Art & Activism in the Age of the 'Obesity Epidemic'

by

Pamela Grombacher

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Department of Art and Design

University of Alberta

Abstract

This thesis considers three contemporary artworks that open up new possibilities for size acceptance activism, a political movement that arose in the late 1960s to combat fat stigma and weight-based discrimination. Fatness is vilified in many parts of the world as an unhealthy, unattractive, and, most significantly, immoral embodiment. This is due, in part, to "healthism," or the moralization of health, and to the perceived controllability of body size. In cultures where health is viewed as a moral obligation and size is viewed as a personal choice, fat people are discriminated against for supposedly choosing to be unhealthy. Fat stigma has worsened in the wake of the "obesity epidemic," the alarmist rhetoric of which frames fatness as a lurking and deadly contagion that threatens to destroy public health. There are those within the size acceptance movement, however, who question the legitimacy of this "epidemic" as a true health crisis and suggest that it is instead a moral panic that reflects cultural anxieties about personal accountability. As politicians, medical practitioners and diet industrialists wage a "War on Obesity" to eradicate fatness and thus rid society of this alleged scourge, size acceptance activists resist weight-based discrimination by arguing that stigma, rather than fat, is the true enemy to be conquered.

I suggest new possibilities for resistance by analyzing artworks that subvert hegemonic notions of fat in novel and nuanced ways. Specifically, I explore how Rachel Herrick's ongoing multimedia project *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies* performs fat drag, Kimberly Dark's narrative performances *Big People on the Airplane* and *Here's Looking at You* demonstrate the subversive potential of visuality, and Jenny Saville's photographic series *Closed Contact* suggests the productive value of transformative violence. I situate these analyses within the burgeoning academic discipline of fat studies, which is a politically-motivated scholarly field

that closely aligns with size acceptance activism in its effort to develop a discourse that challenges that of the "obesity epidemic." Academics within this field study many forms of visual culture because representations of fatness, as a (hyper)visible stigma, carry significant political gravitas. I in turn focus on the visual arts because artistic considerations of fatness can function as alternative sources of knowledge production, as means of questioning and critiquing social issues, and as instruments of activism. That is, art has the potential not only to subvert hegemonic conceptions of fat, but may reveal such conceptions as oppressive social constructions and actively work to undermine them.

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Helen Vallianatos and Kristin Rodier have also played important roles in the development of this thesis. Helen introduced me to fat studies literature when I was enrolled in her graduate anthropology seminar, Engendering Food, Body & Health, in early 2012. Her interest in critical perspectives on body weight led to my own fascination with this topic and

ultimately set me on the path for this research. Kristin Rodier invited me to audit her undergraduate philosophy class, Resistance and Embodiment: Fat Politics, which was the first class to focus exclusively on fat studies at the University of Alberta. Kristin deepened my understanding of and complicated my perspective on issues of size with her thoughtful lectures and willingness to discuss research, both hers and my own.

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Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

Duane Hanson's *Woman Eating*

I must have been standing in front of Nam June Paik's dizzying video installation *Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii* for quite a while – I was transfixed by its flashing neon lights and fragmented film clips, and at least two groups of school children had crowded around me and then dispersed, moving on with their tours of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's contemporary art wing. I eventually tore myself away, and as I turned towards the rest of the collection, a rather peculiar sculpture on the far end of the exhibition space caught my eye. From a distance I could see that it was of a woman sitting at a table, but as I drew nearer, it became clear that this was a fat and seemingly working class woman eating alone at what appeared to be a dingy diner: the fabric of her dress was cheaply-made, her shoes were tattered and scuffed, and the shabby, heavily-stained tabletop had rough, worn edges (1.1). The dining space featured a glass bottle of Sprite, a paper napkin smudged with chocolate sauce, an ice cream sundae dish that had been scraped clean, an unused ashtray, a tin can of salted peanuts, an unopened tabloid featuring a very young-looking Dolly Parton, and a ragged grocery bag filled with spaghetti noodles and dog food (1.2). Curious, I walked over to the work's label and learned that it was Duane Hanson's *Woman Eating*, dated 1971. As I moved back towards the hyper-realistic sculpture, I felt increasingly uneasy, as though I was infringing on a real woman's personal space. Nevertheless, I stood next to the figure and leaned somewhat precariously over the protective rope so that I was a few inches from her face, and was amazed to discover the realism with which Hanson had rendered even the most detailed minutia of the sculpture – the flesh was porous and glistening with sweat, for instance, and an inflamed pimple dominated the forehead (1.3). She seemed so alive, as though she might turn her head at any

moment and tell me to back away. Several school children joined me, tentatively approaching the sculpture only to quickly jump away and burst into fits of uncontrollable giggles. It was a bit of thrill to feel so voyeuristic. But what caused this sense of voyeurism? What was it about this sculpture that was private, illicit, or taboo enough to warrant such a reaction? Surely, part of my discomfort derived from my extremely close proximity to an uncannily realistic sculpture, but I believe that I felt that this constituted a violation of the figure's privacy because I caught her in the act of *overconsumption* – she had already finished an ice cream sundae (and possibly a can of salted peanuts) and was now about to dive her spoon into an uneaten banana split, her mouth open in anticipation, her eyes squarely focused on the dessert, undistracted by the tabloid (1.4). More to the point, I had caught a *fat woman* in the act of overconsumption, devouring several fattening desserts and washing them down with a sugary soda pop.

Fatness both fascinates and repels contemporary Western society.[1] This is evident, for example, in the lingering popularity of fat jokes in an era of supposed tolerance and respect for diversity, in the mockery of fat bodies in the pop-cultural sphere, in public health initiatives combating the so-called "obesity epidemic,"[2] in the slow food movement and complementary vilification of fast food, and in the wild financial success of weight loss industries. These

[1] I use "Western" and "the West" as verbal shorthand to refer to Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and other nations that generally value thinness. However, I recognize that these are somewhat problematic terms, for two main reasons. First, to refer to these countries as the collective "West" suggests cultural uniformity both between and within them, which is misleading, as researchers have found that weight-related beliefs are not homogeneous across social strata; see, for example, Shelly Grabe and Janet Shibley Hyde, "Ethnicity and Body Dissatisfaction Among Women in the United States: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* 132, no. 4 (2006): 633-635. Second, they ignore similar anti-fat attitudes that exist in non-Western cultures. Recent anthropological research has provided evidence for the globalization of weight bias; see Alexandra A. Brewis, Amber Wutich, Ashlan Falletta-Cowden and Isa Rodriguez-Soto, "Body Norms and Fat Stigma in Global Perspective," *Current Anthropology* 52, no. 2 (2011): 273.

[2] Although the media warns that the West is in the throes of an "obesity epidemic," several scholars have taken issue with this idea for various reasons. J. Eric Oliver, for example, discredits the epidemic as a product of media sensationalism that serves the interests of powerful government institutions (such as the Center for Disease Control) as well as private businesses (particularly those involved in the weight loss industry) and that is predicated on misleading statistics and exaggerated health risk assessments; J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 36-59.

phenomena are indicative of the fat subject's marginalized social position within cultures that value thinness as the ideal embodiment: she is the butt of the joke, the target of a public heath crusade, the body to be eradicated with diet and exercise. They also reflect certain negative beliefs about fatness that are firmly entrenched in the West; namely, that fat bodies are undesirable because they are unhealthy, immoral and irresponsible. These beliefs largely stem from healthism, an ideology that conceptualizes health as a personal responsibility and moral obligation.[3] "Obesity" is particularly vulnerable to healthist evaluations because body size fluctuates throughout the lifespan and is therefore considered controllable in a way that other bodily conditions are not; fatness is read as physical proof of particular behaviours, such as overconsumption and inactivity, which are presumed to cause weight gain and related illnesses and are therefore considered irresponsible and immoral in neoliberal, healthist societies that hold individuals accountable for their health and productivity. It is no wonder, in this context, that fatness is stigmatized. Today, fatness constitutes what Erving Goffman called a "spoiled identity" insofar as it is considered both an "abomination of the body" (for its alleged ugliness and presumed ill health) and indicative of "blemishes of individual character" (such as laziness and greed).[4]

[3] Robert Crawford coins the term "healthism" to describe a particular form of medicalization that locates the problem of disease at the level of the individual and thus frames health and wellness as personal responsibilities; Robert Crawford, "Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life," *International Journal of Health Services* 10, no. 3 (1980): 365-388. Food systems scholar Julie Guthman situates healthism within a neoliberal political economy to highlight its moral implications, arguing that in the current neoliberal political climate, fat bodies are not only deemed unhealthy, but also immoral for failing to maintain their own bodily health, and, by extension, the health of the nation; Julie Guthman, *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011): 54. Adele E. Clarke and her co-authors similarly describe health as "an individual goal, a social and moral responsibility;" Adele E. Clarke, Jennifer Ruth Fosket, Laura Mamo, Jennifer R. Fishman and Janet K. Shim, "Charting (Bio)Medicine and (Bio)Medicalization in the United States," in *Biomedicalization: Technoscience, Health, and Illness in the U.S.*, eds. Adele E. Clarke, Laura Mamo, Jennifer Ruth Fosket, Jennifer R. Fishman and Janet K. Shim (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 63. I use Guthman's articulation of healthism as the moralization of health throughout this thesis.

[4] Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* (New York: J. Aronson, [1974] c1963), 4.

Although the stigmatization of fat bodies has been traced to the mid-nineteenth century,[5] it has worsened since the rise of the recent "obesity epidemic," which positions fatness as a threat to public health, the economy,[6] and even to national security.[7] There is an overwhelming body of evidence suggesting that weight bias is rampant and permeates nearly every aspect of contemporary life. Fat people often suffer discrimination at work,[8] at school,[9] and in medical settings.[10] Fat children and adolescents are regularly bullied,[11] teased, name-called, ignored, and

[5] See Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 25; Joyce L. Huff, "A 'Horror of Corpulence': Interrogating Bantingism and Mid-Nineteenth-Century Fat-Phobia," in *Bodies Out Of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression,* eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 39; Elena Levy-Navarro, "Changing Conceptions of the Fat Body in Western History," in *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture*, ed. Elena Levy-Navarro (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010): 2.

[6] For a review of the alleged economic costs of fatness (which are attributed to health care expenses and lost productivity), see Anne Dee, Karen Kearns, Ciaran O'Neil, Linda Sharp, Anthony Staines, Victoria O'Dwyer, Sarah Fitzgerald and Ivan J. Perry, "The Direct and Indirect Costs of Both Overweight and Obesity: A Systematic Review," *BMC Research Notes* 7, no. 1 (2014): 2-17.

