

# Body Modification as Body Art: Aging, Abjection, and Autothanatology

by Jessica Cameron

**Abstract:** In this article, I discuss my “anti-aging” body modification practices as body art. The art documents my bodybuilding programs, self-administered neurotoxin (Botox) injections, and skin resurfacing treatments. Susan Pickard (2020) argues that femininity and aging are associated with the abject. She maps the abject and non-abject onto Simone de Beauvoir’s distinction between immanence and transcendence. Because “abjection should always be understood as an element of [...] oppression” (Pickard 2020, 159), my art practice could be read as an anti-feminist, ageist attempt to expel the abject. After offering a counter-argument that positions my practice as feminist, I use Kathy Acker’s (1993) writing on bodybuilding to offer a third reading. Muscles grow when they are worked until failure. This practice of constantly coming up against the body’s limits is a rehearsal for the ultimate failure of the body: death (Acker 1993). If thanatology is the study of death and dying, bodybuilding is autothanatology. My “anti-aging” interventions are similar; they are inevitable failures that cannot stop the aging process. In this way, my practice is a reminder that the body exists in a state of immanence, even while I may attempt to frame my immanence along transcendental terms.

**Keywords:** abject; aging; ageism; anti-aging; body art; body modification; feminist art; immanence; thanatology; transcendence

**Résumé:** Dans cet article, je parle de mes pratiques de modification corporelle « anti-vieillessement » comme étant un art corporel. L’art documente mes programmes de culturisme, mes injections de neurotoxine (Botox) autoadministrées et mes traitements de restructuration de la peau. Susan Pickard (2020) prétend que la féminité et le vieillissement sont associés à l’abject. Elle associe l’abject et le non-abject à la distinction faite par Simone de Beauvoir entre l’immanence et la transcendance. Parce que « l’abjection devrait toujours être considérée comme un élément [...] d’oppression » (Pickard 2020, 159), ma pratique artistique pourrait être lue comme une tentative antiféministe et âgiste d’expulser l’abject. Après avoir présenté un contre-argument établissant que ma pratique est féministe, je me fonde sur les écrits de Kathy Acker (1993) sur le culturisme pour proposer une troisième lecture. Les muscles se développent lorsqu’on les sollicite jusqu’à l’épuisement. Cette pratique consistant à repousser constamment les limites du corps est une répétition de la défaillance ultime du corps : la mort (Acker 1993). Si la thanatologie est l’étude de la mort et du décès, le culturisme est une autothanatologie. Mes interventions « anti-vieillessement » vont dans le même sens; ce sont des défaillances inévitables qui ne peuvent pas arrêter le processus de vieillissement. Ainsi, ma pratique me rappelle que le corps existe dans un état d’immanence, même si je tente d’encadrer mon immanence selon des termes transcendants.

**Mots clés:** abject; vieillissement; âgisme; anti-vieillessement; art corporel; modification corporelle; art féministe; immanence; thanatologie; transcendance

**Author:** Jessica Joy Cameron / Jesika Joy (PhD) is an artist working in printmaking, painting, and performance art. She teaches gender, sexuality, and visual culture at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, Canada. Her book *Reconsidering Radical Feminism: Affect and the Politics of Heterosexuality* (2018) is published by the University of British Columbia Press.

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## Introduction

Madonna introduced Sam Smith and Kim Petras' performance of *Unholy* at the 2023 Grammy Awards. It quickly became apparent, as Madonna herself noted (2023), that what was noteworthy about the event was Madonna's face, not the fact that Kim Petras was the first trans woman to win an award in the Grammy's history. The celebrity gossip magazines and social media commentators were quick to call Madonna and her face "unrecognizable," "scary," and "sad." These criticisms were largely levied against Madonna's decision to alter her appearance to look younger through surgeries and other means. Like many people, I received unsolicited Facebook "news stories" accompanied by unflattering photos of Madonna in the weeks after the award ceremony. As is common, the comment sections were particularly cruel. Commentators referred to her as a "poor old lady" who should have retired years ago. Most interestingly, from my perspective, were the many women in their 50s, 60s, and 70s who posted pictures of themselves to compare to Madonna: "I'm 63 and I've never had plastic surgery or Botox." "I just turned 57, all natural." In response, other commentators complimented these women by telling them, "Your skin looks so youthful" and "OMG, you look like you are in your 40s." And here we have it! Women are rewarded for looking younger than their years and punished for having visible work done. Media scholar Hilde Van den Bulck (2014) explains that celebrity culture worships youth and that celebrities maintain the allure of being "exceptional (super) human beings" through the illusion of agelessness (73). But while cosmetic surgery has become standard for celebrities, anti-aging interventions are quickly bifurcated into those which are "sanctioned" (producing "natural" and youthful effects) and those which are "desperate" (producing unnatural effects that rupture the perception of youth) (Bulck 2014). Unsurprisingly, choosing not to get work done is not an option. As journalist Belinda Luscombe (2023) wrote in *Time*, "The laws of gravity and biology make it [ageing gracefully] impossible" (n.p.). "It's not as if older female celebrities who don't look as manufactured as Madonna are widely lauded. Nobody is heaping praise on more or less normal-looking women such as Madonna's 60-year old friend Rosie O'Donnell for aging gracefully" (Luscombe 2023, n.p.). You are not allowed to grow old. You are not allowed to get visible work done. You *are* allowed to get older but *only* if you continue to look younger than your chronological age. If you cannot do this, it seems you are expected to "retire" from public life.

