Sheffield Hallam University

It's Us!: Embracing Disruption through Feminist Approaches to Video Editing

SWOFFER, Sophie <http://orcid.org/0009-0001-0845-0255>

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_It's Us!:_ Embracing disruption through feminist approaches to video editing.

Introduction

The lasting impact of the pandemic has evidently been globally significant for the creative and cultural industries. One of the ways it has greatly affected this kind of work has been the ongoing threat to live performance as the preferred format of creative dissemination. Whilst this may be easing up now as things get back to a new version of 'normal', there was a substantial portion of time where live performance was drastically disrupted. This article will reflect on the different forms of disruption that I have experienced as a maker of live performance, due to COVID-19, but this writing will also reflect exuberantly on the forms of disruption that I create and encourage through my feminist performance art practice. These forms of disruption include new, agentive, creative ways of triumphantly disrupting damaging, historical patriarchal narratives, along with providing innovative ways of disrupting the ongoing effects of the objectifying male gaze onto the female body within feminist performance.

Alongside these fruitful investigations, this article will detail how the through line of disruption within my practice was magnified through the inevitable forms of disruption that I experienced and negotiated as a performance maker due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, this meant that I had to shift my practice from live performance to online digital creative work. Therefore, this article will discuss ways of acquiring digitally created dynamic feminist agency which, I argue, can match and even supersede the agency provided by the live performing body. Indeed, throughout this writing, I offer up new productive ways of disturbing the masculinised objectifying gaze that can be taken up and adopted by feminist artists working with intermedial performance or within a fully video-based context. Moreover, I will discuss and provide new feminist approaches to digital video practice and

'glitching' that can be employed by the artist wanting to make work on alternative and disruptive femininities. Furthermore, my digital work is stemming from a fourth wave feminist perspective, which draws upon new technologies to inspire and celebrate feminist action. Mendes, Ringrose and Keller reflect this positioning and assert that "new formations of feminism and diverse feminist communities *do* exist and are being reimagined and expanded through the use of new media" (2019: 1; emphasis in original).

Throughout my PhD, which took place both before and throughout the pandemic, I created three practice-based explorations, documentation of which can be found on my website sophieswoffer.wixsite.com/xxxitsusxxx. Indeed, I recommend going to my website and watching the digital performance work entitled *It's Us!* before reading the main body of this article. My performance art practice investigates alternative hyper-femininities and monstrosities. To productively investigate monstrous, unbridled or excessive elements of femininity, I have carefully created and performed through specific, subversive and challenging multiple personae throughout each work. For each of these personae, I take as my starting point specific Hollywood archetypes, such as the young unknowing Hollywood 'starlet,' and the ageing 'diva' Hollywood actress. My definition of the starlet is a conventionally, yet unattainably glamorous and attractive young woman who is often groomed, controlled, and limited by patriarchal structures. Susan Sontag discusses this fetishisation of the young female in her 1972 article 'The Double Standard of Aging' and critiques how in patriarchal ideology, the "ideal state proposed for women is docility, which means not being fully grown up" (1972: 293). This docility positions the starlet as pliable and easy to control. The heteronormative glamour of the docile starlet is carefully and deliberately constructed by the aforementioned masculinised structures and developed to become the starlet's most defining quality through which she is then given meaning. This young objectified woman is positioned as a star'let' and not a star, as she is perceived by theorists, such as Laura Mulvey who builds on Sigmund

