‘Parafeminism’ and Parody in Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT

Humour is a pleasurable and productive strategy for feminist artists; however, its role within feminist practice has received limited scholarly attention in the last two decades. The most recent study on the role of humour in feminist art is Jo Anna Isaak’s book *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter* (1996, Routledge), which frames feminist subversive laughter through the carnivalesque. Arguing that Isaak’s theory does not account for subsequent paradigm shifts in practice and ideology, this thesis aims to develop a conceptual framework that can explicate the forms and effects of humour currently emerging in contemporary feminist art.

To develop this conceptual framework I draw upon art theorist Amelia Jones’ concept of ‘parafeminism,’ which suggests that contemporary feminist art is engaging in a revision of second wave methodologies: assessing and building upon earlier strategies by rejecting coalitional identity politics and reworking feminist visual politics of ‘the gaze.’ I interpret Jones’ theory by returning to Linda Hutcheon’s notion of parody, in order to frame three significant shifts in feminist practice: intimate corporeal preoccupations, phallocentric modes of spectatorship, and historical re-appropriation. To give focus to the influence of these changes in artists’ practice over the last three decades, I apply my framework of parafeminist parody to two major Euro-American case studies: an early Pipilotti Rist video, entitled *Pickelporno* (1992), and a more recent example, Mika Rottenberg’s video installation *Mary’s Cherries* (2004), as well as to a selection of works that traverse both video and performative modes of practice by three Australian artists (and collectives): Brown Council, Catherine Bell and the Hotham Street Ladies. Drawing upon writings from Freud, affect theory and corporeal semiotics, I extend Jones’ theory to this wider range of artworks thereby identifying ‘parafeminism’ as a greater phenomenon than previously proposed. To summarise, I aim to identify and develop a theoretical approach that will enable deeper understanding of humorous elements in contemporary feminist art.
DECLARATION PAGE

This is to certify that:

i. the thesis comprises only my original work towards the masters except where indicated in the Preface,

ii. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

iii. the thesis is less than 40,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.
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Finally, I would like to thank my supportive partner, Megan Wong, the funniest feminist I know, whose Halloween costume of a life-sized, soiled, sanitary napkin sparked my romantic interest in her many years ago and still makes me giggle today.

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Fig. 1. Hotham Street Ladies, *You Beaut!* (2013), installation in the toilets at Margaret Lawrence Gallery.
In 2013, the Melbourne art collective Hotham Street Ladies decorated the toilets of Margaret Lawrence Gallery with lollies and cake frosting in the shape of a giant uterus spurting menstrual blood. The gooey installation, entitled *You Beaut!*, spilled all over the floor and rendered the bathroom inoperative for the duration of the exhibition, to the delight and disgust of gallery viewers. The roaring laughter elicited by the Hotham Street Ladies’ artwork provokes a series of interrelated questions. What does it mean for feminist artists to insert menstrual blood – the female grotesque *par excellence* – into the gallery more than four decades after the emergence of such subject matter in the Women’s Art Movement? Why might contemporary feminist artists work collaboratively, use domestic techniques and materials and, in doing so, appropriate second wave feminist methodologies? Finally, what’s so funny about this approach?

My thesis aims to identify a range of theoretical approaches that will enable deeper understanding of humorous techniques in contemporary feminist art. I will develop a conceptual framework that incorporates these findings with recent developments in feminist practices and ideology in the visual arts. This new study will articulate new approaches to the representation of women’s bodies through video and performance art and accordingly analyse emergent forms of humour. To do so, I draw from feminist interpretations of semiotic and psychoanalytic theory and consider the current ‘resurgence’ of interest in feminism in the field of art as well as the broader socio-political sphere. Contemporary feminist employment of humour will be analysed through two major Euro-American case studies: an early Pipilotti Rist video, entitled *Pickelporno* (1992), and a more recent example, Mika Rottenberg’s video installation *Mary’s Cherries* (2004). The conceptual framework developed will be applied to Australian examples of feminist contemporary practice: works by Brown Council, Catherine Bell and the Hotham Street Ladies which traverse both video and performative modes of practice. The chronology of these case studies overlaps with the publication of Jo Anna Isaak’s ground-breaking book *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter* in 1996: a methodology that serves to update existing scholarship on the topic as well as provide analytical tools for curators and scholars to more effectively read humour in contemporary feminist art. This scholarship, it is hoped, will inspire further study of lost or misread humour in earlier
feminist practices and thereafter revise mainstream accounts of feminism in art history, culture, and society.

**Conceptual framework**

My conceptual framework will draw upon eminent art theorist Amelia Jones’ important concept of ‘parafeminism’ articulated in her book *Self/Image*. Jones’ notion of parafeminism uses the prefix ‘para’ to denote a model of contemporary art practice that runs “parallel to,” rather than “post,” earlier forms of feminism.¹ It characterises an intersectional form of feminist art practice that refutes coalitional identity politics and adopts a “rethinking” and expansion of second wave feminist methodologies.² Jones’ scholarship was selected from a substantial body of knowledge concerning contemporary feminist art because it performs the unique task of theorising post-1990 feminist practice while recognising that feminism is an ongoing and unfinished project. In doing so, I acknowledge that the contemporary focus of my study omits the important studies of feminist art undertaken by Australian scholars in the 1990s such as Helen McDonald’s book *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) and the chapter on feminism in Anne Marsh’s *Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia 1969-1992*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993), both of which examine the transgressive feminist parody of Linda Sproul, as well as Catriona Moore’s significant edited collection *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970-1990*, (St Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin in association with Artspace, 1994), among others. Such sources would, however, prove extremely useful for the hitherto unwritten historical account of humour in feminist Australian art that I recommend in my thesis conclusion. In this thesis I further interpret Jones’ concept of parafeminism through Linda Hutcheon’s revised theory of parody which, I argue, can accommodate the revisionist aspects of parafeminist practices. Through the framework of parafeminist parody, explained below, I elucidate the forms and effects of humour in contemporary feminist art.

² Ibid.
The etymological root of the prefix ‘para,’ which is shared by parafeminism and parody, provides the foundation for Hutcheon’s theory. She argues:

The prefix para has two meanings, only one of which is usually mentioned – that of “counter” or “against”… However para in Greek can also mean beside, and therefore there is a suggestion of an accord or intimacy instead of a contrast.³

The doubleness of parody’s root, ‘para,’ leads Hutcheon to a new definition of parody which, I suggest, is particularly relevant to parafeminism:

Parody… is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the background text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signalled by irony. But this irony can be playful instead of belittling: it can be critically constructive as well as destructive. The pleasure of parody’s irony comes not from humor in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual “bouncing” (to use E.M Forster’s famous term) between complicity and distance.⁴

While Hutcheon’s insights broaden the term parody to include “beside,” and thus account for strategies of complicity and homage, I reverse Hutcheon’s logic to argue that parafeminism can be expanded to include the term “counter,” and thus account for strategies of distance and critique. This methodology elucidates two important elements of parafeminism: firstly, that the parafeminist strategy of “rethinking” earlier forms of feminism can be read, through Hutcheon’s theory, as a parody of the past through homage. In this way, parafeminism enables contemporary feminist practitioners to own the history of feminist art through parodic strategies of homage and citation. Secondly, Hutcheon’s insights convey that the term ‘parafeminism’ etymologically has two contradictory meanings pertaining to complicity and distance. Thereby, I extend Jones’


⁴ Ibid.
theory to ascertain that parodic pleasure in reading parafeminist practices is produced by the viewers’ engagement in “bouncing” between complicity and distance.\(^5\) As will be explained below, the dialectical see-saw of parafeminism is illustrated in the selected case studies through a dialectic of proximity and distance to the body and fetishism.

The parafeminist dialectic of proximity and distance to the body functions through the parafeminist artwork’s incitement of two, paradoxical, visual politics: embodied (“beside”) and distanced (“counter”). Embodied visual politics, as I refer to them here, denote affective or inter-subjective states of viewing that are usually produced by corporeal imagery and which, Jones suggests, draw the viewer into the work.\(^6\) Strategies of distancing, on the other hand, separate the viewer from the bodies on screen: examples include repulsion, fetish, and the “critical distance” of parody.\(^7\) Through a framework of parafeminism that involves both proximity and distance to the body, I propose that parafeminist art practices repurpose carnivalesque embodiment by offsetting their corporeal concerns through strategies of distancing (or ‘dissecting,’ as I term them in Chapter Three). Distance to the body, however, evokes complicity with fetish: a complicity which, I argue, is displaced by the distancing strategy of critique. The push and pull of conflicting visual effects, from embodiment to distance and back again through fetish, is theorised in this thesis as inherent to Jones’ concept of parafeminism.

Through my revised version of parafeminism, which will be expanded in the thesis chapters, combined with writings from Freud, affect theory and corporeal semiotics, I examine the humorous elements within selected examples of contemporary feminist artworks from the past three decades. Such a methodology enables me to answer the questions posed in relation to Hotham Street Ladies’ installation \textit{You Beaut!}: how might we understand the continued corporeal preoccupations and utilisation of second wave feminist methodologies as humorous?

\(^{5}\) Hutcheon, \textit{Theory of Parody}, 32.


\(^{7}\) Hutcheon, \textit{Theory of Parody}, 32.
Methodology

Feminist art historians often adopt an interdisciplinary methodology. This thesis is no exception, using theory drawn from art history, literary, cultural and film studies. My theoretical framework is in part dependent on the legacy of psychoanalysis, as psychoanalytic theory remains one of the most commonly utilised conceptual frameworks of analysis in scholarship concerning humour in feminist art, however I negotiate this literature through semiotic and literary theory. Similarly, I am indebted to the influential scholarship of Judith Butler, instrumental in developing discourses of subversion, parody feminism, and performance that my thesis draws upon, but which I negotiate through Jones’ interpretation: Butler’s writings are formative to the parafeminist view of identity as “a process of negotiation involving complex circuits of identification and desire primarily in the visual order.”\(^8\) The embodied viewing dynamic and complex parodic forms presented by my case studies, which align themselves so evidently with Jones’ concept, has motivated the theoretical negotiations just outlined to enable deeper focus on my reworking of parafeminism.

Jones’ theoretical framework prioritises video, performance, and photographic practices which lend themselves to her reading. However the consequence of such a priority is that it excludes analysis of humorous strategies that operate in the visual arts more generally. While significant analysis of humour in female-dominated media has been undertaken in recent years,\(^9\) less attention has been paid to the function of humour in traditionally masculine media such as drawing and sculpture. These gaps in literature are a consequence of a broader neglect of humour in feminist art and, while I have

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conducted my research by identifying many relevant artistic examples and theoretical tools, the final selection has been significantly scaled down. Further, I include detailed footnotes to encourage and provide groundwork for future scholarship.

Since many responses to humour seem subjective, in order to conduct this research I needed to develop criteria to ascertain whether each work was indeed funny. In screening all the key works, at conferences or galleries, I have been privileged to access the collective audience responses of laughter and discomfort which provide clues to analysis of their spectatorial politics. Further, in my choice of major case studies I limited my analysis to artworks which were described by reviewers or critics using the specific terms “humorous” or “funny.” Although I define parody as enacting the corporeal response of laughter, the forms of humour analysed in this thesis commonly function as “serious laughter,” as Julia Kristeva explains: “The laughter of the carnival is not simply parodic; it is no more comic than it is tragic; it is both at once, one might say that it is serious.” This carnivalesque humour might not always overtly produce laughter but may reveal an implicit, or recognisable truth through parody. The thesis will not, however, determine any absolute value associated with humour, but rather regards it as one component amongst others which consistently define the works discussed. The question of whether or not these works are also feminist is extrapolated in each chapter, but in selecting case studies I have chosen artists who both identify as feminist and works that present feminist subject matter.

Chapter summaries

The thesis is arranged into four interrelated chapters. Chapter One presents a literature review, whose methodology serves to thematically present the currently available analytical literature concerning humour in feminist art that has been published in English. The aim is to identify theoretical tools that could be utilised in developing my conceptual framework and ascertain their value in relation to reading contemporary feminist art. I regard Jo Anna Isaak’s book *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The*

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Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter as the most comprehensive text concerning humour in feminist art although it relies uncritically on Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque. I argue there are several limitations of applying Isaak’s theory to contemporary feminist video art, including: her problematic application of Bakhtin’s theory, the forms of humour and media employed in the analysed artworks, and the changed context of feminism. I propose the incorporation of additional theoretical strategies of parody and parafeminism to remedy Isaak’s limitations in developing my conceptual framework.

Chapter Two will draw directly on these theoretical strategies to analyse the humorous elements of an early video by established Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist, whose work inspired Jones’ notion of parafeminism. It is in this chapter that I will extend Jones’ notion of parafeminism through the framework of parody. The methodology of this chapter is to undertake close analysis of the video as a case study: enabled by my loan and display of Pickelporno in an exhibition I curated entitled Backflip: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art (2013), as well as numerous subsequent viewings of the video footage through online reproduction. Access to the primary source facilitates a minute level of detail in my analysis of the artworks’ materials and effects, illustrated by film stills. I allow space for this close analysis by devoting the entire chapter to one artwork: a methodology that aims to encourage a deeper understanding of the specific elements of humorous imagery and strategies that emerge in the videos, which will resonate throughout contemporary practices. Conceptually, my close analysis of Pickelporno (1992) will take as its starting point an undeveloped parenthetical comment in Jones’ essay “Screen Eroticisms: Exploring Female Desire in Feminist Film and Video,” which describes the video’s climax as a parodic visualisation of the ‘heat’ of desire in the form of an erupting volcano. In my interrogation of Jones’ statement, I will analyse the form and function of the parodic elements of Pickelporno as well as their relationship to the embodied mode of viewing espoused by readers of her work. In doing so, I ask: through the lens of humour, can we discover something in Rist’s connection between nature and sex that moves beyond essentialist reiterations of the ‘feminine’ towards a more self-reflexive feminist politic?
Chapter Three will mature the insights developed in the previous case study through analysis of a video installation by mid-career Israeli-American artist Mika Rottenberg, *Mary’s Cherries* (2004). The methodology of this chapter is identical to Chapter Two: close analysis of one artwork as case study, illustrated by film stills, enabled by access to primary sources. In this case, I viewed the video component of *Mary’s Cherries* to its full length, combined with photographic documentation and technical specifications of its installation, provided to me by Rottenberg’s dealer Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery.

Repetition of this methodology in two case studies will enable multiple analytical frameworks such as parafeminism, parody, visual politics, and the female grotesque, to emerge and overlap to form a broader picture of how humour works in these examples of contemporary feminist art. Accordingly, *Mary’s Cherries* displays the parodic tropes identified in *Pickelporno* as well as the carnivalesque imagery articulated in Isaak’s book *Feminism and Contemporary Art*. Its parody involves the employment and subversion of fetishistic modes of representation, to which I add Rottenberg’s rendering of symbols of femininity as ‘uncanny’ and thus laughable. Its carnivalesque imagery will be located within the female body, and analysed by extending feminist interpretations of Bakhtinian theory. Through this analysis, the question of Rottenberg’s feminism reoccurs; does the hiring of women’s bodies make Rottenberg, to use her own words, a “bad feminist”?11 The conflicting politics of vision and the complicated relationship of a work built around pornographic representation to feminism will lead me to categorise *Mary’s Cherries* as a uniquely parafeminist artwork that operates through parody.

Chapter Four will answer the questions posed at the beginning of this thesis through extrapolation of my conceptual framework to Australian examples of feminist contemporary practice, including works by collectives and artists Brown Council, Catherine Bell and Hotham Street Ladies which traverse both video and performative modes of practice. This chapter does not add further conceptual tools but rather

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synthesises the analytic threads already identified and developed in the previous two chapters.

The final chapter is shorter than the others because it documents an emerging body of work by younger feminist practitioners working in contemporary art. I acknowledge that the Australian content needs more documenting, analysing and writing into art history than this structure has permitted, however my case study approach enables me to construct modes of engagement via the grotesque, the corporeal and the close-up that can be fully developed in the international case studies, but rendered relevant through local examples. In Chapters Two and Three these concepts enable me to build a conceptual framework using theoretical sources and well-known international artists in order to provide tools for Chapter Four’s analysis of examples that have not yet been canonised. I enjoy long acquaintance with each artist or collectives and have viewed their work in several exhibition and performance contexts, including Backflip. My analysis of the video and photographic documentation in this chapter, therefore, is based on personal experience of emerging live art and thus the discussion is more ‘raw’ than previous chapters. To summarise, the brevity of this chapter devoted to Australian art should be considered as groundwork for further study rather than neglect of local practice.

Noting the recurring motif of baking in the three selected art projects, I analyse the feminist strategy of utilising domestic materials to render the female body as grotesque including activities that lead to: exhaustion and exaggeration provoked by durational performance; acts of maternal disavowal such as cannibalism and abandonment; and the representation of abject and crude imagery. These corporeal preoccupations have a well-worn lineage however, I argue, the parafeminist artworks of Brown Council, Bell, and the Ladies’ forward these strategies of parody by operating through simultaneous critique and homage of both women’s work and feminism itself. Again utilising the lens of parody, I ask: what is the aesthetic and political purchase of contemporary revisions of second wave feminist methodologies? Through this process, I develop, test and hone
my conceptual framework through which I read humorous elements of contemporary feminist art – including the very artwork that began the thesis.

**Significance**

The significance and timeliness of this project arises from feminism’s recent re-entry into public consciousness through numerous events worldwide. Within this social context, feminist parody has re-emerged as a productive activist strategy within the social realm, with local feminist campaigns adopting and subverting slogans including: “Destroy the Joint” (responding to Alan Jones’ comment that women in politics are “destroying the joint”), “La Barbe” (in which women storm into male centred establishments wearing fake beards), and “SlutWalk” (provoked by the suggestion of Constable Michael Sanguinetti, a Toronto Police officer, that "women should avoid dressing like sluts" to remain safe). In response to SlutWalk specifically, critics have debated the productivity of humour as a feminist strategy: with Ellie Mae O'Hagan attacking current forms of feminist action for trying to be ‘funny’ and ‘sexy’ and, thus, likeable, to which an excellent counter article by Naomi McAuliffe argued that such a statement underestimated the political power of humour in the hands of women.¹² Such debate concerning whether feminism can, and should, be funny echoes divergences of opinion that occurred in the 1980s, as reviewed in Chapter One: in both cases my stance unequivocally remains that humour can, and should, be recognised as a productive strategy for feminism and feminist art. I have deliberately chosen to use the term ‘parafeminism,’ rather than just ‘feminism,’ because it enables me to inflect feminism today via the concept of parody, without dismissing the enduring necessity of remembering that feminism is an ongoing battle.

Further significance of this project is reflected in a small, but notable, recent resurgence of curatorial interest in the role of humour in feminist contemporary art. The literature surrounding such exhibitions and video screenings demonstrates the frustration of curators who recognise humour as an important element of feminist art but identify a lack of discipline-specific theoretical tools through which an analysis of such forms can be undertaken. Herein lies the motivation of my thesis: to provide a much-needed conceptual framework through which humorous elements of contemporary feminist artworks can be read, understood and appreciated.

13 Soft & Hard: Celebrating the Humorous in Contemporary Video Art by Women (Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles, 2011); Each Action Equal (Level ARI, Brisbane, 2011); How Many Feminists Does it Take to Change a Light Bulb? (antena, Chicago, 2013); Backflip: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art (Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, 2013). An issue devoted to humour by the leading international feminist art journal *n.paradoxa* will be published in 2015; the first of its type since 1985.

14 For example, Sarah McCool writes: “This show is put together with the intent of getting the academic art world and activist communities to ‘catch up’ with mainstream entertainment in terms of experimentation and trendsetting a female comedic expression [sic].” Sarah McCool, “How Many Feminists Does it Take to Change a Light Bulb?” *antena* (gallery website/blog), July 26, 2013, http://antenapilsen.blogspot.com.au/
CHAPTER 1
Literature Review

There is a longstanding recognition amongst art historians that feminist art frequently possesses a humorous aspect. As critic Jennifer Higgie notes: “The 1970s saw a rise in the number of women who were working as artists and employing humour, especially satire, as a form of rebellion against male power structures.”¹⁵ Similarly, the individual work of many well-known feminist artists has been examined through the lens of humour theory. However, there are very few texts that group together those feminist artists whose work possesses the shared strategy of humour.¹⁶ In this chapter I will thematically review literature that addresses the topic of feminist art and humour, most of which was published in the 1980s and 1990s. In doing so, I identify the limitations in the literature for my purpose of analysing humour in contemporary feminist art, and propose updated theoretical strategies of parody and performativity that will be incorporated in subsequent chapters.

Literature on feminist art and humour in the 1980s and 1990s

In the 1980s and 1990s, the analysis of humour in feminist art took a range of forms including group exhibitions, catalogue publications, issues of art journals, and traditional scholarship. Within the literature there is a divergence of opinion on whether feminist art can indeed be funny, based on the (mis)identification of feminism as prohibiting humour. The stereotype of feminists as humourless, which many argue was developed through skewed media coverage of the 1970s,¹⁷ indeed provoked the 1973 cover of Ms Magazine which depicted the joke: “Do you know the women’s movement has no sense of humour?” “No… but hum a few bars and I’ll fake it!”¹⁸ The 1985 issue


of *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics* devotion to ‘Satire’ was framed by the editorial committee as offering “a suitable rejoinder ready to hurl” for “next time some fool gives vent within earshot to the pronouncement that feminists are all grim and humourless.”¹⁹ In the 1990s humour and feminist art were further separated, as scholars and curators claimed that subversive laughter was a strategy of post-feminism.²⁰

For example, in 1994, the New Museum’s exhibition *Bad Girls* presented artists whose work was, according to curator Marcia Tucker, “funny, really funny, and went ‘too far.’”²¹ Polemically, the exhibition suggested that the presence of humour in an artwork excluded its identification as feminist: Tucker’s co-curator, Marcia Tanner, framed the exhibition as having a “distinctly different spirit from much of the ‘feminist’ art of the 1970s and 80s. It’s irreverent, anti-ideological, non-doctrinaire, non-didactic, unpolemical and thoroughly unladylike.”²² *Bad Girls*’ positioning of subversive humour as the defining feature of 1990s art practices ignored the legacy of humorous feminist artworks of the 1970s and 1980s. This approach was heavily criticised by feminist art critics including Laura Cottingham and Katy Deepwell. Cottingham published a

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¹⁷ For example, Susan J. Douglas wrote: “There is no doubt that the news media of the early 1970s played an absolutely central role in turning feminism into a dirty word, and stereotyping the feminist as a hairy legged, karate chopping commando with a chip on her shoulder the size of China, really bad clothes, and a complete inability to smile- let alone laugh.” Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, (New York: Random House, 1994), 165.


pamphlet chiding the curators for “burying” seventies feminism and scolding Tanner for her “ignorant, sloppy and stupid” essay while Deepwell argued that Bad Girls repressed an earlier generation of feminists, “negatively stereotyping them as didactic, essentialist and collectivist.” The criticism levelled at Bad Girls followed in the wake of influential critics such as Robert Storr claiming the emergence of a “new generation” of subversive feminist art and activism in the United States. Storr’s comments had already prompted criticism by Australian feminist art historian Catriona Moore, who traced the historical legacies of the “new” feminism in her article “Cunts with Attitude: Acting Out in the Gallery.” Therefore Bad Girls presents a key moment in the literature in which feminist art historians hit back at claims of humour as ‘post-feminist’ and, in turn, celebrated the legacy of humour in feminist art. Since then, curators and scholars more readily accept the premise that feminist art frequently possesses humour. Furthermore, the discordant generational attitudes demonstrated in Bad Girls, and typical of third wave feminism, are slowly fading. Instead, I argue, feminist artists today encourage more positive inter-generational dialogue through parafeminist “rethinking” and expansion of earlier feminist methodologies.

