

**Reimagining the Explicit Image:  
A Discourse on Transgressive Self-Expression and the Fe-male Body**

By

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## Abstract

My studio practice focuses on the intersection of sexuality and art. More specifically, I am locating my queer identity through a theoretical lens where pleasure, gender, and power come to the forefront in this Thesis. I examine the theories of philosophers Judith Butler and Michel Foucault as it relates to my work. Pornography scholarship of Margret Grebowicz is also an important part of the conversation in linking the sexually explicit image with my own questions regarding sex and art. My investigation into transgressive self-expression led to the formation of the exhibition *Pleasure Pusher: Reimagining the Explicit Image*.

## **Acknowledgements**

For my daughter Arianna Rodriguez

May your growing curiosity lead to your own quest for self-understanding

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## **I: Introduction**

I begin this paper by introducing my “coming out” story in Chapter II exposing a buried link to my own sexual being. Chapter III identifies terms and language surrounding my sexual identity. I also highlight how I choose to use gendered language in my work. In Chapter IV, I center my studio practice in relation to sex, power and gender. Chapter V will address the explicit image and Porn scholarship as well as the video work that I am currently exploring. Chapter VI opens with a discussion surrounding audience and viewing space. Chapter VII concludes my paper with a look back on my time in the program and my goals post-graduate school.

## II: A New Beginning

The summer of 2013 will go down in history as the start of my new life. My identity as a married heterosexual woman would cease to be. Death of my marriage turned out to be a blessing in disguise, although, I did not know it at the time. It was during that summer when I had my first intimate same-sex encounter. My friend (I will call her “S”) and I decided that we would check out the popular gay club in town. At the time, I was renting a room in her parents’ house. “S” grew up in a conservative and religious home. Her father being a pastor for many years and mother playing the role of supportive wife. “S” had always had a rebellious but quiet side, which is probably why we got along so well.

Dressed in black mini-skirts and tank tops, we were ready for our night out. I had never been one to go to clubs let alone a gay club so I decided to go with the flow. We danced, chatted, and had drinks throughout the evening. I never kissed a girl before. However, I had fantasized about it many times, particularly with “S”. It was how she engaged in conversation that initially attracted me to her but really, it was the bead of sweat slowly rolling down her chest that made my heart race. The way she licked her bottom lip to keep it from getting dry brought out an animalistic urge in me. The sexual encounter with “S” started inside a tiny bathroom in the back corner of the dimly lit club and ended in a hotel room the next morning.

For the first time, my body was alive with powerful sensations of pleasure. All of these new sensations overwhelmed me and that morning, as I sat up on the hotel bed, I found myself saying aloud to “S” for the first time: “Holy shit, I’m gay.” It was at that moment that I knew a new chapter in my life was beginning. In addition, for the first time, I was now able to live without shame.

Coming out to my friends and family was actually easier than I anticipated. I expected many questions. However, the experience of coming out brought me closer to my family and made me a stronger person in the process. Throughout the summer, I threw myself into painting, producing work quickly and rigorously. Although I continued painting, eventually I stepped outside my comfort zone and began taking pictures of myself naked. I knew that I was at a point where I could finally love my body, as it was without feeling ashamed. However, this exercise was still extremely difficult, as I had not photographed my body in such a literal way before. The more I placed myself as subject, in front of the camera, the less awkward I felt. Experimenting with

movement and stillness of my body. Learning to work in unison with the mechanics of the camera, decisions involving lighting and various background fabrics set the stage for this performance. This repetitive act became a crucial piece of how my new identity as a queer human being evolved. Foremost, it has taken me into a new direction of growth inside my artistic practice.

