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Hyper-femininity as radical resistance: re-envisaging the starlet through a feminist practice of solidarity in It's Sophie! (2018)

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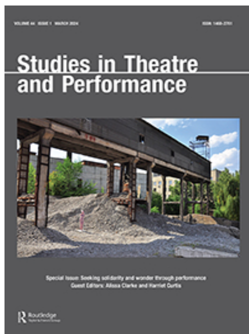

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Hyper-femininity as radical resistance: re-envisaging the starlet through a feminist practice of solidarity in *It's Sophie!* (2018)

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ABSTRACT

This article challenges the often-derided role of the young and apparently naive 'starlet' figure in film and stage performance. My engagement with the concept of the starlet originates from Laura Mulvey's influential psychoanalytical feminist essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1989 [1975]), which investigates women in classical Hollywood cinema as objects of a misogynistic gaze. My definition of the starlet builds on this work and identifies her as a conventionally yet unattainably glamorous and attractive young woman, who is groomed and policed by patriarchal structures. Mulvey explains how, within the patriarchy of the Hollywood studio system, the 'determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly' (1989: 16). This article analyzes how my performance practice seeks new ways of resisting and deconstructing the male gaze to produce innovative alternatives to heteronormative femininity. Specifically, I examine *It's Sophie!* (2018), which presents a starlet who explodes the idea of a fixed masculinised archetype. The starlet personae in *It's Sophie!* engage in subversive hyper-femininities through endurance-based posing that serves to explore their magnified sexuality and monstrous potential. This article presents wonderous and worrying states of unbridled femininity that directly challenge the masculinised gaze.

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Introduction: seeking solidarity for the starlet

In her book *Living A Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed explains that to 'build feminist dwellings, we must dismantle what has already been assembled' (2017: 2).[1] This article aligns with Ahmed's urge to find feminist alternatives to the ongoing dominant patriarchy that attempts to limit and control feminine potential. The male gaze was theorised by Laura Mulvey over 40 years ago, yet the patriarchal gaze retains its oppressive force on female-identifying bodies. This article, by re-envisaging and expanding Mulvey's theorisation, uncovers innovative ways of dismantling the masculinised gaze through contemporary feminist performance art. Deploying an interdisciplinary lens – drawing from both female film figures and feminist performance art – I demonstrate the agentive potential

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of alternative and monstrous femininities that deconstructs women's relationship to objectification. In doing so, I offer subversive practice-based tactics for the feminist performance maker to adopt in order to challenge patriarchal fetishisation of female-identifying bodies. When I use the terms 'women' and 'female' throughout this writing, I am being inclusive of all female-identifying individuals, whilst also aligning with an intersectional focus.[2] This inclusivity specifically works against patriarchal narratives that typically do not acknowledge the multiplicities evident within femininity. As Ahmed states, 'A feminist project is to find ways in which women can exist in relation to other women and how women can be in relation to each other' (2017: 14). This is the only way that as feminists we can approach the topic and practice of solidarity, as the absence of essentialising biological characteristics provides more inclusionary possibilities to radically 'dismantle' patriarchal histories.

This article, and the practice-based research on which it reflects, challenges the often derided and under-acknowledged role of the unknowing or naive 'starlet' figure. As Katherine Farrimond suggests, there has been much written on the 'very specific mythology about tragic starlets and the pitfalls of Hollywood' (2013: 34), but little on the starlet as a figure that resists the male gaze through her own self-constructed, agentive femininity. This article calls for a radical repositioning of the starlet as a figure of feminist wonder, and proposes that the starlet can be put to use in feminist critiques of the fetishisation of the female body. Building on Mulvey's definition of the starlet, which suggests that the fetish of the female Hollywood star 'condenses with a white fetishism, deflecting with glamour the anxiety provoked by racial difference' (Mulvey 2019: 1), I offer a reading of the starlet that explodes the boundaries of the heteronormative glamour celebrated by the Hollywood studio system and instead engages in a hyper-femininity that is simultaneously sexualised and monstrous. Building on Mulvey's recent

Figure 1. Sophie Swoffer, *It's Sophie!* (2018). Photo by George Tildesley.

Figure 2. Sophie Swoffer, *It's Sophie!* (2018). Photo by George Tildesley.

complications of her 1975 theorisation of the male gaze, I re-envisage this model through my own practice as a feminist performance maker. My hope is for like-minded feminist creatives to draw upon and develop the techniques that I propose throughout this article in their own work. By and large, I position my practice as contributing to feminist theorisations of solidarity and the significance of women working together against patriarchal limitation.