The broader acceptance of humour as a feminist strategy owes to Jo Anna Isaak’s ground-breaking exhibition and catalogue The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter in 1982 at Max Protech Gallery in New York (and touring). The first study to bring together humour and feminist art, The Revolutionary Power grouped the work of Mike Glier, Ilona Granet, Jenny Holzer, Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger and Nancy Spero in what Isaak retrospectively described as: “an early attempt to locate art within the arena of contemporary theoretical discussions… (in which there was) a growing


25 Jones, Self/Image, 213.
awareness that a lot was at stake for women.”26 Exactly what was “at stake for women” was extrapolated in Isaak’s exhibition catalogue essay, in which she argues that the acquisition of language was an embrace of its symbolic order: that is, in Lacanian terms, the ‘Law of the Father.’ The speaking subject is thus constructed by language under a patriarchal system that maintains the Law. The only alternative, Isaak argues, is to: “seek the pleasure of the text, either by playing upon the codes already in place, or by finding passages through them, in a word the French recently have reactivated in English – *jouissance*.”27 Presenting works that “play with the signifiers themselves,”28 Isaak explores in her exhibition the potential of that which French feminist theorists celebrated in *écriture féminine*: female ‘difference’ or desire in language. Furthermore, Isaak convincingly argues that artists’ analyses of language and the production of meaning can challenge and thus dismantle the structures of domination in patriarchal society. Isaak’s analysis of feminist art through semiotic and psychoanalytic theory was favorably considered as a dramatic shift in feminist ideology that would broaden the scope of its reception. Marcia Tucker explains:

> The exhibition, by changing the focus from women artists’ marginalization to the underlying meaning of images themselves and the ways in which that meaning can be reconstituted provided a very different vantage point for feminists; it eliminated much of the “male-hating” stereotype previously used to denigrate feminists and substituted a broader and more sophisticated theoretical approach that reverberated in the prevalent cultural and political discourse of postmodernism.29

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Isaak’s theoretical approach was thus considered productive not only in its analysis of feminist humour, but also in its provision of a “different vantage point” for feminists that allowed a broader resonance with contemporaneous critical theory. The discourse of humour in feminist art has also been shaped by the widespread influence of critical theory on feminist art history, as demonstrated in the methodology of “The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter?” a chapter in Moore’s significant book, *Indecent Exposures: Twenty Years of Australian Feminist Photography*, which applies semiotic and psychoanalytic theory to examples of Australian feminist photography produced in the 1980s. Employing theories of Luce Irigaray, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva, Moore privileges “strategic uses” of psychoanalysis by artists who disrupt semiotic associations through blurred and dislocated imagery, photographs that questioned the stability of representation, and celebrations of maternal desire. However, as will be argued later in this chapter, Moore’s (and Isaak’s) framework of analysis is limited to artworks that rely on semiotic readings: which, to use Isaak’s words, “play with the signifiers themselves.” Replacing the singular and semiotic approach of psychoanalysis, I propose the emphasis on materiality and embodiment of contemporary practices necessitates an associative approach to reading artworks that enables multiple meanings to emerge.

Between Isaak’s exhibition in 1982 and her “follow up” exhibition *Laughter Ten Years After*, held at William Smith Colleges, Geneva, New York (and touring) in 1995, which was “intended to commemorate the earlier exhibition and the exceptionally prolific decade of women’s art that followed,” Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque was repeatedly, and I would suggest problematically, incorporated into Isaak’s, as well

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30 Moore’s title references Isaak’s exhibition but does not cite her. The phrase is often attributed to Julia Kristeva but, mysteriously, I have been unable to locate the reference.


33 Isaak, *Laughter Ten Years After*, i. In this second exhibition the list of artists grew, with male artists notably subtracted and women artists of colour added. The exhibition catalogue included essays by Isaak, Marcia Tucker, and Jeanne Silverthorne. As Isaak’s essay in the exhibition catalogue regurgitates content from *Feminism and Contemporary Art*, I will not analyse it in this chapter.
as several other authors’, analysis of humour in feminist art. The carnivalesque refers to an aesthetic that channels the spirit of carnival laughter in the Middle Ages, as a politics which simultaneously degrades the body to its “material lower stratum” and evokes affirmation, to provoke regenerative and potentially revolutionary social effect. While I acknowledge the productivity of the carnivalesque in analysing humorous art, I reject the recurring application of Bakthin’s theory to specifically feminist art practices. Notably, this includes Isaak’s subsequently published book *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter*, which is the most comprehensive text on the topic of humour and feminist art and the only full length book to be published by a leading academic publishing house.

*Feminism and Contemporary Art*, which “grew out of the exhibition and is a continuation of that early project,” enabled Isaak to explore a paradigm shift in the way theorists understood the operation of language and representation. Thus the book begins with the same semiotic premise as the 1982 exhibition: that postmodernism “levelled the playing field for women,” who “began by dismantling ‘the prison house of language’ through play, or laughter.” In her book, however, Isaak notes that Freud suggested women possess “an original primary narcissism that the adult male has renounced” which enables them to transcend the harshness of reality into the realm of laughter and non-sense. According to Freud: “Humour is not resigned, it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances.” This trait, Isaak argues, predisposes women to laughter: a tool which can be used by artists to

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36 Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art*, 3.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 13.
thwart boundaries of representation and language and thus disrupt patriarchal norms. Isaak furthers this contention through Bakhtin’s theory of carnivalesque to argue that laughter is: “a metaphor for transformation, for thinking about cultural change,” and thus can be considered a revolutionary strategy for women artists. In articulating such a compelling intervention into feminist theorising, *Feminism and Contemporary Art* was therefore ground-breaking in its articulation of the form and function of feminist humour as it emerges in contemporary art practice and still serves as a solid foundation for this study. However, as indicated, there are several limitations in applying Isaak’s theory to contemporary feminist art. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to unpacking these limitations and, through these insights, suggesting additional theories that will inform the conceptual framework developed in this thesis. The first limitation to be examined is Isaak’s uncritical application of Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque.

**The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Art? Some limitations and suggestions:**

Isaak’s reliance on Bakhtinian theory occurred in the shadow of a peaked interest in Bakhtin’s work during the late 1970s and 1980s, which saw an increasing body of knowledge dedicated to the subversive and liberating qualities of carnival. As Krystyna Pomorska wrote in 1978: “Mikhail Bakhtin is today one of the most popular, if not the most popular, figures in the domain of humanistic studies.” Bakhtin’s theory was certainly influential and still today the carnivalesque continues to circulate through discourses of subversion and dissent. However, scholars have long argued that there

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40 Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art*, 5.

41 The timing of scholarly interest in Bakhtin’s work relates to its delayed publication: an earlier version of *Rabelais and His World* was submitted as a doctoral thesis in 1940 but for political reasons the book was not published in Russia until 1965, after which translations in English (1968) and French (1970) appeared.


are significant limitations to Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque; especially related to
the temporary and sanctioned nature of Carnival laughter which functions as a “pressure
valve” to retain control over the people.\textsuperscript{44} More directly related to Isaak’s usage of
Bakhtinian theory, in her association of carnival with “women’s laughter,” are the
criticisms of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, who identify carnival as paradoxically
strengthening patriarchal norms: “Carnival often violently abuses and demonizes
weaker, not stronger, social groups – women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who
“don’t belong” – in a process of displaced abjection.”\textsuperscript{45} Stallybrass and White suggest
that violent and demeaning actions towards members of minority groups by normalised
subjects – that is, Anglo-Christian males – reiterate hierarchies of civilisation by
relegating weaker groups to the ‘low.’ Thus, to use Kristeva’s term, women are “thrust
aside in order (for men) to live.”\textsuperscript{46} A good example of Stallybrass and White’s argument
of “displaced abjection”\textsuperscript{47} is charivari; a festive tradition of Roman Carnival that
targeted and humiliated those who had transgressed sexual social norms, such as men
who were beaten by their wives, and widows or widowers who remarried young
partners, through customs such as the singing of satirical songs outside the victims’
houses or their forced parade through the town sitting backwards on a donkey. The
patriarchal driving force of charivari has been explicated by Simon Dentith, who writes:
“The carnival inversions, the world-turned-upside-down of these activities, were clearly
not aimed at loosening people’s sense of the rightness of the rules which kept the world
the right way up, but on the contrary at reinforcing them.”\textsuperscript{48} Therefore carnivalesque
laughter, incited by customs such as charivari, can be seen to reinforce conservative
social norms that are at odds with the patriarchal disruption inherent to feminist art. This

\textsuperscript{44} Terry Eagleton, \textit{Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism}, (London: Verso,

\textsuperscript{45} Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, \textit{The Politics and Poetics of Transgression}, (Ithaca:

Press, 1982), 3.

\textsuperscript{47} Stallybrass and White, 285.

\textsuperscript{48} Simon Dentith, \textit{Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader}, (London and New York:
Routledge, 1995), 74.

\textsuperscript{‘Topsy Turvy’ and turning the world upside down,” \textit{The Shadow Files}, Amsterdam: De Appel
Arts Centre, 2 (2012): 5-20.}
conflict belies the first major limitation of Isaak’s application of Bakhtian theory. The question remains, however: why might Isaak have relied so unquestioningly on Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque in her analysis of humour in feminist art?

Isaak claims there are feminist possibilities of the carnivalesque, despite the violent and patriarchal nature of carnival as well as accusations against Rabelais of misogyny. She locates these possibilities in Bakhtin’s defence of Rabelais: “Rabelais was against the moralists and on the side of the popular and the comic tradition, he is therefore politically on the side of women.” In realising the importance of Rabelais’s alliance with women, Isaak argues: “Bakhtin reveals not just that women have historically been aligned with the popular comic tradition, but that they have a political stake in this site of insurrection.” Furthermore, Isaak positions the violence against women and religious minorities that occurred during carnival in the symbolic:

While carnivalized transgressions should not be idealized, they should also not be confused with attacks on women and other marginalized groups which occur when the public Law is suspended… Acts of violence that occur when the Law that regulates a community and maintains social hierarchy is suspended need to be understood as an extension and reinstatement of that same Law.

Isaak sidesteps the symbolic implications of attacks on women as “displaced abjection” and instead mounts a defensive argument that normalises violence. I reject Isaak’s weak defence of her reliance on Bakhtin as it fails to prove that carnival offered any overlapping strategies or ideology with feminist art.

Another problematic aspect of Isaak’s application of Bakhtinian theory to feminist art is Bakhtin’s ‘underdevelopment’ of the female grotesque as argued by Mary Russo.

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49 Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art*, 18.

50 Ibid, 19.

51 Ibid.

52 This is not to say there are no overlapping strategies; see Natalie Zemon Davis, “Woman on Top,” *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975). This essay was not mentioned by Isaak, and will be discussed in Chapter 3.
among others. The female form is integral to Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque, which he posits as a site of renewal and rebirth and thus synonymous with, and a component of, carnival laughter. Indeed the image of the laughing “senile, pregnant hag,” as represented in the Kerch terracotta figurines, is posited as “typical and very strongly expressed grotesque.” Bakhtin emphasises the liminality and growth of these figures and their unborn foetuses, as they teeter on the brink of life and death but also generate new life. In opposition to the Classical body, which is contained, fixed, and sleek, the grotesque body is in motion, in between states of becoming, and in rupture. However Bakhtin ignores the implications of his engendering of the grotesque as female, leading Russo to argue:

Bakhtin, like many other social theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic, and thus his notion of the Female Grotesque remains in all directions repressed and underdeveloped.

Bakhtin’s “underdevelop(ment)” of the female grotesque prompted Russo to write her critical article “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory” in 1985, and it offers a sophisticated reading of carnival as a historic and semiotic performance that can serve as an analytic framework for the dyadic relationship between the symbolic construct of femininity and women’s lived experience. The sole reference to this text in Isaak’s *Feminism and Contemporary Art*, however, is limited to Russo’s citation of Victor Turner and Emmanuel Le Roy’s research about acts of violence during carnival: demonstrating Russo’s work was not fully utilised. Thus, when Isaak analyses the work of Nancy Spero through the lens of Bakhtinian theory, stating that: “Her entire opus writes large what Baudelaire and Rabelais only hinted at – that women have always been on the laughing side, that women have a stake in laughter’s indissoluble and

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53 Bakhtin, 25.
54 Ibid.
essential relation to freedom,” her reading is necessarily limited. That Russo had also analysed the subversive feminist potential in Spero’s gleeful usurpation of phallocentric fetish symbols only further highlights the unrealised potential of her scholarship for Isaak’s project; Russo analyses Spero’s scroll works through a feminist reading of Michael Balint’s theory of “philobatism”: “female acrobats and “Dildo-dancers” wield huge batons not, as Balint would assume, for balance and security, but rather as symbols of disequilibrium and unease. It has been argued that Isaak’s neglect of feminist theory, as demonstrated in her neglect of Russo, is part of a larger problem with the book; Peggy Zelin Brand writes: “Her reliance upon the “fathers” of psychoanalytical theory, both old and new, is unquestioning.” Therefore, I argue that Isaak’s neglect of feminist theory causes her analysis of the female grotesque to be, like Bakhtin’s, underdeveloped.

Considering the limitations of applying carnival theory to feminist art just outlined, as well as the underutilised feminist interpretations of this theory available, Isaak’s reliance on the carnivalesque is questionable. However, I acknowledge that my criticism benefits from the advantage of hindsight: at the time Isaak was formulating her ideas, Bakhtinian theory was largely enthusiastically and uncritically embraced including within feminist and queer activism.

Twenty years later, however, Isaak’s methodological oversight limits the application of her framework to contemporary art. I argue further analytical tools are required for examination of the feminist employment of carnivalesque imagery: which, as displayed in You Beaut!, remains a productive strategy for contemporary artists. However, the embodied mode of viewing provoked by carnivalesque imagery, which Bakhtin argues is capable of unifying communities and inciting revolution as it “embraces all the

56 Isaak, Feminism and Contemporary Art, 20.
57 Philobatism refers to: “the field of activities and sensations organised around the thrills of seeing, feeling, or imagining the self-supported human body in space.” Michael Balint, Thrills and Regressions, (New York: International Universities Press, 1959), 29.
58 Russo, Female Grotesque, 43.
people,” needs to be understood as part of a broader parafeminist project. Operating within a dialectic of proximity, the carnivalesque, I would suggest, is ‘dissected’ in parafeminist artworks through distancing strategies that include more conscious interaction with spectacle, the uncanny and fetishistic modes of representation. Therefore Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque remains productive in understanding parafeminist spectatorial politic: an approach that will be further detailed in later thesis chapters.

Further limitations of Isaak’s theory in addressing contemporary art relate to the outmoded forms of humour, feminist context, and media she analyses. The recurring humorous strategies Isaak identifies are irony, intertextual parody, and the grotesque, and in many instances, as noted by Brand, “many works are not as humorous as she would like us to think.” It has been argued that the humorous strategies utilised in earlier modes of feminist art, particularly during the 1980s and Isaak’s primary period of analysis, are dramatically different to those employed subsequently; Jacqueline Millner explains:

The ‘revolutionary power of women’s laughter’ became something of a cliché in much irony clogged feminist work of the 1980s. While often smart and sparkling with caustic wit, such work rarely raised a belly laugh, provoking not so much laughter as rueful, knowing smiles.

Contemporary feminist art, Millner argues, specifically in relation to Sydney collective The Twilight Girls, presents a distinctly different form of feminist humour: “a generous and raucous humour that overflows gallery etiquette.” Certainly, the most commonly analysed strategies of humour in Isaak’s book operate through reversal or critique; works by Ilona Granet, Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, for example, enact feminist

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61 Brand, 300.
63 Ibid.
parody by reversing the typical function of mass culture techniques. However, as Jones writes: “in the 2000s reversal and critique are not enough to accommodate new understandings of the complexity of subjectivity in global late capitalism. A myriad of other possibilities are open to feminist artists.” The insights of Millner and Jones demonstrate that forms of humour utilised in feminist art have drastically developed since Isaak presented her theory. Further, humour in art more generally has become the topic of unprecedented scholarship and exhibition over the last ten years and has provided an array of analytical tools for this thesis.

Jones’ comments point towards the third limitation of applying Isaak’s theory to contemporary feminist art: the landscape of feminism art has also transformed dramatically over the past two decades. As cited previously, during the 1990s feminists battled the consensus they were “post-feminism” while today we are enjoying a “resurgence” of interest in feminist practices and ideologies. It was in this context that Jones developed her theory of parafeminism: an intersectional form of feminist art practice that refutes coalitional identity politics and adopts a “rethinking” and expansion


65 However it could be argued that the contemporary feminist strategy of ‘taunting’ the viewer, articulated by Abigail Solomon Godeau, is based on earlier models of reversal and critique. See Abigail Solomon Godeau, “Taunting and Haunting: Critical Tactics in A “Minor” Mode,” in Women Artists at the Millennium, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine De Zegher, (London: MIT Press, 2006).


of second wave feminist methodologies. Thus, in addition to feminist interpretations of psychoanalytic and literary theory utilised by Isaak, the conceptual framework I am developing here incorporates theories of parody and parafeminism that enable better understanding of the types of humour that can be identified in contemporary feminist art; practices that demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the historical context of their production to be a resurgence of interest in feminism discourses and aesthetics.

The final, but most glaring, limitation of *Feminism and Contemporary Art* is the types of media it addresses and ignores; Isaak’s analysis extends to artworks of diverse media including sculpture, painting, performance and photography, however the book does not include any reference to video art despite its proliferation in feminist practices since the 1960s. Thus my study necessitates the analysis of feminist video art to better understand the politics of bodies mediated by the screen. In surveying a new generation of Australian feminist artists, Alexie Glass writes:

> Video and performance art, in particular, are genres now immediately associated with the history of feminism. Unlike painting and photography, these formats were pioneered by feminists, so consequently contemporary feminists who employ them are at an advantage in producing feminist work, building on an existing language at the same time as signposting their intentions.

The revisionist implications of video and performance art, I argue, locate these media at the forefront of Jones’ theory. Furthermore, the ways in which contemporary feminist artists utilise video sits within recent discourses of re-performance and documentation and follows the museological trend of institutionalising and acquiring performance art. In this way it is closely related to the strategies of parody and historical revisionism analysed in Hutcheon’s updated theory of parody as “repetition with critical distance.” My emphasis on video and performance art, and the incorporation of theories from

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Hutcheon and Jones, move my argument toward a conceptual framework that explicates the revisionist strategies at work in contemporary feminist art.

Given that Isaak’s book is the only major study of humour in feminist art, the critique mounted in this chapter has been necessary in order to differentiate my thesis from existing literature. In reviewing the literature published about humour in feminist art, this chapter has identified a gap in scholarship that addresses recent shifts in practice and theory including: feminist criticism of carnival theory; a paradigm shift in feminism, which has resulted in employment of different forms of humour as well as the emergence of Jones’ theory of parafeminism; and changes in the way feminist artists use video and performance art. The following chapters incorporate into their analysis several additional theoretical strategies such as parody and parafeminism in order to progress towards the development of a conceptual framework through which to understand humour in contemporary feminist art.
CHAPTER 2

The ‘nature’ of sex: Pipilotti Rist’s *Pickelporno* (1992)

Synaesthetically, fire, simulacrally rendered via televisual representation, both symbolizes and is signalled (through the saturated reds and the images of flames and exploding volcanoes) as hot, with the heat linked *(parodically: this is a very funny moment)* to the “heat” of consummated desire.71

In the ‘climax’ of Pipilotti Rist’s 1992 video *Pickelporno* (*Pimple Porno*, in English) a crescendo of female moaning accompanies frenetically paced clips of bodies interlaced with footage of an erupting volcano. This sequence was described in a 2012 essay by Amelia Jones as “very funny” in its parodic visualisation of the “heat” of desire. Jones leaves this parenthetical comment unexplained, and continues her reading of *Pickelporno* as “synaesthesia of vision.” In this chapter I will interrogate Jones’ statement, drawing on Jones’ own writings as well as theories of parody and humour, to both explicate the parodic elements at work within *Pickelporno* and extend Jones’ concept of parafeminism in relation to my findings. I present the first English translation of a statement by Rist about *Pickelporno*, through which I argue the work presents a parafeminist see-saw between two conflicting modes of vision: embodied and distanced. Thereafter, I examine key sequences in *Pickelporno* through the lens of humour theory to propose a reading of the work as a multi-layered feminist parody: of representation, phallocentric pornography, and essentialism. In doing so, I ask: through the lens of humour, can we discover something in Rist’s connection between nature and sex that moves beyond essentialist reiterations of the ‘feminine’ towards a more self-reflexive, even paradoxical, feminist politic?

