

Performing Postfeminism: Escaping Identity Politics?

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Abstract

Examining works by three artists, this article discusses whether their sensationalist strategies and transgressions reflect a postfeminist misrecognition of privilege and evasion of identity politics — or a third-wave feminist analysis of potential complicity in the very systems under critique.

Résumé

Cet article discute des stratégies sensationnelles et des transgressions employées par 3 artistes et si elles reflètent la fausse identification du privilège et de l'évasion des politiques d'identité typique à ce soit-disant âge postféministe, où, néanmoins, une troisième vague féministe adresse les contradictions dans nos vies en tant que femme et comment nous sommes parfois complices dans la structure même que nous critiquons.

When and how does an artist's use of the explicit body and her sexuality constitute a savvy critique of the objectification of women, and when, perhaps under the guise of empowerment or sexual expression, is it ultimately naïve and easily co-opted by dominant patriarchal meaning? These questions arose for me upon encountering the performance work of Charmaine Wheatley, a young Canadian artist based in New York. Wheatley performs as the sexually charged persona Charmaine, disrobing as an audience member in strip clubs, and sharing her Moonpies with gallery-goers. In this article I relate her sensationalist strategies to those of British artist Jemima Stehli, who provocatively uses her own body in works such as *Wearing Shoes Chosen by the Curator* (Figure 16), and *Strip Series* (Figure 17), and American artist Andrea Fraser, whose controversial *Untitled* (Figure 18) documents a "personal human exchange" between artist and collector.

In 1976 Lucy Lippard asserted that "It is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult" (125). More recently, art critic Laura Cottingham declared the resurgent phenomenon of women artists making "sexual spectacles of themselves" to be "twat art" (Alison Jones 2001, 28). Wheatley, Stehli and Fraser each employ the "explicit body," a term performance art theorist Rebecca Schneider uses to express how the artist's body, as a "site of social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality," is inscribed with historical meaning that defines social hierarchies of privilege and disprivilege, particularly with regard to the

politics of representation and artistic authority (1997, 2). Women's representation is a particularly sticky question in the current climate of third-wave feminism and postfeminism where we have been witnessing a renewal of women's sexualized images within popular culture, and a general backlash against feminist gains. I am intrigued with artworks that run this risk. For me the practices of Wheatley, Stehli and Fraser are certainly not unproblematic, but sit on a slippery edge, whereby the artists may be seen, as Alison Jones writes, "both [to] expose insult as well as consciously titillate the viewer and invite voyeurism" (1999, 306). I aim to explore some of the tensions in each artist's strategy of explicit objectification. What distinction might be made between the expression of sexual agency, and what amounts to transgressive sexual spectacle? What is effective as critique, or parody, perhaps imagining an alternative position for women, and what is merely sensationalist? I aim to develop a nuanced understanding beyond binaries of "good representations" versus "bad representations" and to challenge conservative apprehension around the body, sexuality and desire. Situating these artists' practices within the current context of third-wave feminism, backlash against feminist gains, and postfeminism, I argue that we need to be aware of how one's position of privilege figures into representations of one's body and self. I aim to determine how these artists' representational practices may or may not analyze and challenge the social operations of power which structure our lives as women.

Defining Terms: Feminist Art Practice, Third-Wave Feminism and Postfeminism.

In my view, feminist art practice must include an analysis of, and intervention into, representations of gender, race, sexuality, class, ethnicity and so on as they operate within systems of power, to construct historical, cultural, social, and political subjects.

The work of Wheatley, Stehli and Fraser engages feminist issues and the tenet that the "personal is political" - the concept that one's position in the world reflects a wider social reality, and that one's choices and actions always have political implications. But what does it mean that some of these artists articulate a dismissal of feminism and position themselves as postfeminist - as somehow beyond the need for feminism?