This article reflects on my 2018 performance *It's Sophie!* (see Figure 1). I recommend viewing the documentation of this, which can be found on my website (sophieswoffer.wixsite.com/xxxitsusxxx), after reading this article. This performance actively unravelled established understandings of the starlet by engaging in a subversive form of hyper-femininity, a magnified and transgressive version of the heteronormative femininity that Mulvey discusses. Nonbinary performance and drag artist Sin Wai Kin states that their deployment of hyper-femininity represents an 'over the top and extravagant embodiment of femininity. It's not a critical position of femininity, and it's not a completely celebratory position on femininity – it's both at the same time' (quoted in Hann 2022: 295). This simultaneity is also reflected in *It's Sophie!*, in which I both critiqued and celebrated femininity by performing exaggerated sexual and sometimes monstrous feminine

personae, whilst externally stylizing my body to epitomise this transgression through costuming, posing, and self-exhibition. Maria-Elena Buszek uses the term 'awarish' to refer to 'sexually self-aware, representational subjects,' and applies the term specifically to early pin-up artists who, through their work, knowingly showcased 'transgressive sexual identities' (1999: 142). The starlet in *It's Sophie!* is 'awarish' of her own potential for subversion through emphasised and excessive presentations of her agentive sexuality. Displaying hyper-feminine sexuality through the body provided a means of rejecting Mulvey's interpretation of Sigmund Freud's writings, which position 'the woman as signifier for the male other' due to her 'lacking' the phallus (Mulvey 1989: 17). In *It's Sophie!*, in alignment with theorisations of multiple, embodied, and excessive femininities (Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen 1976; Irigaray 1985),[3] I instead presented myself as the woman who explodes the fixed, male-constructed iteration of femininity and moves beyond the star'let' to become the star of the performance. I argue that re-envisioning the male gaze through performance can create innovative and critical feminist positionings of the starlet archetype. To explore how these re-positionings were being understood by audiences of *It's Sophie!*, I collated responses to anonymised questionnaires and scrutinised them as part of my research; I refer to these responses throughout the article.

In my research, I explicitly draw on feminist voices and practices by enacting 'citation', as Ahmed proposes, as 'feminist memory' (2017: 15). Acknowledging the labour of women's work is crucial, particularly, as Lucy Robinson highlights, because 'if our work as feminist historians is to uncover the marginalisation and agency of women in the past, then we owe it to those that inspired us to do the same with our work processes' (Robinson 2018). This feminist approach to citation also aligns with Ahmed's critique of the term 'seminal', which refers to 'how ideas are assumed to originate from male bodies' (2017: 16). In this article, I am actively drawing upon primarily female-identifying and non-binary voices as acts of feminist solidarity, and placing my own practice in dialogue with feminist and sex-positive female artists – namely, Lauren Barri Holstein, Penny Slinger, and Sin Wai Kin – who have influenced my work. These artists work to oppose damaging heteronormative ideals, and I too position my performance practice as contributing to this work. Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris position 'performance as an ideal site' for the 'exploration and embodiment' of anti-racist, queer, and feminist work that 'counter[s] or deconstruct[s] the violence of the white Western feminist "we"' that excludes other kinds of feminine experiences' (2006: 9). My practice builds on past and current feminist performance – in which I include film, performative photography, and live performance – to investigate and challenge the fetishisation of the female body. The notion of the self as a speaking subject is also central to my research, and I therefore identify and delineate the voices of feminist artists and film figures who have influenced my work.

I begin by defining the starlet and hyper-femininity within the framework of Mulvey's theory, and offer a detailed analysis of posing in *It's Sophie!* to acquire a challenging feminine agency. I then outline my engagement with stillness and boredom in *It's Sophie!* by questioning audience/performer dichotomies and connecting my work to the performance practice of Lauren Barri Holstein. I will demonstrate further creative connections between *It's Sophie!* and the surrealist artworks of Penny Slinger and drag practice by Sin Wai Kin by examining how positionings that situate femininity as passive are demolished, and the feminine body is defamiliarized and made excessive. Finally, I demonstrate

how my practice, particularly in the presentation of my own body in *It's Sophie!*, draws upon Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray's theorised challenges to woman as lack by displaying the female body as unapologetically present and active. These subversive possibilities for women adopting hyper-feminine self-presentations specifically highlight the constructedness of femininity as opposed to promoting the idea of women as biologically connected to the feminine.

Re-envisaging the male gaze

Ahmed states that 'A significant step for a feminist movement is to recognize what has not ended' (2017: 5). It is clear to me that in a post #metoo climate, the destabilising effects of the male gaze on female identifying bodies is ongoing. It is by not accepting that we are 'past' the male gaze that we are able to continue working in resistance to it. We must re-envisage the theoretical model in order to find new ways to, in Ahmed's words, 'dismantle what has already been assembled' (2017: 2). Indeed, over 40 years have passed since Mulvey articulated 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 1983; Mayne 1990). This article works in dialogue with Mulvey's revisitations of 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1989 [1975]), particularly the emphasis in her 2015 article 'The Pleasure Principle' on how modes of spectatorship 'were always more complex than the "Visual Pleasure" essay allowed,' and the claim that 'the "male gaze" could always be transgressed by anyone who cares to assert their own sexual identity and proclivity' (1989: 51).[4] Mulvey's more recent publication also highlights her previous lack of consideration (in the 1975 essay) of racial and queer presence, and modes of female spectatorship (2019: 242).[5]

My definition of the starlet is that of 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 woman in '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 masculinised structures and becomes the starlet's most defining quality through which she is then given meaning. This figure is positioned as a star'let' and not a star, because she is perceived by theorists – such as Mulvey, who builds on the work of Freud – as somehow lacking, and is thus infantilized in order to neutralise and contain her potential as threat. My engagement with the starlet develops from Mulvey's own writings on women on screen in the classical Hollywood era as objects of the misogynistic gaze.