[7] In 2010, the former U.S. Surgeon General, Richard Carmona, called obesity "the terror within" and warned, "unless we do something about it, the magnitude of the dilemma will dwarf 9-11 or any other terrorist attempt." The Associated Press, "Obesity Bigger Threat than Terrorism?" *CBS News*, last modified July 17, 2010, http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-204_162-1361849.html.

[8] Fat employees frequently earn lower wages and receive fewer opportunities for employment and promotion than their thinner coworkers; see Katherine Mason, "The Unequal Weight of Discrimination: Gender, Body Size, and Income Inequality," *Social Problems* 59, no. 3 (2012): 433; Marco Caliendo and Wang-Sheng Lee, "Fat Chance! Obesity and the Transition from Unemployment to Employment," *Economics and Human Biology* 11, no. 3 (2013): 132.

[9] Teacher weight biases may negatively affect educational performance among fat students; see Rebecca M. Puhl and J.D. Latner, "Stigma, Obesity, and the Health of the Nation's Children," *Psychology Bulletin* 133, no. 3 (2007): 568. Physical educators and sports coaches are especially prone to stigmatizing large bodies; see Jamie Lee Peterson, Rebecca M. Puhl and Joerg Luedicke, "An Experimental Assessment of Physical Educators' Expectations and Attitudes: The Importance of Student Weight and Gender," *Journal of School Health* 82, no. 9 (2012): 436. Furthermore, fat students are often perceived as ill-suited to post-secondary education; see Viren Swami and Rachael Monk, "Weight Bias Against Women in a University Acceptance Scenario," *The Journal of General Psychology* 140, no. 1 (2013): 52; Jacob M. Burmeister, Allison E. Kiefner, Robert A. Carels and Dara R. Musher-Eizenman, "Weight Bias in Graduate School Admissions," *Obesity* 21, no. 5 (2013): 920.

[10] Fat patients frequently receive inadequate and uncompassionate healthcare; see MR Hebl and J Xu, "Weighing the Care: Physicians' Reactions to the Size of a Patient," *International Journal of Obesity* 25, no. 8 (2001): 1250; Klea D. Bertakis and Rahman Azari, "The Impact of Obesity on Primary Care Visits," *Obesity Research* 13, no. 9 (2005): 1621.

[11] Jacqueline Weinstock and Michelle Krehbiel, "Fat Youth as Common Targets for Bullying," in *The Fat Studies Reader,* eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 120; Helen A. Hayden-Wade, Richard I. Stein, Ata Ghaderi, Brian E. Saelens, Marion F. Zabinski and Denise E. Wilfley, "Prevalence, Characteristics, and Correlates of Teasing Experiences among Overweight Children vs. Non-Overweight Peers," *Obesity Research* 13, no. 8 (2005): 1387.

avoided by their peers.[12] Anecdotal evidence and legal disputes suggest that fat subjects are unfavourable candidates as potential jurors, housing tenants, and adoptive parents.[13] Size discrimination is extensive and injurious, yet fat stigma is often experienced as valid and justifiable by the fat phobic because of the alleged governability of size. Unlike other markers of bodily difference, weight is believed to be under individual control; we cannot choose our gender or race, but, according to Western lore, we *can* choose our size. That being said, race, sexual orientation, and ability moderate the experiences of fat stigma in complex ways.[14] Gender, in particular, seems to reliably exacerbate weight biases, as a wealth of research has found that fat

[12] Rebecca M. Puhl, Joerg Luedicke and Cheslea Heuer, "Weight-Based Victimization Toward Overweight Adolescents: Observations and Reactions of Peers," *Journal of School Health* 81, no. 11 (2011): 699.

[13] Rebecca M. Puhl and Kelly D. Brownell, "Bias, Discrimination, and Obesity," *Obesity Research* 9, no. 12 (2001): 788-805.

[14] The relationship between race and weight bias is complicated, varying by race and ethnicity, immigration status, and acculturation; see Nan M. Sussman, Nhan Truong and Joy Lim, "Who Experiences 'America the Beautiful'?: Ethnicity Moderating the Effect of Acculturation on Body Image and Risks for Eating Disorders among Immigrant Women," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 31, no. 1 (2007): 45. The literature is particularly conflicted in regards to Black bodies. Some research indicates that fat African Americans elicit stronger anti-fat attitudes than do fat Caucasians; see Rebecca M. Puhl, Joerg Luedicke and Cheslea Heuer, "The Stigmatizing Effect of Visual Media Portrayals of Obese Persons on Public Attitudes: Does Race or Gender Matter?" *Journal of Health Communication* 18, no. 7 (2013): 822. But many researchers have found that Black women tend to be more satisfied with their *own* bodies weights, and resist fat phobia as a means to reject White beauty ideals; see Svetlana Ristovski-Slijepcevic, Kirsten Bell, Gwen E. Chapman and Brenda L. Beagan, "Being 'Thick' Indicates You Are Eating, You Are Healthy and You Have an Attractive Body Shape: Perspectives on Fatness and Food Choice amongst Black and White Men and Women in Canada," *Health Sociology Review* 19, no. 3 (2010): 326; Wendy N. Gray, Stacey L. Simon, David M. Janicke and Marilyn Dumont-Driscoll, "Moderators of Weight-Based Stigmatization Among Youth Who Are Overweight and Non-overweight: The Role of Gender, Race, and Body Dissatisfaction," *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics* 32, no. 2 (2011): 115. There is evidence, however, that this so-called "ethnicity effect" may have been overstated; see Justine J. Reel, Sonya SooHoo, Julia Franklin Summerhays and Diane L. Gill, "Age Before Beauty: An Exploration of Body Image in African-American and Caucasian Adult Women," *Journal of Gender Studies* 17, no. 4 (2008): 328. With regard to sexual orientation, the mainstream gay community has been found to harbour strong anti-fat biases and to marginalize both its fat members and their admirers, who are commonly referred to as "chubby chasers." Such marginalization has led to the formation of fat-accepting Mirth and Girth Clubs, collectively organized as Affiliated Big Men's Clubs (ABC); see Nathaniel C. Pyle and Michael I. Loewy, "Double Stigma: Fat Men and Their Male Admirers," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 143-149. Lesbians, in contrast, have been found to be more accepting of fatness than heterosexual women, regardless of feminist orientation; see Viren Swami and Martin J. Tovée, "The Influence of Body Mass Index on the Physical Attractiveness Preferences of Feminist and Nonfeminist Heterosexual Women and Lesbians," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 30 (2006): 255. There are, unfortunately, very few studies that consider the relationship between fat and physical ability; see Helen Pain and Rose Wiles, "The Experience of Being Disabled and Obese," *Disability and Rehabilitation* 28, no. 19 (2006): 1211-1220. For a review of the intersections between body size, gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, and age, see Noortje van Amsterdam, "Big Fat Inequalities, Thin Privilege: An Intersectional Perspective on 'Body Size,'" *European Journal of Women's Studies* 20, no. 2 (2013): 155-169.

women suffer considerably worse discrimination than fat men in education, employment, romantic relationships, popular media, and health care.[15] Furthermore, the body weights that incite such discrimination are disproportionately lower for women than men.[16] This is perhaps because female fatness violates current standards of beauty, sexuality and health that valorize thinness (standards that are stricter for women than for men) as well as the feminine imperative to exert bodily self-control and restraint.[17]

I may have felt uncomfortably voyeuristic when viewing Hanson's sculpture because to eat in public, especially as a fat woman, is to put oneself in a position of vulnerability, subject to scrutiny and even harassment. Fat activist blogger Ragen Chastain, for example, laments that regardless of whether she is seen eating a cheeseburger or a salad,

> [e]ither way, because I'm fat and have the 'nerve' to eat in public people feel that they are justified in commenting if my food choice doesn't pass their test for what a fatty should eat or, alternatively, they feel that they are doing me a favor by encouraging what must be an attempt to change the size and shape of my body, rather than just a tasty salad.[18]

Such "public displays of fatness" (to use Chastain's term) are frequently policed, not only verbally, but also with disciplinary gazes. "I get 'the look,'" writes blogger Liat, "the look of disapproval if I eat anything even slightly 'fattening' or 'unhealthy' or the look of approval if I eat lightly."[19] At the time of writing, this specific form of weight discrimination has not, to my knowledge, been systematically studied in the scholarly literature, but a quick Google search of

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[15] Janna L. Fikkan and Esther D. Rothblum, "Is Fat a Feminist Issue? Exploring the Gendered Nature of Weight Bias," *Sex Roles* 66, no. 9-10 (2012): 575.
[16] Ibid, 578.
[17] Joan C. Chrisler, "'Why Can't You Control Yourself?' Fat *Should Be* a Feminist Issue," *Sex Roles* 66, no. 9-10 (2012): 612; Christine A. Smith, "The Confounding of Fat, Control, and Physical Attractiveness for Women," *Sex Roles* 66, no. 9-10 (2012): 628-629.
[18] Ragen Chastain, "PDFs: Public Displays of Fatness," *Dances with Fat: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness Are Not Size Dependent*, last modified April 20, 2011, http://danceswithfat.wordpress.com/2011/04/20/pdfs-public-displays-of-fatness/
[19] Liat, "Eating in Public," *The Spirit of Fat Acceptance: A Blog Exploring the Intersection of Spirituality and Fat Acceptance*, last modified March 29, 2011, http://spiritoffa.blogspot.com/2011/03/eating-in-public.html.

the phrase "fat woman eating in public" illustrates the repulsed and morally outraged reactions elicited by this seemingly innocuous action: search results include "Fat lady eats lunch in front of 2 kids (gross as hell)" and "Why eating in public is a no-no." Not surprisingly, eating in public seems to be a source of anxiety for many women, perhaps from the threat of such judgments.[20] I would like to think that I felt uneasy when looking at Hanson's *Woman Eating* because I was unwilling to take part in her victimization by subjecting her to my judgemental gaze – but this is overly optimistic. It is more likely that I felt voyeuristic because I was uninhibitedly gawking at a social taboo. This was permissible in the context on the Smithsonian exhibition space, but if I were to see this working class, fat woman over-indulging on high-calorie desserts at a public diner, I would probably catch myself staring at her from out of the corners of my eyes or from across the room, trying to be discreet yet unable to avert my eyes from such a spectacle of transgressive eating. The *Woman Eating* defies the (feminine) ethic of restraint that mediates the consumption of fatty foods, and, by extension, the cultural value systems that inform this ethic. As Liat writes, a "fat woman eating in public and relishing her food is an act of rebellion."[21] In this way, *Woman Eating* draws attention to the West's cultural aversion towards fat bodies,

[20] This is made evident, again, by Google search results that communicate fear and anxiety, such as "Too nervous to eat in public?" and "Fear of eating in public – Subtle Signs of Eating Disorders." Academic research exploring the links between eating in public and anxiety typically focuses on people with eating disorders and who therefore already suffer from food-related anxieties; see Marta Ferrer-Garcia, José Gutiérrez-Maldonado, Alejandra Caqueo-Urizar and Elena Moreno, "The Validity of Virtual Environments for Eliciting Emotional Responses in Patients With Eating Disorders and in Controls," *Behavior Modification* 33, no. 6 (2009): 830. Some researchers classify fear of eating in public as a specific social phobia, in which fear stems from "experiencing involuntary responses such as vomiting or losing control of their bowels" rather than from social judgment about the quality and quantity of consumed food; see C. Alec Pollard and J. Gibson Henderson, "Four Types of Social Phobia in a Community Sample," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 176, no. 7 (1988): 443. Thus far, to my knowledge, there has not been any psychological or sociological research examining whether eating in public *itself* causes anxiety, or why. Scholars in the field of fat studies sometimes broach this topic, however. Samantha Murray, for example, suggests that for fat women, eating in public constitutes a performance that is regulated by their hyper-awareness of being watched by others; she asserts that when fat women adjust their food intake (either by type, quantity, or consumptive gesture), they internalize fat shame and others' disgust; Samantha Murray, *The "Fat" Female Body* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 58.