The term "postfeminist" has a different meaning in postmodern and art historical discourse than in that of popular culture, but in each case it signals a rupture with feminism. In its pop cultural usage, where postfeminism has gained wide currency, the term first surfaced in the 1980s media, celebrating women's success in previously male-dominated fields and asserting that the feminist movement was now outdated (Gamble 2000, 43). Postfeminism reinvents "good" feminist practice by relying on an oversimplified opposition between second-wave feminism constructed as "victim feminism" and a corrective sexy "power feminism" that feeds off the public fixation with sexuality to present itself as chic, inoffensive and marketable (Steenbergen 2001, 260). Indeed, postfeminism came into vogue through popular writers such as Camille Paglia and Katie Roiphe, and TV shows such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex in the City*, that made the conservative and individualist views of postfeminism fashionable. In these shows, and symptomatic of postfeminism generally, we see a return to much of what second-wave feminism critiqued - heterosexist and traditional gender roles, using sex appeal to gain power, marriage as affirming a woman's worth and sense of self, consumerism and narrow ideals of feminine beauty. In this way, postfeminism dovetails with the backlash against feminist gains - the conservative reaction that attempts to put women "back in their place." Susan Faludi, author of *Backlash: the Undeclared War Against American Women*, suggests

postfeminism is the backlash against the gains of the women's movement - perhaps the postfeminist "simultaneous incorporation, revision and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second-wave feminism" that Judith Stacey predicted in her essay "Sexism by a Subtler Name?" (1992, 322). Significantly, most postfeminists do not consider themselves to be anti-feminist, but rather claim a postfeminist identity because the emphasis on individualism enables them to escape what they perceive to be second-wave feminism's narrow definition of "a good feminist."

But postfeminism hasn't been the only critique of second-wave feminism. Simultaneously with postfeminism's development in the pop culture sphere, third-wave feminism evolved in comparatively underground and alternative circles as a reaction against what was perceived to have become a limited and elitist academic second-wave feminism. The term "third wave" generally refers to the resurgence in feminist activism among younger generations and a stance against the postfeminist label. Following many second-wave women of colour, queer, and Third-World theorists, third-wave feminism builds upon second-wave critiques of power structures by critiquing essentialist organizing around sameness at the expense of differences. It emphasizes that multiple, shifting axes of power situate individuals such that those privileged by social location may participate in another's oppression. This third-wave attention to ambiguity, contradiction and difference underscores the risks of binary "either-or" thinking.

Both third-wave feminism and postfeminism focus on individual identity, style, sexual agency and pleasure, but third-wave feminism differs in recognizing that critical attention to the self can contribute to an awareness of how the personal is political. Third-wave feminism differs sharply from postfeminism by undertaking an organized response to enduring "privilege and exploitation based on race, ethnicity, sexuality,

physical ability and body shape" (Orr 1997, 34). Those claiming that women have "made it" are only thinking of the "heterosexual, white, able-bodied, well-educated, financially successful, aggressive and overtly sexual women" that mass-market books and hip TV shows tout as "the new faces of feminism." Celebrating "the successes of certain women in previously male-dominated realms" obscures the "oppression of marginalized women even more" (Steenbergen 2001, 259-60). The mistaken postfeminist assumption that the women's movement took care of inequalities and that today it is a matter of individual women making personal choices, portrays contemporary feminism as unnecessary - even oppressive for women. This valuing of individualism endorses the feminist backlash because it enables the status quo to write off ethical responsibility rather than recognizing the full force of institutionalized oppressions. Similarly, the liberal humanist concept of all individuals as equal "obscures the complex ways that exploitation and oppression" operate and are naturalized. We need to question what we want to be equal to: equality with white men concedes to the very structures that feminists have long been critiquing. Yet, equality remains a useful concept, for when we realize in horror that it only applies to a few, equality can also motivate and provide the ground for coalitional politics (Heywood and Drake 1997, 12).

Art historian Amelia Jones notes that while the postfeminism of popular culture safely subordinates women to the commodity system and heterosexual desire, the academic form of postfeminism - or feminist postmodernism - absorbs feminism into postmodernism through appropriative techniques that ultimately generalize and defuse the politics of feminism.¹ Particular feminist artists and theorists, such as Mary Kelly and Barbara Kruger, have been labeled as postfeminist within postmodern discourse to distinguish them from "earlier, supposedly essentialist feminist art

practices," which were not "'radical' or anti-modern enough." This "post" application contributes to anti-feminist ends, as these postmodernist discourses are ultimately masculinist, collapsing specific feminist claims into postmodernism's agenda. The selective appropriation of feminism "radicalizes" postmodernism, making it appear anti-masculinist, and simultaneously silences the confrontational voices of feminism, as postfeminist "(non)difference" (Amelia Jones 1994, 17-22).