### III: Defining My Identity, Language Usage and Terms

With an understanding that terms and labels surrounding sexuality are in a constant flux, I will highlight terms with how they best suit my identity and artistic work. Defining and removing my identity from a specific type of gender is a discussion point in this section. I would like to begin by stating that I am not a woman as defined by heteronormative standards nor do I align myself with a particular gender binary. While I embrace my own biological make up as fe(male), my identity does not fit inside the category “woman”<sup>1</sup>. I redefine “queerness” as it relates to my own identity and body. For me, being queer is not accepting a strict masculine or feminine category. Instead, I situate my identity within what I call an “in-between” space where I exist in a third *gender skin*. I am neither masculine nor feminine but hover somewhere in between these social differences. I do identify as a queer-androgynous-lesbian. It is in the way I dress/undress, how I groom myself, how I talk, and even in the way I walk that I perform my queerness on any given day. This androgynous characteristic is also visible in the sexual nature of the work. Judith Butler states in her book *Gender Trouble*:

“When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with consequences that ‘man’ and ‘masculine’ might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and ‘woman’ and ‘feminine’ a male body as easily as a female one” (9).

It is in this statement where Butler denounces the construct of gender, rearranges, and splits apart the binary construct. My artistic practice echoes the very notion of splitting apart the binary both through the physical representation of my body and in the choices I make when I construct a scene for the camera which I will elaborate upon in chapter IV. The image below, “My Gaze Penetrates You” is a good example of splitting apart the binary, existing in the in-between by dressing in a

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<sup>1</sup> In Butler’s *Gender Trouble* chapter 1 “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire” section 1, she unpacks the very category that is “woman”. Traditionally speaking women are tied to reproductive sex, domesticated, marked as passive and submissive. Butler mentions how this category is restrained by the structures of power and that “woman” as a category is problematic. Politics, religion, medical, art institutions, educational institutions, and family are regulators that keep such structures in place.

man's shirt and tie while also showing myself partly undressed exposing part of my breast; a biological attribute which is tied to my fe(male sex).



"My Gaze Penetrates You", digital image, 2016

For the purpose of this ongoing investigation, I am separating gender from a male/female binary. I will assign “queer” and “fe-male” to the masculine and feminine fluidity of my sexuality as it relates to the work. In addition, when discussing sexuality outside the hetero woman/ man spectrum, I will use “fe-male” and/or “queer”. When addressing biological attributes, I will use “fe()male”. I relate the lens of the camera to the gaze where the viewfinder acts as a window for which I stage these intimate performances. The back and forth dialogue which initially takes place between the camera and myself represents the outside perspective of the viewer.

#### IV: Becoming, Situating the Sexual Body

My clitoris is my cock...it is my phallic center. This is where my power lives. Standing erect, it is the *pleasure pusher*. Secretion pours from my cunt channeling up my quivering body, seeping through my pores and dripping out of my eyes. This declaration speaks directly to the queer attributes of my Thesis Exhibition, "Pleasure Pusher". In this body of work, I redefine not only the representation of my body but also the physical gallery space and how it is intended to be experienced by the viewer.

Three key factors are at the core of my studio research. First, I am addressing the gendered body. Second, it is about sexual display and its relation to the exhibition space. Third, the work addresses the theoretical framework surrounding transgressive behaviors in relation to art. Over the past two years my studio practice has taken me on a search for a new kind of sexual imagery, one where gender categories no longer exist and one has the freedom (without censorship) to embrace the sexual body. I do not seek to establish a barrier between my work and pornography. Nor do I seek to align my work with a grand aesthetic scheme. My practice involves but is not limited to discussing a discursive study of feminine and masculine categories of sexuality in contemporary Western Art. Researching the queer identity within a visual discourse has proven incredibly valuable but necessary as it provides a platform from which to speak as an artist.

My studio practice is an investigation of my own perspective on self-pleasure. I document myself masturbating or at the height of orgasm including the coming down phase. Most of the time this action is simulated due to the limitation of the camera's self-timer. I draw parallels between *simulation* and the psychological exercise taking place during a photo shoot. Since I am the only person present during these shoots, I use my body as a subject. In preparation for the shoot, I imagine my body as a subject. Then, I imagine the camera to be a second body, a fe-male body that I am engaging. I as subject am objectifying myself for the camera-body while maintaining control of what the camera captures. This is a new triangulation between the camera, viewer, and subject. Since the *simulation* leads me often times, to a new sexual arousal, my "head space" becomes especially important during photo shoots. Being calm and focused on bodily sensations is what drives the process. I become hyper-aware of smells, my own breathing, tastes, the wet shirt clinging to my skin, and touch. Much of this self-awareness has become an exercise before I even begin shooting. This process is also about the fantasy of who is watching me, who and how I am



viewed. The fe-male who is watching in my fantasy, engaging with me, her gaze is what I am after. A physiological scenario that I construct for myself makes the image possible.