Freud's writings, as somehow lacking, and infantilized in order to neutralise and contain her potential as threat. My engagement with the concept of the starlet originates from Mulvey's influential psychoanalytical feminist essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1989 [1975]), which investigated women on screen in the classical Hollywood era as objects of a dominant misogynistic gaze. I will be returning to and interrogating this theory later within this article. The diva is regarded as a post-menopausal figure who has decades worth of experience and reputation, but has exceeded her 'prime' position as desirable star. Unlike the starlet, who is perceived in a state of becoming, the diva is firmly present and is moving toward the threat of being 'past it'. The diva's age therefore makes her incompatible with the male gaze, and her larger-than-life persona makes her less 'docile' and therefore less containable than the starlet. Indeed, I will be working in close dialogue with Mulvey's essay on the male gaze demonstrating how my practice builds on, re-envisages, and disrupts this theory. Moreover, I place my own practice in dialogue with feminist artists who subvert the male gaze, and use my performance art to facilitate new ways of thinking about and challenging theorisations of the masculinised viewer. Through my research I re-envisage the aforementioned archetypes through a feminist lens in order to disrupt and dislodge the dynamics of patriarchal systems that surround and limit those archetypes whilst also providing new innovative and feminist destinations for those figures. This is most significant for the starlet archetype who is particularly vulnerable within a post #MeToo context.

The first of my three doctoral performance works directly responds to issues surrounding the starlet figure. *It's Sophie!* (2018), was a live performance work which explored the agentive potential of the starlet, rejecting patriarchal definitions that position her as an unknowing and a passive object. The second performance, also live, entitled *It's Big Mouth!* (2020), celebrated the ageing diva archetype as an embodiment of feminist camp excess, whilst challenging the

'narrative of decline' (Gullete, 1997) that is associated with older women. My third performance *It's Us!* (2021), which took place amongst the effects of the pandemic, consequently took the form of an online video-based performance work, and facilitated a culminative exploration into how the starlet and diva might exist together and share the digital space, pointing towards the importance of feminist camaraderie. Throughout this performance practice, I have fruitfully drawn on intermedial technologies (Kattenbelt 2014, Lavender 2019, Scott and Barton 2019) to add further disruptive potential to my performances of monstrosity and depictions of feminine otherness. I have used projection and multiplied images to layer mediatised versions of the self in each performance, creating an intermedial environment that is characterised by the excess of my feminine image. The writings of Hélène Cixous are particularly useful to consider here through their emphasis on productively feminine multiplicity and states of excess. This is evidenced through her 1976 essay *The Laugh of Medusa*, where Cixous contends that for women there is a "wonder of being several" and that "she doesn't defend herself against these unknown women whom she's surprised at becoming, but derives pleasure from this gift of alterability" (1976: 876). My creative utilisation of digital technologies provides a way to explicitly explore this thread of multiplicity that acts as a through line throughout my practice. The specific varied ways that I have deployed digitised technology throughout my practice significantly evolved and developed in unexpected but fruitful ways, due to the pandemic, which brought with it different challenges and new forms of creative labour and potential due to *It's Us!* having to take place online.

This main body of this article will begin by discussing the specific aspects of Mulvey's theory of the male gaze that I productively disrupt and expand on with my digital performance *It's Us!*. I will also make use of Cixous' writings, reiterating and developing the aforementioned significance of Cixous work on the multifaceted and unpredictable quality of femininity, which works against the notion of their being a singular fixed form of feminine

identity. I will also make reference to the practice of sex-positive artist Penny Slinger,

detailing how I have fruitfully built upon her playful creative techniques which disrupt and

challenge the notion of stereotypical femininty. I will focus in detail on *It's Us!* exploring

and highlighting my innovative feminist approaches and methodologies to digital practice

that I undertook throughout the pandemic, which can be adopted by the feminist video maker.

These strategies include the practice of 'vidding', specific feminist approaches to video

editing and feminist irony as a performative tactic.