Rist was born Elisabeth Charlotte Rist in Grabs, Switzerland, in 1962. Rist began calling herself “Pipilotti Rist” in her late teens inspired by the children’s book character Pippi Longstocking, a self-titling that reflects the feminist undertones and penchant for playfulness that circulate through Rist’s practice. She is widely known for her expansion of the video medium about which, she famously says, there is: “room in them [videos] for everything (painting, technology, language, music, movement, lousy, flowing pictures, poetry, commotion, premonition of death, sex and friendliness) – like in a compact handbag.”72 Her works have been exhibited broadly at museums and festivals throughout the world, including the biennials in Sao Paulo, Venice, Istanbul, the Caribbean and Santa Fe, and she has held retrospectives at prestigious institutions such as the Hayward Gallery in London and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. She has been the subject of several monographs by publishers including Phaidon and awarded significant prizes including the 2009 Joan Miró Prize. Australian audiences were able to view a new commission of Rist’s work at the 19th Biennale of Sydney, curated by Juliana Engberg in 2014, which followed Engberg’s recent curated solo exhibition Pipilotti Rist: I Packed the Postcard in My Suitcase (2011) at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) in Melbourne.73

Rist began her career as a designer and minor Swiss rock star: she studied design at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, then video and animation at the School of Design in Basel, and from 1988 to 1994 she played in the all-female punk band Les Reines Prochaines (The Next Queens). Les Reines Prochaines’ music features in many of Rist’s works, including Pickelporno, and the considerable influence of this early formative period is apparent throughout Rist’s practice in her appropriation of the language of design as well as her experimental use of sound. As Peggy Phelan has


73 Australian audiences have also witnessed Rist’s work in numerous group shows including: Backflip; the 16th Biennale of Sydney (2008); One of Us Cannot Be Wrong (2008) at Centre for Contemporary Photography in Melbourne; Art / Music: Rock, Pop, Punk, Techno (2001) at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney; 12th Biennale of Sydney (2000); and Strange Days (1998), at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney.
noted: “The steady patience of an animator combined with the exuberant irreverence of a rock star inform Rist’s best art.” Fittingly, Rist began making video art in the mid-1980s: a period characterised by the embrace of video in both popular and high art culture. Her first video work, *I’m Not The Girl who Misses Much* (1986), has received considerable attention in the literature, although scholars tend to gloss over the subsequent decade of Rist’s practice (and, accordingly, *Pickelporno*) until the mid-1990s when she received international success with works such as *Eve is All Over* (1997), which won the 2000 Premio award at the Venice Biennale. Thus, my selection of *Pickelporno* for analysis redresses a scholarly neglect of the piece which, I argue, is due to inattention of its humour and thus misinterpretation of the work’s meaning.

*Pickelporno* is a hetero-erotic film in which lovemaking bodies overlap with freewheeling clips of natural imagery that twirl together amongst birds and waterfalls in the hypnotic landscape for which Rist has become known. Rejecting the mainstream pornographic tradition in which a distanced viewer watches two strangers have sex, Rist visualises what these people might be feeling: a sensorial world she describes as occurring “behind the eyelid.”

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The first scene narrates the meeting of the two protagonists through a series of close-ups, mostly of their eyes, intersected with full length action shots. The video opens with a shot of a Caucasian woman, wearing a yellow dress and silver strappy heels, stepping carefully onto a gridded industrial floor. In what appears to be an empty hangar space, she approaches an Asian man dressed in a blue tailcoat who spins like a magician upon her arrival. They enact a series of cross-cultural greetings that conclude with the absurd. Firstly, in traditional Asian address, they face each other and bow. Secondly, as per Western custom, they shake hands: their touch resulting in solarised fade. Thirdly, in a fictive tradition, they touch one another’s nose and tilt their heads to one side. In its oddness this third greeting is the first humorous moment in the video, and it is an important clue as to the otherworldly scenes to follow. Next, the male character reaches up towards the roof and produces a long stemmed flower, which he gives the woman. She knocks his hand away and, in the same motion, pushes him onto a nearby double bed. The camera points upwards, causing the room to spin, and the music ends.

The video transitions to a second phase, in which a stop motion animation of grass is presented and overlaid onto close-up footage of hands touching and the sound of birds chirping. To a slow base soundtrack, the camera revolves around the body of the male character, who is now naked besides green astro turf underwear. His image disappears into and emerges from the grass as the two sets of footage overlap through various special effects including cross fades, green screen and digital transitions. This method continues throughout the video, as images of nature are juxtaposed and overlapped with microscopic close-ups of the two lovemaking bodies that become, at times, indistinguishable. The layers of footage are often edited through effects-driven transitions and green screen superimpositions so that figure and ground are inverted and confused. At times, motifs from the natural world appear unexpectedly in the bedroom; for example the film cuts from footage of multiple lemons to a shot of the woman’s body in which a lemon has been placed between her calves. Other unexpected objects

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77 Jones has argued that these close-ups refute the possibility of ‘racial’ fetishism from the female gaze of desire. See Jones, “Screen Eroticisms,” 262. Race representation is introduced early in *Pickelporno*, through the series of cross-cultural greetings previously cited, and is central to Jones’ theory of parafeminism.
are reminiscent of childhood, such as the tiny doll that appears between the woman’s toes, or the small world globe positioned between her thighs which opens out to a shot of the earth spinning in space.

Figs. 4, 5: Pipilotti Rist, Pickelporno (1992), video, 12:02 mins.

At approximately seven minutes into the film, the tone shifts: triangle shapes wiggle vertically through the screen and thereafter images and sounds of water dominate the video. After one minute, base guitar restarts and the mood changes again: the man blinks, and a shot of his eyeball transitions to footage of fire superimposed over the two bodies. The video jump cuts from images of actual fire, as well as outer space, to the protagonists’ coupling. As previously described by Jones, the heat of this image is “linked (parodically: this is a very funny moment) to the “heat” of consummated desire.” Visual puns are plentiful: a hard penis penetrates underwater imagery of sea coral and, to reiterate the visual resemblance between female genitalia and sea fauna, a vulva floats through the water. Further, a watermelon is split in two, which cuts to breasts jiggling in circles and fades to footage where the camera circles a fire. Subsequently the music speeds up to accompany sounds of moaning and the special effects intensify to frenetically fast paced jump cuts between flames spurting, flowers blooming, and fragmented bodies, as well a finger pushed provocatively into a watermelon. The sequence reaches ‘climax’ with footage of a volcanic eruption, which burn out fades to white. After a few seconds the music restarts, this time piano accompanied by female singing and peaceful footage of the ocean appears before the credits roll.

Pickelporno marks a shift in Rist’s practice. Earlier works, such as I’m Not the Girl who Misses Much (1986), Sexy Sad (1987) and You Called me Jacky (1990), were structured around the reinterpretation of popular music songs through the insertion of Rist’s own (female) voice, imagery, or adjusted lyrics.\textsuperscript{[79]} As noted by Mark Harris, these videos mimicked the original music clips: they were roughly the length of the original song and showed bodies as discrete figures, as per generic music videos. Pickelporno, however, abandons this direct association with music videos: twelve minutes in length, it presents bodies as fragments that drift and overlap to a soundtrack by Rist’s band Les Reines Prochaines.\textsuperscript{[80]} A kitsch and lo-fi aesthetic pervades: an outdated camera appears to have been used, and Rist’s reappropriation of special effects from music videos relies heavily on the green screen technique (and the comedic potential of its failures) made popular in Superman films of the 1970s. Thus Pickelporno, alongside two other video works made during the same year, Blue Bodily Letter and Red Bodily Letter, presents a multifaceted, rather than one-directional, feminist parody of popular culture.

“Synaesthesia of vision”: Pickelporno as embodied viewing

A number of scholars, including Peggy Phelan, Elisabeth Bronfen, Christine Ross and Nancy Spector, have analysed Rist’s incitement of multi-sensorial pleasure as a subversion or complication of dominant 1970s and 1980s feminist film theories of ‘the gaze,’\textsuperscript{[81]} such as Laura Mulvey’s ground-breaking study of Hollywood’s positioning of women’s bodies as objects of “visual pleasure.”\textsuperscript{[82]} Examining this body of theory in light of Rist’s institutional embrace by New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the

\textsuperscript{[79]} For example, “Sexy Sad” is a remake of the Beatles’ song “Sexy Sadie” (1968).


“great bastion of (masculinist) modernism,” scholar Kate Mondloch argues that parafeminist art such as Rist’s necessitates a dramatic shift in feminist theory. She writes:

Where this particular brand of parafeminism is heading is anyone’s guess, but works like Rist’s – as well as the richness of the response to them – signal a decisive and provocative change in the relationship between feminism, media art, and the art museum.  

The significant shift highlighted by Mondloch supports my contention in this thesis that we need to incorporate new theoretical strategies to understand contemporary feminist video art. It is within this new territory that Jones’ essay “Screen Eroticisms: Exploring Female Desire in Feminist Film and Video” can be located: as an attempt to chart and analyse a shift in artistic feminist practice toward an embodiment of vision.

“Screen Eroticisms” is the only in-depth scholarly analysis of Pickelporno published to date. It posits Pickelporno as instantiating “a profound technological and ideological shift” in how feminist practises visualised and conceptualised eroticism between the 1960s and the 1990s. Jones uses two case studies: Pickelporno, and the 16mm experimental film Fuses (1964-7) by Carolee Schneemann, both of which, she argues “push the boundaries of each medium in terms of content, narrative and spatial/temporal structure” to produce “embodied erotic possibilities for viewers that counter these conventional binary structures.” Central to Jones’ analysis of Pickelporno is its embodied mode of viewing that collapses the boundary between subject and object, described by Jones as a “synaesthesia of vision.” Psychological synaesthesia is a rare neurological condition that stimulates multiple sensory experiences, and was the topic of intensive scientific investigation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as well as,

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84 Mondloch, “Pour Your Body Out,” 235.


86 Ibid., 258-273.
famously, a source of inspiration for synesthete Wassily Kandinsky. Jones, however, designates “synaesthesia of vision” culturally, as: “the involvement of all bodily senses in the act of seeing and the corollary way in which the ‘gaze’ is always already muddied by vicissitudes of desire and repulsion that wrack, ruin and elevate the body.”\(^{87}\) For example, upon viewing the imagery of lemons in *Pickelporno*, the viewer might make sensory associations such as the lemon’s scent or its bumpy surface. This mode of viewing subverts traditional structures of knowledge, such as Cartesianism, in which information is attained through rational objective vision and thus understands the mind as being wholly separate from the corporeal body.\(^ {88}\) By presenting overlapping and conflicting cultural synesthetic experiences, such as haptic repetition of the lemon’s bumpy surface through images of goosebump dimpled skin, *Pickelporno* provokes an embodied viewing experience in which senses and images meld together in a heady erotic euphoria. Contributing to what has been dubbed the “synesthetic turn” of the twenty first century towards visual perception as a “subjectively and bodily experiential event,”\(^ {89}\) Jones’ framework adopts synaesthesia as a methodology that refutes both the phallocentric assumptions of Cartesianism and the binarisms of earlier dominant feminist visual theories.\(^ {90}\)

Jones’ framework pivots on her understanding of screens as tools: both to enable embodied experiences for viewers and identificatory responses with onscreen bodies. She argues:

*Pimple Porno* exemplifies the way in which Rist’s work evokes what Laura Marks calls a ‘haptic visuality.’ a ‘feminine’ (rather than penetratory and

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90 The term “methodology” to describe this theoretical application of synaesthesia is borrowed from Tarja Laine and Wanda Strauven, “The Synaesthetic Turn.” For another excellent analysis of feminist art through the lens of affect see: Susan Best, *Visualising Feeling: Affect and the Feminine Avant Garde*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).
perspectival, as is typical in Western visual culture) visual relation, wherein the
viewer is encouraged to engage with the surface of the image as having
substance (as if it could be touched, haptically). Haptic visuality encourages an
‘intersubjective eroticism’ not only (in the case of *Pimple Porno*) between
figures or characters *within* the work but *between* these bodies and ours.91

Therein, according to Jones’s reading of Marks, *Pickelporno* engages a “haptic
visuality” that encourages “intersubjective eroticism” between viewer and subject.92
This type of viewing experience, argues Jones, is specific to the televisual sensibility
rather than the filmic tradition: “The potential of the immersive imagery in the video to
“swallow up” viewers provides a different viewing experience and, thus, a mode of
subjectification different from that of cinema.”93 In other words, ‘haptic visuality’
causes the viewer to be metaphorically drawn into the video and therefore to share
subjectivity with the subject. Jones suggests this inter-subjective experience, especially
when it involves eroticism, can dissolve binaries of gender identification and
heterosexual desire: enabling an empathetic response in the viewer which can “open up
a process of change.”94 This aspect of Jones’ argument recalls the communal spirit and
transformative potential of carnivalesque laughter, suggesting the ability of carnival
imagery to produce embodied, or “synesthetic,” mode of vision, which I will return to in
the following section. In her earlier book *Self/Image*, Jones argues the embodied and

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92 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*,
*The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, (Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 1992). Other examples not cited by Jones, but which are instrumental in recent theoretical
developments concerning embodied vision, include the work of Mieke Bal, Maaike Bleeker and
Erin Manning.
93 Jones, “Screen Eroticisms,” 272. Jones refers to a quote by Rist in which she describes the
experience of viewing video as being “swallowed”: Pipilotti Rist quoted in Hans Ulrich Obrist,
“I rist, you rist, she rists, you rist, they rist, tourist,” in *Pipilotti Rist*, 15.
94 Jones, “Screen Eroticisms,” 266. In his study of Francis Bacon’s work through the lens of
synaesthesia, Nicholas Chare has argued that the artist’s privileging of desires that engage
senses other than sight encourages a queer reading of his work: Nicholas Chare, “Upon the
Scents of Paint: Bacon and Synaesthesia,” *Visual Culture in Britain*, 10. 3 (November 2009):
253–270.
radical potential of the televisual exemplified by Rist’s work characterises a shift towards a new form of feminism; parafeminism. Jones’ theory is concise, but dense, thus I will quote it in full:

If postfeminism implies an end to feminism, through the term parafeminism – with the prefix "para-" meaning both "side by side" and "beyond" – I want to indicate a conceptual model of critique and exploration that is simultaneously parallel to and building on (in the sense of rethinking and pushing the boundaries of, but not superseding) earlier feminisms. With parafeminism I want to indicate a way of thinking that builds on the insights of first- and second-wave feminism – insights such as Simone de Beauvoir’s feminine "immanence" or Laura Mulvey’s "male gaze" – without which I could not have developed this theory. At the same time, I want to leave behind some of the closures and limitations of dominant feminist models for thinking about visuality and identity. Most importantly, with parafeminism I would like polemically to argue for the explicit rejection of the tendency within dominant strands of second-wave feminism to assume a normative gendered subject who is white, middle-class, heterosexual, and “First world” (i.e. from Europe or North America), as well as the tendency to prescribe certain behaviours or strategies – to argue, for example, that women who do not deploy a particular kind of bodily language or cultural practice are not "proper" feminists.  

Framed through an explicit rejection of the term “post-feminism,” Jones’ concept of parafeminism remedies perceived limitations of second-wave feminism by expanding existing models of visual politics and identity, prioritising inter-sectionality, and promoting dialogue about feminism itself. In summary, Jones writes: “Parafeminism is, as I see it, non-prescriptive, open to a multiplicity of cultural expressions and behaviours, and focused on excavating power differentials.”  

96 Ibid.
Rist’s practice has a number of features which, Jones argues, identify it as parafeminist. Firstly, Rist herself is uncertain about her position as feminist: she is described by Jones as a “struggling, uncertain subject willing to narrate her own confusion.”97 Parafeminist subjectivities thus “embrace” the confusion of “the meaning, significance, and status of feminist – or parafeminist – visual practice today.”98 Secondly, analysing Rist’s work through the artist’s own metaphor of “eyes as blood fuelled cameras,” Jones articulates Rist’s practice as rendering impossible the camera’s ability to depict truth and to instrumentalise vision as securing knowledge. She writes: “If the eye is a blood fuelled camera then… vision can no longer be instrumentalized – understood as mechanically securing the viewer in his position of knowing, per Renaissance perspectival models.”99 The parafeminist subject, then, relates vision as well as tools of its representation to the irrational and corporeal human body. Jones concludes:

Rist’s willingness to embrace her confusion, her struggles, her deliberate courting of seduction and spectacle, and her presentation of her work as an openly admitted pursuit for her “lost body” (never to be found) can be counterposed to the tradition in European art of producing bodies in pictures as a way of securing the making and viewing body… Rist’s lost body… proposes a new way of thinking about issues of identity and power, a way that I am embracing as parafeminist.100

Although Jones does not write explicitly about Pickelporno in Self/Image, I argue this early video presents explicitly parafeminist subjectivities and modes of representation. Further, through Jones’ own scholarship and with reference to Pickelporno, I extend Jones’ notion of parafeminism by suggesting that this mode of feminist practice presents a dialectic of proximity and distance, as per Hutcheon’s theory of parody.

97 Jones, Self/Image, 217.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid., 218.
100 Ibid., 238.
“Before and behind the eyelid”:
Visualising a parafeminist eroticism in *Pickelporno*

As cited in the preceding section, Jones argues that *Pickelporno* offers an embodied and inter-subjective eroticism that “swallow(s) up” the viewer. In this section, I argue that carnivalesque elements contribute to this mode of viewing by evoking corporeal imagery and disrupting the stability of subjectivity. Furthermore, I suggest that *Pickelporno* simultaneously employs strategies of distancing such as parody, disgust, and fetishistic modes of representation. This contradiction of closeness and distance, I argue, creates a dialectic of proximity that is intrinsic to the work’s parody of phallocentric pornography, as well as to the parafeminist project more broadly. To do so, I will examine an invaluable and rare piece of text written by Rist during the creation of *Pickelporno*, entitled “Aus Der Produktion von Pickelporno” (On the Production of “Pickelporno”) (1992). In this text, Rist articulates her intentions and process in making the work as part of an ongoing attempt to “visualize the inner bodily
sensations” by creating compositions of what occurs “before and behind the eyelid.”

Although it is a long passage, this thesis presents its first translation into English and thus the heavy citation is valuable. Rist writes:

I try to visualize the inner bodily sensations in my work, specifically the feelings that arise when I am touched or when I am touching. That I am a woman is a coincidence but nevertheless crucial. How little do I know what internal and external images women are seeing or hearing when they are smooching!

My first step is to approach the wonderful chaos of bodily surface with the camera. The landscapes of pores, wrinkles, hairs, and dandruffs are very picturesque. In the beginning, I still feel a bit nauseous, no matter how enlightened I am. Is it just because these macro dimensions are reminding us again and again that we will eventually turn into compost? I am not bantering. *(The lemon smells sugary/ huge it looks from above, the thigh/ the juice blabbers through the lips’ crease, the cool pale blue is placed upon the eyelid).*

In my second step, I am searching for internal images and sounds, which come close to the sensations of flesh, blood, phantasies, bones, and tissue.

Then, I am arranging the quaint compositions of the worlds shortly before and behind the eyelids. *(I take your word for it, I am riding far away now, squeezing my breasts close to me, with a 2 kilometre long smile/ ei ei I am brandishing my head into the white, now I know what to call myself).*

Thus, *Pickelporno* represents two visions simultaneously: what the couple see “before and behind the eyelids.” To produce this sensory dynamic, *Pickelporno* oscillates between the two worlds of “beyond” and “behind” the eyelids through a variety of editing techniques, including overlaid footage, fades and symbolic close-ups of the couples’ eyes. Using this technique, *Pickelporno* presents a parafeminist logic through

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102 Ibid., 61-63.
conflicting modes of vision: evoking the two etymological meanings of ‘parafeminism,’ “counter” and “beside,” as they pertain to complicity and distance. As argued by Hutcheon, “the pleasure of parody’s irony comes not from humor in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual “bouncing” (to use E.M Forster’s famous term) between complicity and distance.”

Through this lens, I suggest that parafeminist parodic pleasure in reading *Pickelporno* is produced by the viewers’ engagement in “bouncing” between complicity and distance to embodiment: a reading which extends Jones’ concept of parafeminism. Repurposing Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, I argue that carnivalesque imagery contributes to the embodied mode of viewing espoused by Jones; which, furthermore, is continually offset by filmic techniques of distancing to create a paradoxical spectatorial logic that is intrinsic to parafeminism.

Following Rist’s description in “Aus Der Produktion von Pickelporno,” the first stage of *Pickelporno* represents the world “before” the eyelid and comprises what the couple sees in reality: each other’s bodies in close-up vision. Rist created this representation through the filmic method of using a tiny surveillance camera attached to the end of a stick. This ingenious approach has been described by Rist as “a step in my camera work” which enabled her to “do movements around the body or into the nature which is with our clumsy head [sic] not possible.”

By repurposing the surveillance camera, a technology that suggests Foucauldian forms of control of the masses, Rist draws the viewer closer to instigate a participatory and vertiginous viewing experience that can be read as carnivalesque.

Firstly, the viewer feels implicated in the sexual act as she or he watches the action from a realistic participatory position. Participation is integral to the carnivalesque; as Bakhtin writes: “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and

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everyone participates because the very idea embraces all the people.” Secondly, the bodies spin and tumble through the screen to create a vertiginous viewing experience. Thus the world is literally “turned upside down” as spectatorial hierarchies are overturned and mocked, as in Carnival. As Jones writes of Pickelporno: “Rist turns her camera around, refusing its authority as stationary ‘eye.’” This emancipatory effect, Jones argues, is simultaneously created through the strategy of the close-up, which blurs the boundaries between the two bodies and effaces their difference. She writes: “the infinitesimal line where one body begins and another ends is effaced; there are no borders. There is no binary separating ‘man’ from ‘woman,’ ‘black’ from ‘white.’” Scrutinising bodily surfaces, Rist’s close-up captures macroscopic views of the human bodies to create, as Rist writes: “landscapes of pores, wrinkles, hairs, and dandruffs.” Elisabeth Bronfen has analysed Rist’s convention of “coming too close” to the body, specifically the female body, through Laura Mulvey’s essay “Pandora’s Box: Topographies of Curiosity.” Bronfen suggests that Rist employs a methodology of “curiosity” about her own body, explored by Mulvey as a potential site of pleasure for women filmmakers, which involves “coming too close” to the female body and thus revelling in its “horrific inside.” Rist’s work, Bronfen concludes, subverts the cultural conception of the female body, described by Mulvey as a “fascinating surface with a horrific inside,” from which one must “avert the gaze”; and instead invites audiences to “re-engage” with the body. In “coming too close”, indeed by probing “behind” the eyelid, I argue that Pickelporno relishes in the female body’s “horrific inside” to produce moments of carnivalesque imagery and, in turn, carnival laughter, that provoke an embodied viewing experience.