My photographs and digital images explore in a transgressive fashion, not only sexual pleasure but also my same-sex desire and food. I am transforming my sexual self by documenting my body engaged in a performance of self-pleasure inside the privacy of my home where I activate the domestic space into a queer one. The bed, the floor, the kitchen, and the bathtub are sites for my performative androgyny as well as explicit acts of transgressive sexual behavior. I construct the scene for the camera by selecting appropriate props such as fabric backdrops, clothing, and colored lighting. These props aid in the isolation and focus of my gestures as well as my body parts where I behave in a visceral manner, introducing fruit and icing. Sex is relegated to the bedroom where it is domesticated and kept secret. From my experience, it is normalized/hetero sex that places woman in a bottom hood, submissive role to be penetrated by man. When I want to feel dominant, I am either sitting, kneeling, or standing in these constructed scenes.

Hetero foreplay may involve a woman pleasuring herself, which might include her male partner “going down” on her. However, this foreplay is warm up for the “real sex” where she is penetrated and the act deems finished when he ejaculates. Websites such as pornhub.com and xvideos.com situate a hetero-male dominance in the pornography industry. Whether one is searching for hetero or gay/lesbian porn, the watching experience is constructed for us through a male lens. When looking for “queer females” in the search box on xvideos.com, I found these video titles: “REAL Retro 90s Lesbian Porn!” and “Prima Ballerina Lesbian Sister Seduction” which provide a good example of additional hundreds of videos portraying butch/femme role-playing. What struck me was the word, “REAL” and what exactly differentiates the “real” from the “not real”? Does that even matter in this context? There is reference to the phallic in my work especially in the title, “My Gaze Penetrates You”. However, it is not tied to a hetero-male dominance. I consider my fingers extremely phallic. Visual clues to this reference are found in images where my fingers are grabbing and/or entering my crotch. First, it is found in the gaze where I stare directly at the viewer. Second, it is attached to the action of my fingers (doing the fucking). Third, I relate it to my clitoris where the intensity of pleasure originates; this is transgressing and queering the image. Michel Foucault claims that power is omnipresent. He states the following:

“Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And ‘power’, insofar as it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these nobilities...”<sup>2</sup>(93).

Foucault also goes on to mention how power is not found in institutions nor is it a structure but rather a “strength we are endowed with” (93). The excerpt, “strength we are endowed with”, aligns with my idea surrounding sexual power and its location found inside the human being. It lives in the organic and in the mind. This idea is at the heart of my studio practice. In the work, I reclaim self-pleasure as a form of sex, which translates to power and dominance. For example, in “Eating Her Fruit” I position myself on my knees but not in a submissive way. My hands grip the cantaloupe firmly, allowing the fruit to cover my face entirely. It is in this image where I am fantasizing about making love to one of my former female lovers. The devoured fruit in front of me represents pleasure I feel when engaged with her flesh. In this image, I portray a masculine, aggressive nature of my sexuality while highlighting my androgyny locating myself in the in-between.

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault’s philosophy on power and society is found in the ‘Methods’ chapter in “History of Sexuality” Vol. 1.



"Eating Her Fruit", digital image, 2015

The bed and floor are domesticated locations for sexual activity. However, I have manipulated these spaces by introducing lighting and props, which mimic porn sets. What is different about these “sets” is that they exist well outside the main stream of pornography in that the presence of man is absent entirely. Opened melons, oranges, and pomegranates<sup>3</sup> reference the fleshy quality of female genitals evoking actions of eating, licking, and sucking to “going down” on a fe-male. The consumption of fruit is a pleasurable act in itself. Applying fruit, frosting, milk, and syrup onto my body triggers sexual arousal and pleasurable sensations in me. The consumption of fruit is a pleasurable act in itself. My fascination with fruit stems from a psychological perspective where I am approaching this act of consuming through eating, evoking bodily pleasure and triggering sexual arousal.