Starting points: Disrupting the 'male gaze'

Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' was ground-breaking at its

time of release for psychoanalytical film theory. Forty years have passed since Mulvey

warned us of the masculinised position of the spectator in Hollywood films of the 1940s and

1950s, and critics, including Mulvey herself, have challenged the outdated elements of this

theory (Doane 1982; Kaplan 1982; Mayne 1991). My research and practice work in dialogue

together to re-envisage Mulvey's thoughts on the male gaze. My PhD thesis disrupted the

male gaze as critiqued by Mulvey, by pushing against it through my own feminist

performance art practice. By doing this I have worked to uncover new subversive potential

within the theory, rather than dismissing the theory as purely outdated and non-productive for

feminist work. My practice directly disrupts the theorised idea that the masculine equates

with activity and the feminine with passivity, which Mulvey suggests is "embedded not just

in the image/object being looked at, but embedded in the gaze of the viewer (traditionally

characterised as *male)*" (1989: 18). A way that I disrupt this gendered assumption of power is

through filling the creative roles of performer, camera operator and video editor throughout

my practice. Through doing this I take stock of my own feminine image and how it is to be

consumed by the spectator. Mulvey considers the camera and how it is used within classical

Hollywood film, as an enforcement of patriarchy. Here Mulvey is building on Freud's

terminology of 'scopophlia,' which means to take pleasure and gratification from images of women on film, treating them as "objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey, 1989: 17). Yet, within my practice, and specifically my digital performance *It's Us!* which I will discuss in detail later on, I perform as both the subject and object of my own disruptively excessive and multiple femininity. Whilst doing this, I use my practice to make my audiences aware of their own role and complicity within the ongoing effects of the masculinised gaze, and to encourage them to perceive ways to disrupt it within their everyday lives.

Mulvey's recent revisitations of her germinal essay emphasise the issues present within the original publication. In her 2015 article 'The Pleasure Principle' Mulvey states how modes of spectatorship "were always more complex than the "Visual Pleasure" essay allowed, and the "male gaze" could always be transgressed by anyone who cares to assert their own sexual identity and proclivity" (2015: 51). Mulvey expands these thoughts in her 2019 book *Afterimages,* which consists of essays and writings that Mulvey published after her 2006 book *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image.* In *Afterimages,* Mulvey responds to the varied and very valid line of critique and questioning surrounding her original theorisations of the male gaze.[1] Building on Mulvey's recent complications of the theory, I re-envisage the model through my own practical explorations of the resilient possibilities for the feminist performance maker. These possibilities are then produced through a revised challenge to an ongoing heteronormative masculinised gaze. Moreover, I use my own feminist performance art to uncover new ways of disrupting, reclaiming, and deconstructing the male gaze, to produce and celebrate innovative alternatives to heteronormative

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[1] In a 2011 interview with Roberta Sassatelli, Mulvey contends that her original 1975 essay was 'written as a polemic' and that she 'had no interest in modifying the argument, it had to be rigorous, to attack as it were' (2011: 128). This sense of militancy within the writing is reflective of the 1970s as a time that required drastic change.

femininity. I will be highlighting these feminist possibilities throughout this article, which were fruitfully expanded on during the pandemic through the use of innovative digital strategies of making performance.

<u>Covid disruption & 'Vidding'</u>

I am now going to discuss my disrupted approach to my performance *It's Us!* (2021). This performance investigated how the starlet and the diva might join forces, share space and exist alongside one another in order to eradicate the patriarchal studio systems of the classical Hollywood era, as well as its misogynist legacy in contemporary Hollywood. *It's Us!* was a piece of digital practice-based research, which consisted of an introductory clip and three ten-minute performance videos that were embedded within a website that I had created. Lauren Barri Holstein is a provocative, contemporary feminist performance artist who also works with persona and highlights how the application of practice-based research allows for the practitioner to 'enact' alternative possibilities of the research (in Kartsaki 2016: 120). Holstein explains how through this methodology, the performer "has the potential to produce, generate and create in the moment of enactment" (ibid). Therefore, in the moment of creative play, the performer can test out and find alternate ways of embodying their research which would not be possible through desk-based research (2016: 120). This builds on Smith and Dean's findings about practice-based research, which assert that this kind of research brings "with it new ways of thinking about research and new methodologies for conducting it," along with "a raised awareness of the different kinds of knowledge that creative practice can convey" (2009:1). Due to COVID-19, my entire approach to making performance had to shift by finding innovative 'non-live' ways of making practice-based research around alternative femininities and the male gaze. I 'enacted' the possibilities of my research, as Holstein encourages, through adopting and learning new possibilities of making creative, feminist digital practice instead of live performance work. As Smith and Dean emphasise, I had to

consider and take on new methodologies of making creative work, that differed to my previous practice through not including my live performing body or a live audience. Whilst the move online presented some limitations, such as not being able to witness the live reactions of my spectators, it also offered new and exciting intermedial techniques of acquiring agency.