More recently, the term and concept "postfeminism" has shifted significantly within art discourse to engage a wider cultural phenomenon. While Amelia Jones discusses postfeminism with regard to 1980s and early 1990s art practices that employ deconstruction and disavow visual pleasure, Helen MacDonald uses the term in her book *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art* to refer to a popular culture understanding of postfeminism as "inscribed in a fantasy of sexual freedom" (2001, 104) and to artists who employ their bodies/selves erotically and strategically dismiss the male gaze (162). Similarly, Alison Jones considers such ironic, ambiguous images to be indicative of "postfeminist pastiche" (1999, 306). When discussing work by Wheatley, Stehli and Fraser, I will refer to the pop cultural connotation of postfeminism, which has had wide social influence, and not to the meaning invoked above by Amelia Jones. Indeed, these artists insist on visual pleasure rather than denying it, and do not rely heavily on deconstruction. It is against a backdrop of postfeminism in this pop cultural sense and (a comparatively marginalized) third-wave feminism that I read these artists' works.

Some Feminist Art History

It is also necessary to situate these artists' practices historically in relation to feminist explorations since the late 1960s of women's problematic relation to representation, and to examine how these artists'

practices relate to wider feminist praxis. Each of these artists transgressively claims agency as artist/subject through the use of her explicit body as the subject and material for her work. This strategy implicitly destabilizes the invisible - yet highly gendered - demarcations upon which Western knowledge production and agency rest.² In 1975 Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* broke ground for feminist claims for authorship of the body. In this performance, Schneemann stood naked on a table and slowly extracted a scroll from her vagina, reading aloud its text that addressed a male filmmaker's misunderstanding of her and her work. Enacting the feminist tenet that "the personal is political," many other women artists during this period also consciously drew upon their gendered experience and situated their own bodies/selves as the subject and material of their art practice, particularly in the new terrain of performance and video. But despite the explosion of women's artwork in the 1970s and onwards, women's art practices continued to be largely dismissed, often with the accusation that to use themselves in their work was narcissistic. It wasn't nudity or sexual display - common throughout the history of art - that was the problem: it was "the agency of the body displayed, the author-ity of the agent" (Schneider 1997, 35).

Women's performance and body art have constituted a critique of Western culture's "universal" subject, but the radical move of women artists employing their own bodies does not in itself guarantee a challenge to patriarchal representations of women. A woman's body is heavily coded: "its pre-existing meanings, as sex object, as object of the male gaze, can always prevail and re-appropriate the body, despite the intentions of the woman herself" (Wolff 1990, 121). In determining whether a work intervenes critically into patriarchal representations, it is useful to revisit Mary Kelly's suggestion to employ "the kind of distancing

devices which...cut across the predominant representations of woman as object of the look, or that...question the notion of femininity as a pre-given entity" (1996, 67). Although Kelly argued at the time that the use of the female body made such distancing nearly impossible, I assert that, by using strategies such as parody and humour, many feminist artists have successfully employed their own bodies and selves to disrupt dominant patriarchal meaning, articulate a critique, and assert agency. As Kelly warned, however, this is difficult because in order to gauge whether the artist succeeds in making a critical intervention into representation, the work must contain a clear analysis of the individual in relation to social operations of power.

Explicit Ambivalence and Contradiction: Charmaine Wheatley's Performance Practice

Both the 2001 exhibition "Charmaine" at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery (Figure 15) and Wheatley's persona, Charmaine, present a construct of hyper-sexualized femininity and claim the illicit porn and stripper images. Employing her given name as a trademark, Wheatley articulates an identity based on the blonde bombshell and expresses a desire for sexual freedom, seeking to "rile up" what is "proper" by feminist standards (Enright 2001, 5). The exhibition presented a boutique aesthetic, comprising hand-printed tee-shirts; a compact disc compilation of the 1950s song "Charmaine"; curious phallic candle holders; a boxed issue of the pornography magazine *High Society*, to which Wheatley submitted a photo of herself; a shelf laden with Moonpies - accurate chocolate copies of the space between Wheatley's butt cheeks; and occupying the centre of the exhibition, various colourful wooden tables housing hundreds of teeny (and teen-like) diaristic drawings under Plexiglas. In an adjoining room were

two video works derived from performance interventions: *Casa Rosso* (2000), and *2385 Agricola Street* (1997).