Another interesting set of commentary came to light about Madonna's face at the Grammy Awards. The word "shame" appeared repeatedly. Some commentators said that "Madonna should be ashamed of herself" while others said that "it is such a shame because she used to be so beautiful." I will return to the politics of shame later in this paper, but suffice it for now to say that shame operates as a mode of social regulation; it disciplines us into "proper comportment." In this case, the "shame," or the violation of correct decorum, include: a) growing older and b) having had visible work done. This is, of course, not the first time women have been shamed for what are human physical features or bodily processes. Women did not regularly shave their bodies until the 1920s. Rising hemlines combined with Gillette's invention of the disposable razor blade and a desire for increased sales, helped to make hairless legs and armpits a social expectation (Edwards 2015). It is now the case that a woman with hairy legs and armpits is, at best, seen to be making a social statement or, at worse, seen to be distasteful. The shaming of growing older combined with the shaming of having had work done is creating a new social norm. If you do not have exceptional

genetics, the social imperative seems to be that you get work done in secret. We are creating a future where women will feel compelled to get regular neurotoxin injections (Botox), small facelift surgeries, and other procedures so that results are present but imperceptible. Women who do not comply will be seen to have aged terribly compared to their peers or they will simply be read as having “let themselves go.” Aging naturally might even become a signifier of poverty the way untreated rotten teeth are viewed at present. Indeed, we have already begun to live this new future. Celebrities like Jennifer Aniston and Jennifer Lopez have normalized looking like you are in your 30s while in your 50s. And then there is Cher who looks in her 40s while in her 70s! Insofar as getting older is a future that awaits us all, this trend is something that calls for political investigation.

Ageism, the public perception of aging women, and modifications to the aging body are starting points for this paper. Body modification refers to any practice of deliberately modifying the body’s appearance. This most commonly refers to piercing, tattooing, scarification, and plastic surgery but is also sometimes used to refer to laser hair removal, circumcision, voluntary amputations, bodybuilding, dieting, and waist training. Body modification has been discussed widely by feminists. Radical feminists take an abolitionist position on the practice. Andrea Dworkin, for instance, reads it as a form of gendered violence particularly when done to adhere more closely to the feminine beauty ideal. Plucking the eyebrows, “fixing” the nose, or wearing a girdle are painful practices that train women to be masochistic and subservient (Dworkin 1974). Most feminists, however, take a more nuanced view. Feminist philosopher Susan Bordo (1989) uses Foucault to examine the social imperative to be thin. While extreme dieting and eating disorders are concerning, they may also be experienced as a form of protest by those engaged in the practice. Similarly, philosopher Francesca Cesarano (2022) critiques the view that even conservative modifications to the female body, such as hymen restoration surgery, are only ever expressions of internalized patriarchy. Because the costs of “non-compliance to social norms” are high, women’s adherence to gendered expectations could be read as a “correct appraisal of what [...] to pursue in their societal context” (647, 650). Modifications to the female body that present alternative visions of femininity are at times celebrated by feminists. Sociologist Victoria Pitts (2003) notes that amongst some pro-sex feminists active in the bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism (BDSM) community, tattoos, scarification, and piercings are seen as a seditious rejection of hegemonic femininity. For biologist and writer Julia Serano (2007), however, it is important not to position non-normative gender expressions as inherently more subversive than those considered normative. She argues that modifications to the (trans) body to appear more in line with gendered expectations should not be maligned even if pursued under systems of oppositional sexism that compel gender identities to be binary.

While I do not propose to resolve the question of whether body modification can be a feminist practice, this paper will look at modifying the body (specifically my “anti-aging” interventions) in relation to both feminist discussions of body modification and the tradition of feminist body art. Body art refers to a particular mode of creating fine art that makes explicit use of the artist’s body. In body art, the artist’s body acts like a medium similar to the way paint is a medium in the creation of a painting. As explained by art historian Amelia Jones (1998), body art overlaps with performance art but it is both more narrow and more broad than performance art; it is more narrow than performance art because it must make use of the artist’s body in a salient way and it is more broad than performance art because it does not need to be performed for a live audience. Body art can be thought of as an inherently feminist practice because, as Jones points out, it displaces the (white male) Cartesian subject through an enactment of the artist’s body “in all of its sexual, racial, and other particularities” (5). This gives historically marginalized artists an opportunity to narrate their embodiment on their own terms. In Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964), for example, the artist sat on a stage in business attire and invited audience members to cut off pieces of her clothing. A more recent example is Marina Abramovic’s *The Artist is Present* (2010) performed during a retrospective of her work at The Museum of Modern Art. Abramovic sat silently for 736.5 hours over the course of two and a