In order to create my own digital video works, I built on the creative methodology of 'vidding'. Rebecca Tushnet states how the "genre of vidding, [is] a type of remix made mostly by women" which "demonstrates how creativity can be disruptive, and how that disruptiveness is often tied to ideas about sex and gender" (2011: 2134). Tushnet continues to explain how "'vidders' make 'vids,' which are 're edited footage from television shows and movies," that focus on guiding the spectator through "revisioned images" (2011: 2135). It is a practice that grew out of media fandom (ibid) and Morgan Dawn outlines how the history of 'vidding' "focuses on a small slice of time and space: the community of women who were fans of TV and movies popular in the Western world" in the 1970s through to the 1990s (2018).[2] I utilised the practice of vidding by actively remixing old footage of Hollywood actresses in with my own filmed work to produce a feminist alternative to the patriarchal narrative of the Hollywood studio system that dominated a large portion of these actresses' careers. I drew specifically on TV interview appearances of Hollywood actresses at later stages in their career when they are older and when the studio system is beginning to collapse. In these moments of practice I re-envisioned these Hollywood figures as having an agency and autonomy that was not controlled and limited by the patriarchal studio. For instance, I had carefully selected moments from films and interviews that showed these actresses in particularly empowered moments and then contrasted this with footage of less glamorous aspects of their later careers. This served to display and critique how

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[2] I acknowledge that vidding processes have been enhanced by social media and the popularity of creating video content but I am deliberately harking back to the earlier practice of vidding.

the ageing Hollywood actresses were often type cast in grotesque roles in B-rated horror films once they reached a certain age, which used characters such as senile hags and crones to present female ageing as a site of monstrous spectacle. I drew specifically on these exploitation films for this trailer in terms of the aesthetic and as part of reclaiming these later performances. I used this aspect of vidding to find out what feminist potential might be possible in this alternate, digital reality that I created within *It's Us!*. Moreover, I employed the creative methodology of vidding throughout my practice, by re-organising and editing old footage, to facilitate a refreshed and disruptive interpretation for the spectator and enhancing that disruption through my own contemporary filmed footage.
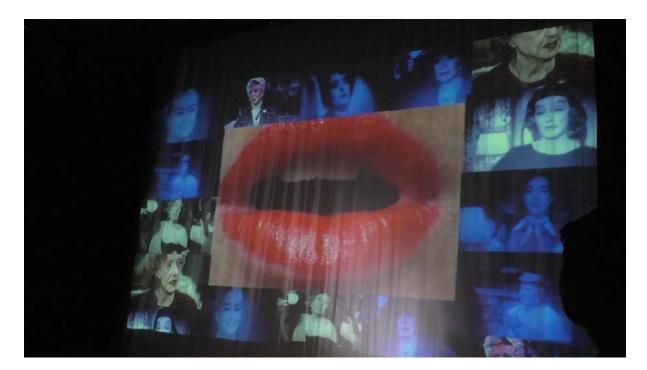

Figure 1*, Image of projection on curtain from It's Big Mouth!*

The creative methodology of vidding was one that I had started to work with in previous performance *It's Big Mouth!*, which took place in 2020 before I fully immersed myself within the methodology for *It's Us!*. Indeed, COVID enabled me to engage in greater depth and breadth with the practice of vidding. For the opening section of *It's Big Mouth!,* I created and projected a film title sequence and trailer for the performance that was made up of footage of

myself performing a constructed persona of the diva archetype, mashed up with moments of film that depicted famous onscreen divas, such as Joan Crawford, Marlene Dietrich, Lana Turner, along with Gloria Swanson and Bette Davis. This aesthetic decision heightened and made explicit the construction behind my intermedial performance techniques, along with emphasising the construction of the diva archetype as one that is rooted within an exaggerated camp aesthetic, which I will discuss further later in this writing. This footage was then projected onto a large curtain that hung at the back of the performance space, thus referencing the mechanisms of cinema projection, and enlarging the diva's image, reiterating her excess.

