:

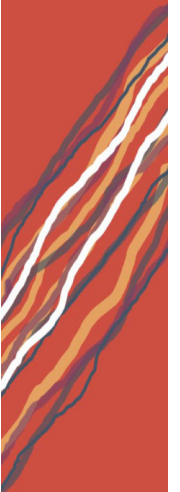
Contemporary feminist performance artists present their own bodies beside or relative to the history of reading the body marked female, the body rendered consumable and consumptive in representation. In this sense, the contemporary explicit body performer consciously and emphatically stands beside herself, in that she grapples overtly with the history of her body's explication, wrestling with the ghosts of that explication ... feminist artists can be understood to present their bodies as dialectical images. (Schneider 2001, vii)

The universalized “body marked female” that feminist performance artists confront in their work, is a very particular kind of body – a body that is heterosexualized, objectified and normalized. The body read as “female” represents not merely what is in the present, but also a history and identity associated with women’s sex, sexuality, and gender. Schneider notes that men and women (and I add those who are gender queer or do not ascribe to a gender binary) “come in a panoply of preferences, experiences, and even bodily markings which threaten a strict understanding of the binary division” (20, 1997). However, as she explains, we live in a society that constructs and advances a binary division of identity categories. The explicit body performer has the ability to acknowledge and annihilate the violent binary that constructs generalizations about what a “woman” is (20, 1997). We can well imagine the binaried “female body” as one that is restricted and bound by the lines of Ahmed’s tracing paper. Challenging this representation, queer women performers in the cabaret leap outside of the lines, performing in the open space, while looking at the ghosts that remain confined within the lines. Indeed, though the performances are queer and “wonky,” and though they shift alignment on the tracing paper, they are still inextricably linked to what remains within the lines.

We can think of this phenomenon (being both inside and outside of the lines) as demanding a double take – indulging in the possibilities off-course while looking into the lines that continually restrict the reception and representation of women’s bodies on and off stage. As Schneider notes, “explicit body performers employ second sight/site, a doubled vision, as they ‘look back’ at visual perspective. Importantly, this looking back occurs both from the inside out and from the ‘space off’—that which is not admitted to the field of vision—simultaneously” (8, 1997). Just as the “wonky” effect of unaligned lines makes them visible, so too the queering of women’s bodies denaturalizes the expectations that make gendered norms appear inherent and make us look again.

Considering this doubling effect – performing the history of the objectified “body marked female” alongside subversive queer women’s bodies – I now turn to a few of the specific performances at *Dirty Plötz*. The observations I make here are based on my firsthand experience viewing two of the cabarets, as well as re-viewing video footage recorded of both events. The three performances I analyze share intriguing features. In each of them, puppetry and vocals are utilized in distinct ways, which corporealize Schneider’s double performance of gender and Ahmed’s “wonky” disorientation. The doubling and subversion is both physical and vocal – most of the performers speak and project some form of dialogue, personal confession, or monologue, yet cease to articulate their ideas in words when they take on their puppeted roles and implicitly confront the representation of woman as consumable normalized object.

In the first of the performances to be analyzed, Jess Dobkin arrives on stage dressed in what would stereotypically be considered a feminine outfit, an appearance and attire, which I immediately read as conventional and normative “woman” when I attended the performance. She carries a box, within which is a roll of tape, a mop head, and colored water in small bottles. Throughout the first half of the piece Dobkin undresses, taking off pieces of clothing to music. As each article of clothing is removed, she wraps tape around her flesh, across her breasts, her thighs, and her head. This binding serves as a way not merely to confine the body, but perhaps more deliberately to draw attention to it as object in the creation of what will become a puppet – the act of taking off the everyday and conventional, replaced by a tight adhesive binding around her entire body, graphically creating a new character/object on stage. Interspersed between these movements, are spoken monologues satiated with cynicism and jovial sardonic humor. Dobkin nonchalantly addresses the abuse she experienced as a child at the hands of her parents, her insecurities about her identity, and the heartbreak of her recent breakup.



Through her actions and words, punctuated by long pauses, Dobkin creates a separation between herself/identity (speaking) and her body as object (stripped, bound and reconstructed). The ways in which Dobkin attended to her body, juxtaposed by her emotional and personal speech, suggest that she is engaging with “the” body, rather than *her* body. Considering the ways in which, as Schneider notes, the physical markers of ‘woman’ are inescapably read on the performance artist, Dobkin’s movements may be read as physically stripping away material signifiers and revealing a body, only to conceal (and confine) it yet again.