half months while gallery goers lined up to sit across from her. These works are both performance art *and* body art because audience members interacted directly with the specificity of the artists' bodies while the artists' bodies were pushed to their mental and physical limits. Another kind of body art is that which makes deliberate use of the artist's body in the creation of an art object. In *Purple Squirt* (1995), for instance, American artist Keith Boadwee filled his rectum with purple paint, sat at the edge of a canvas spread out on the floor, and ejected the paint from his body onto the canvas. The result was a queered drip painting reminiscent of Jackson Pollock. Another example is a series of prints I made called *44 Year Old Pussy* (2022). In this work, I covered my genitals in blue paint (evocative of Yves Klein) and made 44 body prints (one for every year of my life to date).

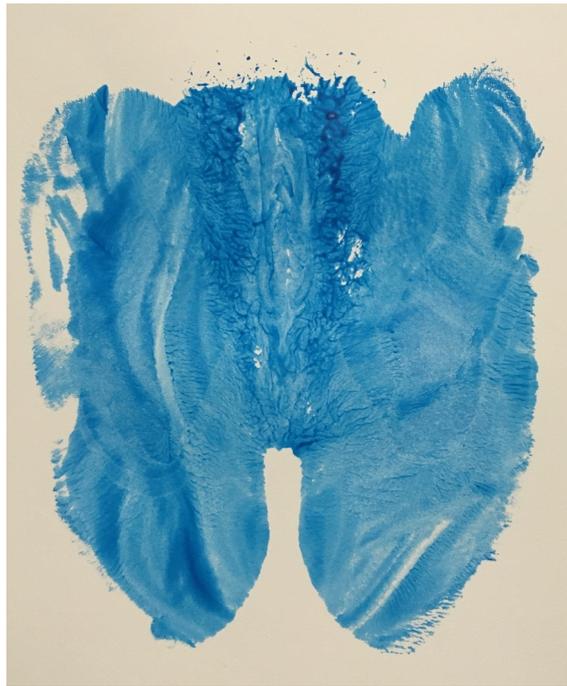


Image 1: *44 Year Old Pussy*, 2022 (acrylic print on paper, artist proof, 16"x12").

But, as mentioned, this paper does not look at body modification or body art in isolation; it looks at the use of body modification *as* a body art practice. Body modification can be categorized as contemporary art when it is conceptually driven and framed in artistic discourse. This has historical precedent. The French artist ORLAN provides the most well-known example of an artist doing this type of work. In her piece *The Reincarnation of Sainte-ORLAN* (1990-93), she had a series of plastic surgeries to transform her features to appear more like those from famous works of art. “She asked her surgeons to give her the nose [of] Diana in *Diana the Huntress* (1550) [...] from the School of Fontainebleau; the mouth of Boucher’s Europa from *The Rape of Europa* (1732-34); the forehead of Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* (1503); and the chin of Botticelli’s Venus from *The Birth of Venus* (1485-86)” (The Art Story 2022). These surgeries were broadcast live to gallery goers and were punctuated by the artist (under local anesthetic) reading poetry and prose. Another example is Eleanor Antin’s piece *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972). In this work, the artist documented a 37-day crash diet where she lost 10 pounds by taking four daily photos from the front, back, and both sides. Nearly 40 years later, Cassil offered a queer reinterpretation of Antin’s work by creating *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011-12). In this piece, the assigned female at birth (AFAB) artist’s body

becomes increasingly masculinized as they deliberately gain 23 lbs of muscle over 23 weeks through bodybuilding, nutrition, and the use of anabolic steroids.

My current artistic practice, distributed under the name Jesika Joy, continues in this tradition. I document my “anti-aging” body modifications including my bodybuilding programs, self-administered neurotoxin injections, hormone replacement regimes, and skin resurfacing treatments. Sociologist Susan Pickard (2020) argues that femininity and aging are associated with philosopher Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject; the aging female body is considered particularly abject. Using existentialist Simone de Beauvoir, Pickard maps the abject onto the material realm of immanence (the realm of birth, ripening, withering, and decay) and the non-abject onto the idealist realm of transcendence (characterized by a control over temporality). Because “abjection should always be understood as an element of regulation, control and oppression” (Pickard 2020, 159), my art practice as a middle-aged, white, able-bodied, cis woman could be read as an anti-feminist, ageist attempt to expel the abject and deny temporality. After exploring the argument that my work is anti-feminist in some detail, I provide an oppositional reading that positions my work as feminist. These two conflicting readings locate my practice within the unresolved feminist debates regarding the status of body modification. Furthermore, if one refuses to resolve the feminist contradictions of my work, a third reading becomes possible. This is to view my art as autothanatology. Postmodern essayist Kathy Acker (1993) explains that muscles grow when they are worked until failure. This practice of constantly coming up against the body’s limits is a kind of rehearsal for the ultimate failure of the body: death (Acker 1993). If thanatology is the study of death and dying, bodybuilding is autothanatology. My “anti-aging” interventions are similar; they involve short term failures (neurotoxins cause facial muscles to fail to contract) and long-term failures (no amount of neurotoxin can permanently stop the facial aging process). In this way, my art practice is a reminder that the body exists in a state of immanence, even while the feminist academic / artist may attempt to frame her immanence within transcendental terms.