[21] Liat, 2011.

particularly fat female bodies. Interrogating my viewing discomfort thus begs the question: Why does fatness make us uncomfortable?

Artworks such as *Woman Eating* are useful when considering this question, for they may enable viewers to think about fat in novel and nuanced ways.[22] Artistic considerations of fatness can function as alternative sources of knowledge production, as means of questioning and critiquing social issues, and as instruments of activism. That is, art has the potential not only to subvert hegemonic conceptions of fat (as bad, unhealthy, and immoral), but may reveal such conceptions as oppressive social constructions and actively work to undermine them. Given the pervasive natures of anti-fat prejudice and size discrimination, this is no small feat. Fortunately, there are a growing number of contemporary artists who seek to disrupt problematic "obesity" discourses, many of whom are affiliated with the size acceptance movement, outlined below. I am interested in the ways in which artists open up new possibilities for fat embodiment, but I wish to explore, in this thesis, how the works of three particular artists – Kimberly Dark, Rachel Herrick, and Jenny Saville – broaden size acceptance activism *itself*.

A History of Fat Activism and Fat Studies

My efforts are situated within the broader historical and academic contexts of fat activism and fat studies, two complementary responses to fat oppression that problematize and resist the socially disadvantaged position of the fat body. Loosely defined, the former consists of localized grassroots organizations, support communities and individuals who seek to enact social change through direct political action, while the latter is an emerging academic discipline that exposes and interrogates numerous social, cultural, and economic forces that converge to create powerful fat stigma, as well as the devastating consequences of such stigma. Although fat activist efforts

[22] Stefanie Snider, "Fatness and Visual Culture: A Brief Look at Some Contemporary Projects," *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 1 (2012): 13.

preceded those of fat scholars by approximately thirty years, today fat studies theory and research are so intertwined with size acceptance activism that it can be difficult to distinguish them from one another. Theorectical discussions of fatness (in all manifestations) both inform and are informed by activist praxis.

The fat liberation movement developed in the context of 1960s social activism, as political struggles against racism, classism, and sexism created a heightened awareness of social injustices that contributed to growing (although by no means comparable) resentment of sizism and fat oppression. The movement established institutional legitimacy in 1969, when self-proclaimed fat admirer[23] Bill Fabrey founded the National Association to Aid Fat Americans (NAAFA). NAAFA initially focused on integrating fat bodies into the social mainstream by educating the public about fat oppression and supporting legal battles against weight-based discrimination. Fabrey eventually renamed the organization the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance and broadened its scope by hosting social events that aimed to foster a vibrant fat-positive community, including self-esteem building workshops, fashion shows, and weekend conventions. Despite having made these important and innovative activist strides, however, NAAFA was criticized by some as overly conservative in terms of its membership (which was primarily white, middle-class and heterosexual) and political inclinations (which initially resisted feminist perspectives),[24] as well as in its overarching goals (it did not originally aim to revolutionize society into one of fat acceptance, but rather to minimize discrimination within the

[23] A "fat admirer" is someone who is sexually attracted to fatness. Although the term is most often used to refer to thin men who are attracted to large women (like Fabrey), fat admirers can be of any gender, sexuality, and size.

[24] For example, until the formation of its Feminist Caucus in the early 1980s (which did not attain significant influence until 1987), the organization was decidedly *not* feminist. Farrell has attributed NAAFA's conservative political stance, at least in part, to Fabrey's own privileged social position as a thin, middle-class white man, suggesting that this made him somewhat disinterested in how other oppressed bodily stigmas, such as race and gender, intersect with fatness. Farrell, 141.

existing fat phobic cultural climate).[25] Thus while NAAFA catalyzed the size acceptance movement,[26] its cautious activism frustrated some of its more liberal members, particularly those who were also actively involved in what has been labeled second-wave feminism.

The most influential of NAAFA's dissenters were a small group of radical lesbian feminists from Los Angeles, California, who, in the early 1970s, led a much more aggressive campaign against fat hatred than was officially sanctioned by the head office: these women distributed anti-diet literature in health clinics, attacked the dieting industry on radio talk shows, and sabotaged local weight loss meetings. As one member recalls, they "employed slashing rhetoric: Doctors are the enemy. Weight loss is genocide."[27] Eventually, in 1973, their antics caught the attention and disapproval of NAAFA leaders, resulting in the protesters' rupture from the organization and subsequent formation of the Fat Underground (whose initials – FU – were carefully chosen to convey the group's impassioned sentiment). At that time, two members wrote "The Fat Liberation Manifesto," a short but important text that takes aim at oppressive patriarchal, capitalist, and medical structures that restrict fat individuals' access to equal rights as protected by the American Constitution. Specifically, they condemn weight-loss industries for exploiting heterosexist beauty standards and problematic "obesity" science to promote diet and exercise products, locating these "reducing industries" within a larger web of economic forces that benefit from fat phobia by suggesting that they are in collusion with "the financial interests

[25] NAAFA has since altered its stance and now explicitly aims to abolish fat phobia: "NAAFA's goal is to help build a society in which people of every size are accepted with dignity and equality in all aspects of life." NAAFA, "Welcome to NAAFA.org," www.naafaonline.com.

[26] Fat Liberation was not confined within the borders of the United States, however, as parallel movements have also developed in Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Each of these three nations has its own national fat activist organization – the Canadian Association for Size Acceptance (CASA), Size Acceptance Network, and the National Size Acceptance Coalition, respectfully– yet the startling lack of available information about these organizations suggest that they have not been able to match the success and influence of NAAFA (for example, the website for the Canadian chapter of the International Size Acceptance Association – another US-based organization – does not appear to have been updated since 2005, while the CASA website is seemingly nonexistent).

[27] Sara Fishman, "Life in the Fat Underground," *Radiance*, Winter 1998.

of insurance companies, the fashion and garment industries […] the food and drug industries, and the medical and psychiatric establishments."[28] The authors refuse to comply with the interests of these "enemies," and issue a call for collective resistance: "FAT PEOPLE OF THE WORLD UNITE! YOU HAVE *NOTHING* TO LOSE… [*sic*]."[29] Although the FU was only active for a brief period of time, its radical feminist approach continues to influence fat activists today, enabling them to view their body fat as politically significant, to trust their own lived experiences of oppression, and to fundamentally challenge thinness as "ideal" beauty.

Two years after the FU disbanded, Susie Orbach published her germinal book *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, in which she argues that compulsive eating (a behaviour that she problematically equates with fatness)[30] is a manifestation of the "emotional problems"[31] created by oppressive patriarchal structures. She references various case studies from her group psychotherapy sessions to support this claim, arguing that gaining and maintaining weight is an unconscious strategy for women to either improve their lives (for example, by gaining influence within the workplace) or to escape from perceived threats (such as heterosexual advances). However, for Orbach, "getting fat remains an unhappy and unsatisfactory attempt to resolve these conflicts."[32] She consequently advocates the formation of self-help groups, insisting that group psychotherapy is the only effective means for the fat woman to rid herself of her specific neuroses and lose weight. Thus while Orbach shares the FU's political inclinations, she positions fat as pathological and frames her text as a weight loss guide. But despite her apparent fat prejudice, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* opened up fatness to non-medical, feminist discourse for a much broader and more mainstream

[28] Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran, "Fat Liberation Manifesto," in *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat* Oppression, eds. Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Weiser (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1983): 53.
[29] Ibid, 53.
[30] Murray, 93.
[31] Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue: The Anti-Diet Guide to Permanent Weight Loss* (New York: Berkley Books, 1979), 5.
[32] Ibid, 22.

audience than that of the FU, and prompted a number of other health professionals to reconsider the social meanings of body size.

American psychologists Susan C. Wooley and Orland W. Wooley, for example, were inspired by Orbach and the FU to challenge the validity of medical "obesity" literature with two papers published in 1979. In "Obesity and Women I: A Closer Look at the Facts," the authors argue that health researchers have not only failed to identify either the cause or the cure for "obesity," but that the presumed ill-health effects of fatness are likely to be caused by harmful dieting practices.[33] Then, in "Obesity and Women II: A Neglected Feminist Topic" Wooley, Wooley and Sue R. Dyrenforth cite both Aldebaran (of the FU) and Orbach to argue that fatness is a highly gendered social and political issue, a stigmatized embodiment that is oppressed both within the doctor's office and by society at large.[34] After reviewing a sizable literature that documents the dangers and futility of weight loss efforts, the authors conclude that health should be pursued via size acceptance rather than dieting.[35]

In 1983, Aldebaran – by then known as Vivian Mayer – solidified the FU's legacy in the fat liberation movement by publishing the groundbreaking anthology *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression*. Comprised both of texts that were originally distributed by the FU (including the Fat Liberation Manifesto) as well as diverse writings by their followers (including essays, poems, testimonials and interviews), this collection is cited over and over

[33] Susan C. Wooley and Orland W. Wooley, "Obesity and Women I: A Closer Look at the Facts," *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 2 (1979): 70.
[34] Orland W. Wooley, Susan C. Wooley and Sue R. Dyrenforth, "Obesity and Women II: A Neglected Feminist Topic," *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 2 (1979): 87-88.
[35] More recent scientific research supports Wooley and Wooley's arguments. Campos et al., for example, review over fifty studies whose findings debunk four main assumptions about "obesity:" that the increasing rate of fatness constitutes a global epidemic, that the body mass index (BMI) is predictive of mortality, that the scientific evidence linking body fat and ill health is indisputable, and that weight loss will improve one's health; Paul Campos, Abigail Saguy, Paul Ernsberger, Eric Oliver, and Glenn Gaesser, "The Epidemiology of Overweight and Obesity: Public Health Crisis or Moral Panic?" *International Journal of Epidemiology* 35 (2006): 55-60. For a more in-depth critique of "obesity" research, see Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight is Hazardous to Your Health* (New York: Gotham Books, 2004), 3-40.