I edited my opening film sequence together in a way that would juxtapose earlier moments of an actress' career with later appearances in 'Hag Horror' films to emphasise how Hollywood rejected and humiliated these women as they aged. These sorts of films emerged in the early 1960s and are what Peter Shelley termed "Grande Dame Guignol," (2009) also known as "Hag Horror" cinema (Fisiak, 2019: 8).[3] Moreover, 'Hag Horror' films are crafted to highlight the older female characters' narrative of ageing as monstrous, which problematically reflected the Hollywood studios' perceptions of their ageing female stars. For example, I included a shot of Crawford delivering a provocative aside in *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and a clip of her image being grotesquely sliced in half by an axe for the trailer for William Castle's horror B film *Strait Jacket* (1964). These two opposing shots displayed how Crawford's star persona shifted throughout her career, due to the camp, grotesque roles that she was cast in as she became older. *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962), as Robertson explains, "imprinted the image of Joan Crawford as a neurotic female grotesque- all flashing eyes, padded shoulders, and maniacally clenched teeth" (Robertson, 1999: 87). Through editing contrasting shots together, I made

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[3]Fisiak continues to explain how Hag Horror cinema is "a conflation of high camp, Gothic excess, superfluous theatricality" along with a "boundless nostalgia for the Golden Era of Hollywood" (2019: 318). Hag Horror films often depict an exaggerated demise of an older female character, who is, as Fisiak explains "struggling to face the inevitable process of aging and dying, she gradually succumbs to mental and physical illnesses that strengthen the trauma and lead to her social exclusion" (2019:318).

explicit to my audience, the patriarchal treatment of ageing actresses withing Hollywood and instead placed them within my own digitally constructed environment. I built on this consideration of my own feminist digital environment when I began to make my next performance *It's Us!.*

It's Us!

With the move online of *It's Us!* I contend that I was able to facilitate an additional level of agency as maker of the practice. Constructing the website and, thus, the virtual environment with which my spectators engaged, enabled an additional level of control over the work. As such, I drew on fourth wave feminism's emphasis on online activism as a way of mobilising collective action through digital means. Mendes, Ringrose and Keller discuss how "new media" is being used to "organise to challenge contemporary sexism, misogyny, and rape culture" (2019: 1; emphasis in original). They continue to state that the "increased visibility of these activist initiatives is largely due to the ways that digital technologies are being used in creative and innovative ways" (2019: 2). I position my practice in *It's Us!* as coming from this kind of orientation. Usually when I perform, I work within a building owned by an academic institution, which has its own set of rules to which my live performing body is expected to adhere, but for *It's Us!* I felt I was able to break away to a greater degree from the institution and instead created a space on my terms.[4]

I presented *It's Us!* as an exclusive 'star at home' tour, that allowed my spectators, or my 'fans', as I addressed them in the piece, to peruse 'Ms Swoffer's' house. Spectators were commanded to meet me in the foyer via an online invitation, which took them to the homepage of my

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[4] However, when making this work, I was aware that I did not have full ownership of the digital space, as I created the website using the company 'Wix' and so it does display Wix branding. Yet, my use of the free option that Wix provides, offered a partial release from absolute containment by the company and displayed my effort to not be caught within the platform that showcasing my work. This was not a complete freedom from commercialism but was a knowing push towards that freedom in a theatrical space that was constructed on my terms.

website. Further instructions were then given on how to enter the rooms of my home, which were my bathroom, my kitchen and my boudoir. I chose these rooms due to their differing functions and gendered social expectations. I purposefully selected spaces that were often featured in 'stars at home' articles, such as the bedroom, which was seen as an enticing private space with its links to female glamour and sexuality. I selected the kitchen space due to its positioning in these magazine features as a functional space for the female star to convey her domesticity. I was interested in how I could disrupt and trouble the preconceptions of each of these classic spaces and create personae that did not engage in expected or appropriate behaviour within them. I chose to create a bathroom video as a means of undoing the notion of the perfect Hollywood star, by exposing a usually secret aspect of 'Ms Swoffer's' life and home.