## **Invisibility, Abjection, Immanence, and the Aging Female Body**

Feminist media scholar and art theorist Michelle Meagher (2014) argues that older women are subjected to a kind of invisibility. This disrupts the common view in feminist studies of visual culture that the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of women, as articulated by Laura Mulvey, constitutes a primary and totalizing means of women’s subjugation (Meagher 2014). Meagher explains that the to-be-looked-at-ness of women is not universal, long lived, or experienced by women as universally oppressive. Furthermore, Mulvey’s theory overlooks the cruelty older women experience in *not* being seen. As Meagher writes, being looked at might actually be “an enabling condition of our lives and the primary mode of entrance into intersubjective experiences and encounters with one another” (131). The threat of invisibility extends beyond the lived experiences of aging women to media representations. With a few notable exceptions, the hit show *Frankie and Grace* being one, older adults are rarely seen on television, in movies, or in advertisements. When they are portrayed, those representations tend to be of men or they tend to be negative (Edstrom 2018). One need only watch a few Disney films to observe the ways in which aging women are associated with evil and pitted against younger women (Elnahla 2015, Do Rozario and Waterhouse-Watson 2014). Negative portrayals of older women further extend to fine art. Meagher (2014) points to August Rodin’s piece *She Who Was the Helmet Maker’s Once-Beautiful Wife* (1885) as a particularly damaging example.

The basis for invisibility and negative portrayals of older women might be found in theories of abjection. Kristeva (1982) defines the abject as that which troubles clearly defined boundaries; the abject “disturbs identity, system, order” (4). It is neither subject nor object, it is neither me nor not-me. The abject can best be defined as an otherness that pervades our lives and troubles our sense of security. But it is not just that we find the abject unsettling, the “abject engenders disgust on account of its ambiguity” (Pickard 2020,

158). Bodily fluids are emblematic of this; they are subject/me (in that they come from me) and they are object/not-me (in that they are no longer a part of me). Women and femininity are associated with the abject because the AFAB body, more so than the AMAB body (assigned male at birth), is said to blur the lines between subject and object, me and not-me. The AFAB body bears the possibility of menstruation, gestation, and lactation; it sometimes leaks blood involuntarily every 28 days, it sometimes grows a parasitic not-me within the me, and it sometimes produces a food from fluids and tissues that were once a part of the subject to be consumed by an external subject/object. For Kristeva, the abjection of bodily fluids is connected to the abjection of death and dying.

These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. (1982, 3).

That the corpse is so sickening provides clues as to why aging is also associated with the abject. Visibly carrying the signs of having grown older blurs the lines between life and death; wrinkles, sagging skin, age spots, rounding spines, grey and thinning hair, remind the living that the border between life and death is one that we must all eventually cross. White Western culture denies this reality by trying to expel the older body from our line of vision so as to hopefully expel it from our consciousness as well.

Beauvoir (1953) distinguishes between the material realm of immanence and the idealist realm of transcendence in her canonical text *The Second Sex*. Immanence is associated with the kinds of unthinking, repetitive labours that have historically fallen to women.

The domestic labours that fell to her lot because they were reconcilable with the cares of maternity imprisoned her in repetition and immanence; they were repeated from day to day in an identical form, which was perpetuated almost without change from century to century; they produced nothing new. (Beauvoir 1953, 88)

Here we can think of gestating, birthing, and nursing infants, the raising children, preparing meals, and cleaning homes. These labours need to be done again and again on repeat and (with the exception of children who eventually reach adulthood) women have little to show for their hours, weeks, months, years of work. Transcendence, conversely, is associated with men; it is associated with the kinds of thinking, inventive labours that elevate humans beyond mere existence.

On the biological level a species is maintained only by creating itself anew; [...] this creation results only in repeating the same Life in more individuals. But man assures the repetition of Life while transcending Life through Existence; by this transcendence he creates values that deprive pure repetition of all value. In the animal, the freedom and variety of male activities are vain because no project is involved. Except for his service to the species, what he does is immaterial. Whereas in serving the species, the human male also remodels the face of the earth, he creates new instruments, he invents, he shapes the future. (Beauvoir 1953, 89-90)

Examples of transcendent labours include writing manuscripts, designing buildings, forging constitutions, sculpting statues. These labours may be done again by the same person or by different people but they are not done in the exact same way twice as the very purpose of the endeavour is to create something that has opportunity of being new.