Mulvey explains how, within the patriarchy of the Hollywood studio system, the 'determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly' (1989: 16). The woman's purpose in these films is to remain fixed in her position as 'bearer of meaning,' and 'not maker of meaning', a role given instead to her male counterparts (1989: 18). Mulvey's phrasing, 'styled accordingly' (16), refers to the laborious process of glamour production that young actresses were expected to passively endure in order to be judged and awarded the commodified status of 'starlet'. Often manifesting as exploitative forms of emotional and physical coercion and violence, this

dehumanising process facilitated by the studio system effectively erased young actresses' previous identities and created and forcibly imposed new ones that adhered more suitably to the masculinised 'phantasy' (Mulvey 1989: 16). My configurations of the starlet in *It's Sophie!* (2018) re-envisaged and challenged Mulvey's theory of the male gaze in order to transcend and subvert the starlet's objectification, and find agency and boundless potential in her own feminine identity.

Strike a pose: boredom and endurance

In *It's Sophie!* I employed hyper-feminine, transgressive personae, progressing from a sexualised beauty vlogger who flirted, posed, and teased within the boundaries of heteronormative glamour, to a spitting, shaking, staring starlet whose abject behaviour spilled out of and submerged these boundaries. The performance was built around three endurance-based poses that I held for up to five minutes, objectifying myself to such a degree that my representation of the starlet propelled the audience into self-conscious feelings of discomfort. Using posing as a hyper-feminine act of endurance and agency, I rejected its purpose as fodder for masculinised consumption and demonstrated its subversive potential within the frame of the male gaze. Through prolonged provocative posing (see Figure 2), I both enacted and subverted (by radically extending its duration) what Amelia Jones has called the 'rhetoric of the pose,' which she defines as the 'long-standing Western code of female objectification' (1998: 52).

Indeed, I argue that the moments of stillness and posing were the most subversive parts of *It's Sophie!*. These moments operated to deliberately stunt the flow of the piece and work against audience expectations that the semi-nude female body should provide erotic stimulation or entertainment. Jones explains how feminist performance artists have engaged with and emphasised the pose as a way of 'mimicking the immobility induced by the gaze, reflecting its power back on itself' (1998: 154). By performing endurance-based poses I sought to challenge the 'patriarchal binary' in which, as Jones states, 'conventionally men act and women pose' (1998: 159), and offer solidarity with feminist performance artists who used their work in a similar way.

By performing durational stillness, my live audience were forced to sit in silence and endure moments of supposed nothingness, becoming aware of themselves within the space and the dynamics of their own gaze. Anthony Howell explains that in visual art, 'when a still tableau is presented, the audience is not required to "follow" the action' (2000: 9). For instance, when spectators are presented with a painting, they can view it at their leisure, choosing how long to spend looking and when they have had enough. However, in the moment of my live performance, the audience were not able to be as relaxed, as the subject – myself, the live body – was alive and present in the space; there was a constant underlying threat that I could come out of the pose and challenge them at any point.

This feeling of self-consciousness experienced by the audience members was also combined with a feeling of frustration of not being appropriately entertained. As a result, I found surprising moments of agency when enforcing boredom onto my audience by removing conventional theatricalised stimulation and presenting them with fixed images, potentially controlling and limiting their engagement with action. During my performance of the poses, my audience fluctuated between boredom and self-

consciousness. One participant's response to this sequence suggested that they felt bored throughout the poses but added, 'when you looked in my eyes that was broken with a sense of awkwardness'. This experience of boredom reflected my own mundane experience of posing in these moments. Frozen in these poses, I had to work hard to keep my mind and body fixed on the task. These moments of monotony and also frustration connect to what Rachel Hann terms the 'gaze labour,' which she defines as 'the manner in which acts of looking are stressed to the point that the various "gazes" through which an individual is considered are rendered eventful, and potentially tiring' (2022: 308).[6] In this act of posing, I am emphasising the tiresome effects of the male gaze by presenting a body that has chosen to engage in durational and monotonous stillness. Indeed, this posing encouraged the audience to feel an aspect of that same tiredness and labour by being met with a frustratingly still body, whilst also being astutely aware of time passing.