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106 Bakhtin, 7.
107 As Bakhtin writes: “The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival was of particular significance.” Ibid, 10.
109 Ibid., 263.
112 Bronfen, “Pipilotti’s Body Camera,” 120, 123.
At the same time, however, an element of distancing operates in this first stage. “These macro dimensions,” Rist writes, evoke a feeling of “nausea” because they are: “reminding us again and again that we will eventually turn into compost.”113 Film scholar Julian Hanich describes the close-up as a “tried and tested” strategy of engaging the viewer’s sensorium synaesthetically through disgust.114 Since the close-up usually denotes a slowing down in the film’s narrative, notes Hanich, the technique: “assumes an important affective function: it magnifies our emotional response to the object.”115 Thus, through their “nausea,” the viewer encounters *Pickelporno* through embodied vision, which draws them into the work. However, the close-up enforces an “obtrusive nearness”116 which, for many viewers, causes a phenomenological distancing through aversive reactions such as averting one’s eyes, moaning, or in some cases, laughing. These eruptive responses, according to Julia Kristeva, are part of the process of abjection which distances the viewer from the unknowable: in the case of *Pickelporno*, death and decay.117 Building on Sigmund Freud’s earlier ‘relief theory,’ which sees laughter as a bodily release of tension,118 Kristeva argues: “Laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection.”119 The viewer then undergoes a “see-saw process,” to use Hanich’s term, of immersion and repulsion, of drawing the artwork closer and of distancing themselves from it. This dialectic, Hanich argues, is essential in creating meaning: “if we had no possibility to recreate a proper aesthetic distance, we would be wholly (and not merely partially) involved in humiliating disgust and therefore remain unable to reflect on what (the artist) wants to convince us of.”120 Through synesthetic

115 Ibid., 300.
116 Ibid.
120 Hanich, “Dis/Liking Disgust,” 306. Latter parenthetical comment is mine, to alter the specificity of Hanich’s subject of examination, the film director Pier Paolo Pasolini, to a more broader statement that encompasses the work of Rist.
means, therefore, the first stage of *Pickelporno* balances conflicting modes of viewing that provoke as well as refute Cartesianism. This visual dialectic, I argue, is inherent to Jones’ concept of parafeminism.

The second stage of *Pickelporno* represents that which occurs “behind” the eyelid: the inner feelings of the couple’s sexual pleasure. That is, as Rist has explained elsewhere: “how and what these people are feeling when they are having sex.” According to Rist, this inner word is represented as images of nature: waterfalls, birds, trees, mountains. This method, as Rist has explained, avoids the raging pornography debates of the period by instead proposing an alternative erotic film that expresses what she was interested in: feeling. She writes:

> Instead of spending too much energy on what we don’t like, [I was interested in] what would be erotic film that interests women or me, and one conclusion was probably we – or actually I, I cannot generalise – I’m more interested to know what the other feels when we are kissing much more than what it looks from outside.

In focusing on tactility, Rist proposes an embodied mode of viewing and refuses the tradition of mainstream phallocentric pornography to objectify and display bodies. As will be examined subsequently, this embodied mode of viewing is often mistaken as essentialist. I argue the second stage of *Pickelporno*, that which occurs “behind” the eyelid, is represented through bad puns and dirty jokes; which, when read through the lens of parody, articulates a parafeminist logic which distances the work from essentialism.

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122 Rist, “Pipilotti Rist lecture,” 7:01 mins.
A parodic climax: Feminist critique of phallocentric pornography


Toward its conclusion, *Pickelporno* reaches ‘climax’ with footage of a volcanic eruption: described by Jones as “a very funny moment.” Building on Jones’ unexplained statement to dissect the parodic elements at work within *Pickelporno*, in the remainder of this chapter I will argue that the video’s climax presents a multi-layered parody: firstly, as Jones ascertained, of sexual “heat,” secondly, of phallocentric pornography, and thirdly, of feminist essentialism.

As I suggest in my opening to this chapter, Jones proposes that parody operates in the ‘climax’ of *Pickelporno* specifically in the linking of the “heat” of fire to the “‘heat’ of consummated desire.” Hutcheon’s theory of parody is based on the following definition:

Parody… is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the background text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signalled by irony. But this irony can be playful instead of belittling: it can be critically constructive as well as destructive.

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124 Ibid.
Following this logic, Rist’s parodic linking of the two forms of “heat” in *Pickelporno*’s climax functions through its “repetition with difference.” The first heat, which is *synaesthetically* signalled through fire, is “repeated” through the second form of heat: erotic pleasure. Parody is enacted through the “difference” between these two types of heat: one, a physical temperature, and the other, a metaphorical one. As noted by Jones, this physical temperature is rendered both as simulacra, through the screen, and synaesthetically, by provoking an affective response in the viewer. Therefore the sequence parodies the representation of sex, an action centred upon tactility, through visual means. The viewer’s critical distance, which enables them to recognise the parody, is facilitated by prior knowledge of the difference between the two types of “heat” as well as recognition of the irony inherent in these layered metaphors and their onscreen representation. Thus the viewer experiences a contradictory response, at once affective and distanced: evoking a dialectic of proximity that circulates through parodic humour in its requirement of distance and provocation of a corporeal state of laughter.

A second layer of parody in this sequence mocks the conventions of mainstream phallocentric pornography: namely, the ‘money shot.’ Recognition of *Pickelporno*’s derisive parody lies in the viewer’s prior knowledge of this filmic custom, in which the pornographic scene concludes with a close-up of the male performer ejaculating, usually on a partner. Similarly, the final two frames of *Pickelporno* are close-up, slowed down, repeated images of a spurting volcano after which the moaning ceases and the video swipe fades to white. The parody is emphasised by what I will term a ‘build up’ sequence that echoes the standard narrative of pornography; after a series of images of liquid and water, themselves parodying the liquidity of vaginal lubrication, *Pickelporno* presents a series of frenetically fast paced shots screened to the soundtrack of female moaning. Thus the spurting volcano “repeats” the money shot through visual similarity to male ejaculation and with “difference” in that it presents a geological feature rather than a human one. Further, Pickelporno enacts a sprawling pun through visual metaphor, with an ‘eruption’ standing in for an ‘ejaculation’; a mere substitution that has been overplayed and endlessly repeated through comedy. As will be further analysed in the following section, this scene is one of many ‘bad jokes’ which distance *Pickelporno* from claims of essentialism.
Feminist film scholar Linda Williams has theorised the “money shot” as: “an obvious perversion – in the literal sense of the term, as a swerving away from more ‘direct’ forms of genital engagement – of the tactile sexual connection.”¹²⁶ Rist positions her parody of phallocentric pornography within a film that attempts to visualise this “tactile sexual connection” through, as previously examined, “imagining how and what these people are feeling when they are having sex.”¹²⁷ In doing so, Kirsten Mey has argued: “Rist seeks to overcome the distance from real experience, the unattainable, that is part of the staple diet of porn.”¹²⁸ By rejecting the spectatorial modes of phallocentric pornography, Mey argues, Rist refutes the “knowledge system produced by (self) surveillance, its informational and evidential, objectifying and ultimately disciplining character.”¹²⁹ Instead Pickelporno, Mey suggests, embodies sexual experience and thus “empowers the subject as it builds on understanding.”¹³⁰ More than that, I argue, Pickelporno employs conflicting modes of representation, both embodied and distanced, to enact a delicate parafeminist parody of pornographic conventions as well as the patriarchal culture that produces them. The embodied response of laughter is enabled, and contradicted, by the viewer’s “critical distance” with which they decipher Rist’s layered parody.

As my analysis of its multi-directional parody has demonstrated, Pickelporno’s feminist critique extends to the broader conventions of pornography and, by implication, dominant modes of erotic representation that privilege the male gaze. Simon Dentith accounts for this aspect of parody when he argues that parody’s imitation is “relatively polemical.” He writes: “Parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice.”¹³¹ Dentith’s use of the word “relatively” points toward Hutcheon’s notion that “the ferocity of the attack can vary widely between different forms of parody” and,

¹²⁹ Ibid.
¹³⁰ Ibid.
furthermore, that “the direction of the attack can vary.”

... In other words, “the polemic can work both ways: towards the imitated text or towards the ‘world.’”

Accordingly, *Pickelporno* enacts multiple mimeses that range from homage of technical strategies to an attack directed toward the dominant cultural paradigm: our patriarchal ‘world.’

As a feminist critique of the ‘world’, then, *Pickelporno* utilises feminist parody as an emancipatory strategy. In her book *Subversive Intent*, Susan Suleiman proposes the transformative potential of feminist parody through the metaphor of the playing mother. Drawing from Bakhtinian theory and focusing on the case study of Leonora Carrington’s comic novel *The Hearing Trumpet*, Suleiman argues that the activity of playing simultaneously reaffirms and emancipates the female subject. Situating her theory as an extension of the subversive ‘maternal metaphor’ elaborated by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray in the mid-1970s, Suleiman urges: “To imagine the mother playing is to recognize her most fully as a subject – as autonomous and free, yet (or for that reason) able to take the risk of infinite expansion that goes with creativity.”

The implications for this vision, she writes, are substantial: “Whence the possibility, or the hope, that through the rewriting of old stories and the invention of new forms of language for doing so, it is the world as well as words that will be transformed.” This is the future envisaged and forwarded by the feminist parody of *Pickelporno*.

However, as I argue in the next section, *Pickelporno* refutes the pathway of maternal metaphors as celebrated by Suleiman and, through the distancing strategy of parody, subverts the notion of feminist eroticism based on essentialism. More appropriate to *Pickelporno*, perhaps, is Simon Critchley’s theory of jokes as proponents of social

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133 Ibid.
135 Ibid, 143.
change; expressing “shared life-world practices,” their humour indicates “how these practices might be transformed… how things might be otherwise.”

Parody (and puns) in the bedroom: A reading that moves beyond essentialism

Scholars tend to read *Pickelporno* as an essentialist celebration of the female body, ignoring the parodic elements I examined in the previous section. For example, Elisabeth Mangini has argued that *Pickelporno* instigates “an innate connection between the female body and natural processes” and thus fails to “create a non-essentialising and therefore truly feminine work.” More specifically, Mangini argues, *Pickelporno* is limited in its ability to effect subversive social change due to its focus on female

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 9:** Pipilotti Rist, *Pickelporno* (1992), video, 12:02 mins.

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138 Nancy Spector and Elisabeth Mangini locate *Pickelporno* within the strain of *écriture féminine* feminist theory; Spector claims the theoretical sources of Rist’s feminist agenda lie in the work of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, whose writings “resonate in the leitmotif of aqueous imagery running through many of Rist’s videos.” Mangini concurs: Rist “looked to the feminist writings of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray for a mode of creating from a female stance, exploring the purely feminine incarnations they espouse in motifs such as fluid and the body.” Spector, “The Mechanics of Fluids,” 84; Mangini, “Pipilotti’s Pickle,” 1.

139 Mangini, “Pipilotti’s Pickle,” 1.

140 Ibid., 2.
desire: a concept she argues is “still tied to the binary opposition of gender differentiation.”\textsuperscript{141} Countering such a reading, in this section I will extend my examination of \textit{Pickelporno}, through the framework of parafeminist parody developed in the previous section, to argue that Rist’s juxtaposition of lovemaking bodies with images of nature operates as a parodic representation of female essentialism. The implication of this argument is a suggestion that \textit{Pickelporno} has been hitherto misread through insufficient analysis of its humour. Further, through this reading, I extend Jones’ notion of parafeminism and argue that this mode of practice enables, if not encourages, parody through their shared paradoxical logic.

Essentialism is the belief that the cause of women’s oppression is that men and women are essentially and biologically different. Feminist artists in the 1970s, such as Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneeman, Nancy Spero and Ana Mendieta, sought to uncover an essentially ‘female imagery’ that would present an archaic and powerful feminine force buried by millennia of patriarchal dominance. Since the popularisation of feminist theory in the 1980s which understood gender as socially constructed, rather than innate, theories of female essentialism are now commonly seen to reiterate rather than undermine patriarchal norms by equating women with the dark, unruly, and ‘primitive’ force of nature in opposition to the male domain of intellectualism, rationality and culture. Thus, Mangini’s claim that Rist’s work is essentialist suggests the work operates through the outdated, if not dangerous, territory of her feminist foremothers that forced them, in her words: “deeper into the patriarchal abyss.”\textsuperscript{142}

Mangini specifically locates Rist’s essentialism in her juxtaposition of “clips of the female body with shots of various fruits.”\textsuperscript{143} However Peggy Phelan has analysed the same sequence as illustrative of the work’s humour. She writes:

\begin{quote}
The extreme close-ups of bodily orifices are intercut with brightly coloured images of fruit and flowers, giving the proceedings a \textit{hilarious} edge. He wears a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{141} Mangini, “Pipilotti’s Pickle,” 1.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 1.
kind of astro turf bikini and she spins across the sky clutching a globe between her thighs. Attempting to capture the floating feeling of great sex, *Pimple Porno* creates a *riotous* videoscape that scrambles space and time and collects their slow drip through skin the way carnal passion can.\(^{144}\)

Phelan’s suggestion that Rist’s juxtaposition of bodily orifices with fruit and flowers gives the work a “hilarious edge” diverges radically from Mangini’s reading of the same sequence as essentialist.

![Figs. 10, 11, 12: Pipilotti Rist, *Pickelporno* (1992), video, 12:02 mins.](image1)

In one such scene, which is part of the frenetically paced sequence that leads to the work’s ‘climax,’ *Pickelporno* presents footage of a watermelon being split in two, which cuts to breasts jiggling in circles, and fades to footage where the camera circles a fire. This sequence can best be described as a visual pun. Puns subvert the idea of a word’s singular and universal meaning, and exploit the ambiguities of language to produce laughter. Bakhtin includes puns as a form of *grammatica jocose*: a transgression of grammatical order which functions, as Stallybrass and White note, “to reveal erotic and obscene or merely satisfying counter-meaning.”\(^{145}\) In this tradition, Rist reveals the erotic counter-meaning of the term ‘melons’ as women’s breasts through juxtaposition of the two meanings. Further, as this particular pun is often used derogatively towards women to denote larger breasts, in depicting the melons hacked into two halves, Rist simultaneously undermines and subverts the degradation of women’s bodies to fruit through slang. In employing sexist language itself, Rist’s visual pun enacts a parafeminist parody of, and thus distances itself from, the very tropes it


\(^{145}\) Stallybrass and White, 10.
appropriates. Thus the pun is not simply humorous, it is also derisively feminist. As Debra Wacks writes in regards to the feminist punning of Hannah Wilke: “if language is a critical ingredient in the foundation of society and the formation of individuals, then the manipulation of words should be seen as a socially radical gesture.”\textsuperscript{146} Rist’s joke expresses, to borrow Critchley’s terminology, “shared life-world practices” to indicate “how things might be otherwise.”\textsuperscript{147}


In \textit{Pickelporno}, visual puns are also created through juxtaposition of nature with male reproductive organs, as previously examined through the example of the erupting/ejaculating volcano. \textit{Pickelporno} lingers excessively on footage of the eroticised male body: the first body we encounter “behind the eyelid” is that of the male protagonist, naked besides astro turf underwear, whose image fades in and out of imagery of grass. At a later point in the work, Rist cuts from an image of the male character (in which the female character’s head hovers provocatively near his groin) to footage of an upright and stiff cacti. The second shot mimics the colour scheme of the first, with a pale blue background surrounding a green plant/crotch, enacting a visual pun at the expense of the male’s erect genitals. That \textit{Pickelporno} does not present visual juxtapositions of nature exclusively with the female body counters claims such as Mangini’s that \textit{Pickelporno} presents “an innate connection between the female body


\textsuperscript{147} Critchley, \textit{On Humour}, 90.
and natural processes.” Instead, as indicated, Pickelporno presents several erotic visual puns: ejaculating and erupting, penis and cacti, melons and breasts.

At one level, such representations of reproductive organs and their actions elicit the carnivalesque laughter aimed at what Bakhtin terms ‘degradation’: “the incessant reminders that we are all creatures of flesh and thus of food and faeces also – this degradation is simultaneously an affirmation, for even ‘excrement is gay matter.’” However these puns operate on multiple levels: they are a ‘bad joke,’ with their humour derived from the very obviousness of metaphors, as well as an ironic parody of this very ‘badness,’ as a conscious citation of a trope which has been endlessly repeated in popular culture. According to the superiority theory of humour, laughter arises from a “sudden glory” felt when the viewer recognises their supremacy over the creators of this ‘bad joke.’ In employing the ‘bad joke,’ as well as in its postmodern reappropriation of filmic techniques from the lowest forms of popular culture, Pickelporno takes pleasure in subverting markers of quality and taste that uphold discourses of ‘high art.’ This strategy embraces what Judith Halberstam theorises as “the queer art of failure”: the subversive potential that lies in resisting markers of ‘success’ in a capitalist and patriarchal society. Through her enactment, and ironic repetition of, the ‘bad joke’, Rist’s visual puns complicate the assumption of an innate connection between the female body and nature and, furthermore, enact a delicate parody of essentialism.

148 Mangini, “Pipilotti’s Pickle,” 1.
149 Bakhtin, 175.
150 The superiority theory is considered to have its roots in the writings of Plato and Aristotle however the theory took its most concrete form in the work of 17th century theorist Thomas Hobbes: Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan [1651], ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 43.
152 Halberstam, Queer Art of Failure, 2-4.
153 Although it is outside the scope of this thesis, I’d like to acknowledge the broader implications of Pickelporno’s postmodern reappropriation of music video tropes, as well as her deliberate ‘bad jokes,’ on the feminist politic of the work, in consideration of Hutcheon’s claims.
Utilising Hutcheon’s theory of parody as “repetition with difference,” as enabled by a “critical distance”, in my view *Pickelporno* mimics or “repeats” essentialism by juxtaposing women’s bodies with images of natural processes. The “difference”, however, is precarious in *Pickelporno* because the required “critical distance” is obscured by the participatory and embodied modes of representation that threaten to “swallow up” the viewer.\textsuperscript{154} The viewer is invited to recognise the difference between Rist’s humorous approach to the connection between female bodies with nature through erotic visual puns, to the earnestness of essentialist feminist artists mentioned earlier. The slightness in this difference highlights the precariousness of parody which, as Hutcheon explains, can lead to the absorption of repetition to the work’s meaning. She writes: “If a decoder does not notice, or cannot identify, an intended allusion or quotation, he or she will merely naturalize it, adapting it to the context of the work as a whole.”\textsuperscript{155} Thus critics, such as Mangini, who misread Rist’s parody of essentialism have “not notice(d)” the humorous element of her connection between women and nature (the “difference” between her work and an essentialist connection) and thus “naturalized” this connection between “the background text being parodied” and “the new incorporating work.”\textsuperscript{156} It is my contention that such misreadings present a critical problem in the study of Rist’s practice which, therefore, necessitates further analysis through the lens of humour theory.

An alternate reading of *Pickelporno* necessitates the reading of parodic humour as a productive parafeminist strategy. In Jones’ essay, “Genital Panic: The Threat of Feminist Bodies and Parafeminism,” she offers an in depth analysis of work by VALIE EXPORT whose project, she argues, uses strategies of reversal to “turn fetishism violently around.”\textsuperscript{157} These strategies, she argues, have been paralleled and expanded in a parafeminist way by contemporary artists Mona Hatoum and Karolina Wysocka.

\textsuperscript{154} Jones, “Screen Eroticsms”, 272.
\textsuperscript{155} Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody*, 34.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{157} Jones, “Genital Panic,” 294.
Jones notes their projects “must be different” to EXPORT’s; namely, their contemporary context is endowed with an “awareness of newly networked modes of gender/sex identifications” which requires an extension of earlier feminist strategies of reversal and critique through “newly complex visual registers.” That is, Hatoum and Wysocka enact “alternative and potentially queer desire, offering a pulsating and haptic image ripe for sexual identification, but also of attachment, through an attenuated (rather than simplistically fetishistic) kind of visual pleasure and desire.” From this parafeminist extension, Jones suggests, emerges humour: the artists expand EXPORT’s project by “offer(ing) parafeminist imagery that is both acerbic and funny.” Jones writes:

The black humour made available to us in Hatoum’s and Wysocka’s pieces – itself a brilliant tool to recast our relationship to visual structures of gender and sex identification – returns us to history. We can laugh now, but only thanks to the hard work of EXPORT and other earlier feminists. The work of (para) feminism isn’t done yet.

Thus Jones offers parafeminism, which necessarily involves casting back to the past through “rethinking” and extending upon earlier strategies, as a fertile ground for humour. “We can laugh now,” she writes, with “now” denoting looking back to the past from the vantage point of the 1990s and 2000s. The parodic potential of this historical homage can be found through Hutcheon’s differentiation of parody from satire: a form of humour which, she argues, is always mocking, while parody’s definition includes works that mimic, refer or pay homage through their utilisation of irony which “can be playful instead of belittling.” Thus parody, in its inclusion of

159 Ibid.
160 Ibid.
161 Ibid.
162 Jones, Self/Image, 213.
164 Hutcheon, Theory of Parody, 32.
“critically constructive” strategies of homage or expansion, can incorporate the parafeminist “rethinking” and expansion of second wave feminist methodologies evident in *Pickelporno*. Through this lens, we can see the parodic potential of the parafeminist art practices and, furthermore, how the parafeminist project itself can be considered a playful parody of earlier feminisms: a line of enquiry which will be developed in Chapter Four. In summary, I interpret Jones’ theory of parafeminism as enabling feminist practitioners to own the history of feminist art through strategies of homage and citation.