Kristeva's (1982) theory of the abject and Beauvoir's (1953) theory of immanence are related. In fact, as ex-

plained by Pickard (2020), “Immanence is directly constituted through women’s abjection” (158). While transcendence “refers to a control over temporality,” immanence “is associated with developmental cycles, blooming, ripening, withering, rotting and decaying” (Pickard 2020, 158). These developmental cycles map roughly onto common stages of a girl’s / woman’s life from puberty, to adulthood, to maternity, to menopause, to old age, to death—stages of life that tie women to animality, repetitive immanence, and the abject. With the onset of menses, the girl is initiated into the material realm of immanence and her body becomes associated with the abject. This continues into adulthood and is affirmed should she decide to gestate a fetus, birth an infant, or nurse. Aging and menopause are particularly difficult for women based upon how they are often socially constituted in relation to these life stages. While fertility might tie women to immanence and the abject, infertility is worse. The infertile woman is ambiguous; she is female but not by an important standard through which women are defined in patriarchal societies. Furthermore, she has taken on another signification of the abject, that of aging itself. This association of the AFAB body to the abject, specifically the aging female body, is amplified by the fact that the abject and immanence are often depicted from the vantage point of the youthful male (Pickard 2020).

### **Body Modification / Body Art Practice**

I have been situating my “anti-aging” body modifications as body art since 2021. This began while doing an online workshop led by artists Kate Berry and Vanessa Dion Fletcher through the Abrons Arts Center called *Performance Art: The Human Body, Intimacy, and Taboo*. We were asked to prepare a piece for our last day of class. I had been wanting to do a skin treatment anyway so I decided I would document it for the group. Over the course of two days, I inserted a total of 107 PDO (polydioxanone) and PCL (polycaprolactone) threads into my face and neck. PDO and PCL thread is what is used to suture wounds and incisions during surgery. Older adults have thicker skin around healed stitches that cannot be accounted for by scar tissue alone; physicians found that suture materials encourage collagen synthesis as they dissolve in the skin. The PDO and PCL threads used for “anti-aging” purposes are attached to a thin sterile needle. The needle is inserted into the dermis parallel with the epidermis and when the needle is removed the PDO or PCL thread is left behind in the skin. In my documented performance, I inserted anywhere between 4 and 10 threads at a time and took a still photograph each time with the needles still inserted into the skin. The still images were then edited into a short video called *Beauty Kink: A Meditation on the Obscenity of the Inevitability of Death*. This title refers to the fact that visible signs of aging are treated as shameful obscenities in need of “correction.”



Image 2: *Beauty Kink: A Meditation on the Obscenity of the Inevitability of Death*, 2021 (video still, 1:00 min).

This piece led me to make a series of works documenting a variety of body modification practices. I inject liquid PCL a few times a year. This functions similarly to PDO and PCL threads. The liquid is put into select areas of the face and neck to induce collagen synthesis. I do microneedling of my face, neck, and body approximately once every 6 weeks. Microneedling involves using a pen or roller to create thousands of small puncture wounds in the epidermis and dermis. This controlled injury results in a thickening of the skin when it heals. I do my own neurotoxin injections once every 4 months. I studied facial anatomy and injection techniques during the pandemic. I import the neurotoxin from South Korea and use insulin syringes to inject the drug into select muscles of the face and neck to cause temporary paralysis which lessens the appearance of wrinkles. I have filler injected professionally once every year or two to replace age-related facial fat loss. Areas of the face that are done when “needed” include the forehead, temples, tear troughs, cheeks, and (with moderation) the lips. I do skin resurfacing treatments, such as lasers and chemical peels, every few years. I recently had two professional CO<sub>2</sub> laser treatments done on my face and neck and took a picture each day after the procedure to document the week-long healing process. And I just had my first plastic surgery; I underwent an upper blepharoplasty to remove excess skin of the eyelids that had started to rest on my eyelashes. The final thing I document in my work are my bulking and cutting diets. I alternate between eating in a caloric surplus while weight training (with the intention of putting on muscle mass) and eating in a caloric deficit while weight training (to maintain muscle mass while losing body fat). I take before and after pictures and share how much weight I gained or lost and how many quarter inches I gained or lost from my waist.



Image 3: *Healing From CO<sub>2</sub> Laser Resurfacing (Day Two)*, 2022 (digital photograph, dimensions variable).



Image 4: *Before Successfully Gaining 14.5 Pounds, 2022* (digital photograph, dimensions variable).



Image 5: *After Successfully Gaining 14.5 Pounds, 2023* (digital photograph, dimensions variable).