Feminist performance artist Lauren Barri Holstein has commented on how she often creates moments of boredom in her own work that is experienced by herself, the other female performers in her shows, and by her audience, explaining that 'boredom here *is* agency' (in Gorman 2017; emphasis in original). Sarah Gorman expands on this and writes that 'Holstein displays control and authority in her manipulation of time' in how 'she deliberately tries the patience of the audience' (2021: 66). By enforcing this boredom upon her audience, Holstein affects and limits their experience of the show by not allowing them to switch off and become absorbed in the piece, but instead to continuously be aware of their own thoughts. During *It's Sophie!*, my audience reported experiencing individual internal journeys that began with boredom, which were then surpassed to find new meanings and revelations in these moments of apparent 'nothingness'. This was reflected in one of the spectator's comments that 'during the prolonged poses', they felt 'slight boredom', but after a while this sense of 'uncomfortability [*sic*] became a fantastic aspect to experience and visualise', which suggests that the fluctuating feeling of boredom created individual and ongoing endurance-based experiences.

The experiences of endurance felt by the spectators mimicked my own in the sense of the enduring frustration I felt in holding my body still in these moments. Howell explains how we should perceive stillness as 'a manifestation of sheer physical endurance,' due to the focus it demands from the body (2000: 6). When posed, I had to keep my body and mind focused on rigidity and balance in order to sustain the position without wobbling or temporarily relaxing. My first pose was reminiscent of the 1950s pin-up; I placed my body in profile to my audience in a way that directed their gaze to my chest and buttocks, whilst consciously flattening my stomach. I held both arms up and behind my head, put my weight onto my right leg and stood with my left leg bent out slightly. All of this was undertaken whilst wearing high heels. I held this pose for 3 min, which does not seem like a particularly arduous amount of time, but my body began fighting against the pose; my balance started to shift due to the positioning of my legs (and the impact of wearing high heels) and I felt a nerve in my right leg, which was closest to the audience, begin to twitch. Howell reflects on this enduring aspect of posing and explains that 'stillness is hard to perform if it's more than a supine position' and even 'the simplest action can become a strain when stilled and sustained' (2000: 8).

My sequence of poses progressed towards a rejection of the initially flattering positioning of the pin-up pose. For the final pose, I seductively stripped off my 1950s-style

Figure 3. Sophie Swoffer, *It's Sophie!* (2018). Photo by George Tildesley.

playsuit to reveal red underwear. Instead of adopting another sexualised pose, which is what my audience perhaps would have expected given the initial sexual framing of my body, I stooped and strongly held my body into a low squat position (see Figure 3). I posed facing toward my audience, rejecting the pin-up and burlesque emphasis on the silhouette, and took up a more directly challenging stature. This pose mimicked a fighter's stance, as if setting myself up against my audience. I stood strongly supported on open bent legs and placed my hands onto my thighs, either side of my softened stomach. This position was the most gruelling of the three to perform, due to the power that it demanded of my legs and my overall commitment as a performer; it developed 'the enduring "sculptural" status' that Howell characterises as stillness in performance art (2000: 4). I held this pose for five minutes,[7] which resulted in my leg muscles burning and evidently shaking.

This moment allowed my audience to see, perhaps for the first time, how I was challenging my body, as well as challenging audience members. Howell terms the body's involuntary reactions to stillness '*Dynamic Tension*', where 'one muscle is pitted against another in the performance exercise' (2000: 2; emphasis in original). When pushed to an extreme, this tension built from stillness can, as Howell explains, 'even

Figure 4. Sophie Swoffer, *It's Sophie!* (2018). Photo by George Tildesley.

start to vibrate (a patina of repetition), which leads to a shuddering, clenching act, probably evoking from frustration or rage' (2). This building of frustration also resulted in my breath quickening and becoming more audible. This echoed the hyper-feminine orgasmic breathing that I demonstrated in the opening sequence of the piece, which was both aligned with and parodying feminine pleasure, in the sense of showing how a female orgasm is 'stereotypically' performed. This was the first introduction of sound that I used in *It's Sophie!*, which consisted of around five minutes of exaggerated and sexually framed breathing[8] (and whispering of my own name) before introducing the full voice, emphasising the sensual aspect of my persona. When addressing how an orgasm is 'stereotypically' performed, I am referring to how the female orgasm has been representationally fixed as exaggeratedly fetishised through misogynistic film and pornographic representation. However, my use of hyper-femininity parodied and transgressed that hyper-sexual representation when it was coupled with endurance, and instead suggested an embodied, agentive femininity. This coupling served to disrupt the notion that endurance work, particularly in performance art, is used to demonstrate masculine toughness, and that historically displays of men enduring hardship have been read as demonstrations of excessive machismo (Shalson 2018).[9] By associating endurance with clearly constructed hyper-femininity in the work, I highlighted the constructed nature of both femininity and masculinity, rejecting the perception that masculinity and demonstrations of strength go hand-in-hand, and emphasised instead that all ideological and socially constructed characteristics of gender can be tried on, transcended, and rejected.