Casa Rosso presents footage from an intervention in an Amsterdam strip club where Wheatley disrobed as an audience member. The cloaked surveillance camera worn by her escort recorded more of the bar's ceiling and clientele than of Wheatley. The resultant video thus foregrounds our voyeuristic desire by vexing our satisfaction. She similarly teases us with her bookwork *Cambridge Suites* (1997), which contains black and white images photocopied onto black paper of Wheatley and friends hanging out naked in a hotel room. Wheatley indulges the curiosity of those viewers with enough patience by providing convex glass magnifiers to explore her hundreds of miniscule drawings and diaristic writings.

Wheatley made *2385 Agricola* shortly after graduating from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (1995). She describes *2385 Agricola* on her website:

Video from a 15 minute performance, where I sat naked in a storefront window, legs on the window sill, camcorder in hand, taping responses of passersby, while a second audience of approximately 20 people sat behind me. I had two audiences. The invited "audience" inside...expected to passively witness a performance, and instead implicated themselves as active participants in the ensuing exchange of words with the street audience ("The cloak of invisibility has been stripped away, and ones' spectatorship becomes an issue within the work"- Catherine Elwes). My performance served as a catalyst for the interaction between the inside and outside audiences as neither group sought to address me directly. The performance ended

with an army of four police vans and a total of eight policemen. They asked the inside audience questions about what I did and me. After taking some notes based on the audiences' answers to their questions they left.

The first part of 2385 *Agricola* is shot from Wheatley's point of view: we see passersby react to what appears to be some sort of spectacle, and hear a version of the song "Charmaine" as well as the murmurs and laughs of the gallery audience behind her. It is only upon switching to the street camera that we realize what is going on: Wheatley sitting naked, recording the disbelieving gazes of passersby on *Agricola* Street in Halifax's North End - one of Halifax's poorer, and largely Black neighbourhoods.

Some people react aggressively, one woman decrying Wheatley for not using "the common sense God gave her." Wheatley states that her performance became a catalyst for the interaction between the inside gallery audience and the outside street audience. But what Wheatley's performance sets up is the "inside-r" gallery audience - and by extension a subsequent gallery audience viewing the video - co-opting the street audience. The gallery audience observing the *Agricola* passersby's (predictable) surprised reaction to Wheatley's staged naked spectacle constitutes a dynamic whereby a traditionally elitist art cognoscenti have a laugh at the expense of the "poor folk" who don't recognize Wheatley's actions as art.

Wheatley's interventions in strip clubs similarly appropriate the unsuspecting club audience - the insider audience this time being her art entourage who accompany her with a camera. In the exhibition's accompanying catalogue, curator Cliff Eyland describes two strip club experiments Wheatley performed to coincide with her exhibition earlier in 2001 in

Winnipeg. In "Club A," Wheatley took a stage-front seat between two men and proceeded to disrobe. The manager soon escorted her out. In "Club B," Wheatley convinced the club staff to entertain her desire to perform an amateur pole dance. The art world may perceive Wheatley's actions to be transgressive, subverting the economy structuring women's sexual display by "offering for free what people had originally intended to buy" (Hollenberg 2002, 8), but it is unlikely that such interventions provided anything but an enticing diversion for the club clientele.

As Wheatley works to make viewers complicit voyeurs, she raises attendant "moral" and (inadvertently) class issues, as well as feminist hackles. Her rebellious stance - transgressing propriety by emphasizing sexuality, and entering "bad girl" spaces to appropriate the stripper - invests in the historical association of avant-garde transgression and the cultural capital it garners in the art world. However, transgression in itself does not constitute critique. Wheatley's desire to define her individual sexuality, insisting that her work is about "Charmaine's naked self in a strip club," while she meanwhile smuggles the art world into the strip club to appropriate the stripper, relies on her relative privilege. Wheatley's experimental strip club performances fulfill a curiosity about "why [she is] attracted to going there" and enact a fantasy of sexual freedom as a stripper "get[ting] off on the bright lights and the glitter and the glamour" (Enright 2001, 5-6), but what does it mean for the stripper when Wheatley claims such an identity for her self and her art?³ When art practice downwardly crosses a class boundary, it often fails to analyze those class structures and exploitation. As Martha Rosler writes:

Identifying something essential about oneself-as-woman with society's most vilified, most sexual definitions of women, is a recurrent

theme...involv[ing] a radical feminist assertion of the identity of women in exploitation....Like the "Third-Worldism" of New Left politics, it provokes questions centering on adventurism...and obliviousness to the facts of working-class life. The reality of lower-class women's lives is an honorable topic, but in the auteurist art world its significance is subject to inversion and distortion.