## Reading of Body Modification / Body Art Practice as Anti-Feminist

These body modification practices can be read as anti-feminist. If read through Dworkin (1974), they become a capitulation to male dominance. If read through Cesarano's (2022) more nuanced position, they become a careful calculation of how best to navigate one's social context. Either way, modifying the AFAB cannot be divorced from the patriarchal environment within which it is practiced. Here, I will read my work as a middle-aged, white, able-bodied, cis woman, as a postfeminist, ageist attempt to expel the object. According to Rosalind Gill (2007), postfeminism can be defined as representations that entangle feminist and anti-feminist themes. Postfeminism emphasizes empowerment and choice but what is portrayed as empowering is narrow and is often tied to choosing to be sexually attractive along conventionally defined terms. For Gill, postfeminism "represents a shift in the way that power operates: from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing, narcissistic gaze" (151). Objectification becomes freely chosen by active agents and it requires constant monitoring. According to this definition, my body modification practices are certainly postfeminist. These procedures come on the heels of constant self-surveillance: when I notice my crow's feet coming back, it is time for more neurotoxin; when I notice a crepiness of the skin on my neck, it is time to microneedle; when I notice my tummy is starting to bulge over my pants, it is time to end my bulk and start a cut. To argue that I am simply exercising bodily autonomy overlooks the relentless ageist messaging women receive to look younger. Or, as Gill asks, if "women are just pleasing themselves," why is "the resulting valued 'look' so similar"? (154).

This self-policing, postfeminist tendency seen in my body art work can also be theorized through Judith Butler's (1997) understanding of subjection. Subjection refers to the process by which one becomes a subject through the workings of discourse and the ways that subjects internalize social constructions. Applied to questions of gender and age, this would be the ways that we become subjects through the internalization of discourses that constitute gender and age as they intersect with race, sexuality, and ability. "Subjection," Butler writes, "consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency" (2). We exist as social agents through labels and identities that have been imposed on us and that ground our social intelligibility. An interesting implication of this, for Butler, is that we develop affective attachments to the discourses through which we enter sociality. Applied to the question of why feminist women sometimes engage in "anti-aging" practices, this might have to do with the emotional investments that middle-aged and older women have in belonging to the category of woman itself. Put another way, if being a woman has been discursively linked to youth, even feminist women might feel the need to create the illusion of youth in order to, in the words of Shania Twain, "feel like a woman." For Beauvoir, as described by Pickard, this can be explained by the ways that "woman," by definition, "refers to the subject who has become a subject through making herself an object" (161). Menopause and aging, for Beauvoir, offer women the opportunity to stop existing as an object to themselves and to move from a life of immanence to a life of transcendence. But, as Pickard (2020) notes, "Instead of seizing the opportunity for liberation, [many women] may suffer a crisis of self-reproach and a desire for retaining the non-object youthful self through aesthetic and other practices" (161). If woman only exists as woman insofar as she remains an object to herself, this makes sense. Or as Butler (1997) might conclude, we would "rather exist in subordination than not exist" (7).

When read as postfeminist subjection, I have to ask myself what kind of future I am creating through my body modification / body art practice. Feminists have long been fighting against the constraints of unrealistic beauty ideals. Could it be that I am undermining this struggle in my art work? It would seem that the feminist thing to do would be to find a different way of being a middle-aged woman, a way that does not involve the crisis of self-reproach described by Pickard (2020). Shannon Bell (2010) does this in her book *Fast Feminism*.

One of my political commitments [...] is to queer the old female body, to fuck with the signs of aging while presenting them. Gesture, movement, style and body composition meet and meld with age spots, knee wrinkles and sagging upper-arm undercarriage. It doesn't matter how many years one has worked out, or how long and how hard each time, time will get you. Perhaps that is why time is my most worthy and best-endowed seducer. (21)

Here, Bell is engaged in a project of resignification. Instead of erasing the aging AFAB body or participating in its desexualization, she renders it highly visible and foregrounds its sexual agency. Indeed, because gender, as it intersects with age, is performative, it can be performed differently. Using the metaphor of theatre, Butler (1988) explains that we might not be able to choose the gendered scripts that we have been given but we do have some leeway in terms of how we read them. We "are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance" but the gendered and aged body "*enacts interpretations* within the confines of already existing directives" (Butler 1988, 526, my emphasis).