again by contemporary fat activists as the catalyst for their own resistance. It is here that one can find the first traces of a "coming out" discourse in fat politics,[36] most clearly articulated by a contributor writing under the moniker of "thunder." For thunder, coming out as a fat woman entails rejecting socially imposed shame in favour of bodily pride. This, she argues, is more difficult than coming out as a lesbian, because the struggles of fat women are often invalidated by mainstream (that is, thinner) feminist and lesbian communities, for whom "fat pride is virtually nonexistent."[37] Indeed, "fat women's oppression is seen as minimal… or overexaggerated [*sic*], or inconsequential in the light of the struggles against race/class/sex oppression."[38] Her observations are supported by fellow contributor Laurie Ann Lepoff, who spat at her uncompassionate lesbian friend:

> Why the fuck do I have to explain myself to you, you slender, privileged bitch? You live in this world, you have eyes, you see what abuse I have to take! How much pain must I suffer before you accept my oppression as valid?[39]

Lepoff suggests that thin feminists are not simply dismissive of weight discrimination, but that they are largely *ignorant* of it. Her anger thus highlights the problem of social (in)visibility, and (when read alongside thunder's testimonial) suggests that coming out as fat functions to raise consciousness about fat phobia, in addition to expressing bodily pride. But according to Mayer,

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[36] Four years prior to the publication of *Shadow on a Tightrope,* Orbach suggested that for some women, disclosing their compulsive eating habits to self-help groups "is like coming out of the closet," especially for those whose weight is within the "normal" BMI range. Thus while she appropriated the phrase "coming out" to describe an act of disclosure, the revelation pertains to a hidden behaviour rather than a politicized identity. Orbach's outing discourse is therefore clinical, rather than political.

[37] thunder, "coming out: notes on fat lesbian pride," in *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression,* eds. Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Weiser (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1983), 214. thunder may have felt that it is more difficult to come out as fat than to come out as a lesbian because sexuality is commonly understood to be genetic, whereas fatness is imagined to be a consequence of personal choices (despite the inaccuracy of these beliefs). But as another contributor points out, the exact causes of sexuality and size should not determine the manner in which one is treated: "whether or not lesbianism is a choice is irrelevant, the homophobic boot in the face is still an outrage. Whether or not I choose to be fat, I *am*. Choice doesn't make it legitimate to torment me." Joan Dickenson, "Some Thoughts on Fat," in *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression,* eds. Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Weiser (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1983), 42.

[38] Ibid, 215.

[39] Laurie Ann Lepoff, "Fat Politics," in *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression,* eds. Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Weiser (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1983), 204.

even those feminists who *do* acknowledge weight discrimination tend to condone hegemonic views about fatness as pathological: "Aside from a superficial awareness that fat women are oppressed by looksism [*sic*], radical women still see fat as a personal sickness: abnormal, undesirable, lamentable, and curable."[40] Mayer argues that these beliefs are not grounded in reality, but rather stem from what she calls the "Fat Illusion," the false notion that body size can be fully controlled with chosen behaviours. After discrediting this illusion with medical research, she explains its grip over the public imagination by identifying several sociocultural forces that make it so compelling, so "dazzling," that it is blindly accepted as truth.[41] In doing so, Mayer resists pathology discourse, blaming society, rather than the individual, for the plight of the fat subject.

Mayer's refusal to pathologize fatness is significant in the context of the early 1980s, an era that witnessed an explosion of scholarship on disordered eating. Orbach was not alone in conceptualizing anorectic and fat bodies as a kind of neurotic pair – Kim Chernin, too, argues that fat and anorectic women are "sisters" who express their emotional disturbances through body size.[42] Chernin theorized the "tyranny of slenderness" in terms of feminist psychoanalysis, arguing that the cultural disdain for fatness (especially female fatness) can be traced to feelings of helplessness in infancy, as men and women alike enact revenge against their mothers'

[40] Mayer suggests that fatness is not only considered pathological in and of itself, but that it is believed to be caused by pathological behaviour (overconsumption), psychology (emotional disconnectedness), and personality (being weak-willed).Vivian F. Mayer, "The Fat Illusion," in *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression,* eds. Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Weiser (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1983), 4.

[41] Mayer lists four illusions that constitute the Fat Illusion: the illusion of personal control (dieting can disrupt normal metabolic functioning and make it increasingly difficult to control one's weight and size), the illusion of freedom of choice (dieting is compulsory in fat phobic cultures), the illusion that it's for our own good (dieting and prejudice are more harmful to physical health than fat), and the illusion of self-limited achievement (dieting is a tool for female domination); ibid 6-12.

[42] Kim Chernin, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1981): 107.

inevitable failures by disempowering large, maternal bodies.[43] It is only by confronting her antagonism towards the female body and accepting her status as woman that the fat female will be able to lose weight. Thus, by contriving "a 'correct,' feminist reason to diet,"[44] Chernin is guilty of the pathologizing tendencies that the Fat Underground so vehemently rejects.

In contrast, feminist philosopher Susan Bordo formulates an ambitious analysis of slenderness that positions the anorectic body within a broad social context, thereby sidestepping psychopathology discourse. Like Chernin, Orbach, and the members of the Fat Underground, Bordo assumes that female embodiment is a distinctly political issue that relates to gendered power structures. However, she conceives of these power dynamics in the terms developed by Michel Foucault, insisting that power is not something that one *owns* and imposes on others, but is rather *enacted* through interpersonal relations and self-surveillance; power operates "from below" rather than "from above."[45] "Men are not the enemy"[46] as such; rather, her analyses suggest that being male is only one of many privileged subject positions upheld by Foucauldian power dynamics, alongside being white, straight, middle class, and, of course, thin. In this way, considering Foucault enables Bordo to stress the need to attend to various intersectionalities, or the ways in which race, class, and sexuality interact with gender to fragment the mythological singular female embodiment (an essentialist assumption held by both Orbach and Chernin). Foucault's formulation of power also opens up the possibility of exploring the ways in which particular philosophical, moral, religious, and economic structures create and support weight biases on a day-to-day basis. Bordo argues, for example, that many negative stereotypes about fatness derive from the dualist philosophical tradition and its intersections with Christianity,

[43] Ibid, 147.
[44] thunder, 214.
[45] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 27.
[46] Ibid, 29.

Victorian ethics, and capitalist ideology. Mind/body dualism, she explains, positions the body as alien to the mind, as a fleshy enemy that threatens mental mastery. To control the body and manage its desires, such as hunger and sexual yearning, is to privilege the mind, soul, and spirit. In this context, Bordo argues, thinness is associated with the mind, with spiritual purity and "hyperintellectuality," whereas fatness is associated with "the taint of matter and flesh, 'wantonness,' mental stupor and mental decay."[47] Gaining weight, furthermore, demonstrates a loss of the self-control that lies "at the center of Christianity's ethic of anti-sexuality."[48] Fat's connotations of mental and disciplinary inferiority are also detrimental in a capitalist workforce, as it is "perceived as indicative of laziness, lack of discipline, unwillingness to conform and absence of all those 'managerial' abilities that, according to the dominant ideology, confer upward mobility."[49] Thus while Bordo maintains a feminist analysis in her insistence on politicized embodiment, she also points to a range of issues that contribute to the tyranny of slenderness.

Five years later, in 1998, two landmark fat activist texts were published on either side of the Atlantic: Marilyn Wann's *Fat!So?: Because You Don't Have to Apologize For Your Size*, and Charlotte Cooper's *Fat and Proud: The Politics of Size*. Perhaps the more influential of the two, *Fat!So?* is an outgrowth of Wann's San Francisco-based zine of the same name (launched in 1993). Fun and campy, Wann's text features a flipbook cartoon of a dancing fat woman, a Venus of Willendorf paper doll complete with nine outfits and accessories, and trading cards depicting "the heroes and villains of fat history."[50] Despite its flash and frivolity, however, *Fat!So?* systematically combats virtually every aspect of fat oppression, ranging from hurtful

[47] Ibid, 148.
[48] Ibid, 146.
[49] Ibid, 195.
[50] Marilyn Wann, *FAT!SO? Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size!* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1998), 189.

euphemisms for fatness[51] to negative beliefs about fat (a)sexuality.[52] In comparison, *Fat and Proud* is rather conventional; Cooper's no-frills text outlines the devastating consequences of fat stigma and traces the history of fat activism both in the United States and in her native Britain. Time and again, Cooper stresses the political importance of naming one's experiences of discrimination so that common forms of oppression might be identified and resisted – and indeed, when reading the texts together, patterns emerge. For example, both authors debunk weight-related health misconceptions,[53] critique medical institutions for constructing the fat body as pathological, and explore the politics of beauty and fashion.[54] There are, however, some marked differences between the two works that illustrate the diversity of fat activist views and agendas. For instance, both authors advocate coming out as a means for self-empowerment and social change, yet Cooper acknowledges the difficulties and contradictions inherent in the act,[55] while Wann lauds the phrase "Yes, I am a fatso!" as "magic words" capable of igniting

[51] Wann explores the power of language throughout *Fat!So?* She praises the power of linguistic reclamation (encouraging readers to take the word "fat" "back from the bullies!") and condemns the menace of euphemisms ("you only need a euphemism if you find the truth distasteful"). Wann takes particular issue with medical terms such as "overweight" and "obese," which imply bodily normativity ("over *whose* weight?") and, she argues, function as tools of abuse within medical institutions; Wann, 18-20. For these reasons, nearly all academics in fat studies avoid the use of euphemisms and situate weight-related medical terminology in scare quotes.

[52] Fat women are often perceived to be "less sexually attractive, desirable, skilled, warm, and responsive" than thin women or men (regardless of size); see Pamela C. Regan, "Sexual Outcasts: The Perceived Impact of Body Weight and Gender on Sexuality," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 26 (1996): 1812. Wann counters such stereotypes by revelling in "the joys of fat sex, of which there are just so, very, very many;" Wann, 178.

[53] As Cooper points out, health is effectively ground zero in the battle for fat rights because it is the primary target of fat-phobic public discourse; Charlotte Cooper, *Fat and Proud: The Politics of Size* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1998): 69. Many fat activists refuse to engage in discussions of physical health, however, arguing that one's (ill)health should not impact his/her social value.