(Rosler 1997, 72-74)

Wheatley states that she is concerned with the reality of sex workers' lives, but in mimetically inserting herself into that role/space, her work fails to analyze the structures of power operating within that realm. This is evident when Wheatley relates an experience getting kicked out of a club, revealing her privilege in the telling: "I thought I was going to be beat up or tossed out a back door (the beating option seemed more desirable than sitting naked in a cold Manitoba snowbank)" (Eyland 2001, 4).

I argue that Wheatley's position of relative privilege enables her transgressive pleasure in flaunting and objectifying her own body. Kate Davy examines how "performing sexuality excessively," in opposition to the "good-girl construct" of (white) womanhood in order to claim alternative sexualities, relies on an exclusionary intersection of whiteness and class for its subversive effect (1995, 193). Wheatley states on her website that she seeks to "agitate" what she sees as "prissy" attitudes about the (naked) body and to call "into question the audience's ability to notice one's own perceived social taboos." During the exhibition's opening, Wheatley served up her chocolate Moonpies, inviting viewers to consume her symbolically, returning the teeth-marked remains to the exhibition shelf as records of "intimacy generated during the performance" (Wheatley 2001). Through this rather fun work,

Wheatley aimed to encourage a less uptight attitude toward sexuality. At another exhibition in New York, Wheatley performed her chocolate offering wearing a fresh white paper dress with a clear plastic bustle, provocatively and humourously emphasizing her consumption as a sexual commodity.

Wheatley's Moonpies performance resonates with Hannah Wilke's 1974 S.O.S. - Starification Object Series. Wilke handed gum out to gallery audiences, asking them to chew it, and then stripped and shaped these gum wads into tiny cock/cunts that she then applied to her naked body. While viewers participate in the literal consumption of Wheatley's metaphorical sex, Wilke had viewers take part in what can be interpreted as her "wounding" - placing the gum sculptures on her flesh signified the subject as always sexually marked. The ambiguity of the markings subverted the specificity of sexed subjects' signification under patriarchy. Wheatley's Moonpies are also double-edged (or double-lipped), embodying a subversive play with feminine sexuality, and simultaneously pointing to the consumption of woman as sex.

But while chocolate represents sexual desire or functions as a replacement for sexual satisfaction, it can also have a racialized significance - something Bahamian-born artist Janine Antoni explored in works such as 1993's Lick and Lather, in which she produced self-portrait busts made from chocolate and soap. And as critical theorist Dorota Glowacka has observed, citing bell hooks' discomfort with several white colleagues' amusement at chocolate breasts sold in a coffee shop, chocolate breasts and butts infer the consumption of black women's bodies, both historically within slavery, and contemporaneously with "the current overexposure of black women's buttocks in the hip-hop industry, which is avidly consumed by white teenagers" (2002, 7). Wheatley's insistence that we engage with her work specifically on the individual level of "Charmaine's ass

in milk chocolate, or Charmaine's naked self in a strip club" (Eyland 2001, 2) is indicative of her relative privilege as a white woman. As Davy pointedly asks, "who can demand the right to be 'bad' without reinscribing an already naturalized deviance" (1995, 204)? This typically postfeminist essentialization of sexuality misrecognizes the differing ways that women's bodies have been historically marked. It is fully present in pop culture shows like *Sex in the City*, where characters are afforded their sexy individualism by virtue of their race, class and normative heterosexuality.

As a confident, attractive young woman, Wheatley dismisses feminism and sidesteps identity politics, revealing an assumption that she can escape the more generalized signifier "woman," or, more specifically, "white woman." Wheatley cites feminist traditions, tropes and strategies in her creation of a persona, explicit sexuality and articulation of desire, performative agency, strategy of self-objectification, transgression, use of chocolate, and the personal revealed through the diary (Wark 2001, 78). And yet, even as Wheatley's gendered sexuality is the impetus for her work, and as she names Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke among others as artists she admires, she freely dismisses feminism as no longer relevant - "ambient white noise" and "a non-issue now" (Eyland 2001, 2).⁴ So where does Wheatley's characteristically postfeminist rejection of the feminist framing of her work leave the viewer? Her work's deep resonance with feminism and feminist art make it impossible to read otherwise. Art historian Jayne Wark points out that like many young women, Wheatley enjoys the benefits feminism has brought but in typical postfeminist fashion, avoids bearing any responsibility for that struggle (2002, 10). This negation of feminist and postmodernist critiques of subjectivity, invests, as Wark points out, in an untenable "mythical individualism" (2001, 80).