## Reading of Body Modification / Body Art Practice as Feminist

My body modification / body art practice can also be read as feminist. If read according to pro-sex feminists active in the BDSM community, as discussed by Pitts (2003), my work could be seen as a rejection of hegemonic femininity in that any and all modifications are made explicit. Indeed, here, I will explore the idea that altering the body to adhere to hegemonic beauty ideals need not be read as a postfeminist mark of one's attachment to the restrictive discourses through which one has come into sociality *when* those alterations are deliberately made public. Artist Nina Arsenault provides an example. Arsenault is a trans woman who wrote about the \$200,000 worth of surgeries she had to feminize her face and body in her one-woman play *The Silicone Diaries*. Judith Rudakoff (2012) explains that Arsenault changed her external appearance to better match her feminine self but that she did so "*unreasonably* by embodying extreme and even unreal representations of Western beauty" (3). Arsenault has modelled herself after women like Pamela Anderson who, Arsenault argues, is a "caricature of a woman" which makes Arsenault "an imitation of an imitation of an idea of a woman" (White 2016, 175, quoting Arsenault). Arsenault is thin with large breasts, hips, and lips; she is what many would consider to be the feminine ideal. Shannon Bell (2012) writes that "she is beauty," the "perfect female given-to-be-seen" (95). While feminists like Dworkin might argue that Arsenault's project is anti-feminist in chasing unrealistic beauty standards that cater to the male gaze, Bell disagrees. Using Jacques Lacan's concept of the *objet a*, Bell argues that Arsenault's work is feminist precisely because it discloses the process involved in becoming the feminine beauty ideal. By deconstructing the binaries of real / fake and authenticity / artifice (Rudakoff 2012), Arsenault exposes the fake and artifice present in all constructions of femininity. She deconstructs hegemonic beauty ideals and, in so doing, queers male gaze. While my body modification / body art practice does not go to the same lengths as Arsenault's, I too reveal the suffering involved in trying to adhere to unrealistic beauty ideals and, in so doing, hopefully demystify expectations of "aging gracefully."

Another way my body modification / body art practice can be read as feminist is in how it confronts shame. As I mentioned earlier, women are both shamed for growing older and shamed for having work done to appear as if they have not aged. Femmegimp scholar Loree Erickson (2014) explains that "shame is not so much a psychological state of individuals [...] but [...] a socially based harm which oppressed groups are subject to in particular ways" (Erickson 2014, 155, quoting Abby Wilkerson). In this way, shame operates as a strategy of stratification. If guilt says you have done something wrong, shame says you *are* wrong for not living up to social standards that could never include you; you are not male enough, you are not young enough, you are not white enough; you are not straight enough, and so on. This points to one of the most insidious aspects of shame: it requires an internalization of social hierarchies and oppress-

ive ideals. “Shame is a panoptical device used to urge bodies toward assimilation and normalcy” (Erickson 2014, 157). We learn to police ourselves. But what if instead of self-regulation, we rejected exclusionary social standards? This is what Erickson does in her film *Want*. The film intersperses discussions of ableism with images of the author engaged in explicit sex acts. In doing so, Erickson disarms the shame that would tell her that disabled bodies are not sexy and that disabled people are not allowed to be sexual. As she explains, “Rather than hide away, deny, and ignore those very sites of the deepest shame, we must not only embrace them and learn from them, we need to *flaunt* them” (155).

The practice of “flaunting it” has been integral to body art since it came onto the art scene in the 1960s. Because it is the oppressed who are associated with the abject (Pickard 2020), it is women, older adults, people of colour, trans folks, and disabled people who are told to feel shame on account of their embodiment. As such, body artists from oppressed groups have embraced the abject as part of their art practice. Rina Arya (2014) explains this history in her article *Taking Apart the Body: Abjection and Body Art*. “Abjection became a tool of social critique in which marginalized groups could articulate their concerns as a way of empowering their minority status” (5). Artists, Arya continues, “turned to the very site of repulsion and stigmatization that they embodied – their gender, sexuality, race, disability – [in order to destabilize] Western notions of otherness” (7). They did this by highlighting their bodily specificity, by deliberately blurring the lines between subject and object, by incorporating abject materials into their work, and by engaging in sadomasochistic activities (Arya 2014). We can see these techniques employed in my own art practice. I highlight the specificity of my middle-aged, white, able-bodied, cis female embodiment (it is my body that is on display). I am both the subject and the object of my practice (my own body becomes the object of my interventions). My imagery often shows abject materials in the form of bodily fluids (puncture wounds bleed, abraded skin scabs, occasionally infected lesions puss). And I take on the role of both sadist and masochist (my self-administered and professional treatments are, no doubt, painful). By flaunting my body modification practices and making them into art, I refuse the shame that would have me either deny my middle-aged body or the fact that I am taking measures to minimize the appearance of that aging.

## Reading of Body Modification / Body Art Practice as Autothanatology

The fact that my art practice, and body modification more generally, can be read as both anti-feminist and as feminist points to a third reading. If we argue that body modification is definitively anti-feminist, we risk attributing false consciousness to women who engage in such practices (Cesarano (2022)). If we argue that body modification is definitively feminist, we risk forwarding a postfeminist argument that does not take seriously the manner in which women are disciplined to take on, what Gill (2007) would call, a “self-policing, narcissistic gaze” (151). While reading my art practice in a binary fashion does not illuminate the ultimate meaning of the text, the fact that it can be read both ways implies that the work might itself be politically ambivalent. This is, in my analysis, the same political ambivalence that can be seen in the work of ORLAN, Antin, and Cassil, discussed earlier. All three artists situate their practice in relation to feminist art and speak to how the gendered body is socially received while simultaneously enacting a kind of violence against the body by way of plastic surgery, extreme dieting, or anabolic steroid use. Cindy Sherman and Suzy Lake’s later work could also be called politically ambivalent. Both artists create imagery that directly addresses questions of aging and femininity in distinctly feminist ways but, as Meagher (2014) points out, some of these works, such as Sherman’s series *Untitled* (2008) and Lake’s *Forever Young* (2000), “reproduce the ageist structure of the look” (141). Martha Wilson’s later work also addresses questions of aging and femininity. Like Sherman and Lake, Wilson has been engaged in practices of self-representation over the course of her multi-decade career (Meagher 2014). And, like Sherman and Lake, this permits the artist to explore “the shifting relationship to visibility that attends aging” (106). But unlike Sherman and Lake, Wilson produces “images that embody the passing of time” (141). In *Beauty + Beastly* (1974/2009), for example, the artist juxtaposes two self-portraits, one from 1974 when she is young and one from 2009 when