The impulse behind my fruit images relates to same-sex desires and sexual experiences with fe-males. In addition to my own physical experiences, Monique Wittig’s *Lesbian Body* has been highly influential for the visual work. This fictive piece of writing engages the reader in a fantasy of lesbian intimacies, carnage, and sexual delights in a visceral manner. An excerpt from the *Lesbian Body*:

“You gaze at m / e with your ten thousand eyes, you do so and it is I, I do not stir, m / y feet are completely embedded in the ground, I allow m / yself to be reached by your ten thousand glances or if you prefer by the single glances of your ten thousand eyes but it is not the same, such an immense gaze touches m / e everywhere...”(18).

‘I’ [j / e] is introduced here as feminine, the main subject of Wittig’s fiction. The body that ‘I’ speaks to/engages with is described as “human (masculine)” to use Wittig’s words. The gaze here described as an action much like that of physical touching in a very electric way. In my work, I stare directly at the viewer, which sends a message of control and power. The sheer power in Wittig’s poetry is found in the way she denounces gender labels focusing on raw, sexual pleasure. It is the connection that Wittig makes throughout *Lesbian Body* with the visceral and same-sex

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<sup>3</sup> From Stefano Zuffi’s *Food and Feasting in Art*: “Partly eaten pieces of fruit [in Western still life painting] are symbolic of earthly pleasures and their ephemeral nature.” Regarding symbolism of milk in the Old Testament, it is said to evoke maternity and purity. Milk is also linked to transformation...linked to the Christian idea of spiritual rebirth and the Incarnation. In a biblical context, melons are attached to the symbolic meaning of friendship, earthly pleasures, and pleasures of the flesh. It’s the pleasures of the flesh that I’m interested in exploring.

desires, where I draw influence for my work. There is an overlap of feminine and masculine traits in the two figures represented in “Watching You Watch Me”. The soft, transparent overlay of color and the tilting of my head back closing my eyes, stand in contrast to the intense gaze. We can see these same characteristics in “Wet n Wild” where the overlap of feminine and masculine is portrayed. In addition, digital cutting or biting is also present along the outside edges of my body and inner thighs. I relate digital biting to consuming of the flesh.





"Watching You Watch Me", digital image, 2015





"Wet n Wild", digital image, 2016

## V: The Explicit Image and the Gaze

Power, identity, and the gaze has been a theme throughout this paper. I tap into a brief discussion of sex in section III and will now address more specifically pleasure and orgasm. How and why I isolate the explicit nature of the imagery will also be discussed. Initially, at the start of my research, I had a rather difficult time finding scholarship on the topic of masturbation and orgasm. Granted there is discussion of the sexual body in modern and contemporary Western Art history. However, the body is regulated and confined to a discipline of aesthetics<sup>4</sup>. It is possible that pornography in itself lacks complexity and is deemed unsophisticated which could explain the division between art and porn. When my research expanded to include Porn scholarship and other writings about orgasm, I was amazed and delighted to discover an abundance of articles relating to gay and lesbian pornography. I would have argued that pornography exists under a patriarchal structure where true sexual liberation for women would be impossible. I am encouraged to see female sexuality being addressed and taken seriously within the discourse surrounding Porn. Margret Grebowicz claims in her book, *Why Internet Porn Matters*:

“This phrase that is thrown around so casually, “women’s sexual pleasure”—what is meant by it, how it functions socially, how it is represented and communicated—is thus a complex issue. Its relationship to pornography becomes even more complex when the pornography itself is packaged as being in the service of women’s pleasure” (77).

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<sup>4</sup> Examples of texts that were initially a part of my investigation:

“History of Modern Art”, sixth edition, authored by H.H. Arnason and Elizabeth C. Mansfield. “Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics”, “Artists, Critics, Context” by Paul F. Fabozzi. “The Power of Feminist Art” edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard. Artists Carolee Schneemann’s “Meat Joy” performance (1964); Paul McCarthy; and Tee Corinne (there is no reference to Corinne in any of these textbooks) are the sources I go to for visual inspiration. I then began to move away from these Art History references as I felt like I was running into a brick wall.