[54] Cooper classifies fat phobia as a subset of "lookism," or prejudice against those who defy cultural beauty standards; Cooper, 6. Wann, in contrast, rejects the many binaries that structure such beauty standards (such as thin/fat or young/old) and celebrates bodily diversity: "Dichotomies are dumb. Love it all!" Wann, 30. Wann later suggests that certain fashions can serve the fat liberationist movement by expressing bodily pride. "Bikinis *are* political," she insists. "Your wardrobe can indeed change your life;" Wann, 152. Cooper, on the other hand, suggests that wearing so-called slimming outfits – clothes that promise to help fat consumers pass as thin – can be "a significant psychological survival manoeuvre" for victims of fat oppression; Cooper, 42.

[55] Cooper admits that coming out as fat and proud is challenging for many women, as weight-loss fantasies and health concerns are often persistent and can be difficult to dispel. Cooper, 47-54.

revolution.[56] This discrepancy hints at the authors' differing views on the nature of fat pride: for Cooper, developing bodily pride is an ongoing battle for fat women, but for Wann, pride is "the magic trick that makes all your worries about fat disappear."[57] For this reason, Wann envisions a social revolution grounded in pride politics. Cooper, on the other hand, suggests that fat liberation models itself after the disability rights movement, which, she feels, is a more useful model for fat liberation than "civil rights and feminist struggles" because it is a contemporary effort that deals with bodily difference.[58] Disability rights activists, she explains, combat the medicalization of non-normative bodies by arguing that "disability" is a product of limiting and disabling cultural environments (for example, public buildings that lack the ramps and elevators necessary for wheelchair access). Cooper believes that fat activists should emulate this shift in perspective because a "social model enables us to regard our bodies not as abnormal or shameful, but as part of an infinite spectrum of bodies types."[59] Although she is sensitive to potential problems that might arise by classifying fat bodies as "impaired" or "disabled" (such labels, for example, imply illness and disease, and may thus reinforce negative health stereotypes about fatness), she stresses the great potential of adopting a cultural, rather than medical, model of fatness.[60] Despite their many differences (or perhaps because of them), *Fat!So?* and *Fat and Proud* laid the foundation for fat studies proper.

In 2001, Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco co-edited *Bodies Out Of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, the first scholarly anthology to focus exclusively on fat. A diverse

[56] Wann, 28. For a critique of Wann's views on fat pride, coming out as fat, and fat identity, see Murray, 87-89.
[57] Wann, 18.
[58] Cooper, 121.
[59] Ibid, 122.
[60] Several other scholars have suggested that size acceptance align with disability politics; see April Herndon, "Disparate but Disabled: Fat Embodiment and Disability Studies," *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (2002):120-137; Zoe Meleo-Erwin, "Disrupting Normal: Toward the 'Ordinary and Familiar' in Fat Politics," *Feminism and Psychology* 22, no. 3 (2012): 394-395.

collection, its contributors outline theoretical frameworks for the field,[61] analyze the power dynamics enacted by representations of fat bodies, reconsider fat sexualities, debate the subversive potential of carnivalesque and grotesque fatness, and suggest fat performativity. As a whole, *Bodies Out Of Bounds* demonstrates not only the inextricable link between fat academia and fat activism (as most essays suggest modes of resistance), but also the *benefits* of this alliance. For example, the contributors who theorize the grotesque fat body are not rearticulating decades-old activist strategies in academic terms, but are rather referencing existing scholarship (specifically, the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin and Mary Russo) to suggest new possibilities for fat activist efforts (for more information on the fat grotesque, see Chapter 3). However, even those contributors who *do* reconsider established activist strategies are not redundant in doing so, as they often reinvigorate these strategies and renew their political utility. Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for example, draw upon queer theory to complicate fat outing discourse, considering the nuances of visibility and the nature of closet to suggest that coming out as fat is not simply a matter of exposure and disclosure – of revealing fat phobia as well as one's own size acceptance and bodily pride – but rather a matter of self-definition.[62]

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[61] Namely, feminist and queer; see Cecilia Hartley, "Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship," in *Bodies Out Of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression,* eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 60-73; Kathleen LeBesco, "Queering Fat Bodies/Politics," in *Bodies Out Of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression,* eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 74-87.

[62] Moon and Sedgewick consider the performances of Divine – the fat, transgendered star of many John Waters films – in order to reflect upon overlapping embodied experiences of fat women and gay men. Divine's performances consistently defy convention – for example, her most infamous scenes enact taboos (such as mother-son incest) and/or grotesqueries (such as eating shit) – and thus operate at the "interface between abjection and defiance." The authors argue that Divine's performances constitute a project of self-creation that produces the joyous affect of "divinity" (feeling god-like), and that this project is central to the act of coming out. Gay liberation, they suggest, is contingent on self-definition. Interestingly, Moon argues that the closet functions as though it were made of transparent glass insofar as it cannot conceal the secret it contains. Thus when he suggests the existence of a "closet of size," Moon asks: "What kind of a secret can the body of a fat woman keep?" It is certainly no secret that she is fat, as fatness is always already hyper-visible. But Moon and Sedgwick argue that the "truth" of the fat female body does not necessarily align with the way in which it is read and understood by others. For Sedgwick, "*coming out as a fat woman*" is a way in which one can renegotiate the "*representational contract* between one's body and one's world." In other words, by identifying herself as fat and defining the terms of that identity, the fat woman reduces the discrepancy between the truth of her self and the ways in which others presume her to be. Michael Moon

Bodies Out of Bounds is especially notable, to me, for its early emphasis on various cultural portrayals of fatness (literary, televisual, photographic, comedic, performed). This topic continues to dominate fat scholarship due to its complexity and influence; many academics argue that common visual representations of corpulence – or lack thereof – are instrumental in the perpetuation of fat phobia. Fatness is not only underrepresented in contemporary culture,[63] it is also frequently subjected to visual erasure; for example, in weight loss advertisements that feature before-and-after photographs (in which the previously fat body has transformed into a thinner version of itself),[64] in the use of fat suits (which deny the actual representation of fat flesh), and in what Braziel has termed "the corporeal mark of absence" (whereby fat bodies are signified but not actually shown).[65] When fat subjects *are* represented, it is usually to their detriment. Time and again, films, television programs, news reports, documentaries, and advertisements marginalize, stereotype, fetishize, and mock the fat form, especially the fat female form. Some scholars have argued that even seemingly innocuous depictions of corpulence – such as workout videos featuring fat athletes or medical imagery of fat flesh – can frame fatness as a grotesque corporeality,[66] as an abject embodiment.[67] Especially problematic is

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and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little-Understood Emotion," in *Bodies Out Of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression,* eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 295-306.

[63] It is quite rare to see fat bodies in popular visual culture, despite the fact that over one third of the American population is considered "obese." This relative invisibility is troubling because it reveals the social marginalization of the fat subject.

[64] Le'a Kent, "Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001): 134-135.

[65] Braziel argues that the "corporeal mark of absence" is at work, for example, in women's magazines that are rife with advertisements promoting both fattening foods and weight loss regimens, because the fat woman lurks within the pages of these types of publications yet is very rarely (if ever) shown. Jana Evans Braziel, "Sex and Fat Chics: Deterritorializing the Fat Female Body," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001): 233.

[66] Antonia Losano and Brenda A. Risch argue that fat women are excluded from most workout videos because they are considered unacceptable within fitness culture. Some videos, however, include a "token" fat woman who typically wears unflattering gray workout attire and is relegated either to the back row or the sidelines (or both). The authors suggest that many of these videos are discriminatory in their very structure, as the cameras focus "on anything *but* the Fat Woman in Gray," and that common video editing techniques – such as close up views of

the photographic trope of the "headless fatty," a term coined by Charlotte Cooper to describe images of faceless fat bodies that frequently accompany news reports about the "obesity epidemic."[68] To illustrate, I include a photograph of a fat woman sitting down to eat lunch; she holds one hot dog in her right hand, and a second hot dog lies on the table in front of her (1.5).[69] The photograph has been cropped so that we only see her torso, from her stomach up to the centre of her head. The bottom half of her face is visible – her mouth is open and she wipes the corner of her lip with her fingers – but her nose, eyes, and forehead extend beyond the upper limits of the frame. This photo is typical of headless fatty images because it seems to have been covertly taken of an unsuspecting subject (the woman is photographed in a public space and is seemingly unaware of the camera), it has been edited to foreground specific fat body parts (her large breasts and arms), and because it reinforces negative stereotypes about fat bodies as lazy and excessive (the woman is both sedentary and eating junk foods). Numerous critics have argued that such visual decapitation strips fat people of their humanity and reduces them to cultural symbols of fear surrounding the "obesity epidemic," especially when coupled with

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particular body parts – function to discipline the body by compartmentalizing it into specific "problem areas" (read: fat) that must be sculpted into the desired, lean shape. Within this context, large, flabby bodies are seen as unruly, out-of-control, and grotesque; Antonia Losano and Brenda A. Risch, "Resisting Venus: Negotiating Corpulence in Exercise Videos," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 111-129.

[67] In her visual analysis of a special issue of *Life* magazine that was dedicated to the "obesity epidemic," Le'a Kent observes that the portrayed fat bodies are either fragmented into specific body parts that are shedding weight (a fat chin undergoing liposuction, a fat calf exercising), or they are dehumanized by a medical aesthetic (for example, a thermogram image reduces the portrayed fat body to "a brightly colored [*sic*] pseudoscientific, psychedelic blob"). This latter image, like the accompanying text, frames fatness as unhealthy and pathological, and thus as something to be remedied, to be erased. Kent likens the incessant erasure of fatness within the magazine – and within the broader visual culture – to the process of abjection as defined by Julia Kristeva, whereby the clean and proper self is both created and sustained by expelling the abject other. The implications of such visual abjection, Kent argues, is that the "self is never fat," that "there is no such thing as a fat *person*." Kent, 133-135.

[68] Charlotte Cooper, "Headless Fatties," *Dr. Charlotte Cooper*, last modified January, 2007, http://charlottecooper.net/publishing/digital/headless-fatties-01-07.