I have argued that the incongruous moments and visual puns enacted in *Pickelporno* complicate and parody the essentialist assumption of an innate connection between women and nature. In enacting such a parody (of feminism, albeit of an outdated and problematic strand of theory), *Pickelporno* belongs to a parafeminist strand of practice which belies conflicting attitudes and proximities to feminism: it is a work that, to use Jones’ words, “embrace(s)” the confusion of “the meaning, significance, and status of feminist – or parafeminist – visual practice today.” Through the lens of parody and parafeminism, then, this chapter has furthered existing readings of *Pickelporno*. I have discovered that Rist’s connection between nature and sex moves beyond essentialist reiterations of the ‘feminine’ towards a parodic parafeminist visual politic; one that operates through a dialectic of complicity and distance, to “rethink” and expand second wave feminist methodologies. That my analysis of *Pickelporno* diverges so significantly from previous essentialist readings demonstrates the ease with which parody can be misread; and thus the critical importance of developing tools through which scholars can read humour in contemporary feminist art.

Further, I have extended Jones’ concept of parafeminism as involving a dialectic of proximity and distance to the body demonstrated in this chapter by conflicting modes of representation, embodied and distanced, that simultaneously enact an inter-subjective and objectifying viewing experience. In the process, I have recognised several strategies

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166 Ibid., 217.
167 Ibid, 213.
through which parafeminist parody operates: employing and subverting phallocentric methods of objectification, appropriating visual strategies from ‘low culture’ and embracing failure, revealing the predictability of pornographic conventions, parodying female essentialism through visual puns and ‘bad jokes,’ and most importantly, presenting paradoxical modes of representation. My contribution to Jones’ framework of parafeminism will be extended in the next chapter, in relation to the way parody functions in Rottenberg’s work *Mary’s Cherries* (2004) through paradoxical strategies of proximity and distance to the body, fetishism, and feminism.
CHAPTER 3
A parafeminist ‘dissection’ of the carnivalesque:
Mika Rottenberg’s Mary’s Cherries (2004)

“People might say that my work is absurd, but reality is even more so.”

The previous chapter furthered existing readings of Rist’s Pickelporno (1992) by arguing it is a multi-layered feminist parody of representation, phallocentric pornography, and essentialism itself. In doing so, I extended Jones’ notion of ‘parafeminism’ through Hutcheon’s theory of parody to propose that contemporary feminist art operates through a dialectic of proximity and distance to the body. This chapter further develops the conceptual framework established in Chapter Two through an analysis of Mika Rottenberg’s video installation Mary’s Cherries (2004). Mary’s Cherries is the second in a comprehensive body of video based work made between 2004-2010 in which Rottenberg cast women with extraordinary abilities in videos featuring absurd assembly lines. The other works are Tropical Breeze (2004), Dough (2005-6), Cheese (2008), Fried Sweat (2009) and Squeeze (2010), all of which took several years to produce.

Mary’s Cherries has been chosen as a case study for this chapter for both practical and conceptual reasons. Mary’s Cherries was made while Rottenberg was undertaking her Master of Fine Arts at Columbia University in New York, and was subsequently shown as a solo exhibition at the prestigious contemporary art centre MoMA PS1, as part of the ‘Special Projects’ program. Rottenberg’s participation in this program received significant acclaim, including from New York Times critic Roberta Smith who praised

168 Rottenberg, “Long Hair Lover.”
Mary’s Cherries as “best of show, among the artists’ projects.” Mary’s Cherries was thus Rottenberg’s first major success and, as cited below, set the tone for subsequent achievements. Editions of Mary’s Cherries have since been acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA Number: 534.2004.a-d) and, more recently, the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA) in Brisbane (Accession number: 2013.152a-b). Of the latter acquisition, Assistant Curator Ellie Buttrose explained to me:

As part of our acquisitions policy we have a focus on contemporary video installation and sculpture, so Rottenberg was an obvious candidate for acquisition as her work is a wonderful synthesis of these two mediums. In addition to this we also aim to reflect to the broad geographies of contemporary art, to do this artists from Central and South America have been a priority for the collection.

GOMA’s acquisition is the first Australian purchase of an artwork by Rottenberg, and its scheduled exhibition in 2014 will be the first time Mary’s Cherries has been shown in Australia. Thus, now is an appropriate moment to undertake scholarly research into Mary’s Cherries, which has not yet been the subject of individual academic analysis. Finally, more than any other work of Rottenberg’s, Mary’s Cherries presents a singular narrative that readily lends itself to an analysis of its carnivalesque and grotesque imagery. Presented as a vertical structure that echoes Bakhtin’s hierarchy of “low” and

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171 Ellie Buttrose, email to the author, 3 December 2013.

172 It will be the second time Rottenberg’s work will be shown in Australia; Rottenberg’s single channel video, “Time and a Half” (2003), was exhibited in Backflip.
“high” bodily categories, *Mary’s Cherries* depicts a cyclical relationship between food, growth, renewal, and excessive female bodies.\textsuperscript{173}

Rottenberg was born in 1976 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, but grew up in Tel Aviv, Israel, where she attended Hamidrasha, Beit Berl College of Arts. She has lived in New York since 2000, where she completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts at leading Manhattan art college School of Visual Arts (SVA) under the guidance of senior artist Marilyn Minter, who has continued to support her practice.\textsuperscript{174} After participating in the Cuban Biennial (2000) and showing at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise at Passerby in New York (2004), Rottenberg came to prominence in the New York art scene during the mid-2000s with a cohesive body of video-based work that complicates notions of agency and exploitation surrounding the commodification of women’s bodies. Usually shot within constructed sets in her studio, but more recently outdoors, she invents and films illogical and highly imaginative systems of production orchestrated by mostly women labourers. For example, one of her early works, *Tropical Breeze*, takes place inside a truck where scented moist tissues are produced with the sweat of the driver, champion bodybuilder Heather Foster. To play these characters she hires non-actors with extraordinary attributes – hyper musculature, excessive obesity, or exceptionally long hair – who professionally rent out their bodies. The website of Queen Racqui, for example, the main character in *Squeeze*, offers a range of erotic services including: “Squashing, Wrestling, Crushing & Trampling.”\textsuperscript{175} Rottenberg has described her working process as inspired by the extraordinary physiques of her cast of characters, whom she calls her “talents.” In a recent documentary by *Art21*, Rottenberg revealed: “Meeting the person

\textsuperscript{173} Mika Rottenberg describes the “shapes” of her work as follows: “Each of the five pieces from the last five years had its own basic shape, like I mentioned before: *Tropical Breeze* is a horizontal line, *Mary’s Cherries* is a vertical line, *Dough* is a plus sign, *Cheese* is a circle. I feel *Squeeze* completes this body of work by combining all these shapes in a single kinetic sculpture.” Mika Rottenberg interview by Judith Hudson, “Mika Rottenberg”, *BOMB*, 113 (2010): 31.


\textsuperscript{175} Queen Raqui’s website, accessed December 2, 2013, http://www.queenraqui.com/home.htm
is part of developing the concept… A lot of the time the main characters are my inspiration.”

In 2005, the year following her Masters completion, Rottenberg participated in two important group exhibitions of emerging American artists: Greater New York at MoMA PS1 and Uncertain States of America: American Art in the Third Millennium at Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo (and travelling). Since then, her career has skyrocketed. She has held solo exhibitions at De Appel, Amsterdam; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; and Magasin 3, Stockholm, and participated in important survey exhibitions including the 2008 Whitney Biennale. In 2006 she won The Cartier Award in conjunction with the Frieze Art Fair, and her New York solo-gallery debut Dough was cited one of the top 10 exhibitions of 2006 by New York Magazine, who also named her among “ten of the most promising New York artists to have emerged from the boom.”

Often grouped together with fellow New York video artists Ryan Trecartin, Laurel Nakadate and Kalup Linzy, Rottenberg is, as Ossian Ward writes: “part of a vital New York scene that is currently attracting a good deal of international attention.”

Despite this attention, due to her lesser level of seniority and international success the literature on Rottenberg’s practice is not as voluminous as that of Rist: comprising one monograph alongside numerous reviews and interviews. The central concern of


180 Published on the occasion of the retrospective exhibition Mika Rottenberg: Dough, Cheese, Squeeze and Tropical Breeze, Video Works 2003-2010, held at De Appel Arts Centre,
literature about Rottenberg is her motif of the factory, and associated themes of labour and capitalism. This includes Hsuan L. Hsu’s essay “Mika Rottenberg’s Productive Bodies,” which is the only scholarly analysis of Rottenberg’s work published to date. In this thesis I cite the most recent publication of Hsu’s essay in Mika Rottenberg’s monograph. However, the essay was previously published as Hsuan L. Hsu, “Mika Rottenberg’s Productive Bodies,” Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies, 25.2 (2010): 41-73

Hsu draws from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s influential account of immaterial labour to argue that Rottenberg’s assembly lines derive value from the labouring body itself rather than the products it manufactures. In this chapter I articulate the ways in which this labouring body is costumed and exaggerated to be presented as carnivalesque: a parody of the normative body which unfolds to reveal an expansive parody of femininity, fetish, and feminism. To do so, I analyse the carnivalesque imagery in Mary’s Cherries beginning with the central motif in the video – the transformation and regrowth of Mary’s long, red, fingernails – through feminist interpretations of Bakhtin’s theory which prioritise the female grotesque. The embodied mode of vision produced by such imagery is, I argue, offset by the spectatorial politics of Mary’s Cherries as part of the broader parafeminist project that employs strategies that function to distance the viewer. These strategies, herein referred to as ‘distancing strategies’, include evocation of the Uncanny and appropriation of fetishistic modes of representation. The dialectical parafeminist approach presents a significant shift from the way in which feminist artists of the 1980s and 1990s employed carnivalesque imagery, and enables Rottenberg to squeeze in a multitude of references that lead to an ever expanding proliferation of meanings: more than can be dealt with in the scope of this chapter as demonstrated by my extensive footnotes. The paradoxical, parodic, and manifold logic of Mary’s Cherries contributes to my reworking of Jones’ theory of parafeminism.

Mary’s Cherries (2004) is a single channel video installation in which a CRT cube monitor displaying the film is encased in a self-contained wooden box structure covered

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181 In this thesis I cite the most recent publication of Hsu’s essay in Mika Rottenberg’s monograph. However, the essay was previously published as Hsuan L. Hsu, “Mika Rottenberg’s Productive Bodies,” Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies, 25.2 (2010): 41-73

with stucco and custom carpet recycled from the film set. The box is usually suspended from the ceiling so the monitor hangs at the viewer’s eye height,\textsuperscript{183} which, combined with the analogue cube monitor, creates a viewing system that is at once nostalgic and reminiscent of surveillance arrangements.

\textbf{Fig. 15:} Mika Rottenberg, \textit{Mary’s Cherries} (2004), installation view at FRAC Languedoc Roussillon, Montpellier, 7 June-29 September 2012.

\textsuperscript{183} Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, “Mika Rottenberg: Video Fact Sheet,” sent to the author via post on January 3, 2013. The suspended version was depicted in its exhibition at FRAC Languedoc Roussillon in 2012. However, the box may also be supported from the ground according to the artist’s site-specific decision; the floor-supported version was installed at Rottenberg’s solo exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary, United Kingdom, 5 May – 1 July, 2012.
The 3:50 minute looped video content of Mary’s Cherries is set in a claustrophobic factory in which three small rooms are vertically stacked. In each of the three rooms a middle aged Caucasian woman, dressed in a low cut, pastel coloured, work uniform and visor, sits on a cyclopad at a multi-layered wooden workstation. The bizarre assembly line begins in the highest room where an unidentified woman, whose face we rarely glimpse but presumably is Mary, sits. Mary wears a different hat to the others, one with an in-built fan, and thus is both vertically and symbolically superior to the other two women. The first shot of Mary’s Cherries is a close-up of Mary’s desk, where she is cutting her long red fingernail onto a circle of white clay: a substance visually repeated in the film through the stucco white plaster which covers the walls of each room. Mary undertakes this process with utmost precision, despite wearing a yellow dishwashing glove on her cutting hand, before picking up the nail clipping with the same scissors and dropping it down a small hole in her workstation.

Fig. 16, 17: Mika Rottenberg, Mary’s Cherries (2004), video installation, 3:50 mins.

Barbara, who has been waiting expectantly, catches the clipping. With sandy brown hair and tanned skin, she is slightly masculine: she wears a pale blue uniform, no makeup, and minimal gold jewellery. With her fist, whose unpainted fingernails seem stumpy in comparison to the bright talons of Mary, Barbara pounds the clipping into a lump of clay she has prepared earlier. As a result the red cutting takes on a different form.

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184 This exercise bicycle/ workstation reappears in a photograph produced in the same year; Mika Rottenberg, “The Cardio Solaric Cyclopad- Work from Home as You Get Fit and Tan,” 2004, digital c-print, 152.4 x 127 cm, edition of 3 + 2AP. Thus in my analysis I refer to the structure as ‘cyclopad.’
appearing as a soft and viscous jelly when Barbara picks it up between her forefinger and thumb. Calling out to Rose, Barbara drops the object down to the next floor.

Rock Rose, as her name tag identifies her, is comparably ultra-feminine: wearing lipstick and mascara, she has dyed blonde hair, manicured pink nails, and gigantic braless breasts that topple from her unbuttoned pink dress. She catches the red substance, and vigorously rolls it between her hands to form a ball. Holding it up we realise she has produced a maraschino cherry: which she drops into a half-filled container. This is the point in which audiences usually laugh in recognition of the absurd logic of production.

Figs. 18, 19: Mika Rottenberg, Mary’s Cherries (2004), video installation, 3:50 mins.

This process repeats and, amidst the boredom of waiting for their turn in the assembly line, the women work collaboratively and quietly: the only sound emitting is the whirring fan and the labourers’ calls. Once all of Mary’s five nails have been cut and transformed into cherries, she makes a clicking noise with her mouth, at which Barbara and Rose start pedalling their cyclopads. The energy produced by the cycling enables regenerative activities to occur at Mary’s workstation: a black conveyor belt brings hamburgers for the three workers and, more surprisingly, a buzzing lamp above Mary’s hand prompts the regrowth of her trimmed nails to full length. This usually provokes the second eruption of audience laughter, again in realisation of the incongruous manufacturing rationale. The workers then refresh themselves with wet towels brought by the conveyor belt, rearrange their workstations, and wait for the next round of production to begin.
Once more, without so much feeling: The parafeminist female grotesque

Mary’s transformative fingernails enact a cyclical and regenerative growth process which can be read through Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque.\textsuperscript{185} However, as will be elucidated by my analysis of Mary’s Cherries through Russo’s theory of the Female Grotesque, Rottenberg firmly positions her performers’ bodies within the hierarchical viewing politics of spectacle. In this section, I ask: how does Rottenberg negotiate between the embodied mode of viewing provoked by carnival imagery and the spectacular terms of the Female Grotesque?

\begin{center}
\textbf{Figs. 20, 21:} Mika Rottenberg, \textit{Mary’s Cherries} (2004), video installation, 3:50 mins.
\end{center}

In the first stage of production, Mary’s nails are presented in a state of artificially-induced growth that is comic in its exaggeration. This image can be described, to use Bakhtin’s term, as ‘grotesque realism’: the artistic or literary expression of the material body in a transformative state of becoming, such as eating, copulating, excreting, or decaying. The production of food is intrinsic to the narrative of Mary’s Cherries but it also features as a nourishing reward to its labourers in the form of hamburgers, delivered on a conveyor belt at the end of each shift. Furthermore, shots of half-eaten

burgers recur throughout the video, suggesting an excess of food. According to Bakhtin, images belonging to the category of ‘grotesque realism’ express that which makes us all human and thus incite an attitude of positive affirmation and revelation at our commonly held material body: a realisation which evokes a carnivalesque laughter that can be traced to “the collective ancestral body of all the people.” The regenerative potential of carnivalesque laughter is allegorised in *Mary’s Cherries* by the transformation of fingernails into food which is ingested back into the body by maraschino cherry consumers. Thus Rottenberg creates an ambivalent space where life (cherries) stem from death (clippings): transforming abjection into sustenance, and degradation into laughter. As a metaphor for digestion, the cyclical nature of the production line becomes further abjected and carnivalised.

*Mary’s Cherries* revolves around painted fingernails, themselves markers of femininity, which are transformed into cherries by female performers. Therefore the transformation is symbolically located within the female body: celebrated by Bakhtin as a strong expression of the grotesque. However, as examined in the introduction, Mary Russo, among others, argues that Bakhtin’s notion of the female grotesque is underdeveloped. It was Bakhtin’s uncritical insistence on the grotesque as female that prompted the feminist reinterpretation of his theory by Russo, whose influential book *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (1995) offers a sophisticated analysis of carnival and grotesque strategies in feminist artistic production that locates subversion in the unruly female body. Russo focuses her analysis on images of female performers who deviate from the norm; “who are, in one way or another, in error.” “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory” (1985), an earlier essay reprinted in Russo’s book, undertakes critical analysis of the female grotesque body in carnival as it is constituted both historically, drawing from the work of Natalie Zemon Davis, and symbolically, through the work of Bakhtin and Kristeva. Having already discussed Bakhtin’s thoughts

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186 That these hamburgers arrive from a gap in the wall suggests its production in a neighbouring factory; alluding to the necessity of further production lines to create food for the hamburger labourers, and so on, to parody the expansive and generative nature of capitalism.

187 Bakhtin, 19.

on the topic, I will turn to the work of Zemon Davis and Kristeva to develop a deeper understanding of the conceptual groundwork on which Russo’s study is based.

Zemon Davis has analysed the political potential in the figure of the “disorderly woman” in her essay “Woman on Top”: an impressive study of archival material documenting both literary and festive inversions of gender in early modern Europe. Davis diverges from scholarly consensus that such traditions reinforced patriarchal hierarchies and instead forwards the figure of the disorderly women as a “multivalent image” that could “widen behavioural options of women” and “sanction riot and political disobedience” for both sexes of the lower classes, whose formal means of protest were heavily restricted.\(^{189}\) Suggesting the transformative social potential of comic gender transgression, she writes: “Play with the unruly women… is also part of the conflict over efforts to change the basic distribution of power within society. The women-on-top might even facilitate innovation in historical theory and political behaviour.”\(^{190}\) Attributing the “disorderly woman” with the potential for social change, Zemon Davis’ account of carnival is thus a productive standpoint for Russo’s conceptual framework of the female grotesque.

Bakhtin’s treatise on the carnival was highly influential for Kristeva and thus instrumental in her formulation of the abject as encompassing that which we must “thrust aside in order to live.”\(^{191}\) The abject can be individual (bodily fluids) or collective (lower social classes), but functions across all its permutations. To formulate the notion of abjection, Kristeva built on Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*,\(^{192}\) in which he contends that civilisation is formed through two taboos: patricide and incest. Kristeva argues that Freud doesn’t fully develop the incest taboo and, through her analysis, locates abjection within the maternal: an ambivalent space which, in addition to housing


\(^{190}\) Ibid.


horror,¹⁹³ is described as: “the polymorphic, orgasmic body, desiring and laughing.”¹⁹⁴ Kristeva’s theory of the abject maternal elucidates the simultaneous response of repulsion and laughter produced by Rottenberg’s treatment of Mary’s fingernails and thus, symbolically, the feminine. In Mary’s Cherries, Mary’s fingernails are thrice abjected: as long talons, they represent a sinister threat; as re-growing, they are animated as unnatural and monstrous; and as a clipping, once removed from the body, they become dead. A reaction of laughter produces the boundary of abjection: as a civilised person we “thrust aside” the clippings, drawing a line through disgust at the thought they could be transformed into food. As argued by Kristeva: “laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection.”¹⁹⁵ Further, as articulated in the previous chapter, disgust can act as a distancing strategy that ensures the viewed is not “swallow(ed) up”¹⁹⁶ by the corporeal experience. Instead, as Hanich argues, the viewer undertakes a “see-saw process” of immersion and repulsion that enables them to “reflect on what (the artist) wants to convince us of.”¹⁹⁷

Incorporating the work of Kristeva and Zemon Davis in her study of carnival and carnivalesque theory, to compensate for Bakhtin’s ‘underdevelopment’ of the female grotesque, Russo analyses the comic and subversive possibilities of female bodies that are “in error”¹⁹⁸: bodies termed “disorderly”¹⁹⁹ by Zemon Davis and framed as “abject”²⁰⁰ by Kristeva. With reference to feminist theories of female hysteria, mimesis and masquerades, Russo posits laughter – or, more specifically “the laughter of intertext and multiple identifications” – as a potential strategy to “expose and subvert the

¹⁹³ For further elucidation of how the maternal is figured as horrific, see Barbara Creed, The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).
¹⁹⁵ Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 8.
¹⁹⁸ Russo, Female Grotesque, 13.
²⁰⁰ Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 3.
impasse of femininity.” In doing so, Russo emphasises the element of display, positing her analysis in relation to “the spatial and temporal dimensions of modern spectacle.” This methodology is developed in the introductory chapter to The Female Grotesque, in which she complicates naturalised associations of the female body and the grotesque through models of depth and surface. The depth model refers to the epistemological origin of the term grotesque, the grotto-esque, and the metaphor of the abject and material female body that it evokes: from which, Russo argues, “it is an easy and perilous slide” to “misogyny.” The surface model refers to the marginal and superficial positioning of both the grotesque, which emerged in classical Rome “only in relation to the norms which exceeded it,” and the feminine, as it is often described by poststructuralist and feminist theorists as “bodily surface and detail.” Russo explains: “The late Renaissance and baroque combinations of depth and surface models of the body resurface in the twentieth century to produce the spectacular category of female grotesque.” In its location of the female grotesque in the hierarchical viewing politics of spectacle, Russo’s treatise diverges from theories of carnival, which emphasise its unifying and participatory qualities, and thus echoes the dialectic of complicity and distance that I argue is intrinsic to parafeminism. As I will argue in the final section, Mary’s Cherries simultaneously employs these two conflicting politics of vision, embodied and distanced, to produce a parafeminist parody of pornographic tropes.