My squatted pose combined feminine depictions of strength with feminine excess, moving beyond the pin-up to present a starlet figure much more troubling to

heteronormative femininity. This sense of 'troubling' the audience while displaying female autonomy was significant. In discussion of Holstein's 2017 performance *Notorious*, Anna Richmond explains how the artist invited the gaze of her spectators into the work by posing her body – presenting it as exaggeratedly exposed and monstrous – and then making them feel 'complicit in objectifying her' (2018). In this work, Holstein critiques the privileged position that an audience normally finds themselves in when presented with a nude, white, supine, and able female body, where the objectified woman passively receives the gaze. Holstein emphasises that she welcomes the discomfort experienced by audiences of *Notorious*, and explains that it 'is a really important feeling, and I really support your feeling that way. I hope you find time exploring that' (Richmond 2018). This emphasis on taking time to explore connects to my own practice, which provokes the audience to experience what I term 'gendered consciousness' in performance. By gendered consciousness, I mean that I intend my performance to provoke spectators' awareness of agentive non-normative femininity, along with the constructed, performative states of their own varying genders. Holstein also wants her audience to experience an awakening in which they become aware of the male gaze in their everyday lives and go away from the performance seeking to challenging this. In *It's Sophie!*, I sought to leave my audience challenging their own personal involvement in and with the male gaze. My posed body parodied the many posed (and paused) bodies that appear passively on film and which audiences engage with in the privacy of their own homes by extending it into a live and excessive act of stillness.

De-familiarity and feminine excess

Like Holstein, the work of Penny Slinger operates to awaken spectators to the dangers of limiting and repressing the female body. Slinger's work demolishes positionings that situate an 'original' feminine sexual identity as passive, and instead displays feminine identity as an explosive entity. This is communicated through Slinger's 1970s surrealist-inspired photocollage work that challenges her imposed 'feminine role' as object, through her playful and 'awarish' parodies of normative femininity. In *It's Sophie!* I build on the way in which Slinger presents her body in the 1973 photo works, entitled *Bride's Cake Series*. In these images, Slinger playfully positions herself as the veiled bride but subverts the notion of the bride as 'virginal' by sitting open legged inside her own wedding cake, which is missing a slice, to reveal her crotch. This provocative imagery, and the playful title *Eat Me*, demonstrates Slinger's tongue-in-cheek approach to re-envisaging and reclaiming female objectification.

My interest in this photo series is focused on how Slinger complicates and defamiliarises the female body by placing body parts where they should not be. In *Eat Me*, Slinger has positioned an image of erotic and slightly parted lips where her vulva should be. Deliberately drawing the spectator's eye directly to her sex, Slinger presents herself as a figure of heightened feminine sexuality, whilst offering us a limited and controlled view of her body. With a clear awareness of the symbolism of this placement of the mouth as stand-in for the genitals, as in the concept of vagina dentata, Slinger positions herself as intellectually aware of the differing feminist and sex-positive approaches to bodily representation, which, in the late 1960s and 1970s were informed and shaped by the so-called 'porn wars'. In 2017, Slinger contextualised her deliberate – and 'awarish' – focus

on feminine intelligence as a through-line in her work, and demonstrated its necessity in presenting the feminine as 'a fully conscious being, who has all kinds of fantasies and all kinds of intelligence' (Slinger 2017). Slinger explains that as a young, attractive (and white) woman making work on sexuality she 'was not an object' but a 'fully fledged subject' and had 'a hell of a lot going on inside' that she wanted to use to 'shock people into recognition' (2017).

As a young woman making work on feminine sexuality and playing with perceptions of attractiveness, it was vital when creating *It's Sophie!* for me to also make explicit my intelligence and sexual awareness. Taking direct influence from Slinger's *Eat Me*, I too wanted to disrupt and defamiliarise the body and use parody to heighten my feminine sexuality to excess. Parody holds great potential for understanding and exposing the performative nature of gender, and for challenging the idea of a 'natural' gender identity. Parody positions femininity as multifaceted and not merely definable in terms of objectification. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains how gender can be read as a 'series of mimetic, socially constructed, stylised acts', and suggests that parodic performance offers the most effective mode of exploring the performativity of gender (1999: 57). Butler argues that parodic performances of gender expose 'the parodic representation of "the original,"' and therefore 'reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and original' (1999: 41; emphasis in original). Jack Halberstam argues that Butler's work has also been influential in trans theory by promoting the idea that whilst all bodies are subject to the pressure and conditioning of gender norms, 'some bodies can repeat those norms to the point of absurdity, shaking loose some of the confinement that those norms enact' (2018: 122). This notion of shaking loose from gender normativity is evident in Sin Wai Kin's drag practice, through the purposeful failure to achieve a coherent or complete performance of gender. In Sin's video works *Narrative Reflections on Looking* (2016–17), they wear thick caked-on white make-up and a blonde wig, a look that works to remove their Chinese heritage and to embody idealised white femininity. This drag look, completed with a drawn-on black beauty spot above the lip and a large and exposed pale breast plate, parodies the femininity of the ultimate fetishized starlet – Marilyn Monroe. Hann discusses how Sin's drag aesthetic often includes a visible artificial breast plate, which meets their skin with a 'kiss' and draws upon Sylvia Lavin's use of 'the practice of a kiss to articulate the slippages that occur when images are projects onto an artificial surface' (Hann 2022: 306). This slippage, which reveals the process of gender, works to defamiliarise the feminine body by layering constructed and heavily gendered symbols of fetishized femininity onto Sin's body.