[69] "What Fast Food Diets Show," *Classically Liberal*, last modified April 4, 2010, http://freestudents.blogspot.com/2010/04/what-fast-food-diets-show.html

negative, stereotypical representation.[70] Indeed, clinical psychologist Rebecca Puhl and her colleagues have demonstrated the damaging effects of headless fatty images, which perpetuate the social acceptability of weight stigmatization by visually communicating fat bias, irrespective of the written or verbal content of the accompanying news report.[71] She thus recommends the increased production of positive, non-stereotypical images of fat bodies, which she and Rebecca Pearl have found to significantly reduce viewers' weight biases.[72]

Not surprisingly, size acceptance activists have invested considerable time and effort counteracting harmful representations of fatness by creating a fat-positive visual subculture. Lauren Gurrieri, for example, created Stocky Bodies, an online image base designed to disrupt the widespread use of headless fatty photographs by making fat-positive imagery freely available for media publication (1.6).[73] The image library consists of photographs depicting whole fat bodies at work, at play, at the gym, eating vegetables and in meaningful relationships; photographs that resist the flattening effects of stereotypical imagery by portraying people of size as full, complex individuals with unique talents, interests, and personalities.[74] Such fat-positive imagery is seen as vital within the fat activist community because, to quote Erin Keating, "visibility leads to acceptance in our seeing-is-believing culture."[75] It is no wonder, then, that image-based activism is one of the most popular modes of resistance within the size acceptance movement. In addition to Stocky Bodies, visual activist efforts include the publication of fat-

[70] See Rebecca M. Puhl, Jamie Lee Peterson, Jenny A. DePierre and Joerg Luedicke, "Headless, Hungry, and Unhealthy: A Video Content Analysis of Obese Persons Portrayed in Online News," *Journal of Health Communication: International Perspectives* 18, no. 6 (2013): 697; Majida Kargbo, "Toward a New Relationality: Digital Photography, Shame, and the Fat Subject," *Fat Studies* 2, no. 2 (2013): 160.
[71] Puhl, Peterson, DePierre and Luedicke, 687.
[72] Rebecca L. Pearl, Rebecca M. Puhl, and Kelly D. Brownell, "Positive Media Portrayals of Obese Persons: Impact on Attitudes and Image Preferences," *Health Psychology* 31, no. 6 (2012): 827.
[73] See www.stockybodies.com.
[74] Gurrieri argues that Stocky Bodies challenge negative stereotypes, re-humanize fat bodies, and celebrate fat flesh; Lauren Gurrieri, "Stocky Bodies: Fat Visual Activism," *Fat Studies* 2, no. 2 (2013), 202-206.
[75] Erin Keating quoted by LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?* 72.

positive zines,[76] theatre productions,[77] documentary films,[78] online comics and graphic novels,[79] fat burlesque,[80] Fat Lady revivalist performance,[81] and fat nude portraiture.[82] These works are as diverse in content as they are in form, yet they share the goal of not only combating the invisibility of fat flesh, but also of framing the fat body in particular ways that defy negative stereotypes; depicting fatness, for example, as heroic (1.7), athletic (1.8, 1.9), sexual (1.10), and beautiful (1.11).

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[76] Examples include the 1990s classics *FaT GiRl: A Zine for Fat Dykes and the Women Who Want Them* and *i'm so fucking beautiful*, as well as the more recent *Two By Four* and *Girlzilla: A Zine for Fat Girls by Fat Girls.* For an analysis on these and other zines, see Stefanie Snider, "Revisioning Fat Lesbian Subjects in Contemporary Lesbian Periodicals," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 14 (2010): 174-184.

[77] For an in-depth analysis on contemporary body-conscious theatre productions, see Rebecca Stone Thornberry, "Fat Chance: Images of Women of Size in the American Theatre" (PhD diss., University of Colorado, Boulder, 2008).

[78] Two recent documentary films about the size acceptance movement are *The Fat Body (In)Visible* and *Aquaporko!*

[79] For an analysis of the graphic novel *Skim*, see Marty Fink, "*It Gets Fatter*: Graphic Fatness and Resilient Eating in Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's *Skim*," *Fat Studies* 2, no. 2 (2013): 132.

[80] The now-disbanded Fat Bottom Revue, founded by the late Heather McAllister, remains one of the most influential fat activist performance groups of all time. McAllister lauded fat burlesque as a rare opportunity for fat women to gain "sexual currency," and famously insisted that because"(t)he oppression of anti-fat hatred is sited on the body, […] it is in the body that those wounds can be healed;" Heather McAllister, "Embodying Fat Liberation," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 311.

[81] For an analysis of Katy Dierlam's performance as the Fat Lady Helen Melon, see Sharon Mazer, "'She's So Fat…': Facing the Fat Lady at Coney Island's Sideshows by the Seashore," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 257.

[82] Fat nude portraiture combats the invisibility of fat flesh and tends to also (re)claim beauty for fat subjects. Laurie Toby Edison and Debbie Notkin created *Women En Large: Images of Fat Nudes* (a black-and-white art photography book that features fat female models of various ages, races, and abilities gardening, cooking, playing instruments, lifting weights, and engaging in a variety of other everyday activities) to rectify the erasure of the fat body from 1990s visual culture, in which, the authors observe, "the fat woman herself is rarely shown at all, and virtually never shown as beautiful, or real;" Laurie Toby Edison and Debbie Notkin, *Women En Large: Images of Fat Nudes* (San Francisco: Books in Focus, 1994): 91-92. Former *Star Trek* actor Leonard Nimoy photographed members of Fat Bottom Revue in his black-and-white art photography book, *The Full Body Project*. Unlike Notkin and Edison, Nimoy highlights only the beauty of his models (rather than their "real" identities) by photographing them in an art gallery and posing them in ways that explicitly reference famous fashion photography of the 1980s; Leonard Nimoy, *The Full Body Project* (New York: Five Ties, 2007): 11. Substantia Jones' ongoing *Adipositivity Project* features joyous, playful, and overtly sexual photographs of fat bodies. With this website, Jones "aims to promote size acceptance […] through a visual display of fat physicality. The sort that's normally unseen. The hope is to widen definitions of beauty. Literally;" Substantia Jones, "The Adipositivity Project," *Adipositivity*, last modified March 3, 2014, www.adipositivity.com. Finally, the Italian artist Yossi Loloi exclusively photographs women who weigh between 420-600 lbs. for his striking *Full Beauty Project*. Although Loloi describes the project "as a form of protest against discrimination set by media and by today's society," he suggests that such discrimination is directed at men who are attracted to fat women, rather than at fat women themselves. "I believe we own a 'freedom of taste,'" he writes, "and one shouldn't be reluctant of expressing his inclination towards it;" Yossi Loloi, "Artist Statement," *Full Beauty Project*, last modified 2011, http://fullbeautyproject.com/index.php?/about/about/.

Although the size acceptance movement remains relatively small, it has certainly gained momentum in recent decades, its growth paralleling the mounting moral panic of the so-called "obesity epidemic." Cooper provided evidence for this growth at the 2010 NOLOSE (National Organization for Lesbians of Size Everywhere) conference, where she organized a workshop entitled *The Time of Our Lives: Fighting Fat Panic through Fat History, Memory and Culture*, in which she mounted a massive, blank timeline on the wall and invited fellow conference attendees to write down their own activist histories. While this fascinating document (1.12) and accompanying zine[83] are not (and were not intended to be) comprehensive histories of fat resistance, they nonetheless reveal both the diversity of grassroots activism as well as its increasing popularity over time. Specifically, the timeline chronicles the formation of local fat liberation groups; the publication of fat-positive fashion magazines and subversive zines; the emergence of fat-friendly physical activity programs, fat fashion, and "adipositive" blogs; the popularity of fat-positive creative projects involving photography, poetry, and performance; the organization of community-building social events and academic conferences; successful weight-discrimination law suits and government lobbying efforts; and, finally, the development of Health At Every Size, an alternative medical paradigm that promotes healthy living rather than weight loss.[84] The timeline thus reveals a diverse and multifaceted movement that counterbalances hardnosed education efforts, legal battles, and critical health research with the strategic use of play[85] to challenge hegemonic conceptions of fatness.

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[83] Charlotte Cooper, "A Queer and Trans Fat Activist Timeline: Queering Fat Activist Nationality and Cultural Imperialism," *Fat Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 61-74.

[84] For more information, see Deb Burgard, "What is Health at Every Size?" in *The Fat Studies Reader,* eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 42; and Linda Bacon, *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2010).

[85] I use "play" to reference two (potentially overlapping) activist strategies. On the one hand, "play" refers to the widespread use of (often satirical) humour in fat activism, which Farrell praises as a powerful means to combat fat stigma; Farrell, 138. But as LeBesco demonstrates in *Revolting Bodies?*, "play" can also involve politicized self-experimentation. "In a political climate where the comfort of some is predicated upon the silence of others," she

My Chapters

But what, one might ask, is the next step for size acceptance? How to further diversify fat activist efforts? How to improve upon existing strategies? These are the questions that have guided my research and that form the conceptual backbone of this thesis, as I consider the work of three artists who, I believe, steer the movement into unchartered territory.

I begin with Rachel Herrick and her ongoing *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies* (*MOCS*), a multimedia project centred on the figure of the "obeast," a fictional animal that is modelled after the artist's likeness and that embodies many fat stereotypes. Specifically, I consider *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History*, a faux interdisciplinary academic journal detailing the obeast's biology and complicated history with humankind. Focusing on Herrick's appropriation of the muumuu as obeast pelt, I develop a definition of "fat drag" as the parodic performance of fat stereotypes that both exaggerates and resists stereotypical fatness. I compare Herrick's political use of fashion with that of the now-disbanded Canadian performance troupe Pretty Porky and Pissed Off (PPPO), who shun the muumuu in favour of sexy and trendy clothing that, they believe, counter negative stereotypes about fat bodies as dowdy and asexual. I argue that Herrick's fat drag is an important deviation from these kinds of visual activist strategies that seek only to dispel negative stereotypes about fatness because it cleverly exaggerates such beliefs in ways that re-signify fatness as a positive embodiment.

My second chapter considers Kimberly Dark, a Californian performance artist who explores issues of social inequality (particularly those relating to gender, sexuality and size)

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argues, "queer theory encourages us to play with our selves and to make joyful noise in the doing." Inspired by queer activists who speak their sexualities in order to insert themselves into sexuality discourses, LeBesco is convinced of the power of daily interpersonal communication (or "small talk") and encourages fat activists to use language to re-define the cultural meanings of fatness. LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?* 1-13. Only then, she suggests, will we be able to "begin to envision *fat play*, rather than *fat pathology*." LeBesco, "Queering Fat Bodies/Politics," 83.

through storytelling. In June, 2012, Dark performed at the University of Alberta as part of the Canadian Student Obesity Meeting, a graduate conference focusing on the causes, consequences, and potential treatments of "obesity." Her performance comprises two stories that investigate the contested presence of fat bodies within two particularly fat-phobic social settings: the airplane and the yoga studio. Both narratives centre on themes of status and visibility as Dark considers how the ways in which strangers alternately look and refuse to look at her body enact size-related power disparities. I situate her work within the tradition of visibility politics, which, in fat activism, involves raising consciousness about fat phobia, coming out as fat, and creating a fat-positive visual subculture. Although many aspects of Dark's performance adhere to this rather conventional activist model (conventional because all three of its components are deeply rooted in fat activist tradition and enjoy immense popularity), I argue that she also complicates visibility politics by attending to *visuality*: the historically and culturally specific ways that we learn to see. Specifically, Dark explores a visuality that the anthropologist Mark Graham refers to as "lipoliteracy," which is the practice of "reading" body fat as evidence of one's health, behaviours, abilities, and personality traits. Painting lipoliteracy as an unconscious and automatic process, Dark refuses to allow it to go unnoticed in the space of her performance. I argue that by foregrounding and probematizing lipoliteracy, Dark ultimately disrupts the ways in which we read fat bodies.