The insights of Russo’s theory, in its insistence on spectacle, becomes apparent in my analysis of Mary’s Cherries when we realise that in real life the two ‘characters’ in Mary’s Cherries – Rock Rose and Barbara – are not factory workers: they are professional erotic fantasy wrestlers who hire their services on the internet to clients, most of whom request the women to “win.” This form of labour, in which the body

201 Russo, Female Grotesque, 73.
202 Ibid.
203 Ibid., 2.
204 Ibid., 3, 6.
205 Ibid, 6.

Fig. 23: Mika Rottenberg, *Mary’s Cherries* (2004), video installation, 3:50 mins.
itself is the means of production, could be considered as subverting or failing the reproductive value of women (whose traditional means of ‘production’ is indeed reproduction). Furthermore, the ageing bodies of Barbara and Rock Rose are not those typically eroticised in Western culture, and thus in their occupation are fetishised as non-normative: to use Russo’s phrase, they are “in error.” The size of Rock Rose who, in addition to her age (45 years), is as an extremely overweight and big-breasted woman, doubly marks her as an ‘erroneous’ sexual body. She is the only character from Mary’s Cherries whose professional erotic services are discussed in interviews, and an image of her website, WrestlerRockrose.com, is reproduced in Rottenberg’s monograph. Thus the oversized, braless, breasts of Rock Rose, which in real life serve her work as a BBW (Big, Beautiful, Woman) porn star, dominatrix, and model, are prioritised as extraordinary in Mary’s Cherries. Rottenberg’s work features two other BBW women (Queen Racqui and Trixxter Bombshell, both feature in Squeeze), so this casting choice requires close attention.

Russo locates the display of overweight and ageing bodies with the notion of a woman “making a spectacle out of herself.” She writes: “for a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, ageing, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach.” She cites ageing, pregnant and irregular women as exemplifying taboos that circulate around female bodies, in a society where femininity has long been equated with discipline and regulation. Russo locates transgressive potential in the display of such bodies, which become “unruly” when “set loose in public.” Elaine Aston develops Russo’s argument in her analysis of the female grotesque in British performance artist Bobby

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207 Russo, Female Grotesque, 13.
208 Van Duyn, Mika Rottenberg, 48-49. Rock Rose was also cast in Squeeze (2010), which may explain why her performance in Mary’s Cherries was emphasised.
209 The term BBW was coined by Carole Shaw in 1979, when she launched BBW Magazine, a lifestyle magazine for plus sized women. However it is now commonly used in the context of fat fetishism.
210 Russo, Female Grotesque, 53.
211 Ibid.
212 Ibid., 56.
Baker’s piece, “Take a Peek!”, in which she argues Baker’s ageing body is “at a risk of becoming a spectacle.” She writes:

The failure to recognize boundaries is at once a source of humiliation, pain, embarrassment and amusement. It can be used to admonish the woman who ‘gets herself wrong’ in public, but, on the other hand, it can also yield possibilities, subversive possibilities, of ‘bad’ behaviour.

Female transgression is therefore located in spectacle: in Rottenberg’s display of Rock Rose’s body rather than in the physical body itself. Rottenberg is inspired by the bodies of these women and, as such, has said they are her “muses.” She rents them for her films at their usual rate and never asks her characters to act, rather “create(s) a situation in which their bodies will have to react rather than act.” Thus, Barbara and Rock Rose, who also perform for their professional occupation, perform their ‘erroneous’ bodies for Rottenberg’s camera through the distancing strategy of spectacle. Therefore, the female grotesque presents conflicting modes of vision: embodied and spectacular, which enact a dialectic of proximity and distance to the body.

Similarly, the video component of Mary’s Cherries is exhibited in a viewing structure that functions to emphasise bodily sensation but, at the same time, to distance the viewer. Of the viewing structures, Rottenberg writes:

I want people to have a physical connection to the work. That’s why I create viewing devices, installations around the films that accentuate the relation

between body and space. Through the setting I want to make viewers aware of the surrounding architecture and go back to their physicality.\textsuperscript{217}

To do so, Rottenberg recycles materials from the film set to make structures that mirror the architecture, and in turn the bodies and sensations presented on screen. In Mary’s Cherries the video is housed in a small container covered with lumpy, flesh-coloured, dollops of stucco plucked from the factory walls, which reflect the pudgy flesh of Rock Rose. Maud Ellmann has argued that the figure of the fat woman, especially if she is working class, embodies a liberatory failing of “everything the prosperous must disavow”: “she siphons off this guilt, desire, and denial, leaving her idealized counterpart behind: the kind of woman one sees on billboards, sleek and streamlined like the cars she is often used to advertise, bathed in the radiance of the commodity.”\textsuperscript{218} Like Rock Rose, whose body “in error,”\textsuperscript{219} the lumpy walls in Mary’s Cherries reject the sleek texture usually associated with capitalism through commercial architecture; even the walls are making a spectacle out of themselves.

Forced by the scale of the structure to watch the video alone, the viewing experience mimics the claustrophobic situation of women on screen, implicating the viewer in the production line. The participatory nature of the carnivalesque was previously discussed in relation to the macroscopic and vertiginous experience of watching Pickelporno, drawing on Bakhtin’s assertion that “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because the very idea embraces all the people.”\textsuperscript{220} However, as argued in Chapter Two, enforcing an “obtrusive nearness” causes a phenomenological distancing for many viewers.\textsuperscript{221} This is further emphasised in Rottenberg’s video because it is screened on a surveillance monitor: a model that self-
consciously highlights the act of viewing itself and thus creates further distance between
the spectator and subject. Similarly to Pickelporno, then, Mary’s Cherries presents the
corporeal body through conflicting modes of representation, embodied and distancing; it
sees the eye as a parafeminist “blood fuelled camera”\(^{222}\) that subverts the concept of
vision as securing knowledge. That is, Rottenberg’s representation of the grotesque
oscillates between corporeal and sterile: the abject and perpetually re-growing female
body is presented through a spectatorial lens, emphasised by Rottenberg’s use of
medical tropes, futuristic lo-fi construction of the cyclopads, and appropriation of the
sanitising filmic language of advertising. As argued by Hutcheon, “the pleasure of
parody’s irony comes not from humor in particular but from the degree of engagement
of the reader in the intertextual “bouncing” (to use E.M Forster’s famous term) between
complicity and distance. “\(^{223}\) In this way, I argue, Mary’s Cherries repurposes the
carnivalesque to enact a parafeminist dissection of the female body whose pleasure is
elicited through “intertextual ‘bouncing’” between complicity and distance. In doing so,
Mary’s Cherries instantiates the continued relevance of Russo’s claim that laughter can
“expose and subvert the impasse of femininity.”\(^{224}\) I will demonstrate this point in the
following section, using the framework of the uncanny.

**Femininity as “creepy and uncanny.”**

My videos employ clichés about femininity... I’m attracted to how these trite ways
of thinking about women offer a kind of bliss, that is, they satisfy a basic desire
for resolution and simplicity. I’m a sucker for the related visual images – girls
playing with little lambs and bunnies, waterfalls, and long blond hair blowing in
the wind. But the fun really starts when I dissect the clichés, turning them inside
out and showing them as they really are – creepy and uncanny.\(^{225}\)

\(^{222}\) Jones, *Self/Image*, 218.
\(^{223}\) Ibid, 32.
\(^{224}\) Russo, *Female Grotesque*, 73.
\(^{225}\) Rottenberg, “Long Hair Lover.”
In this section I examine Rottenberg’s critique of traditional gender norms through the representation of femininity as “creepy and uncanny.” I argue this strategy offsets the embodied mode of viewing encouraged by carnivalesque imagery. Thus, I further articulate how *Mary’s Cherries* presents the female body through a dialectic of complicity and distance, that is integral to the work’s parafeminist parody.

*Mary’s Cherries* contains images which can certainly be located in Freud’s notion of the uncanny. The uncanny is a Freudian concept referring to the uncomfortable feeling of encountering something familiar and strange simultaneously. Freud’s essay *The Uncanny* (1919) attempts to define the “special core of feeling” which enables us to distinguish that which is uncanny from the more general category of the frightening. Some examples cited by Freud of objects and occurrences which provoke an uncanny response are: things that cause us to doubt whether something is an animate being or an object, such as waxwork figures, dolls, and automata as well as epileptic fits and episodes of insanity which suggest mental activities are mechanical process; damaging

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or losing one’s eyes; doubles, including unintentional recurrences and coincidences; dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, feet which dance by themselves; being buried alive by mistake; and the female genital organ. In summary: “animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man’s attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex comprise all the factors which turn something frightening into something uncanny.”

To develop his treatise on the uncanny Freud builds on Ernst Jentsch’s essay On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906), which he argues is incomplete in its definition of the uncanny as arising from “intellectual uncertainty.” Freud contrasts the German word unheimlich (uncanny) with its base word heimlich which, in addition to familiar, also means hidden or secret, to define the uncanny as that which reminds us of our repressed or infantile desires. He concludes: “An uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.” The infantile element of the uncanny is emphasized by Freud in his final point of general application which, he writes: “deserves special emphasis.” That is:

An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on.

Freud locates the uncanny in slippages between the real and the imaginary. It is this conflation, I argue, in which Rottenberg’s practice delightfully revels.

The physiological experience of watching Mary’s Cherries evokes the uncanny through disorientation. Exploiting the capabilities of the video medium, Mary’s Cherries distorts

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227 Freud, “The Uncanny,” 635.
228 Ibid, 620.
229 Ibid, 639.
230 Ibid, 636.
time through quick jump cuts, magnified sound, and repetition of the entire artwork through looping as well as visual resemblances between the three stages of cyclical production. Disorientation through “unintended recurrence,” Freud argues, can evoke the feeling of “helplessness and uncanniness.” Furthermore, through “wild exaggeration,” he notes, such situations can become “irresistibly comic.” Accordingly, poet Efrat Mishori has argued that Rottenberg’s practice employs and exaggerates the conventions of television commercials:

Her works are a hyper-realistic deformation of a deformed hyper-realism, a simulacrum of simulacra, a morbid exaggeration of morbid excess. They fake the appeal of fake appeal, they are synthetically synthesized; they are the reworking of a reworked reworking.

Thus, in evoking the uncanny, the strategy of repetition simultaneously functions to parody the filmic language of commercial advertising. Through her dizzying exaggeration of television marketing which, to use the words of Hutcheon, enacts a “repetition with critical distance,” Rottenberg evokes the uncanny to offer a derisive yet playful parody of consumerist tactics.

Rottenberg’s enactment of parody through the uncanny re-emerges in her treatment of Mary’s astonishingly long red fingernails, which are symbolically located as central in the film’s narrative as well as the published literature. Firstly, a seemingly dead clipping is transformed into an edible, animate, maraschino cherry. Secondly, with the aid of a buzzing lamp, Mary’s fingernails grow at a comical speed. Thirdly, they grow from her body already painted red, thus growing the artificial from the organic. In

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232 Ibid, 631. Freud uses the example of Mark Twain trying to find the switch in a dark room and repeatedly running into the same piece of furniture: Mark Twain, A Tramp Abroad, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1880), 107.
234 Hutcheon, Theory of Parody, 32.
235 Van Duyn, Mika Rottenberg, 57.
summary, the impossible is presented as truth and, to use Freud’s words: “something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality.”

This transformation casts into doubt our perception of the border between dead and alive; we are suddenly unsure whether the labourers are indeed human or whether the architecture is indeed inanimate. As Ellie Buttrose has written of *Mary’s Cherries*:

> Everything seems overwrought, from the ‘licks’ of stucco on the walls of their claustrophobic rooms, to the fleshiness of their bodies on the exercise bikes, to their flimsy plywood workbenches. Rottenberg transforms the factory line from a mechanical space to a feast of flesh.

For Henri Bergson, an early essayist on laughter, anthropomorphism was a key factor to the comic: in fact, he argued “the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human.” The small rooms are certainly womb-like which, according to Freud, evokes the uncanny through the viewer’s regression to an infantile state. Thus, Rottenberg’s transformation of fingernails to cherries, from inanimate to animate, has a comic effect rooted in its evocation of the uncanny that contradicts the embodied mode of viewing produced by carnivalesque imagery.

As cited, according to Freud the uncanny occurs when: “a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on.” Rottenberg consciously provokes and conflates symbolic meaning; she has said: “A maraschino cherry and red fingernails have other connotations, so one thing that looks like something will turn into something else. Each thing that it transforms into will need its own baggage for it to be interesting.

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236 Freud, “The Uncanny,” 636.
239 Freud, “The Uncanny,” 636.
to me.”

Certainly, long painted fingernails are simultaneously a signifier of femininity and womanhood, in particular of the upper class woman who doesn’t get her hands dirty. They also function as phallic fetish, working to alleviate castration fears of the assumed heterosexual male viewer. At the same time, cherries are often considered a delectable and erotic fruit through their visual similarity to inner reproductive organs as well as their metaphor for the end-goal of desire. It seems appropriate then, that this desirable and unattainable cherry belongs to Mary: a woman whose face we never see in the video and whose name recalls the archetype of the sexually unattainable, the Virgin Mary.

Yet the real-life profession of the women handling the nail/cherries, and thus responsible for their transformation, is sex work; Rock Rose and Barbara are erotic fantasy wrestlers hired by Rottenberg through the internet. Thus, Rottenberg casts fetish workers as labouring bodies to clip long red phallic fingernails (gleefully inciting the viewer’s castration complex) and aggressively pound symbol of femininity into a lump of clay, before metaphorically transforming it into a bloody red, juicy cherry. In provoking and conflating symbolic meaning, Rottenberg evokes the uncanny which, Freud argues, occurs when: “a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on.” To use Rottenberg’s words, this process: “dissect(s) the clichés (of femininity), turning them inside out and showing them as they really are – creepy and uncanny.” Furthermore, in rendering symbols of femininity uncanny, I argue, Rottenberg enacts an expansive feminist parody of the markers of femininity as well as the fetishisation of women’s bodies. The bodies of Rock Rose and Barbara have been hired by Rottenberg, and thus their display does not exert the same transgressive

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241 For example, consider the phrase “popping the cherry.”

242 All three characters’ names relate to biblical references; Saint Barbara, who was martyred and had her breasts sliced off, and the Rose of Sharon (in Song of Solomon 2:1) which some biblical commentators interpret as symbolising Christ (but this is contested). Roses, of course, are a flower associated with romance and thus chaste female sexuality.


244 Rottenberg, “Long Hair Lover.”
agency as, for instance, Bobby Baker’s might. Further, Rottenberg’s camera is complicit in fetishistic tropes of representation that exaggerate Rock Rose and Barbara’s everyday professions as sex workers. This dialectic of female liberation and exploitation, as well as its implications for Rottenberg’s relationship to feminism, will be the subject of the following section.

**The paradox of parafeminism: A dialectic of complicity and distance**

I’ve always defined myself as a feminist. There is an aspect of misogyny in my work that is a response to the way society in general is. I have to ask myself what it means to be a ‘good’ feminist. If I use people’s bodies and objectify them, then I’m a bad feminist… I keep questioning my own morality.245

Rottenberg claims she is a feminist, but acknowledges her relationship to feminism is complicated by her practice of hiring women’s bodies. The relationship of Rottenberg’s work to feminism is thus centred upon notions of exploitation, in both her casting process and employment of fetishistic tropes of representation. This conflict is integral to the work’s meaning; as Rottenberg has said: “In my videos, I cast women with extreme physical abilities in roles that both exploit and empower them by focusing on their real extraordinary talents”.246 Critics have responded to the work in a number of ways, with some arguing it “empowers” women and others labelling Rottenberg’s practice as “post-feminist.”247 Others still have praised Rottenberg’s work for utilising humour to tackle serious themes: in citing *Dough* as “Best of 2006 – Art” New York Magazine described Rottenberg’s practice as “art about gender politics that doesn’t feel heavy-handed,”248 while Chris Bors wrote in *ArtPapers*: “her theory-laden critique

245 Rottenberg, “Long Hair Lover.”
248 Stevens and Rosenberg, “The Year in Art.”
manages to avoid the pitfall of didacticism.” According to Jones, this debate about feminism forms an integral part of parafeminism, with parafeminist subjectivities themselves often questioning “the meaning, significance, and status of feminist – or parafeminist – visual practice today.” Furthering Jones’ notion of parafeminism as possessing a paradoxical relationship to feminism itself, in this section I argue that parafeminist practices engage phallocentric modes of representation in order to politicise objectification and desire. Hutcheon has articulated this parodic strategy as a distinctly productive tactic for feminist artists:

To work it must be complicitous with the values it challenges: we have to feel the seduction in order to question it and then to theorize the site of that contradiction. Such feminist uses of postmodern tactics politicize desire in their play with the revealed and the hidden, the offered and the deferred.

That is, parafeminist parody make the viewer complicit “with the values it challenges” in order to politicise desire. Following Hutcheon’s theory, in this section I analyse the affective and critical effects of the cinematic strategies employed in Mary’s Cherries in order to “theorise the site of that contradiction.” Through analysis of Mary’s Cherries, I articulate a parafeminist dialectic of exploitation and empowerment that “bounces” between complicity and distance of fetish and feminism; and in doing so elucidate the way parafeminist parody engages phallocentric modes of spectatorship.

Figs. 25, 26, 27: Mika Rottenberg, Mary’s Cherries (2004), video installation, 3:50 mins.

249 Bors, “Mika Rottenberg,” 41.
250 Jones, Self/Image, 217.
251 Hutcheon, Politics of Postmodernism, 150
Further to the embodied and proximate functions of carnivalesque imagery, *Mary’s Cherries* simultaneously employs distancing strategies of both fetishishistic and parodic modes of representation. Rottenberg’s camera observes the bodies of her performers with an intense and lingering gaze, often through the strategy of close-ups, which appropriates fetishistic modes of representation. Of the close-ups, Rottenberg herself has noted the technical similarity of her videos to pornography:

The film’s cinematic language is rather brutal and, in some ways, it is reminiscent of pornography: in the way the sound is amplified to the different movements of the people, and in the closeness of the camera. But, it’s the brutality that helps you accept this reality.252

Rottenberg’s fetishistic parody is encapsulated by a sequence of three close-ups which occur 3.10 minutes into the video, when Barbara and Rock Rose pedal their cyclopads. The first two close-ups examine the women’s movements as they pedal: first the camera scrutinises Rose’s legs as they pump beneath her pink dress, her ring-laden and manicured hand resting on her thigh. Cutting to the same frame of Barbara’s body, the second close-up of the sequence observes her pedalling, then pans up her fleshy arm. Enclosed in matronly uniforms, these body parts are presented as particularly mundane. The third close-up, however, is not of Mary: instead, Rottenberg’s camera scrutinises the lumpy dollops of stucco that line the walls of the factory’s architecture. As I will demonstrate, this sequence simultaneously empowers and exploits the bodies it displays through its parafeminist parody.

Hsuan L. Hsu argues that Rottenberg’s use of close-ups is empowering: they enable her characters to “negotiate their own versions of erotic signification.”253 Hsu links Rottenberg’s “idealisation of extraordinary bodies” to earlier video artists who enacted a “critique of, and explorations of alternatives to, mass media stereotypes about gender

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253 Hsu, “Mika Rottenberg’s Productive Bodies,” 54.
and body image.” Having traced a lineage for Rottenberg that includes Joan Jonas, Martha Rosler, Dara Birnbaum, and Joan Braderman, Hsu locates Rottenberg’s casting within a feminist celebration of “alternative body images.” He writes: “Whereas Jonas, Rosler, Birnbaum, and Braderman critiqued mainstream television’s images of women, the Internet makes some room for alternative body images that video can incorporate in less oppositional ways.” Thus, Hsu suggests that Rottenberg’s eroticisation of extraordinary bodies generates a critique of mainstream stereotypes about female beauty unique to a post-internet age. Agency is a key factor in this argument, in that Rottenberg celebrates the control her characters have in their self-managed profession: “they are very much in charge,” she says. Ellie Buttrose has argued that in this agency lies the work’s feminist subversion of phallocentric modes of viewing: “Rottenberg is interested in collaborating with exhibitionists in her works; by hiring people who seek an audience, she subverts the traditional power of the viewer’s gaze.” Empowerment, Hsu and Buttrose concur, arises from subversion of the male gaze. Hsu develops this line of enquiry when he argues that the fetishistic gaze of Rottenberg’s camera upon Barbara and Rose’s bodies enacts a “displaced and expanded conception of the fetish” that subverts Freud’s account of fetishism as a phallic substitute to ease the male subject’s fear of castration.

The “displaced” fetish recurs throughout Mary’s Cherries, most evidently in the subversion of the symbolic function of the long red fingernails which, as cited previously, are clipped and pounded into clay. Rottenberg’s light-hearted treatment of this subversion – Artforum reviewer Claire Barliant singled out Mary’s Cherries as a particularly humorous work, describing it as “a rambunctious, absurdist romp involving the manufacturing of maraschino cherries” – suggests that Mary’s Cherries delights

254 Hsu, “Mika Rottenberg’s Productive Bodies,” 51.
255 Ibid., 54.
256 Ibid.
257 Rottenberg, “Mika Rottenberg.”
258 Buttrose, “Mika Rottenberg,” 473.
259 Hsu, “Mika Rottenberg’s Productive Bodies,” 53.
in evoking the castration complex as a pathway to female liberation and solidarity through laughter. In her manifesto essay “Laugh of the Medusa” from 1975, Hélène Cixous analyses this type of women’s laughter through the myth of Medusa, who Freud accuses of symbolising the mother’s castration seen from the “terrorized” view of the male spectator. “She's not deadly,” Cixous writes, “She's beautiful and she's laughing.” From women’s laughter, suggests Cixous, emerges a “stormy” powerful force that can break down the systems of patriarchy. In this tradition, Mary’s Cherries exemplifies the subversive feminist potential of gleefully inciting the castration complex and subverting the phallic function of both fetish symbols and pornographic modes of representation.

Rottenberg’s “displacement” of the fetish emerges as feminist parody of phallocentric pornography in the third close-up of the previously examined sequence. After close-ups of Barbara and Rock Rose’s bodies, Mary’s Cherries presents a close-up of the stucco: implying a resemblance of the lumpy architecture to the dimpled and excessive bodies it contains. However the relationship between Rottenberg’s hired bodies and architecture is dualistic: if she simulates bodies through sculpture, she also treats bodies as sculpture. Rottenberg insists she is a sculptor, and thus she sees her characters “in dimensions, in size, depth, height.” She uses women with extreme physiques because: “they have a lot of body, and the relationship between them and their bodies gets amplified.” However, read through the lens of Hutcheon’s notion of parody as “repetition with critical distance,” the juxtaposition of women’s flesh and stucco walls parodies fetishistic close-ups of women’s bodies, by “repeating” the filmic technique with “difference” of focussing on inanimate objects. Thus, Mary’s Cherries employs pornographic conventions to fetishise the mundane (thighs, walls), and in turn enacts a feminist parody of phallocentric modes of representation. This strategy, therefore, simultaneously empowers and exploits the bodies of Rock Rose and Barbara: a strategy that counters earlier feminist disavowals of fetish.