Artist Tagny Duff shares Wheatley's investment

in this mythic stance, suggesting that "Charmaine's desire to name her own action and her body beyond constructs of identity is a necessary trajectory of feminism - a post-feminist stance seeking to embody the states of ambiguity and contradiction" (2002, 5). Contradiction and ambiguity are key concepts of third-wave feminism and postfeminism, but are most useful in analyzing our complex relation to others and the social sphere - particularly as third-wave feminism emphasizes that we may discover we enjoy certain "privileges" that capitalist patriarchy affords. The feminist tenet that "the personal is political" has particular resonance within this climate of individualism, in that one must be accountable to the inevitable political repercussions of choice and privilege.

Complicit in the System: Jemima Stehli and Andrea Fraser

Many artists critically employ strategies of self-objectification to underscore the ambivalence of women's investment in their own objectification within patriarchy. Even with the best intentions, however, this is risky territory: "The depiction of women by women (sometimes themselves) in this quasi-sexist manner as a political statement grows potentially more powerful as it approaches actual exploitation but then, within an ace of it, collapses into ambiguity and confusion. The more attractive the women, the higher the risk, since the more closely they approach conventional stereotypes in the first place" (Tickner 1987, 248).

As Alison Jones suggests, British artist Jemima Stehli "seems to have taken the trajectory of representation in women's art from principled critique of commodified sexual imagery to abject acquiescence in the commodification of woman" (Alison Jones 1999, 298). Stehli stages self-portraits that parody her own status as sexual object and foreground her ambivalent relation to the male (art) economy. In the photograph

Wearing Shoes Chosen by the Curator (Figure 16) we see Stehli lying facedown on the exhibition's cement floor (the same exhibition in which the photograph is installed), naked save for a pair of green brocade mules - chosen by the male curator. Stehli appears passive, even dead, like a used object. In Strip Series (Figure 17), Stehli looms in the foreground of the photograph, her back to the viewer as she teeters on high-heels undressing. The individual titles indicate an anonymous curator, critic and dealer, each sitting in a chair with the shutter release cable in hand. Stehli instructed them each to take a photograph when they saw what they liked as she stripped. Epitomizing what art historian Craig Owens has called the "rhetoric of the pose," Stehli presents herself "to the gaze of the other as if...already a picture," seducing and immobilizing the male gaze through adopting stereotypical "feminine" poses.

It is arguable whether Stehli's Strip Series would register as critique in the pages of *GQ* or *Loaded*: the feminist backlash includes the politically incorrect phenomenon of New Laddism, where misogyny is met with an ironic acquiescence. How are we to make sense of what appears to be Stehli's "craven complicity?" Alison Jones' point is that sometimes we are complicit and she reads Stehli's work as raising necessary questions about this ambiguity. She argues that rather than being a "whorish sell-out to sensationalism" betraying the gains of the women's movement, Stehli's work addresses the problematic whereby women's participation in patriarchal capitalist systems of exchange often encompasses complicity in their own commodification (Alison Jones 1999, 298). Stehli imbricates her own sexual commodifiability with her success within the art world by underscoring her relationship to (often male) art world positions of power: curators, critics, gallerists. In discussing feminist performance artists' use of the explicit body, Schneider recalls Walter Benjamin's designation of the prostitute

as "a prime dialectical image because of her status as 'commodity and seller' in one"; she is also labourer, and, in her agency as a "two-way street walker," threatens to reveal the labour concealed in commodity exchange (Benjamin 1969, 25; 107). As artist and subject of her work, Stehli wields her explicit body to literalize, or "out," her own labour as artist in the production of herself as (sexual) commodity.