she is older. In looking at the work, we cannot miss that this is the same person but we also cannot miss that 35 years span the two photographs. As Meagher explains, "What we see is not an old woman and a young woman, but a young body that will become old and an old body that was once young" (140-1). This, to my mind, represents a feminist practice of autothanatology; Wilson simultaneously marks that human bodies exist in finite time while reflecting on how this universal condition is interpreted differently according to how one is gendered. I do not claim that my body art is as successful as Wilson's self-portraits, but I would like to move on from the unresolvable question of whether or not my work is feminist to read it, similarly, as a practice of autothanatology.

In her well-known piece, "Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body," Kathy Acker (1993) struggles to articulate her bodybuilding practice in verbal language. "The general law behind bodybuilding is that muscle, if broken down in a controlled fashion and then provided with the proper growth factors such as nutrients and rest, will grow back larger than before" (22). Breaking the muscle down requires working the target muscle close to failure. But this is a meticulous process and the practitioner must execute great care so as not to injure themselves. As such, bodybuilders spend their time in the gym meditatively counting weights, reps, sets, and breaths. Language is reduced to a few verbs, nouns, and grunts. This is why Acker calls bodybuilding a "*language of the body*," one that offers a potentially different kind of cognition based in the specificity of the body as it exists in the moment (23). The body is different each time the bodybuilder steps into the gym; the body is "controlled by change and by chance" (Acker 1993, 26). It is in this confrontation with the body that Acker gets to something else of significance. Because the failures of bodybuilding are situated in the materiality of the body, it is a reminder that the body is forever moving towards its ultimate failure, "towards death" (Acker 1993, 23). In this way, bodybuilding is thanatology applied to the self.

Acker's (1993) analysis of bodybuilding provides a model through which I can analyze my own "anti-aging" interventions. My body modifications constantly bring me up against the limitations of the body and its ultimate failures. On a micro level, the purpose of neurotoxin is to cause facial muscles to *fail* to contract. On a macro level, all "anti-aging" interventions are inevitable *failures*; no amount of neurotoxin, hormone replacement regimes, skin resurfacing treatments, bodybuilding programs, or plastic surgeries can stop the external or internal manifestations of aging. And, as in the case of bodybuilding, the body never responds the same way to the same stimulus. It is always about this particular body, having these particular healing responses, at this particular point in time. Sometimes a muscle that usually requires 2 units of neurotoxin requires four. Sometimes an injection point will develop an unexpected hematoma. Documenting this process becomes a public meditation on my private experience of slowly moving towards the end of my life.

If my body modification / body art practice can be considered autothanatology, then it necessarily aligns with the realm of immanence. This is paradoxical. On the one hand, my practice embraces the materiality of the body and its impermanence; it accepts the body's embeddedness in developmental cycles and rejects the lie that temporality can somehow be controlled. On the other, my practice is situated within the thinking, inventive labours of the idealist realm. To my mind, this is where the feminist credentials of my project are located, not only in question of how we read "anti-aging" body modifications, not only in the question of whether or not we have made these modifications adequately public so as to be deconstructed, and not only in the question of whether or not they adequately eschew the shame that would have us modify our bodies in private. What is feminist is the deconstruction of the immanence / transcendence dualism itself. My body modification / body art practice embraces immanence along transcendental terms and as such my immanence becomes tied to the project of "transcending Life through Existence" (Beauvoir 1953, 89). Life is not simply reproduced but new values are created as I shape the future, even if those values might sometimes be conflicted. This is also a rejection of Cartesian dualism.

In our culture, we simultaneously fetishize and disdain the athlete, a worker in the body. For we still live under the sign of Descartes. This sign is also the sign of patriarchy. As long as we continue to regard the body, that which is subject to change, chance, and death, as disgusting and inimical, so long shall we continue to regard our own selves as dangerous others. (Acker 1993, 27)

Acker's writing here indicates that deconstructing the division between immanence and transcendence also becomes a means of disempowering the tyranny of the abject and its attempts to oppress and solicit self-regulation. Embracing the body, its rhythms, and materiality helps us accept mortality as something that is not relegated to certain Others; mortality is an equalizing universality.

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