262 Ibid.
263 Rottenberg, “Simply Fantastic (Realism),” 17.
264 Rottenberg, “Fetishizing the Visual.”
As a parafeminist work of art, then, *Mary’s Cherries* involves a “rethinking” and extension of second wave feminist strategies; that is, a simultaneous proximity to, and distance from, history.\(^{265}\) Certainly Rottenberg’s emphasis on the female labouring bodies in her work – sweating, squeezing, growing and kneading – continues the trajectory of important feminist artists who examined contested notions of women’s labour in the 1970s and 1980s: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Martha Rosler, Suzanne Lacey, Annie Sprinkle, Mary Kelly, and locally, Helen Grace and Jude Adams. Feminist film critic Linda Williams has expanded on the feminist legacy in Rottenberg’s work, marking it is as a “wonderfully new” form of feminist art:

This is feminist art that seeks neither to express the nobility nor the suffering of women who squeeze and are squeezed… Women’s work, we see in this video, is beautiful and oppressive and strange. Though the women work together and squeeze and get squeezed in a strangely isolated, wordless togetherness, the point

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is neither union nor revolt. It is sheer wonder at the strangeness and beauty of the labour itself. This is women’s work, this is women’s time. The elements of Rottenberg’s video are all the things feminist artists and theorists of the seventies and eighties used to find important, only here they are made wonderfully new and strange through the surreal insight of “the squeeze.”

This evocative passage locates Rottenberg’s work within a strong lineage of feminist artists whose practices examine the notion of ‘women’s work’: a history that interweaves positions of celebration, critique, and ambivalence. In a typically parafeminist manner, Mary’s Cherries channels this often contradictory history to present paradoxical strategies of empowerment and exploitation which complicate existing notions of what a feminist artist is in the 21st century.

This chapter has introduced new parafeminist strategies as well as identifying overlaps with the previous chapter, including: the dialectic of proximity through simultaneous strategies of fetishisation, parody, and participation; the employment and subversion of pornographic tropes; and the affectation of eroticism and disgust. More importantly, however, I have identified that contemporary feminist art repurposes the carnivalesque as part of a broader parafeminist visual politics. Firstly, I recognised the continuing existence of carnivalesque elements in contemporary feminist art. However, as I have previously argued, Bakhtin’s theory of carnival is not entirely appropriate for the analysis of feminist video art, so I have incorporated feminist interpretations into my examination, to establish that Mary’s Cherries employs the female grotesque to enact feminist subversive laughter. In doing so, I have recognised that Russo’s emphasis on the hierarchical viewing politics of spectacle has significant implications for the fetishistic tropes of representation used to frame the non-normative (and in real life, sex workers’) bodies in Mary’s Cherries. My primary finding of this chapter is that parafeminist art offsets (or ‘dissects’) the carnivalesque viewing dynamic through distancing strategies: in the case of Mary’s Cherries, through spectacle, the uncanny and fetishistic modes of representation. I propose a reading of Mary’s Cherries as

Linda Williams, “On Squeeze,” in Mika Rottenberg, 188.
displaying a parafeminist dialectic of distance and proximity to the body, and to fetish, that unfolds to reveal an expansive parody. Analysis of this second case study, then, has brought in the element of fetish to both solidify and broaden my reinterpretation of parafeminism: bringing me closer to my aim of developing a conceptual framework that will enable deeper understanding of humour in contemporary feminist art.
CHAPTER 4
Let them eat cake:

The historical vocabulary of feminist performance has stayed with us and almost folded in upon itself in very interesting, very unusual, and often very very, funny ways.  

In her introduction to the panel “Performing Feminisms” at the 2013 LEVEL forum, Catriona Moore argued that many contemporary practices have utilised and “folded in upon itself” the historical strategies of feminist performance to produce “very, very funny” results. In many practices, this strategy of historical revisionism includes, she argued, a performance of feminism itself: “Today I see in a lot of contemporary practice feminism being performed in very funny ways, sometimes being performed badly.”

In this chapter I will develop Moore’s line of enquiry by incorporating the theories of parody and parafeminism thus far examined in this thesis to analyse the trend in contemporary practice of, to use Moore’s words, “performing feminism, and performing it badly.” To do so, I build upon my suggestion from Chapter Two that Hutcheon’s theory of parody, in its inclusion of “critically constructive” strategies of homage or expansion, can incorporate the parafeminist “rethinking” and expansion of second wave feminist methodologies evident in Pickelporno and Mary’s Cherries. Through this framework I will argue that complicated notions of parody are operating within the

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268 Moore, “Introduction: Performing Feminisms.”

269 Ibid.

270 Ibid.

271 Hutcheon, Theory of Parody, 32.

272 Jones, Self/Image, 213.
recent ‘resurgence’ of feminism, which can be seen in the examples of Australian feminist contemporary practice that I will analyse: video and performance work by Brown Council, Catherine Bell and Hotham Street Ladies.

All three artists (or artist collectives) have made work that utilises domestic strategies of food preparation to enact various types of feminist critique and homage: of femininity, women’s work, and the politics and practices of an earlier generation of feminist performance artists that includes Barbara Campbell, Lyndal Jones, Bonita Ely and Joan Grounds. Indeed the feminist strategy of performing with domestic materials to render the female grotesque, shared by the three contemporary artists I have selected for analysis, was developed in the 1970s; notable performances include Bobby Baker’s invitation for audiences to eat life-sized cake versions of her family members in The Edible Family (1976), the Waitresses’ performance of a many-breasted torso waitress The Great Goddess Diana (1978), and Bonita Ely’s cooking demonstration Murray River Punch (1980) in which she served ‘punch’ with ingredients of pollutants in the Murray River.273 The subversive element of these practices relies on the mimesis of a constructed femininity, based on the view that gender is instilled by behaviours regulated by societal norms, predominantly theorised by Joan Rivière,274 Mary Anne Doane,275 and Judith Butler.276 The interjection of food into discourses of gender and performance has allowed feminists to understand the way that systems of labour and value influence the codification and regulation of women’s bodies according to patriarchy,277 as well as to rework models of female desire and pleasure towards inter-

273 This strategy is also evident in photography; see Lee Miller’s surrealist cakes of the 1960s and 1970s.
275 Mary Anne Doane, ‘Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator,” Screen 23.3-4 (1982).
subjective forms of exchange. Thus works by Baker, the Waitresses, Ely, and others, functioned to simultaneously celebrate women’s work and critique the subjection of women through domestic roles, while relishing in the corporeal pleasure of grotesque food behaviours.

By re-presenting these second wave strategies in the 2010s, a new generation of feminist artists possess a “critical distance” to their predecessors and are “repeating with difference” earlier feminist agendas. The work of Brown Council, Bell and the Hotham Street Ladies demonstrates not only the persistence of artists who wish to address gender inequality but also their subtle homage to earlier feminist artists through parafeminist “rethinking” and extension of earlier strategies: thus their presentation of a simultaneous proximity and distance to history that shifts the terrain of feminism towards new dimensions of practice. I suggest that this citational and historicising project of parafeminist practices allows the corporeal preoccupations of live and video art to be restaged: both more proximally and playfully, and at a distance from, the explicit politics of the past.

**The ‘resurgence’ of feminist art**

In the past decade, feminist art has enjoyed renewed interest internationally by curators and writers who insist on global dialogue and acknowledge there is a plurality of histories and feminisms. This ‘resurgence’, as it is often defined, peaked in 2007,

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280 Jones, *Self/Image*, 213. Other local examples of contemporary artists that incorporate cake into their feminist art are: Madeline Kidd’s glossy sculptural and painting arrangements; Heide Holmes’ video *CAKE* (2010); Damp’s *The Damp Pie Chart* (2009); and most pertinently Kalinda Vary and Ebony Gulliver’s recent performance *Food for Thought* (2014) in which they offered to their audience a choice of home-made cakes with satirical names such as: “The Obedient Wife” (crushed nice biscuits, no fillings, just the shell); “The Julie Bishop/Margaret Thatcher Tart” (Zesty lemon tart in flakey pastry case) and “Pussy Riot Tart- Vladimir Putin with cream on his face” (Caution: Contains unpalatable, indigestible elements.)

281 In Europe exhibitions included *It’s Time for Action (There’s No Option). About Feminism* (Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst: Zurich, 2006) and elles@centrepompidou (Centre Pompidou, 2009-11). Australian exhibitions include: *Contemporary Australia: Women* (Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2012); SEXES (Performance Space,
when two blockbuster exhibitions opened in the United States; *Wack: Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles), a historical exhibition curated by Cornelia Butler which examined international feminist art during the period 1965-1980; and *Global Feminisms* (Brooklyn Museum, New York), a transnational exhibition of young artists curated by Maura Reilly.\(^{282}\) In the same year, the coveted international art journals *Frieze* and *Art News* published issues devoted to feminism titled "Feminism" and “Feminist Art: The Next Wave” respectively.\(^{283}\) The impact of this resurgence has largely been enabled through the support of influential institutions: for example the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, through its establishment of the Modern Women’s Fund in 2005, has presented a range of feminist programming including the publication *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art* in 2010, and the symposia *The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts* in 2007 and *Art Institutions and Feminist Politics Now* in 2010.\(^{284}\) Major publishing houses have reprinted and released new anthologies of primary texts on feminist art, including *Art and Feminism* (Phaidon, 2009); *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, (Routledge, 2003); and *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology, 1968-

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Thus, embedded within the discourse of the feminist art ‘resurgence’ is concern over the institutionalisation of its practices and politics.

Such apprehension is evident in Jones’ article “1970/2007: The Return of Feminist Art” (2008), in which she argues that the resurgence of feminism may be related to the “age of terror” we are experiencing in the post 9/11 climate. She writes: “The recuperation of feminism in art discourse and institutions is, in part, about a desire to return to, and take wisdom from, the most successful political movement within the visual arts in the past 50 years.” However, Jones feels “nervous” about the resurgence. She argues:

Recent practices seem to appropriate strategies from earlier feminisms without sustaining the politics these strategies aimed at promoting. And the strategies are replicated either without knowing of the earlier models or by knowingly repeating them, but in new contexts in which they do not have the same political effect.

Moore expresses similar concerns in her concluding statements of “Performing Feminisms,” asking: “Where is the analytic and political purchase of the very potent form of feminist performance as we’ve explored it over the last forty years? Where is it going today? And to perform badly; is that a good way to go?” Moore suggests, however, that repeating earlier strategies in a new context in which, as Jones argues, “they do not have the same political effect,” does open up “interesting possibilities” for practice. This line of enquiry is developed in Moore’s recent essay “Feminist aesthetics, then and now,” in which she suggests that contemporary strategies of

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288 Moore, “Introduction: Performing Feminisms.”


290 Moore, “Introduction: Performing Feminisms.”
historical revisionism are developing a new visual language through which to explore feminine sensibility. She writes:

Then, as now, feminist artists do not feel comfortable with any set formal or stylistic lexicon. Hipster feminism instead cheerfully embroiders, playfully unravels or badly performs the baser depths of feminine sensibility. Maybe this is another case of strategic essentialism, in this case feminist aesthetics, turned inside out and replayed in decadent, camp and provocative form.\(^291\)

The “replaying” of feminist aesthetics, then, while considered ideologically problematic, opens up possibilities for new forms of visual practice.

In her oft-cited essay “Extimacy: A new generation of feminism,” the critic Alexie Glass diverges from such readings by arguing for an historical revision of feminist aesthetics as a potential site for bringing feminist politics back into cultural consciousness. She writes: “In recent practice feminism is often claimed as a site of discourse which has become actively recharged via appropriations of feminist visual language.”\(^292\) This “recharging” of feminism through artistic appropriation simultaneously gives weight to history, as Bree Richards argues in her article “Doing, Being, Performing.” Reviewing the ‘resurgence’ of performance art by women artists in Australia, through the insights of Glass, Richards argues: “Their collective sidelong glances, quotations, nods, random encounters or riffs on the multi-layered histories of the body and the performative in art history gives presence to the past, reimagining the terrain for new parallels.”\(^293\) Richards further notes that the shift in practice has been enabled by practical considerations, namely: “With greater access to early performance documentation, there is now a history of these kinds of works for artists to respond to.”\(^294\)

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\(^{291}\) Catriona Moore, “The more things change... feminist aesthetics, then and now,” *Artlink*, 33.3 (2013): 24.


\(^{294}\) Ibid.
documentation of iconic performance works from the 1960s and 1970s, making them accessible to audiences who couldn’t ‘be there’ to experience the original live event. Reflecting on the generational rift that has erupted in performance art discourse, Jones has argued that viewing performance documentation should hold the same value as ‘being there’ for the original live experience. In her article “Presence” in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation (1997), Jones posits, and deliberately limits, her analysis of a selection of performance artworks “as documentary traces, and this goes even for those events I also experienced ‘in the flesh’; I view these, through the memory screen, and they become documentary in their own right.”295 Anne Marsh has also furthered this point by articulating that “now artists are creating actions to be documented.”296 Such insights necessitate this chapter’s divergence from the confines of video art, as utilised in the previous chapters, to examine live performance and its documentation; because it is within the context of this resurgence, and its production of historically appropriate strategies, that Jones developed her framework of parafeminism. Therefore, in the remainder of this chapter, I will advance an analysis of contemporary Australian practices which appropriate earlier feminist strategies, in order to suggest that contemporary feminist art can be read as a parody of earlier feminisms because it operates according to a dialectic of proximity and distance to history. In doing so, I will ask: what is the political purchase of this parody? Is it purely aesthetic, as per the arguments of Jones and Moore, or does it belie a return to feminist politics, as argued by Glass and Richards?


In her articulation of “performing feminism badly,” Moore cites the example of endurance performance video *Work in Progress: Dawn to Dusk* (2010) by Sydney collective Brown Council (Frances Barrett, Kate Blackmore, Kelly Doley and Diana Smith) in which the four artists, dressed in blue overalls, silently hammer a wooden post into the ground for 16 hours. As Pip Wallis has argued: “With tongue-in-cheek humour, Dawn to Dusk references performance art and its intertwined history with feminist art of the 1960s and 70s.” Like many of Brown Council’s works, *Work in Progress: Dawn to Dusk* cites the aesthetics of feminist art history through their employment of durational performance, but filters their homage through an added layer of absurdity: thereby embodying the characteristics of parafeminist parody.

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298 Anne Marsh analyses Brown Council’s work as using “humour as an interventionist strategy.” Further, Marsh sees humour as “a particularly Australian characteristic, one that really deserves to be analysed in further detail.” Marsh, *Performance Ritual Document*, 245, 247.
Early video works of Brown Council employ strategies of comic exaggeration, including exaggeration of time through durational performances, to create presentations of their bodies that cycle through the absurd towards the grotesque. *Milkshake* (2007), originally presented as a performance but now existing primarily as performative video, appropriates the strategy of durational performance made popular during the 1970s to parody stereotypical representations of women in popular culture. It depicts the artists, who are wearing home-made skeleton suits, drinking one litre of milk before attempting an energetic choreographed dance routine to Kelis’ song “Milkshakes.” Similarly, “Runaway” (2008) enacts a parodic feminist critique of popular culture; filmed against a black backdrop, the video presents a female figure (played by all four artists interchangeably) running towards the camera in slow motion. The dramatic soundtrack builds tension, lights flash onto her face and body, until suddenly the female figure is squirted with (fake) blood and climactically rips off her singlet. Underneath is exposed a caricature of the glistening body we expect to see in such Hollywood scenes: a tan coloured t-shirt with big breasts drawn in black marker. In 2009, Brown Council undertook an intensive period of research into the form and functions of comedy, developing three works: a four hour live performance, *A Comedy* (2010), in which the artists interrogate power dynamics in performance by placing themselves at the mercy of the audience; *Big Show* (2009), a video which documents the artists’ durational performance of clichéd comedic gags; and *One Hour Laugh* (2009), in which the artists’ film themselves laughing continuously for one hour. In all three works, the members of Brown Council sport a costume of dunce hats and bibs hand-crafted from primary-coloured paper.

This DIY style of costume reappears throughout Brown Council’s early works, reminiscent of the low-grade quality of construction celebrated in *Mary’s Cherries* as well as the reappropriation of filmic techniques from ‘low’ popular culture and the use of deliberately ‘bad jokes’ in *Pickelporno*. Taking pleasure in sabotaging the markers of quality and taste that uphold discourses of ‘high art’, these Brown Council works revel

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in “the queer art of failure”: theorised by Halberstam as the subversive potential that lies in resisting markers of ‘success’ in a capitalist and patriarchal society. Failure is a strategy that circulates through the work, often to grotesquely comic potential: the *Milkshakes* performance is disrupted by bumps and cramps, the jokes told in *A Comedy* are often terribly bad, and the endurance tasks set in *Big Show* result in retching, pain, and boredom. In their emphasis on bodily functions, Brown Council represent Bakhtin’s ‘grotesque realism’ and use laughter, to use Russo’s words, as a strategy to “expose and subvert the impasse of femininity.” However they do so through a parafeminist lens: a blend of self-conscious failure and irony that results in a parody of comedy itself.

![Fig. 30: Brown Council, *One Hour Laugh* (2009), HD video, 60 mins.](image)

Cringe-worthy comedy reappears in more recent Brown Council works, which have seen them turn their attention to the legacy of durational performance. These works investigate the idea of ‘the artist’ as well as the construction of performance and art histories, including, of course, earlier forms of feminism. This interest is exemplified in works such as *Dance Work* (2009) in which Brown Council hired a dancer to perform a striptease at an exhibition opening; *Photo with the Artist* (2011) in which the public were invited to buy a photo of themselves with the four artists outside the Museum of

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300 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*.

301 Russo, *Female Grotesque*, 73.
Contemporary Art; *Performance Fee* (2012) in which the collective sat blindfolded in Queensland’s Gallery of Modern Art and sold kisses for $2; and the ongoing project, *This is Barbara Cleveland* (2013) in which the artists honor the life and work of a fictive 1970s Australian performance artist named Barbara Cleveland.\(^{302}\) A specifically feminist history was investigated in the live performance *Mass Action: 137 Cakes in 90 Hours* (2012), a 90 hour “bake off” undertaken by the artists in the headquarters of Sydney’s Country Women’s Association (CWA). Broadcast on the internet through live video feed and updates by invited bloggers, *Mass Action* saw the artists attempt to cook every recipe in the CWA cookbook without stopping. Thereafter, the artists offered the cakes to a judging panel and held an afternoon tea for CWA members.\(^{303}\)

![Fig. 31: Brown Council, *Mass Action: 137 Cakes in 90 Hours* (2012), promotional image.](image)

\(^{302}\) The video *This is Barbara Cleveland* (2013) is the latest instalment in the project. Note: Brown Council appear to be riffing the popularity of the name “Barbara” in this generation of feminists in the arts: Barbara Campbell, Barbara Hall, Barbara Creed (and, a little later, Barbara Bolt).

Brown Council’s deadpan publicity shot (fig. 30) was a grey-scale image of the collective marching in protest with “Mass Action” placards that appears at once nostalgic and ironic. The way the performance was broadcast and promoted, articulated by critic Laura Brown as “socially designed in its format and dissemination,” contrasts with the pre-internet techniques used in the historical legacies it evokes as well as the durational element of the performance. Within this dialectic of proximity and distance to time, provoking further paradoxes related to durational performance and instantaneous documentation, we can locate the parodic element of Mass Action. Furthermore, in its simultaneous functions of feminist critique and celebration of women’s work, Mass Action exemplifies the broad range of parody articulated by Hutchenon’s definition: including works that mimic, refer or pay homage through their utilisation of irony which “can be playful instead of belittling.” Brown Council’s restaging of earlier strategies of feminism, or to use Moore’s phrase, “performing feminism, and performing it badly,” presents a parafeminist “rethinking” of durational performance and the notion of ‘herstory’ and thus operates as a parody of second wave feminist methodologies. The dialectic between critique and celebration of women’s work that emerges in Mass Action is a critical element of contemporary feminist practice, and will be examined in the remainder of the chapter using further examples of local feminist artists for whom baking is a liberatory and subversive strategy. The examples include two separate performance projects undertaken by Melbourne artists in the last five years which involve the presentation of subversive cakes in female-dominated public spaces. These artworks, I argue, insert the female body “in error” into the domestic sphere to enact a layered feminist parody that simultaneously celebrates and critiques women’s work: thus demonstrating a dialectic of proximity and distance to history as intrinsic to parafeminism.

305 Hutcheon, Theory of Parody, 32.
306 Moore, “Introduction: Performing Feminisms.”
307 Jones, Self/Image, 213.
308 The term “herstory” refers to historiography which emphasises the perspective of women. Evolving in the 1960s, the strategy is an attempt to rectify the neglect of female experience in conventional narratives of history.
309 Russo, Female Grotesque, 13.
Catherine Bell: A “rethinking” of earlier feminist strategies

Fig. 32: Catherine Bell, Making A Baby (2003-2007), monthly performance ritual.

The multi-layered feminist parody evident in Brown Council’s Mass Action presents itself in Bell’s ritual performance Making a Baby (2003-2006). Bell is a mid-career video and performance artist whose work is based in personal experience, including her status as a childless woman. Themes of maternal deviance, jealously, and trauma emerge in many of Bell’s performative videos of the mid-2000s, including: This little piggy… fades to pink (2003), a triptych of the artist nursing, shaving, and bathing a piglet; Snow Baby (2003), a triptych of the artist collecting snow, beating it into the shape of a baby, and washing (and in turn destroying) the snow baby; Soap, Slip, Splash

310 Bell’s work prior to this period was more concerned with sexual fetish, violence and desire presented with, as Timothy Morrell writes, “sexual puns” and “a dry, cool, sense of humour.” See Timothy Morrell, “Hook, Line, Sinker,” Eyeline 29 (2002): 14-16. Morrell’s article points to the use of humour as a distancing strategy and thus suggests the location of Bell’s early work in parafeminism.
(2006), in which the artist shaves the pregnant belly of a friend in her bathroom; and later, in documentary-type lens based works, such as the video *Gorilla Baby* (2009) that depicts a baby sitting with numerous wind up gorilla toys; and the photographic series *Mum’s the Word* (2011) which captures, through surveillance camera, instances of African-American nannies caring for Caucasian white children in New York City. *Making a Baby* is similarly documented through still photography and video, but exists primarily as performance art.