In my third chapter, I consider *Closed Contact*, a photographic series that depicts Scottish painter Jenny Saville lying naked atop a large pane of plastic glass and violently contorting her flesh into nearly unrecognizable forms. I suggest that her demonstrably painful poses are potentially subversive because they arouse, at least in me, a rather visceral empathy that makes me very aware of my own fat. I identify these poses as examples of transformative violence,

which I differentiate from the kinds of violence that stem from and support fat phobia, such as disciplinary violence (which controls the appearance and arrangement of fat on the body) and exclusionary violence (which expels fat from the body). Transformative violence, in contrast, drastically alters the body to create a number of ambiguities, for example between interior and exterior, visible and invisible, subject and object. These ambiguities, I argue, blur the socially constructed distinction between body and fat, enabling one to re-conceive fat as integral to flesh. Finally, I suggest that the transformative violence of *Closed Contact* poses an exciting alternative to the grotesque as a means of theorizing ambiguity in fat studies.

***Woman Eating*, Revisited**

I had been staring at *Woman Eating* for too long. I no longer felt the pulse of this figure; her warmth chilled, her breath stilled, her uncanny sense of presence withered with time. Her grit now clashed with the sterile surroundings – no longer a grimy diner, but a cold, cavernous museum. Her immobile flesh seemed almost taxidermic, frozen forever in her characteristic pose: spoon in hand, ready to consume. The illusion of authenticity, of life, slowly cracked and then shattered as her reality came into focus. This was not a woman caught in the act of transgressive overconsumption. This was, instead, a *spectacle of transgression*. In fat phobic societies that value thinness as the embodiment of self-control, personal responsibility and morality – a construction that is tightly bound with classist ideologies[86] – the fat, working-class woman is triply transgressive for her size, her poverty, and her apparent rejection of hegemonic value systems, demonstrated by her refusal to limit her consumption of fatty foods (a stereotype enacted by Duane Hanson's sculpture). *Woman Eating* can be understood as a spectacle of transgression because it offers the viewer visual evidence of the woman's weight, class, and subversive eating habits. Her size is inherently visible, but is nonetheless accentuated by the fit

[86] See Farrell, 25-58.

of her dress, which pulls tight against the expanse of her stomach. Her inexpensive and well-worn clothing also indicates her class position, which is seemingly confirmed by the presence of the *Globe*, a tabloid newspaper, and by the shabbiness of the implied dining space. The table most clearly functions as a spectacle of transgression, as the can of peanuts, empty sundae dish, glass of soda pop, and uneaten banana split are laid out as proof of the fat woman's overconsumption. This is not an arbitrary arrangement of objects, but a careful display of evidence intended to teach the viewer something about the figure: she is fat because she eats too much. But because overconsumption is taboo in fat phobic cultures, this seemingly objective observation is loaded with hateful connotations: she is fat because she cannot control her appetite, and by extension, because she is irresponsible and immoral. *Woman Eating* can thus be interpreted as both a spectacle and condemnation of transgressions against Western bodily norms.

One could follow this train of thought to explore how *Woman Eating* operates in relation to the politics of museum display. Briefly, cultural historian Tony Bennett argues that early museums democratized the power of knowledge by organizing exhibitions in ways that maximized their pedagogical potential, thereby enabling the viewing public to look at the objects on display from a position of authority as knowledgeable experts.[87] This practice was incredibly problematic when applied to the display of bodies, which was common in the nineteenth century. International expositions and world fairs, for example, often featured cultural pavilions that were spatially organized to hierarchize non-white bodies "from the barbaric to the nearly civilized,"[88] thereby conferring imperialist ideology. Cultural theorists have, unsurprisingly, argued that these kinds of exhibits construct non-white bodies as Other; Bennett, for example, suggests that such

[87] Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," *New Formations* 4 (1988): 73-102.
[88] Ibid, 96.

displays were instrumental in the formation of European nation-states because they solidified national identities by differentiating "us" from "them."[89] Rendering non-white bodies objects of display effects similar power dynamics as the pedagogical displays of museum exhibitions because the viewer's ability to see, inspect, and become knowledgeable about the displayed object situates him/her in a position of relative power; as Susan Stewart writes, "the spectacle assumes that the object is blinded; only the audience sees."[90]

Woman Eating might be understood in this context as an object of display that mimics (but does not recreate) the troubling power differential described by Bennett and Stewart. My initial viewing discomfort arose from my sense of voyeurism, as the sculpted figure's uncannily lifelike quality created the illusion that she could, at any moment, return my scrutinizing look. Given that she is an inanimate object, this was of course impossible, but her status as an object of *display* symbolically confirmed this impossibility by rendering her powerless to the violence of my gaze. Thus even after the illusion of her authenticity shattered, and my gaze consequently shifted from one of illicit voyeurism to one of sanctioned evaluation, I remained uncomfortable knowing that my continued visual inspection of the artwork disempowered fatness. Although these and other ideas (relating, perhaps, to the relations between size, class, and economic structures) could be explored in more depth, I hope to have shown, with this brief analysis of *Woman Eating*, that art can catalyze critical analyses of hegemonic notions of fatness and of the marginalized position of the fat subject, even when the art in question is not explicitly activist, or indeed, works to uphold fat phobia.

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[89] Bennett argues that the display of non-white bodies "organized the implied public – the white citizenries of the imperialist powers – into a unity, representationally effacing divisions within the body politic in constructing a 'we' conceived as the realization, and therefore just beneficiaries, of the processes of evolution and identified as a unity in opposition to the primitive otherness of conquered peoples." Ibid, 92.

[90] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 108.

1.1 Duane Hanson, *Woman Eating*, 1971.

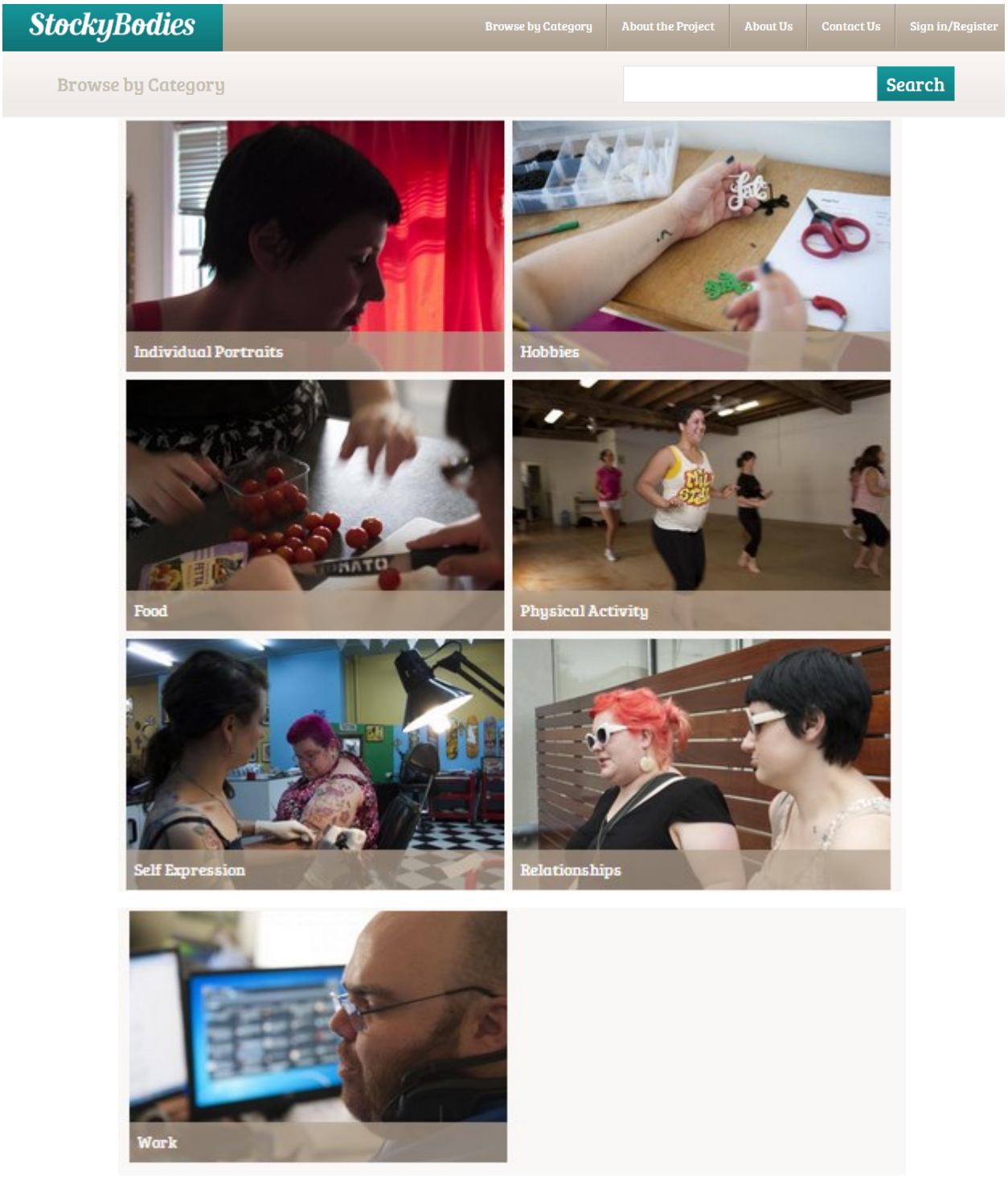
1.2 Duane Hanson, *Woman Eating*, detail, 1971.

1.3 Duane Hanson, *Woman Eating*, detail, 1971.

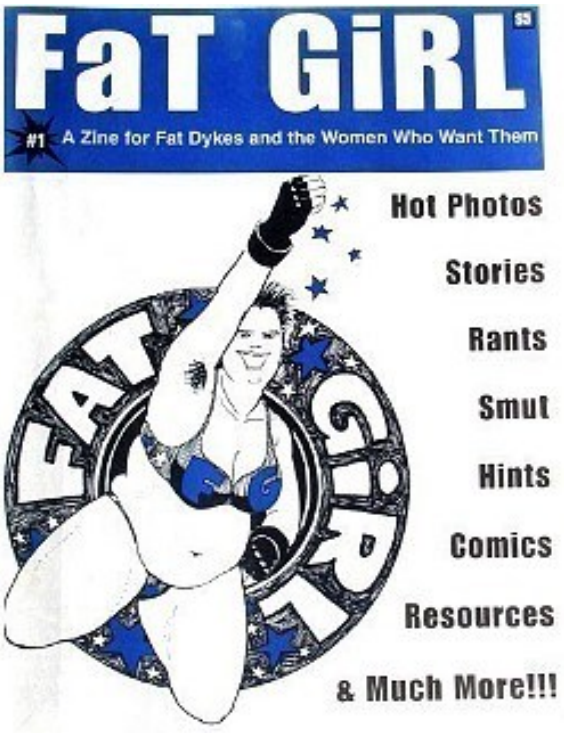
1.4 Duane Hanson, *Woman Eating*, detail, 1971.