In *Untitled*, of 2003, American artist Andrea Fraser intentionally provokes the metaphor of artist as prostitute, stating, "My first thought was, if I'm going to have to sell it, I might as well sell it" (Trebay 2004). Fraser initiated *Untitled* (Figure 18) by arranging a commission through her New York gallery that comprised a sexual encounter between herself and a private collector. The resulting hotel room sex was documented as a sixty-minute, silent video and produced as a DVD in an edition of five, the first copy going to the collector. In an interview with Praxis (Delia Bajo and Brainard Carey 2004), Fraser states that *Untitled* is "about taking the economic exchange of buying and selling art and turning it into a very personal, human exchange." While her contract with the collector was verbal and based on trust (aside from his payment of close to \$20,000), the terms for the other four DVDs are stringent - and for Fraser, integral to the piece. Fraser outlines that buyers do not have rights to make video stills, excerpts, or any representations of it, nor do they have the right to loan it. Fraser must first review any publicity material, and she must be consulted before the video is shown publicly.

The circulation of the DVDs as commodities underscores the market context in which *Untitled* was produced. Fraser "remains much less comfortable with selling the DVDs of *Untitled* than [she] was in producing the piece," fearing having instrumentalized the collector. By exhibiting this piece and selling it as an edition of multiples, Fraser is complicit in the very structures and

exchanges she critiques. This is in keeping with her twenty-year practice of institutional critique, in which she has investigated the mechanisms of the art world as institution as well as "artistic practice and the way artists feed those institutions" (Praxis 2004). Fraser was interested in posing the question "whether art is prostitution - in a metaphorical sense," but concludes that Untitled is "not a literalization of...a very old metaphor, that selling art is prostitution" (Trebay 2004). For Fraser, Untitled is "a very different kind of relationship, one in which [she] has an enormous amount of power" (Praxis 2004). Indeed, although the encounter was "normal to the extent that it could be" - certainly such exchanges occur very ordinarily as prostitution, although typically in less posh hotels.

Untitled was garnished by the frisson of art world transgression. The piece resulted in a fair bit of controversy, and for Fraser, the upset it raised in the art world signals its success. While Untitled - like Stehli's work - undoubtedly makes a point about women artists' relation to the art world's predominantly male economy, Fraser also states, "my work is about what we want from art...By that, I mean what we want not only economically, but in more personal, psychological and affective terms" (Praxis 2004). Does her enactment of a "very personal human exchange" reduce what we supposedly want - from art, from artists, from collectors - to an exchange in the most simplified of terms as sex? I for one am disappointed in the cliché of sex underlying all exchange, as well as Untitled's rather lame sensationalism. Fraser is an artist whose practice I otherwise admire for its savvy analysis and aesthetics. It seems to me that she was/is confused about what her intentions in producing Untitled were. Me too. In an interview with the Brooklyn Rail, Fraser describes herself as "a second generation feminist, not a post-feminist," and states that her experience making the piece "was very empowering and quite in line with [her]

understanding of [her] own feminism," but that she hadn't yet worked out Untitled's relationship to feminism (Praxis 2004). What accountability does Fraser maintain for a work whose political meaning she herself cannot work out?

Explicit Accountability

Wheatley and Duff share a postfeminist desire for a "new vocabulary of the nude...or unclothed, female body," unfettered by "canonized art historical and feminist discourses" (Duff 2002, 5). More effective would be to desire a female body unfettered by canonized patriarchy. But as Wheatley's replaying of stereotypical postures indicates, this "new" postfeminist vocabulary of the female nude turns out to be more of the same old. While Stehli "repeats with a difference" in parodying the identification of women with their sex and as sexual commodities, Wheatley's strip club interventions appear to earnestly mime "the real thing." I support the desire for a radical re-presentation of women's representation, but to evade - rather than critique - the historical signification of "woman" by insistence on the "self" - particularly via displaying the explicit female body - is naïve, individualistic and ultimately affirms the patriarchal status quo.