The complexity of this issue is located at the center of feminist ideology of the 1960s and well into the 1970s where repressing female sexuality was a necessary political agenda. Grebowicz further mentions:

“The way to a women’s autonomy and agency was through her clitoris, as it were, which was offered as proof that women’s sexuality was essentially the same as men’s”<sup>5</sup>(78).

Yet, the woman was marked as subordinate being tied to reproductive sex. What happens when queer females and hetero-women claim sexual agency? What happens when they express how it truly feels to be sexual?

My power comes from my sexual nature. It is seen in the form of gestures, actions, and the direct gaze where I invite the viewer to “look” while still maintaining control of what I allow one to see. The triangulation of the camera as second body, viewer, and myself is fluid and therefore becomes queered. Pornography that has existed and exists now is not of interest to me. Rather, the possibility of a *new kind of explicit imagery* for the fe-male gaze that is of urgency, one where from a fe-male perspective body positivity is a central theme. My recent video work involves a combination of digital imagery and digital editing actions recorded with Quick Time Player. I select areas of my body using digital tools in Photoshop to create a color masking. Again, this action is recorded where the arrow cursor and lines from the selection tool are visible. These digital images are meant to be watched on a large LED screen. The action of the visible cursor is an extension of my hand where I control a point of focus for whoever is watching. The dialogue now expands to include inviting the viewer to participate in this performance. The explicit nature of the imagery is evident in the tight cropping of my body within the camera frame and how I choose to “mask” body parts. In “Pink Crotch”, I want the viewer to focus on my mouth and crotch area so those areas are highlighted with a color overlay using Photoshop.

The line between what is real and not real becomes blurred and irrelevant much like the

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<sup>5</sup> Grebowicz opens chapter 5, *Privacy and Pleasure* in *Why Internet Porn Matters* by introducing antiporn feminists MacKinnon and Dworkin who both connected sexual abuse and violence against women to porn. These issues of violence and male dominance take place under a ‘male model’ of power. What happens when one seeks out a ‘female model’ of power surrounding sexual pleasure? Perhaps it’s time for women and queer folks to explore their experiences outside of what we know as porn by creating a new genre of transgressive sex acts all together. Grebowicz notes at the end of chapter 5: “Historically, pornography and feminism have been fellow travelers and natural allies”. The internet provides a platform to tap into this partnership. Perhaps this becomes a discourse on sexual freedom and not pornography.

distinction between art and porn. This is where I am relating the screen to my *third skin*, the digital sexual self. I aim to provoke visceral feelings in the viewers of my work. At the same time, I acknowledge the potential to excite my viewers both emotionally and physically. The color masking in the images is inspired by a “sex flush”, a term used to describe the excitement phase during the sexual response cycle addressed in “Sapphisty: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality” by Pat Califia. This phase begins the moment a woman is sexually aroused. The author goes on to describe the physical changes happening with the body when the sex flush appears. Heartbeat and breathing speed up. Deepening of skin color, nipples may stand erect; veins become more announced and stand out. Of course, every individual will experience this phase differently. Within the imagery, the color masking references change in skin color, feeling of contractions during orgasm, and the warm intensity of cumming. At times, I select my entire body (references the all over body sensations of orgasm) for color masking and other times it is about specific areas. We have now entered the in-between space. The work is no longer about the representation of the body alone but also the representation of sexual pleasure, which becomes a site for discussion where gender and gaze is queered. Again, I am echoing Judith Butler when I state that the gender of a viewer is relative to the constructed experiences of my work. I identify a masculine and feminine experience all at once as queer.