The premise of *Making a Baby* (2003-2006) is that every menstrual cycle for three years, Bell performed a nine-hour cake baking and icing process using a Wilton aluminium cake tin called the 'Premmie' to make a life-sized cake reminiscent of a cabbage patch baby. Dolls are one of the examples cited by Freud of things that evoke the “uncanny,” and thus their rendering through the act of baking, itself the quintessential symbol of femininity, exemplifies Rottenberg’s strategy of representing femininity as “creepy and uncanny.” In doing so, Bell critiques the subjection of women through their association with domesticity and maternity; as Bell herself has noted: “The production of food is traditionally the responsibility of women whose status is often determined through the performance of this domestic role.” However, Bell’s baby cakes are labour intensive and their creation, the artist argues, “demands commitment, care, patience and devotion – attributes that I consider essential to the rearing of children.” She writes: “I want the viewer to recognize that the cake is handmade, that it is lovingly laboured over.” The meticulous detail in Bell’s cake decoration is integral to the works meaning, celebrating traditional forms of women’s

311 For analysis of these works see Melissa Miles, “Catherine Bell: Cooking Up Crimes and Maternal Misdemeanours,” *Eyeline* 65 (2008): 46-48

312 A citational reference to feminist art collective the Guerrilla Girls, who formed in 1985.


314 Freud, “The Uncanny,” 635.

315 Rottenberg, “Long Hair Lover.”

316 Bell, “Cooking Up Crimes.”

317 Ibid.

318 Ibid.
work and their potential as artistic strategies. Thus, in *Making A Baby*, parody operates through a simultaneous critique and homage of second wave feminist strategies.


There were, however, further stages of Bell’s project. Each month, Bell invited pregnant women and childless women to cut and eat the baby cakes, whose sponge was usually dyed red, in private participatory performances. According to Bell, these performances encouraged participants’ expression of “individual attitudes, opinions and suppressed anxieties about motherhood or childlessness.” However, as argued by Jordana Aamalia: “for a mother-to-be to devour this ‘infant’ body there must be an acknowledgement of an inverse line of maternal exchange, an acceptance of the potential for deviance within the maternal.” In acting out this visually abhorrent situation of slicing and consuming baby cakes, Bell questions the expectation of women to embrace both domesticity and maternal instinct; and thus performs the female body “in error.” In its participatory presentation, however, Bell opens up a carnivalesque space which echoes the Middle Ages tradition, cited by Bakhtin, of female gatherings at the bedside of a woman recovering from childbirth, which were “marked by abundant

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319 Bell, “Cooking Up Crimes.”


food and frank conversation, at which social conventions were dropped.” In these gatherings: “the acts of procreation and eating predetermined the role of the material bodily lower stratum and the theme of these conversations.” In this tradition, argues Jo Anna Isaak, the spirit of carnivalesque laughter was “kept alive primarily by small groups of women.” The carnivalesque dynamic of the work, however, was transformed into a spectatorial mode of viewing in 2007, when Making a Baby developed into the “stealth intervention” performance Baby Drop.

Fig. 34: Catherine Bell, Baby Drop, (Baby Cake no. 48, July 2007) (2007), Delivered to Mothers' Room, Caulfield Plaza, Melbourne.

This new series of performances was spurred by practical considerations described by Bell as: “The regularity of this monthly ritual made it difficult to find participants and I

322 Bakhtin, 105.
323 Bakhtin, 105.
324 Isaak, Revolutionary Power, 17.
started to feel guilty about the cakes proliferating in my bedroom and refrigeration." It involved Bell abandoning the cakes in various sites including in an open cardboard box at Dandenong Hospital and on baby-change tables in public Mother’s rooms in Ikea, Caulfield Plaza, Northcote Plaza. In this context, the cakes were put on display for unsuspecting members of the public to encounter. The emphasis on public display in *Baby Drop* locates the work in Russo’s spectatorial terms of the female grotesque: as bodies which become “unruly” when “set loose in public.” The distanced nature of this performance, in which the artist literally distances herself from the object by abandoning it, reworks earlier feminist art strategies of the female grotesque to present the explicitly parafeminist version articulated in Chapter Three. As I will discuss in the next section, this reworking of the past can be understood as part of the parafeminist dialectic of proximity and distance to feminist history.

**The Hotham Street Ladies: Coming to terms with the weight of the past**

![Fig. 35: Hotham Street Ladies, *At Home with the Hotham Street Ladies* (2013), installation in the foyer of Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, Melbourne.](image)

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326 Bell, “Cooking Up Crimes.”
327 This particular “drop” responded to a highly publicised media story in which a woman left her newborn daughter in a cardboard box outside the Dandenong Hospital on Mother's Day 2007. Bell, “Cooking up Crimes.”
328 Aamalia argues that as the public encounter only exists in Bell’s imagination, her artistic strategy is based on “suppositions.” Aamalia, “Mad, Bad Mothers,” 74.
329 Russo, *Female Grotesque*, 56.
As articulated through analysis of Bell’s and Brown Council’s work, parafeminist parody can involve a dialectic of proximity and distance: to the body, through the parafeminist grotesque; and to history, through citation and homage. Both elements of parafeminist parody, however, operate in the work of The Hotham Street Ladies (HSL): Cassandra Chilton, Molly O’Shaughnessy, Sarah Parkes, Caroline Price and Lyndal Walker. The collective, all of whom lived at one time in a Melbourne share house in Hotham Street in Collingwood, cite their inspiration as “groups such as mother’s auxiliaries and the Country Women’s Association. They also come together out of necessity to make things for the enjoyment of their community and for the enrichment of girly chat.”

HSL pay homage to women’s collective of the past through their titling as “ladies,” their celebration of female friendship, and the employment of traditional domestic activities of baking, cake decorating and craft. However, HSL’s practice exploits the grotesque elements of food and share-household living to present incongruities between ideals of femininity, as often depicted in the women’s groups cited, and the Ladies’ lived experience as women today.

HSL’s first collective effort was The HSL Contribution Cookery Book (2004), a community recipe book, after which their work has traversed a broad range of materials and contexts including: Hotham Street House Cake (2008), a cake creation of the original sharehouse exhibited in a gallery; Frosting, (2008–), an ongoing series of street art rendered in icing; Green Bin (2011), an oversized public sculpture of a recycling bin; and their most ambitious project to date, At Home with the Hotham Street Ladies (2013), an installation of two comically messy domestic living spaces meticulously crafted through cake decoration that transformed the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia foyer. HSL’s representation of the abject – food, mess, and bodily functions – through ‘low’ techniques of craft usually aligned with the feminine, revels in the subversive marginal space described by Russo as the “female grotesque.”

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331 This latter artwork has thrust the collective into public consciousness; however this chapter provides the first scholarly analysis of their work.
332 Russo, Female Grotesque.
For three years in a row, from 2009-2012, HSL submitted absurd entries to the Royal Melbourne Show Cake Decorating competition. Their first effort was *Pizza Cake* (2009): a crude cake creation that depicted two pizza boxes emblazoned with a HSL emblem as well as half eaten crusts, an ashtray, and a remote control. They didn’t win, but the following year the collective offered *Miss Havisham Cake* (2010) for the contest: a destroyed three tiered wedding cake which included fake mice scampering throughout detritus of broken columns and missing plastic groom that was inspired by the unhinged female character in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. Much to the artists’ amusement, the second cake was disqualified for being “in bad taste.” The judges’ comments read: “Be aware that the exhibit is in bad taste. You are presenting something that is food based and should be pleasing to the eye. A nice idea but not suited for a major competition.” In 2011, HSL presented *Amy Varden* (2011), a cake which depicted the recently deceased pop singer Amy Winehouse.

![Fig. 36: Hotham Street Ladies, Miss Havisham Cake (2010), entered in 2010 Royal Melbourne Show cake contest.](image)

333 The Hotham Street Ladies website.

HSL’s cake contest performance enacts parody on a number of levels: it mocks the notion of competition based on women’s domestic prowess through presentation of crude imagery in a medium that, according to the judges, “should be pleasing to the eye.”335 The artists delight in their failure to confirm to prescribed gender roles and thus present the female body, to use Russo’s words, “in error.”336 At the same time, however, the cakes are meticulously detailed and demonstrate enormous technical skill: suggesting a sincere celebration of the women’s work displayed at the Royal Melbourne Show. Further, they pay tribute to female characters and artists, thus remixing and presenting them in divergent cultural contexts. Therefore a dialectic of critique and homage operates within HSL’s parodic performance, demonstrating Hutcheon’s argument that parody can include “critically constructive” strategies of homage.337 The cakes demonstrate Simon Dentith’s argument, previously examined in Chapter Two with reference to Pickelporno, that within parody “the polemic can work both ways: towards the imitated text or towards the ‘world.’”338 Thus, to use Dentith’s logic, HSL draw on the authority of precursor texts (the cake contest, the novel, the singer) to attack and satirise elements of the broader ‘world’ (gender stereotypes).339

In 2013, HSL were commissioned to make a new work for the feminist group exhibition I curated, entitled Backflip. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the Ladies responded to my brief with You Beaut (2013): an installation of lollies and cake frosting in the Margaret Lawrence Gallery toilets that depicted a giant uterus spurting menstrual blood. I began with this artwork to open up questions about humour in contemporary feminist art and the associated strategies of parody and historical homage, and I asked more specifically what kinds of conclusions can be drawn when artists render abject female bodily fluid in a medium usually reserved for domestic pleasantries. From the outset, HSL’s presentation of menstrual blood as feminist subject matter demonstrates the continued constraints and expectations that surround women’s bodies. However, it

335 Undecipherable author, “Royal Melbourne Show.”
336 Russo, Female Grotesque, 13.
337 Hutcheon, Theory of Parody, 32.
338 Dentith, Parody, 17.
339 Ibid.
further recalls the centrality of this subject matter in feminist exhibitions of the
1970s. The Ladies’ rendering of female bodily fluid through cake decoration (itself a
parody of another second wave methodology) exaggerates the work’s ‘feminism’ to the
point of exaggerated cliché. Through the insights developed in this thesis, I propose that
You Beaut parodies the very notion of a feminist exhibition: it presents a ‘bad joke’ that
parodies the predictability of feminist art conventions as well as their continued
relevance after forty years. It revels in menstrual blood, parodies (both in the sense of
critique and celebration) women’s work, and delights in the viewer’s shock; and in

340 For example the Feminist Art Program’s iconic exhibition Womanhouse (1972) which
included Judy Chicago’s installation Menstruation Bathroom.
doing so, laughs at how stereotypical this performance is. At its critical peak, this multilayered parody asks of feminism: how far have we really come? Thus, You Beaut instantiates Hutcheon’s claim that parody is: “one of the ways in which modern artists have managed to come to terms with the weight of the past.”

The work of Brown Council, Bell, and the Hotham Street Ladies, as well as Rottenberg and Rist, presents a parodic inversion of the Bad Girls exhibition, and its broader phenomenon, by including homage as a central element of their subversive feminist humour. The “critical distance” that enables parody, Hutcheon suggests, is usually presented through irony. Later, she adds: “Irony functions, therefore, as both antiphrasis and as an evaluative strategy.” Therein, I read contemporary feminist art as a parody of earlier forms of feminism, with the “critical distance” between the text being parodied and the new, incorporating, work signalled by an irony that is both critical and evaluative. To answer the questions posed by Moore, Jones, Glass and Richards, I argue that the parafeminist reworking of the past has developed a sophisticated understanding of the political purchase of historical and physical context that has important implications for both aesthetics and politics. Revisionist parody, I argue, is a strategy for feminist artists to pay homage to the triumphs of their predecessors as well as to articulate their position within the ongoing project of producing a feminist art history. In doing so, this chapter has successfully demonstrated that the conceptual framework of parafeminist parody, as developed in this thesis, can be readily applied to a range of contemporary feminist practices including performance art. The pleasure produced in such parafeminist practices demonstrates the value of parafeminism to a new generation of feminist artists, enabling them to assess both the gains and losses of their foremothers and, in doing so, negotiate new possibilities for feminist practices and ideology.

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341 Hutcheon, Theory of Parody, 29.
342 Tellingly, Mika Rottenberg was included in the “Bad Girls” section of Heartney et. al., The Reckoning.
343 Hutcheon, Theory of Parody, 53. My emphasis.
CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to develop a conceptual framework through which to read humour in contemporary feminist art. It achieved this aim by analysing humorous elements of the selected case studies through writings from Freud, affect theory and corporeal semiotics, and by incorporating into its analysis developments in feminist practice and ideology that have occurred since the most recent scholarly investigation, Jo Anna Isaak’s *Feminism and Contemporary Art* (1996). Drawing upon Jones’ concept of parafeminism, which I reworked through Hutcheon’s theory of parody, the thesis developed a conceptual framework of parafeminist parody to account for the parodic nature of contemporary practice.

The first chapter reviewed the current state of literature concerning humour in feminist art, through which it identified the 1980s as a key moment in theoretical discourse on the topic and, furthermore, Jo Anna Isaak’s scholarship as the most comprehensive literature available. In that chapter I also examined the theoretical basis of Isaak’s study and argued that her reliance on Bakthin’s study of carnival laughter, which critics contemporaneously argued both strengthened the patriarchal status quo and was underdeveloped in its notion of the female grotesque, limits its application to feminist art. Further, I argued that the exclusion of video in Isaak’s theory is unable to account for recent developments in practice. Finally, I proposed that contemporary feminist artists currently operate in conditions vastly different from those analysed by Isaak in the 1990s, and that these conditions affect the forms of humour employed by feminist artists. That is, feminist artists working during the 1980s responded to their ‘post-feminist’ climate by employing strategies of humour that relied on reversal or critique. Contemporary feminist artists, however, operate within a ‘resurgence’ of institutional interest in feminism and thus employ parafeminist strategies of revision, homage, and, as I argue in the fourth chapter, historical parody. In summary, the first chapter demonstrates the gap in scholarship that addresses contemporary feminist art through the lens of humour. Further, it introduces recent developments in practice and ideology that need to be incorporated in order to update Isaak’s framework.
Chapter Two extends Jones’ notion of parafeminism through the analysis of an early video artwork by Rist, whose work Jones also used when developing her theory. My choice of *Pickelporno* (1992) strategically presents an analysis of a previously neglected work but also proposes a chronological overlap between the publication of Isaak’s book in 1996 and the strand of parafeminist practise examined in the thesis. Taking as a starting point a parenthetical comment by Jones, that *Pickelporno* presents a parodic moment in its synesthetic visualisation of the “heat” of desire, Chapter Two argues that *Pickelporno* presents an inter-subjective feminist eroticism that, when combined with Rist’s parody of phallocentric pornography, destabilises binary modes of spectatorship as well as the patriarchal system that upholds them. In doing so, it suggests that the dialectic of proximity and distance which creates pleasure for readers of parody operates within, and is encouraged by, parafeminist practices. Although pornography debates do not rage as loudly as they did in the early 1990s when Rist created *Pickelporno*, the analytic tools developed in this chapter have significant implications for analysis of work by feminist artists today who continue to create parodic visualisations of eroticism that, I argue, also present a parafeminist visual politic. One recent Australian example is Deborah Kelly’s video *Beastliness* (2011): a fast-paced animation which, like *Pickelporno*, takes formal cues from the visual language of MTV, and presents an orgiastic, queer, interspecies dance of female forms before building up to a joyous orgasm in an embodied and parodic presentation of feminist eroticism. The conceptual framework developed in this chapter could prove useful for a further study of the relationship between contemporary feminism, humour, eroticism, and animals as it emerges in the practice of Deborah Kelly, as well as other international artists including Mithu Sen, Tejal Shah and Melanie Bonajo. Further study of the ‘bad joke,’ in Rist’s work as well as a recurring strategy in contemporary art, is also recommended.

Chapter Three furthered the discussion of parody and parafeminism developed in Chapter Two by presenting a contemporary artwork that presents carnivalesque imagery: Rottenberg’s *Mary’s Cherries* (2004). Numerous areas of recommended further analysis of *Mary’s Cherries* were highlighted in the chapter, however many could also be applied to Rottenberg’s practice more broadly as significant scholarship
remains to be undertaken. My selection of Mary’s Cherries as case study provided an opportunity to incorporate feminist interpretations of carnival theory that were neglected in Isaak’s book Feminism and Contemporary Art. Revisiting Russo’s The Female Grotesque, I recognised that Russo’s emphasis on the hierarchical viewing politics of spectacle could be considered one of many distancing strategies used by parafeminist artists, such as Rottenberg, to offset the embodied mode of viewing produced by carnivalesque imagery. Thus I repurposed the carnivalesque to develop my interpretation of parafeminism as involving a dialectic of distance and proximity, both to the body and to fetish, that unfolds in Mary’s Cherries to reveal an expansive parody of normative bodies, femininity, fetishistic modes of representation, and feminism. These findings suggest a significant shift has occurred from the earlier feminist employment of carnivalesque: analyses of which would be an important area for further study in relation to contemporary feminist artists such as Alex Bag, Tamy Bel-Tor, Jenny Saville, Janine Antoni and Stanya Kahn, among many others.

Chapter Four, a significantly shorter study, synthesises conceptual threads that emerged in the two major case studies through the analysis of performance work by three Australian artists and collectives that sparked my initial interest in the research topic: Brown Council, Catherine Bell and Hotham Street Ladies. By returning to Australian material after examining international case studies, I located this work in a transnational context of parafeminist parody to suggest the importance of its further study. The chapter began by interrogating Catriona Moore’s claim that a number of contemporary artists are “performing feminism… badly” to humorous ends344 in relation to the current “resurgence” of feminism. It examined the widespread practice of feminist historical appropriation through the narrow focus of artists who utilise domestic strategies of baking and cake decorating to render the female grotesque. In doing so, the thesis continued to repurpose the carnivalesque, and further expand Jones’ framework of parafeminism in relation to historical citation, to argue that contemporary feminist art could be read as a parody of earlier feminisms: a reading which enables a more sophisticated understanding of historical and physical context. Further studies of the pleasure produced by such citational practices are recommended as they would, I

344 Moore, “Introduction: Performing Feminisms.”
suggest, enable more positive inter-generational relationships. Recent critical interest in more direct forms of historical appropriation by artists that literally re-enact or re-perform artworks could also be interpreted through the framework I have developed, including the work of Australian feminist artists Roberta Rich, Natalya Hughes and Alex Martinis Roe,345 among others. More generally, however, there is much to be done to address the significant gap of scholarship on feminist art in this country.346

In these four chapters, I articulate the functions and effects of a new kind of feminist parody that has emerged in the last twenty years. This form of parody is multi-layered and paradoxical: artists are restaging the corporeal preoccupations of the past but ‘dissecting’ them through distanced representation, see-sawing between complicity and rejection of phallocentric forms of representation, and simultaneously embracing failure while self-consciously aligning themselves with feminist histories. Characterised by my thesis as ‘parafeminist parody,’ this new type of practice moves beyond earlier feminist strategies of reversal and critique and, in turn, beyond the grasp of semiotic and psychoanalytic theory negotiated in Isaak’s framework of humour in feminist art. The recurrence of ‘parafeminist parody’ in contemporary practice, and its neglect in scholarship, requires new frameworks of analysis to be developed.

In this endeavour, my thesis developed an analytical framework of humour in contemporary feminist art by extending Jones’ concept of parafeminism through Hutcheon’s theory of parody. This approach articulated a discerning feature of parafeminism that was not fully expressed in Jones’s original account, which I elucidated from the two contradictory etymological meanings of parafeminism’s prefix “para”: “beside” and “counter.” Reading these meanings as they pertain to parody, I

345 Alex Martinis Roe, Collective Difference: Re-presentation as Feminist Practice, Ph.D. diss., (Melbourne: Monash University, 2010). Roe posits her series of re-enactment and citational works as developing a specifically feminist genealogy; mimetic language as feminine and the contemporary relationship between documentation and live works.

346 Despite the abundance of individual articles, theses, and exhibitions about Australian feminist art, the most comprehensive book on the topic remains Dissonances, published in 1994. Recently an ARC application to write an up-to-date overview of Australian feminist art was submitted, and denied.
argued that the pleasure of viewing parafeminist practices arises not only from the humorous elements they often possess, but also from the viewer’s engagement in a see-sawing dialectic of complicity and distance: to and from the body, fetish, and earlier forms of feminism. Accounting for recurring strategies of feminist homage and citation, as well as the humorous effects they can elicit, my reworking of Jones’ concept of parafeminism through the framework of parody identifies parafeminism as a valuable critical framework for contemporary art. However, further work remains to be done. Future studies of Jones’ concept of parafeminism would do well to address the conflicts that arise from using methodology that goes beyond identity politics in relation to artworks that unavoidably present identified bodies: for example, Jones’ argument that “identify is not a ‘position’ based on biological anatomy or cultural experience”\(^{347}\) has made it difficult to position the Caucasian bodies in this thesis, whose dominance potentially represents whiteness as the overriding norm. I also recommend further study of the iconic feminist works cited by parafeminist practices; especially in the context of Australia, whose history of feminist art remains to be written through the lens of humour.\(^{348}\) Finally, although this thesis has applied the concept of parafeminism to a wider range of artworks than initially considered by Jones, I suggest it is a greater phenomenon, which encompasses a much broader reach of practices than could be accommodated within the scope of a Masters thesis, and deserves further attention.

The scarce scholarly attention paid to the strategy of humour in feminist art belies assumptions that operate in the reading, curating and analysis of feminist art and point to broader societal problems concerning the way women’s voices are often misheard or silenced. In developing a conceptual framework through which curators and scholars can read humour in contemporary feminist art, this thesis has aimed to expand scholarly understanding and improve recognition of the public and critical consciousness at work. Therefore, in my thesis, I offer a parafeminist parody of existing feminist art history methodologies: simultaneously paying homage to my predecessors and offering a critique of the way feminist history has previously been written.


\(^{348}\) Such an account could include the work of Vivienne Binns, Jude Adams, Bonita Ely, Helen Grace, Destiny Deacon, Tracey Moffatt, Julie Rrap, VNX Matrix, Linda Sproul, The Twilight Girls, among many others.
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**Discography**