Claiming sexual agency offers feminist performance artists an alluring means to "construct a... space wherein both the spectator and performer become differentiated subjects" (Forte 1992, 256). But as Jeannie Forte reminds us by drawing upon Michel Foucault's analysis in *The History of Sexuality*, sexuality is "a system of power, a strategy of dominant ideology in the manipulation and control of bodies." The "deployment of sexuality established the desire for sex, a desire that makes us think that we, too, are autonomous beings, with some 'essential ingredient' untouched by power" (1992, 254-55; emphasis in the original). Desire and power derived from one's status as

sexual object, then, are figments of individual power that create an illusionary agency (1992, 255-56). This is abundantly clear when attractive female athletes pose in skimpy shorts for Nike or nude for Playboy. Laura Robinson has examined the argument that women who have figured out "the system" of our patriarchal capitalist culture should be free to profit from their portrayal as sex objects - the ubiquitous justification being, "Hey, if you've got it, why not use it." Robinson asks where this leaves those women who do not want their bodies reduced to a sexual object or who haven't had as much choice about the economic exploitation of their bodies. As she asserts, when beautiful women pose for such spreads, "they're not reclaiming any of their lost power, they're simply making it easier for men to go on objectifying" (2002, 28). If there is some sexual agency to be had - however illusionary it may be, as Foucault argues - Robinson has found little evidence of it, pointing out that few of these ads or articles depict women as active or show their muscular strength. She argues that there is a difference between sexually objectifying a woman and her representation as a "sexy" sexual subject, in full command of herself.

Wheatley claims sexual agency by relying on the very stereotypes, objectifications and economic exploitations of women's bodies that feminism critiques and works to subvert. She leaves these relations of exploitation and power intact, enabling both gallery and club audiences free to consume her body uncritically as spectacle. Wheatley, Stehli and Fraser have all been critiqued for capitalizing on their appeal as sexual objects, but this decision also underscores how a woman's status and agency in our society are often paradoxically enabled by her sexual desirability. But if their art works make us aware of this well-known paradox, do they also challenge it? These works present a dialectic whereby the viewer must untangle what may amount to the artists' and/or the works' simultaneous

critique of, and complicity in perpetuating, feminine stereotypes and exploitive power relations.

I have ultimately come to agree with Jones' critical affirmation of Stehli's work - but not without some measure of, yes, ambivalence. I propose that just as we are subject to contradictions under the relations of power that affect our lives as women, so must feminist art practice critically engage and analyze how these contradictions and ambivalences are functions of various systems of domination. The evolution of a third wave of feminism reflects the growing understanding of the complex power relations shaping women's lives. Space must be created within the field of representation for women's diverse experiences of gender, but these representations must challenge stereotypes of femininity; otherwise, women will continue to be "reduced to stereotypes of their 'sex' or have imposed upon them objectified fantasies of their 'sex' so that they are viewed and treated as unworthy of equal citizenship" (Cornell 1995, 10). Employing the explicit (and by patriarchal standards, attractive) female body to perform a critical feminist statement inherently involves making oneself vulnerable to co-option back into patriarchal systems of meaning. But this risk is often necessary in representing women as embodied sexual subjects. Feminist performance artists take up their lives as women, their experiencing of the body and desires, in order to probe representation's constitution of both self and other, and to contribute to feminism's collective effort for social and political change, by reimagining representations and new social realities.

Endnotes

1. Not all alliances of feminism and postmodernism necessarily subsume and depoliticize feminism, nor constitute postfeminism. See for example Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, "Social Criticism without Philosophy" (1990).

2. The representation of the female body has historically been a male prerogative serving to maintain patriarchal control over women. See Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art Obscenity, and Sexuality* (1992); Linda Klinger, "Where's the Artist: Feminist Practices and Poststructural Theories of Authorship" (1991); and Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997).

3. Annie Sprinkle is among several artists who developed an art practice from her work in the sex trade. See Rebecca Schneider, "Binary Terror and the Body Made Explicit," *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997); and Marina Abramovic's *Role Exchange of 1975* in which Abramovic sat in the window of an Amsterdam brothel, while S.J., a prostitute, attended the opening as the artist (Abramovic: 1998).

4. Jayne Wark addresses Eyland's framing of the exhibition whereby he strategically allows Wheatley to dismiss feminism, thereby sanctioning himself to avoid its debates. Eyland fails to analyze either Wheatley's performances or the objects in the exhibition, offering instead first-person accounts of her Winnipeg interventions (Wark 2001).

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Figure 15. Installation view of the exhibition "Charmaine" at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, 2001. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 16. Jemima Stehli, *Wearing Shoes Chosen by the Curator* (1997). Courtesy of Lisson Gallery, London and the artist.



Figure 17. Jemima Stehli, *Strip Series* (1999-2000). Courtesy of Lisson Gallery, London and the artist.



Figure 18. Andrea Fraser, video still from *Untitled* (2003), 60-minute DVD. Courtesy of Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York.