"Pink Crotch", digital image, 2016

## VI: Audience and Space

My Thesis Exhibition, “Pleasure Pusher: Reimagining the Explicit Image” on the surface, centers the fe-male body as an object for sexual consumption. However, as I have discussed throughout the paper other conversations emerge surrounding performance, gender, and power. Ideally, I would like to cast my net as wide as possible when searching for an ideal audience, one that appreciates diverse sexualities in relation to art. Although, the work has the potential to make the most impact on those who might be uncomfortable and deem it offensive. The physical space/installation for this particular exhibition was deliberately constructed to address private/public space. I wanted to create an intimate experience but not about hiding which is why I built open rooms and produced mural size prints. Also, once a viewer entered one of the rooms, I did not allow much physical space for one to avoid the imagery by walking away or “backing up” against a wall as there was an additional image directly behind. The only option one had to escape the work was to leave the room entirely. According to Art Historian Lynda Nead:

“The Legitimacy of viewing [the female body] within the art gallery is symbolized by the viewer’s distance from the displayed object, and viewing protocols within the gallery are organized in order to enhance contemplative viewing and to eliminate the possibilities of a physical response”<sup>6</sup>(101).

I question these “viewing protocols” by manipulating the physical space and displacing the viewer’s expectations of art. My intention is to provoke an emotional and physical response in my viewers. The sheer scale of these images demands the viewer to engage. The vertical position and scale of the screens mimicked a leaning mirror. My aim here was to invite the viewer (now one who watches) to see themselves in this digital space. It is as if, I am inviting the viewer to perform with me. I also found it appropriate that this exhibition took place in an academic setting. The dialogue takes place in the academic gallery also carried over into the classroom, which is incredibly encouraging as I think about the future. It is inspiring. I hope to center my search for

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<sup>6</sup> From *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality* by Lynda Nead. She notes that the image of the female body is the pinnacle of purity and “enlightened aesthetics” in Western art. When one goes to the edge of this ideal ‘it’ “risks losing its respectability and spilling over into the obscene”, to use Nead’s words.



future exhibitions on academic institutions and alternative gallery spaces both locally and nationwide.

The video work is very fresh and there is still much to discover. I do associate the screen with the *digital skin* where seeking a deeper connection between myself as object and commodity will be of focus. I aim to explore video as a medium more rigorously in the coming year while I evolve professionally as a teacher in higher education. I aim to motivate younger generations of students to challenge pre-existing notions of femininity/masculinity and the binary construction of sexuality. I aim to formulate an on-going dialogue, one in which body positivity and sexual freedom are at the center of my practice. I consider the work to be a symbol of strength where I define what it means to be a sexual being on my own terms.



Thesis Exhibition, "Pleasure Pusher: Reimagining the Explicit Image", audience watching "Sex Flush", and installation shot (below), 2016 Photo credit: Brian Hawkins



Thesis Exhibition, "Pleasure Pusher: Reimagining the Explicit Image", installation shot, 2016  
Photo credit: Brian Hawkins





Thesis Exhibition, "Pleasure Pusher: Reimagining the Explicit Image", viewer standing with "Tasting Myself" and "Wet n Wild", 2016 Photo credit: Brian Hawkins

\*All images courtesy of the artist. © Trish Nixon

## VII: Closing Thoughts

At the start of the graduate program, I called myself a “painter”. The thought of picking up a camera had not even entered my mind. I figured that creating abstract paintings would be my focus as that was what I knew and was most comfortable doing. However, I quickly realized that being in graduate school had nothing to do with staying inside my comfort zone. It had nothing to do with creating the same kind of work that got me into the program. In fact, it had more to do with undoing my frame of mind. I allowed myself to feel vulnerable, dispose of self-censorship, and act upon deep inner reflection. This academic experience was about starting my artistic endeavor from scratch and meeting people who were going to change my outlook on everything. Finally, accepting my own internal truth as a queer human being has accelerated growth and confidence in not only my studio practice but in the way I engage in conversation with students. I accept and embrace the tremendous responsibility that comes with the work that I do which is why teaching is the next logical path to take. One goal post-graduate school is to develop panel discussions in the Kansas City metro area (which may or may not include art venues) on the topic of queer sexuality and art. Other goals are to seek exhibitions locally and nationally, continue my career as a professional artist, and teach on the college level.



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