I developed this layering of hyper-feminine artificiality over my own body in *It's Sophie!* by projecting footage of my larger-than-life mouth over my crotch (see Figure 4). Expanding the still image of lips in Slinger's *Eat Me*, the projected lips in *It's Sophie!* also spoke, smiled, and spat. In this moment of intermedial and animated performance, I instructed my audience on how to perform 'face yoga', which consisted of facial exercises designed to combat wrinkles that were influenced by YouTube video tutorials. Vocal instructions, such as 'I want you to open your mouth wide' (Swoffer 2018), were delivered verbally to my spectators whilst the digital mouth projected on my crotch demonstrated the exercise that they should copy. I deliberately left it unclear whether I was being rhetorical when asking the audience to take part to exacerbate their self-

consciousness; many members looked around at each other for assurance that they were behaving 'correctly'. Because the projected lips that appeared over my crotch were my own, and thus demonstrated the action alongside my vocal instructions, the audience appeared to accept my de-familiarised and parodied representation of the feminine form. The mediatised lips acted as an extension of my sex and my speaking vagina became the controller of audience action.[10] This sense of control highlighted that an internal tension was at work; the vagina, an entity patriarchally positioned as closed and passive (Irigaray 1985: 23), was now calling the shots. In rejecting conventional understandings of femininity as implicating passivity, my parodic placement of the lips in addition to their exaggerated size and movements sought to queer degraded forms of femininity such that, as Sin has suggested, femininity could represent 'something that meant to be really loud and take up a lot of space' (quoted in Hann 2022: 296).

The vulva as a site of expression

Presenting the vulva as calling the shots in this moment foreshadowed the final section of *It's Sophie!*, which explicitly presented the vagina as a site of agentive feminine expression. This positioning of the vulva as active communicator reclaims the perception upheld in Freud's writings that by not possessing a penis, women inhabit lack. In his 1927 essay 'Fetishism', Freud writes that 'probably no male human is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital' (1927: 154). Due to their 'lack' of penis, women are regarded by Freud as being castrated and, therefore, lacking. Cixous draws upon and challenges Freud's writings on lack and outlines a need for women to come together in solidarity and speak out against patriarchal discourse that 'has kept them in the dark,' and states 'we are not afraid of lacking' (1976: 878). Cixous endorses the inhabitation of lack as a site of subversive resistance and alternative expression. Building on Cixous' writings and responding to her argument that 'woman must write herself' (1976: 878), in *It's Sophie!* I explicitly framed the female body, and specifically the vagina, as a site of expression and not of lack in a challenge to Freud's negative positioning.

This moment of *It's Sophie!* built on Holstein's self-described 'vagina-based' practice, in which she 'invents moments that draw prolonged focus onto her vagina' (Gorman 2021: 62). By drawing attention to her vulva, Holstein repeatedly challenges its patriarchal positioning as a space of lack. In *Notorious*, with the help of her collaborators, Holstein climbs onto a table, opens her legs wide and stands in a half squatting position. She lifts her dress that is made of ragged hair and exposes her vagina. When presented with images of the vagina in mass popular culture, it is nearly always within an erotic context and hairless, and so the coarse and matted hair-dress in this context acts as a playful reference to pubic hair (or lack thereof) as it surrounds Holstein's vagina. Holstein's collaborator points a camera lens up between Holstein's legs, projecting a close-up image of her shaved vagina onto the back wall. Irigaray suggests that within patriarchal frameworks the vagina represents '*the horror of nothing to see*,' as the two vagina lips caress each other and form a seal, keeping the inside of the woman hidden and silenced (1985: 26; emphasis in original). However, Holstein deliberately disrupts this image by squeezing out an artificial green eyeball, which we see slowly emerge between her vaginal lips.

This image and action of producing an extra eye between the lips can be read as a mode of reclaiming the gaze, and can also be seen in Slinger's work. The eye looking out from the vagina in Holstein's performance acts as a three-dimensional version of Slinger's surrealist explorations with eyes – for example, *I Speak What I See* (1973) – that compartmentalise and collage body parts into new and unfamiliar places.[11] Such practices mix and mess up the logic of the body, and echo imagery from Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1928). In the final scene of Bataille's book, the character Simone, after killing a priest, plucks out his eye and places it inside her vagina. Simone's lover looks into this lifeless eye staring out from her vagina and explains: 'I found myself facing something I imagine I had been waiting for in the same way that a guillotine waits for a neck to slice' (1928: 67). This feeling of anticipation is one that we are met with when Holstein presents us with the image of the eye emerging from the vagina, the intensity of which is heightened by its projection onto a large screen in the performance space. It displays the 'horror of seeing' the vagina, which, as Irigaray outlines, describes not only seeing the horror of the castrated body, but also the threat of horror inherent in the vagina as the birthing place of the unruly feminine.