In the following and final act of the performance, Dobkin slowly turns around to reveal that she has created, throughout her monologue, a puppet, using a mop, fake eyes, and lipstick painted across her bum. As soon as she turns around there is a release of tension in the collective audience, as audible sighs and laughs are heard. It is shocking to see a new figure on stage, but it also relieves an anxiety that had been building throughout the manifold the silences. With the introduction of new upbeat music and Dobkin facing upstage, her face now invisible, the puppet begins to dance. During the dance Dobkin inserts an enema with red coloured liquid, which she shoots into the audience. Because the puppet seems to be apart from the subjective voice of the performer on stage, this very visceral moment forces the audience to acknowledge again the (dis)connection between the body as object and self as experiencing subject. Dobkin makes visible the overtly objectified, transformed, and consumable “female body” while reclaiming her identity and self through a queer double take from outside the lines.

Jess Dobkin demonstrates both a reclaiming of the presentation of the woman’s body and a noteworthy schism between the self as performer and the “body marked female”—in her performance she does not merely present herself, or even a character on stage, but instead objectifies herself

as woman/ object, and as Schneider argues, as a signifier “beside” herself as subject. In so doing, Dobkin separates her own corporeal body from her articulation of self and experience. Her doubling functions to make the lines on Ahmed’s tracing paper almost palpable. By presenting the historically and currently objectified woman’s body on stage and then subverting its presentation, the lines that previously were “unseen” are made manifest as Dobkin effectively steps outside of them.

Similarly, in the final performance of the second production of the cabaret, a performer by the pseudonym, Ghost Taco, exemplifies Schneider’s explicit body, which Johanna Frank argues aims “to identify the means by which female performance artists position and incorporate their bodies in performance despite (or maybe, in spite of) the fact that the body of the female or feminist performance artist is already implicated in the body of the artist’s work” (Frank 2005/2006).

In her performance, Ghost Taco arrives on a dim stage in a black leather outfit with a sound mixer and a microphone. In a procedure, which seems both ritualistic and surgical in its precision, Ghost Taco prepares the sound mixer and begins experimenting with noises. At first it is unclear what the intention is behind her actions. After an extended period of abstract sounds, melodically increasing and decreasing in volume, the performer extracts the microphone from the stand and inserts a condom on it. Applying lubricant to the condom she then inserts the microphone into her vagina, and with the crackling sound of the microphone against her organs and flesh, an almost operatic symphony begins.

Ghost Taco’s sounds are manipulated and transformed with the sound mixer, with vocal accompaniment coming in and out of the instrumental, and at times alarming music of her body. By giving “voice” to the physical body, whose workings and sounds are typically concealed or ignored,

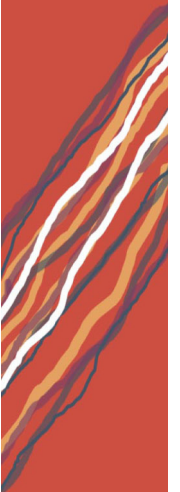
Ghost Taco emphasizes the corporeal body and queers our expectations of what it is and what it should do. Though the only comprehensible words that the performer speaks on stage are, “mic check” as she taps the microphone at the beginning of the performance, the use and manipulation of the internal body’s sound as a means of expression and character creation challenge normative conceptions of the woman and the body.

In her article Johanna Frank looks at performance artist, Laurie Anderson’s work and discusses her use of the auditory, suggesting that Anderson’s disembodied voice in performance acts to “constitute the art-creator as character in as much as it accomplishes the same with the art-object. This enables us to consider both art-creator and art-object as equal entities, and examine voice as that which blurs the boundary between the two” (Frank 2005/2006). Like Dobkin’s puppet, the sound coming out of Ghost Taco’s sound mixer objectifies the performer doubly – at once Ghost Taco is a performer on stage, and simultaneously the sound from her internal organs portrays a separate and equally fascinating object, one which seems both a part of and a part from her character. This divorce between the two objects of perception is so distinct, and so dramatic, that it seems there is a duet on stage, harmonies building between the voice of a person and the disconnected expression from subterranean parts. Where Dobkin’s body was made hyper-visible, with dim lights on the stage, Ghost Taco’s body as visible object moves to the background, and the visceral internal body emerges in the foreground. Though separated entities, voice and sound here function to queer our expectations, blurring the boundaries, as Frank notes, between that which exists inside and outside. We become aware of bodily expectations and the ways bodies are normalized through a wonky and disoriented queer gaze.