The Domme/ Star Persona

Using my own name immediately played with the boundaries of the real, but also clearly served to develop the 'star' persona being performed. Moreover, in *It's Us!* I introduced a third persona: the 'star,' which I interpreted as a diva in training. This persona sat chronologically between the young starlet and the ageing diva archetypes. If we consider the starlet as a trainee in her craft, and the diva as an established figure who can choose to use or reject her position of respectability, I presented the star as the embodiment of consummate professionalism, fully embedded within her role. Throughout *It's Us!* I present a connection between the 'Domme' archetype and the star figure. I achieved this through crafting my 'star' persona in 'The Kitchen' as a threatening dominatrix style figure. Danielle J. Lindemann suggests that the Dominatrix is "perceived with an unsteady mixture of repulsion, disinterest, concern, amusement, and fascination" (2010: 9). Therefore, within 'The Kitchen' space within *It's Us!* I built on the culturally understood threat/fascination dichotomy of the female dominatrix, as a tactic to demand attention whilst exerting control over the viewer of the screen. This was an

attempt to enhance the agentive domination achieved by my live performing body occupying the same space as the spectator in my previous two performances. Moreover, use of the Domme/Star was a performative tactic to demand the attention of the spectator and to not allow them to be distracted, wherever they were watching the work.

Developing on this context of threat, I positioned the Domme/Star as having murderous potential, continuing the sense of threat that surrounds the murderous and senile ageing female characters in Hag Horror. I expanded this threat in 'The Kitchen' into one that celebrated the feminist capacity of both the diva and the Domme/Star, for, as Thais E. Morgan outlines, "in her ambiguity and excess the dominatrix confounds more than delights the male spectator, putting into jeopardy his gaze of power" (1989:7). My directorial direction of the spectator's gaze through this fully digital performance intensified that experience of jeopardy. Moreover, this sense of 'confounding' was something that I deliberately deployed with spectators of *all* genders who might utilise the male gaze. There is a clear connection between the figure of the dominatrix and the figure of the diva in the making, as each of their displays of excess position them as a threat to the masculinised gaze. I perceive all three of my personae (starlet/star/diva) as having a relationship to the Domme. The starlet should be viewed as the trainee Domme, the star as the Domme figure, and the diva as moving through and beyond the role of Domme to further levels of excess that materialise via adopting specialised aspects of the camp and the grotesque.

Figures 2 & 3, Stills from 'The Kitchen' in *It's Us!*

I communicated the role of the Domme/Star through the ways in which she engaged with the space and audience as well as her relationship to food in 'The Kitchen'. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett states that "food, and all that is associated with it, is already larger than life. It is already highly charged with meaning and affect. It is already performative and theatrical"