Here, Holstein is performing her own 'brutal separation' of the vaginal lips, which Irigaray explains as conventionally being performed by the penis (Irigaray 1985: 24). Holstein is also challenging the view that the vagina is an organ of absence and instead, is exposing it as an unpredictable spectacle. Holstein is operating multiple gazes in this moment: her own active gaze at the audience, a non-human or 'other' gaze of the fake eyeball, and the gaze of the camera and, therefore, the viewer. This 'other' eye certainly holds a presence of its own as it stares out from somewhere that it should not be. Like the eye in Slinger's surrealist image *I Speak What I See*, this other eye has seen parts of the internal body to which outsiders are not allowed access. Irigaray describes how, due to the closing of the vagina, women are 'masked' and characterised as 'sewn back up inside their crack' (1985: 23). However, the eyeball transcends this seal, surpassing the internal hidden place, giving birth to itself. In this way, the vagina is no longer valued only for the 'lodging' of the penis; its lips now act as eyelids to this non-human eye and arguably take on a human disguise.

Aligning her work with the grotesque, Holstein, after holding this striking image, squeezes out the eyeball, letting it fall to the floor. She picks it up, chews, spits and then finally swallows it. Here, Holstein is presenting an abject body, which, as Julia Kristeva describes, 'beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire' (1981: 1). The abject body emerges explicitly in Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, as the vaginal hole into which the eye is inserted begins to leak, making the eye gaze out with 'tears of urine' (1928: 67). In Holstein's *Notorious*, audience members at the performance I attended expressed their discomfort during this sequence – the man sitting next to me, for example, began to laugh in what I read as an attempt to hide his unease. Kristeva explains how it is in our nature as humans to avoid 'face-to-face confrontation with the abject' (1981: 209), and Holstein directly plays on this fear in presenting an abject display of the feminine body to her audience. By eating and re-consuming the object that had just been inside her vagina – supposedly a dirty, 'absent' space (Irigaray 1985: 26) – Holstein harnesses the abject, which, when faced with rules and laws 'turns them aside, misleads, corrupts' (Kristeva 1981: 15), to pervert the unspoken rules of heteronormative and passive femininity.

In the final section of *It's Sophie!* I positioned the vagina as a site from which to express light. I inserted a battery-operated circular torch into my vagina on stage, which, at that moment was the only source of light for the audience. Responding directly to Cixous' characterisation of how 'the enormity of [patriarchal] repression' has 'kept [women] in the dark,' I used my body to convey light and subvert the 'internalized fear of the dark' that Cixous argues women inhabit (1976: 878). Continuing to challenge the idea of woman as 'lack', I developed Cixous' wish for women to say 'I, too, overflow with desire' (1976: 878) by presenting a body that was overflowing with and expelling light as representative of enlightening desire.

Unlike Holstein, in the final sequence of *It's Sophie!* I included the act of insertion of the object in the live performance in order to make the whole process uncomfortably explicit for my audience. This was expressed by one of the spectators who, when asked what the most uncomfortable moment was in the performance, responded: 'when you put the torch in, as you had to shuffle your body. It must have been uncomfortable for you'. This demonstration of difficulty, and perhaps perceived awkwardness, in the process of inserting the torch removed the ease and grace that might be expected of a woman's body and, indeed, that of a performer. In this moment, the whole space was in darkness; as I faced away from the audience, I mimicked the same strong squat position I had adopted earlier. I then turned on the torch light and began to insert it inside myself, which illuminated the shuffling movement of my legs. Once I had inserted the torch, I turned to face the audience with the torch pointing down toward the floor. I slowly walked towards the audience, lighting my pathway as I did so. Although the audience was I aware that I was nude from the waist down – I had removed my underwear earlier in the performance – because the torch was the only source of light, their view of my body was restricted, my legs were lit and my vulva was hidden. Although nude and exposed, I retained control of my representation.

Once I arrived at the front of the space, I sat on the floor facing the audience with my legs open (see Figure 5), casting the light directly toward them. The light from the torch affected the entire space around me, externalising the agency that I felt from performing this act. As the light from the torch was so bright, it cast the rest of my body in darkness, so that the only thing the audience could fully see in this moment was the light itself. My vagina was now displayed through this act as a parodic version of the source of life; it had now succeeded the other forms of expression I had used throughout the piece – speech, posing, film – and was now my sole tool of communication. Although my audience were aware that this light was emanating from the torch, the spherical and unfamiliar light shining outwards from my internal body mirrored the 'other' eye that also stared out from Holstein's vagina. The light represented the hidden, sealed and 'dark' parts of my femininity that were now spilling out into the performance space and staring back at my spectators, returning their gaze.

My 'other' eye, in this sense, reversed the gazing dynamic that had been in operation throughout the performance and now cast a spotlight onto the audience, not the performer, removing them from their comfortable womb-like viewing position (Mulvey 1989: 17). Throughout the performance, I had used harsh spotlights for each of the durational poses; by casting the light back on the audience with the torch, I was now reversing the spotlight effect but this time using DIY and body-held technologies, effectively casting the audience as subjects of my own feminine 'other' gaze.[12] The image

Figure 5. Sophie Swoffer, *It's Sophie!* (2018). Photo by George Tildesley.

of the light shining out onto the audience was the last that was offered in *It's Sophie!*; the audience was invited to dwell upon the image for two minutes in silence, after which they could leave the space.