In another instance, and the final performance I will discuss here, the host of the evening, Alex Tigchelaar, opens the cabaret by descending the staircase of the venue, nude except for a fur sash around her. During a

provocative dance, in which she moves through the audience and towards the stage, a light (emitted from an orb like moon on stage) reveals another statuesque nude woman painted entirely grey, sitting on a box at the upstage left corner. As Tigchelaar steps onto the stage, the two women engage in what appears to be a choreographed ritual, as if summoning the moon, using their arms and bodies to reflect one and other. In watching the piece, there is a kind of sacral movement in the visual spectacle. The two women move in unison standing across from one and other, as if they are mirror images without a clearly defined source. In so doing, they seemingly draw out the lines of Ahmed’s tracing paper and bring to life the objectified “female body” on stage. The invisible lines of the tracing paper are rendered visible, as the two women then step beyond them through their unconventional presentations of the bodies.

As the first dance progresses, Tigchelaar fingers the other woman, removing her hands from the other’s vagina and smearing them on her own face and body. Tigchelaar’s autonomous agency and liberated sexuality, juxtaposed against the statue’s immobility and silent stance throughout the remainder of the production importantly distinguishes the roles of the two women. In this case, “doubling” is once again evident in an interaction between two performers, one taking on the role of expressive performer, and the other as gendered object. For the rest of the performance, the statuesque performer is presented as nothing more than static object on stage. She remains inside Ahmed’s lines, and does not speak or move outside of her first and final number. She seems to act more as an omnipresent silent symbol than a sentient, expressive being. In contrast, Tigchelaar’s expressive and overtly queer presentation of her body explores and celebrates the space outside of the lines. While the doubling which occurs here differs from Dobkin and Ghost Taco’s more evident doubling of themselves as objects for their own consumption, the interaction between these two performers functions in many ways to precisely the same effect.



Look, Perceive, Repeat, Repeat

Constructed norms and expectations mold a universalized perception of “the body marked female” and how one is oriented towards her. When we are compelled to see her through the lens of a subversive cultural frame, new facets of her identity, her histories, and her experiences are exposed. Ultimately, the singular essentialized and universalized woman’s body is shattered to reveal the diversity within queer women’s experiences. Hence a subcultural phenomenon of disorientation may become a productive and celebratory space of creativity. In this way *Dirty Plötz* demonstrates how disorientation in space can shape and define performance and its reception.

Through staging the unconventional, often nude, at times erotic woman’s body in front of spectators, the performers discussed here present their bodies as simultaneous objects and sites of rebellion. Their work does not shy away from the female form as something, which socio-historically has been objectified by the male gaze, but instead makes shared histories of objectification and confinement simultaneously visible. The performers step outside of convention and expectation to reveal the possibilities that arise from creative representation. These acts engage in a reclamation of the body, increasing the visibility of women’s sexuality and presenting provocative and queer women’s bodies specifically targeted at queer audiences. In this way, the performances in *Dirty Plötz* advocate erotic and sexualized images produced by queer/alternative creators that aim to recode the perception of women’s sexualized bodies and gendered behaviors. The cabaret can be seen as a performative gesture, queering normative mainstream performance, and thus to subvert the conventional relations between a woman and her body, and a performer and her spectator.

Using puppetry, visceral engagement with internal organs, and mirror imagery these performances positively exemplify queer modes of perception and engagement with women’s bodies. Through a simultaneous presentation of the objectified “body marked female” and of expressive queer performers, *Dirty Plötz* invites the audience to step outside of the lines. The disorientation and wonky effect of these performances have the charged capacity to impact not only the audiences’ perception of what occurs on stage, but also their own experiences beyond the theatre. The consumable and objectified image of “woman” presented through puppeted representations seems both linked to and detached from the performer on stage. When I attended the productions, this double imagery made me reflect on how my own body is consumed and read as “female” prior to even speaking a word.

As a subculture, queer women’s aesthetic and creative practice arise partly out of their experiences of being Othered both for their gender and sexual orientation and partly out of a desire to create queer women’s work that questions and counters the limited perceptions of “woman.” In *Dirty Plötz*, this results in unique works that are characterized by distinct and overtly corporeal doubling. Asking us to reconsider the single and essentialized *woman’s body*, the cabaret demonstrates diversities and possibilities within women’s bodies. When we are compelled to question the unity and the singularity of women’s bodies, when we are forced to question the boundaries of her corporeal form, we experience a sense of disorientation, which I, alongside Ahmed, argue may be a space of discovery, joy and politically charged creativity.

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