(1999: 1). I perceived a connection between the understanding of the performativity of food and the theatricality of the Domme figure. The Domme is also "highly charged with meaning and affect," and aligns with Bobby Baker's justification of how in her performance practice, food refers to her "role as a woman as a sort of provider or nourisher" (Heathfield, 1999: 98) or feeder. I positioned the Domme as representative of the potential of the phallic mother in her fruitful capacity to overwhelm. This positioning of the phallic mother moved beyond Baker's less aggressive use of food. I explored this through emphasising the role of the maternal provider, through moments of infantilising and force feeding the audience via the camera lens. Figure 2 demonstrates how I edited the footage to accentuate an aspect of intrusion, which was further exaggerated through lines such as 'I have worked so hard to put food on the table, so you will eat!'.
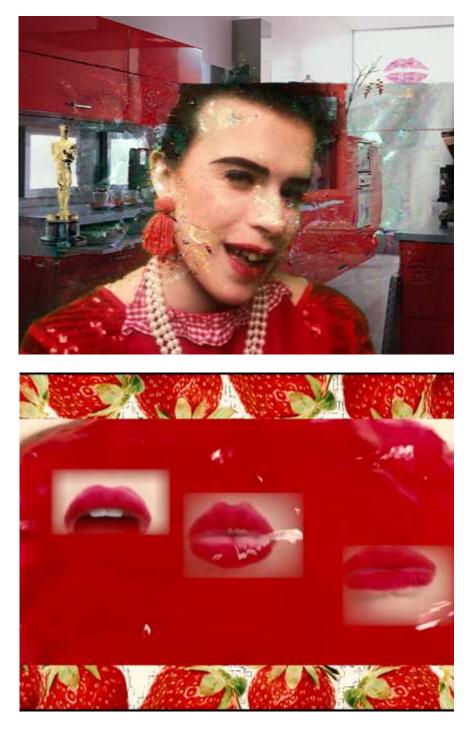
A Feminist Approach to Editing

When editing the footage for *It's Us!* I built on my previous experience of vidding in *It's Big Mouth!* in order to develop my own distinctively feminist digital environment. This manifested through a feminist approach to editing that was joyously rooted within a sense of feminist irony, which Lydia Rainford suggests is a form of "internalised agency" for the female performer (in Gorman, 2021: 31). Firstly, in *It's Us!* I deliberately commanded the masculine tools of digital technology and employed them as a female artist to exaggeratedly reveal the construction of fetishized femininty. However, I was also working in acknowledgement of Melanie Ball's recent writings on women's roles within British film production in the 1930s. Ball discusses how the increase in British film production in the 30s "created a demand for "feminine" labour," which materialised through "editing roles" (2021: 3). Ball explains how *Picturegoer* magazine in the early 1930's ran features that advertised Film Production as an "attractive employment destination for women" with feature titles such as "Lady with Scissors" (2021: 3). Yet, Bell states that "the usual male self-aggrandizement

was a gendered narrative" within the British film industry and that women's place within it "was being imagined in increasingly narrow terms" (2021: 11). Through my digital editing role in *It's Us,* I re-imagined the 'Lady with Scissors' as the 'Domme with the Knife', a figure that cuts out and crafts her own agency through editing digital work.

 'The Kitchen' specifically showcased my feminist approach to video and audio editing that I deployed throughout *It's Us!.* When considering the video practice within this digital room, it is useful to refer to Mulvey's writings on the 'pensive spectator' who is a different type of spectator to the cinematic spectator that she addressed in the 70s. The pensive spectator, through use of newer homemade viewing technologies, can pause the action bringing back "the resonance of the still photograph", whilst also choosing to watch certain moments again and again (2006: 186). Having the option to pause the film also gives the spectator more opportunities to operate a covert objectifying gaze upon the female stars on screen in the comfort of their own homes. Therefore, Mulvey argues that as the "female spectator is now able to manipulate and control the image she can reverse the power relationship so central to the cinema of 24 frames a second, in which the female spectator was amalgamated into the male look, and the male protagonist controlled the dynamism and the drive of the image" (2006: 139). Yet, through *It's Us!* I also reversed the power relationship by engaging in 'vidding' processes by slicing up and reordering my footage, along with manipulating that footage to represent my body as a challenge to the male gaze. However, I developed this power reversal further. Whilst my spectators could pause my image, I carefully constructed each image to represent my body in a way that called the masculinised gaze into question and I drove the image as the central protagonist/s. I then extended this disruption of the masculinised forms of viewing through engaging in glitching as a performative technique.