Reclaiming the starlet as a figure of feminist solidarity

In *It's Sophie*, I worked to re-envisage the figure of the starlet as one that explodes the idea of a 'docile' fixed form that can be controlled by the male gaze. I presented a transgressive starlet persona that challenged the heteronormative binary of the passive, posed female and active, masculinised spectator. Building on the practices of feminist artists, such as Holstein, Sin, and Slinger, I located parody as a feminist performance technique that can be used to deconstruct and disrupt the very existence of a 'natural' state of femininity, and move toward the many possible multiplicities of woman. The starlet role continues to be emblematic of sexualised feminine youth, which is deeply ingrained into film culture, but my creative presentation of alternative starlet behaviours offers a challenge to this objectification through a productive hyper-femininity that is magnified by its agentive

representation of sexuality. This presentation of hyper-femininity in *It's Sophie!* made audience members conscious of their own complicity with female objectification, and, as Sin states in relation to their own practice, 'I want people to look at the images and find themselves looking at themselves more than they're looking at me' (quoted in Hann 2022: 308). Through my performances of alternative femininities, I work to both resist sexualisation and prompt spectators to reach a gendered consciousness that encourages a sense of solidarity for all female-identifying and non-gender conforming individuals. In Ahmed's terms, 'A collective is what does not stand still but creates and is created by movement' (2017: 3);, my work advocates for continuous movement and the necessity of pushing against the dominant misogynistic gaze in an attempt to reverse the tiring effects of 'gaze labour' (Hann 2022: 308). Following Ahmed's statement, 'No wonder feminism causes fear; together we are dangerous' (2017: 18), I seek to create and sustain a space for feminist disruption and solidarity, and to provide meaningful modes of dismantling the patriarchal forces that oppress and regulate the female body.

Notes

1. Ahmed is building on Audre Lorde's 1984 text 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', in which Lorde states that if a racist patriarchy is not challenged and alternative feminist strategies discovered, then 'only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable' (1984: 23).
2. I am working with an acknowledgement that Mulvey's male gaze at the time of its publication only considers biologically born women and not all female-identifying individuals.
3. This is demonstrated in Irigaray's *The Sex Which is Not One* (1985), in which she comments on the multiplicity of women's sexuality in comparison to the phallus and explains that women have 'sex organs more or less everywhere' (1985: 28). Similarly, Cixous contends in *The Laugh of Medusa* (1976) 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).
4. 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' (Mulvey quoted in Sassatelli 2011: 128). This sense of militancy within the writing is reflective of the 1970s as a time that required drastic change.
5. Mulvey expands these thoughts in her 2019 book *Afterimages*, which consists of essays and writings that Mulvey published after her 2006 book *Death 24× a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. In *Afterimages*, Mulvey responds to the varied and crucial lines of critique and questioning of her original theorisations of the male gaze.
6. It is important to note that Hann is using the term 'gaze labour' in her writing to discuss her own experience of the objectifying gaze as a trans woman and also applying the term to the practice of nonbinary artist Sin Wai Kin. Both Hann and Sin's bodies are not inscribed with the same cis gendered and white privilege that my own body possesses. I argue that endurance-based posing would be even more subversive and exciting in its potential for dismantling the heteronormative male gaze if it were being performed by queer artists or artists of colour. However, through the poses in *It's Sophie!* I was actively attempting to reverse the damaging effects of the male gaze and masculinised iterations of looking at all kinds of bodies.
7. It should be noted that on the video version of the performance that you will have witnessed, this time has been edited down to fit in with Wix's regulations for free use.
8. Again, this sequence of breathing is shortened for the purpose of the Wix video.
9. This is epitomised by Chris Burden's 1971 performance *Shoot*, where Burden asked someone to shoot him in the arm with a rifle. Kathy O'Dell comments how Burden's own

description of the event is 'almost neutral in tone' with 'a calm emphasis on technical details', such as the type of gun used, as if to perpetuate this notion of toughness (1998: 1). Therefore, Burden demonstrates a link between the painful and 'impressive' act of being shot without seeming being phased by it, with displaying a masculinity built upon endurance and strength. He exhibits how he was able to 'take it like a man'.

10. I am following the populist terminology of the era and Irigaray's use of the term 'vagina,' whilst recognising that the word it is not anatomically correct.
11. This surrealist technique of placing body parts where they are not meant to belong is also evident in Salvador Dali's images involving eyeballs, such as *The Painter's Eye* (1942) and *The Eye* (1945).
12. I was also building on and reversing the use of light in Sprinkle's *A Public Cervix Announcement*, where Sprinkle encourages audience members to shine a torch light into her vagina that is being opened by a speculum.

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