Embracing the 'glitch' as a form of disruption

'The Kitchen' explicitly adopted an approach to video editing that celebrated and embraced the disruptive messiness of femininity through an engagement with 'glitching'. My feminist video practice developed on the use of glitch art as a well-established form in new media art. Goriunova and Shulgin suggest that a glitch in software "is a mess that is a moment," and "a possibility to glance at software's inner structure" (in Sundén, 2008: 27). I was interested in how I could use the 'messy' or incomplete edit to draw attention to and expose the construction of my personae, and hence make explicit the construction of gender. This further located my practice within a tone of feminist irony, as Gorman explains how ironic work made by feminist performance artists is "deconstructive in so far as they draw attention back to the process of performance making and foreground expectation" (2021: 70). Indeed, I edited my footage in a way that disrupted the performance by revealing the 'inner structure' of the work and how my personae, with their specific approaches to femininity, were constructed.

Figures 4 & 5, Stills from 'The Kitchen' in *It's Us!*

Jenny Sundén argues that gender, femininity in particular, is something that is

"fundamentally technological, *and hence broken"* (2016: 23; emphasis in original). In other

words, Sundén suggests that femininity is a construction and thus likens gender to digital

technology in that it is ultimately destined to have moments of disruptive glitching and

failure. My D.I.Y aesthetic in 'The Kitchen' points towards Sundén's conclusion by

portraying my image of femininty as often incomplete or broken in some way. As you can see from figure 4, I edited the footage together so that it purposefully cut off sections of my image, such as the top of my head. This emphasised to my audience how my digital image, along with my surrounding virtual environment, was artificially created, and therefore, always at risk too of failure.[5]

This sense of technological risk further emphasised how my performance within 'The Kitchen' trod a fine line between calm and chaos, in that I (as both artist and the Domme/Star) could choose to slice apart the digital image at any point and rebuild it. As you can see from figure 5, I experimented with cropping out sections of my face from other pieces of footage and placing them within a new digitally manipulated image. I purposefully did so in a way that did not blend in or neatly combine these images, but instead emphasised their juxtaposition by creating a digital clash against its background. This can be likened to the practice of Penny Slinger, an artist whose practice I built on and developed in *It's Us!*. Slinger's art-work disrupts stereotypical, gendered roles and suggests a feminine identity for female identifying individuals to explore that is joyously excessive and explosive. This is communicated through Slinger's 70s surrealist-inspired photocollage work that challenges her imposed 'feminine role' as object, through her playful parodies of normative femininity. My purposeful clashes within my digital environment can be compared to Slinger's process of collaging where she explains, in a 2016 interview with Alissa Clarke, how she "take[s] elements that are familiar, but you recombine them in a way, which is unsettling and unfamiliar", creating "relationship[s] between things that opens you up into a new world" (Clarke, 2021: 45). This agency over the

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[5] Halberstam's writings in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) are particularly useful here when considering the liberating freedoms of failing against capitalist perceptions of success. Halberstam explains that "while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative effects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (2011: 3).

digital image along with the construction of the Domme/Star in this room served to further facilitate my sense of control over the space and over the spectator in a way that I did not achieve within my previous live performance works.

Tactics of Disruption

This article has demonstrated my original approach to disrupting the male gaze through innovative forms of feminist digital performance practice. I have discussed strategies that can be productively adopted by the feminist video maker, including a combination of vidding practices, feminist video editing, threatening feminine personae and an application of feminist irony. These tactics were employed to reveal the exciting yet threatening unpredictability of femininity, along with celebrating and drawing attention to its constructedness. Along with this, I have highlighted how specific derided film figure archetypes can productively be questioned and interrogated through feminist performance art. Through using the digital to disrupt and provide alternatives to the masculinised gaze, I have also expanded the level of challenge that my live body posed in my previous performances and used intermedial technology to facilitate an enhanced state of aggression against damaging patriarchal power structures. Cixous asserts that "throughout literature masculine figures all say the same thing: "I'm reckoning" what to do to win," (1981: 47). Yet through *It's Us!* I created a digital environment where winning is not an option for the masculinised gaze. There is only space for the feminine to be triumphant.

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