1.5 Example of a “Headless Fatty” photograph. Photographer unknown, 2010.

1.6 Lauren Gurrieri, *StockyBodies* homepage, 2013.



1.7 Front cover of *FaT GiRl: A Zine for Fat Dykes and the Women Who Want Them*, issue no. 1, 1994.



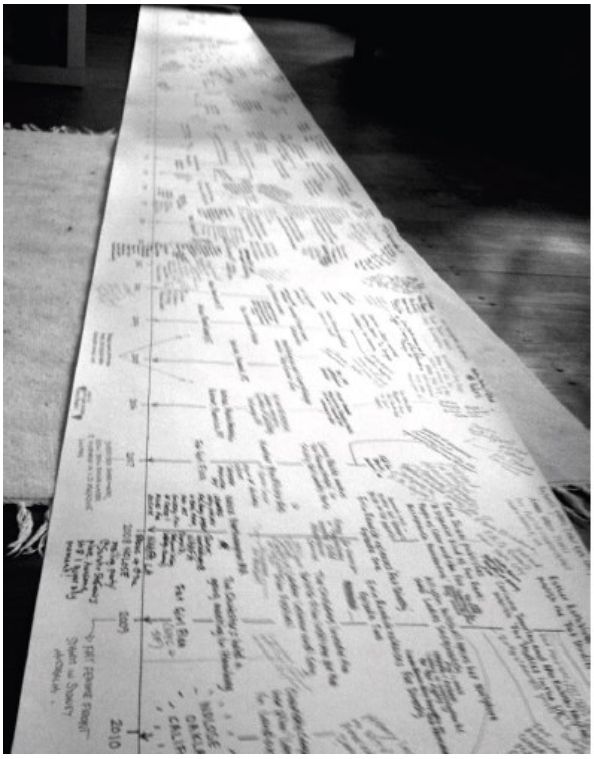
1.8 Film still, *Aquaporko! The Documentary*, directed by Kelli Jean Drinkwater, 2013.

1.9 Substantia Jones, *Adipositivity 508*, 2014.

1.10 Substantia Jones, *Adipositivity 513*, 2014.

1.11 Yossi Loloi, *Full Beauty Project*, 2012.

1.12 Charlotte Cooper, *A Trans and Queer Fat Activist Timeline*, 2010.



Rachel Herrick's Fat Drag

Introducing the Obeast

A few months ago, I heard the click of my apartment door's mail slot and immediately darted towards my entranceway. There, I found a slim package lying on the floor and beamed; after weeks of impatient waiting, Rachel Herrick's two-part book set, *A Guide to the North American Obeast*, had finally arrived (2.1). I carried the parcel back into my living room, tore open its wrappings, removed the thick rubber band that bound the two books together, sat down, and examined the front cover of the set's first book, *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History.* A simple outline drawing of a woman's face dominated the page, whose profile – specifically, her sloping chin line – hinted at her size. The book's title was printed across her shoulder-length hair, effectively labelling her as an "obeast," an uncannily familiar term that combines the words "obese" and "beast" to conjure stereotypical images of monstrous, animalistic fatness. As I opened the book's cover and flipped through its pages, I found all the trappings of an interdisciplinary academic journal, including the editor's (Herrick's) introduction, a series of scholarly articles complete with careful citations and explanatory footnotes, short biographies of its contributors, and a list of included figures and illustrations. Essay topics ranged from the obeast's evolutionary history, taxonomy, anatomical functions and mating behaviours to its commercial value in Georgian England and spiritual relevance in American Protestantism. I was particularly struck by the journal's various images, which ranged from the humorous (such as an anatomical diagram that labelled the obeast's cankle, 2.2) to the darkly disturbing (such as the illustration of an obeast locked within an eighteenth-century "obvoile" extraction cage, 2.3). My intrigue had now matched my initial excitement, and I began reading in earnest.

In her introduction, Herrick identifies herself as the Executive Director of the Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies (MOCS), an organization dedicated to the survival of the endangered obeast. Arguing that this can only be accomplished with both scientific research and educational public outreach, she classifies *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History* as part of the latter effort. Here, however, the obeast is neither pictured nor defined; Herrick instead assumes that the reader is already familiar with the imagined animal, for she is "hard pressed to find an animal whose history is as linked with that of humans as the North American Obeast."[91] Herrick's initial vagueness is short-lived, however, for two pages later, writing under the guise of the fictitious paleontologist Houston K. Chalmers, she defines the obeast as "a genus of bipedal mammals that share distant ungulate ancestry with today's manatees, aardvarks, and elephants."[92] Herrick/Chalmers then traces the obeast's evolution from the aquatic *Obestus rex* (the "fourteen-foot, seven-thousand-pound, air-breathing behemoth" that lived ninety-five million years ago, 2.4) to its three current species, the Northern Obeast (*Obeastus horrentus*), the Southern Obeast (*Obeastus appalachus*), and the Western Obeast (*Obeastus pratarius*).[93] An evolutionary diagram accompanies the text (2.5). Its figures are shown in profile and rendered in gray with thin, precise white lines marking the animals' fins and arms. The modern obeast is visually linked with its evolutionary ancestors through shared facial features such as humanoid foreheads, noses, lips and chins. Because the diagram clearly appropriates similar imagery commonly used to illustrate human evolution, it establishes what Herrick calls the "preposterous

[91] Rachel Herrick, *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History* (Portland: Publication Studio, 2013), vii.
[92] Ibid, 1.
[93] Ibid, 1.

pretense"[94] of the MOCS project, which is that fat bodies and thin bodies constitute separate species: obeasts and humans.

The following article, "Modern Obeast Taxonomy and Description," is a faux report by the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife that systematically organizes biological data about the three obeast species into a rather straightforward classification system.[95] The text describes anatomical consistencies (such as height and weight ranges) and disparities (such as thermal regulatory systems) between obeasts, paying particular attention to the features and functions of the animals' insulating brown manes and thick, fleshy pelts. Further information about the obeasts' physical characteristics is conveyed with three illustrative diagrams (2.6). Male and female obeasts (also referred to as bulls and cows) are displayed side-by-side, their sex made identifiable by the inclusion of gender symbols. One can differentiate between them by the colouration of their floral patterned pelts and by their distinctive facial features: black, ovular growths surround the eyes of cows, while vivid hues of pink and blue colour the cheeks and eyelids of bulls. But as Stefanie Snider points out in her analysis of MOCS, "the pelts of the obeast […] are obviously fabric muumuus, not actual furry skins; the gendered facial features are obviously human glasses for the female and human cosmetics for the male, not actual facial growths or skin colors."[96] Even Herrick admits that "the obeast is a badly created animal"[97] that faithfully models her own fat body and is thus easily recognizable as human. Together, then, the

[94] Rachel Herrick, "Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies," in *Obeast: A Broader View*, ed. Rachel Herrick (Portland: Publication Studio, 2013), 70. This was originally published as the artist's MFA thesis in 2011.
[95] The report also describes obeast behavioural patterns, lists lethal attacks on humans, provides an account of the animal's fluctuating population levels and consequent "extinct" and "endangered" statuses, and summarizes the controversy surrounding the illegal conservation efforts of MOCS extremists. Herrick, *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History,* 7-15.
[96] Stefanie Snider, "An Obeast Walk into a Museum: The Politics of Fat Oppression, Performing the Other, and Museum Display in Rachel Herrick's *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies*," in *Obeast: A Broader View,* ed. Rachel Herrick (Portland: Publication Studio, 2013): 13.
[97] E-mail correspondence quoted in Snider, 14.

front cover and first ten pages of *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History* present the obeast as an unmistakably "unnatural" artistic construction.

In *Obeast: A Broader View* (the second half of *A Guide to the North American Obeast* that compiles real-life academic analyses of, and activist responses to, the larger MOCS project),[98] Herrick pinpoints her exasperation with fat phobia as the catalyst for inventing the obeast:

> The wearing dissonance caused by my self-perceptions existing at odds with the cultural treatment and portrayal of fat people frustrated me to the point where I could no longer simply navigate within the system of fat discrimination; I needed to examine it with the tools available to me as an artist. At a genesis moment for the project, I remember thinking, "Ok, fine. I'll be fat just the way the world thinks I am. I'll live the stereotype."[99]

To live the stereotype of the fat woman is to occupy the position of the disenfranchised Other. Herrick marked herself as such by wearing homemade muumuus, which are very loose, drape-like dresses that she describes as "culturally representative (in a kitschy, clichéd kind of way) of obesity."[100] The tedious task of sewing muumuus provided Herrick the opportunity for further critical reflection on fat phobia and size discrimination, during which time she

> began to think of [herself] (and all overweight people) as a kind of wild animal – a creature that lived outside human culture but was of concern to humans. Thus the North American Obeast was born.[101]

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[98] It is unclear whether the contributors to *Obeast: A Broader View* had access to *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History* prior to its concurrent publication; what is certain, however, is that they studied other, earlier manifestations of MOCS, including numerous art gallery installations modelled after natural history museums and the official MOCS website, www.obeasts.org. This chapter focuses exclusively on *A Guide to the North American Obeast*. For more information about Herrick's gallery installations and website, see Snider, "An Obeast Walks into a Museum," 10-12, 20-22.

[99] Herrick, "Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies," 68.

[100] Rachel Herrick, "Muumuus," *Rachel Herrick*, last modified April 27, 2010, rachelherrick.wordpress.com/2010/04/27/muumuus. This blog entry chronicles Herrick's initial adoption of muumuus as a kind of daily uniform, describing the sewing process, the viewing reactions of strangers (who often gawked at her outfit), and the complex affects she felt whilst wearing her creations, such as shame, sadness, and anger; "It felt like an admission that I was all the things that people think fat people are;" ibid.

[101] Herrick, "Museum," 68.

As the obeast, Herrick performs the *ultimate* Other: the animal, the non-human, the monster. Her visual representation in *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History* is at odds, however, with her verbal/written representation in the same text. Visually, she occupies the marginalized position of the obeast as the object of study. Verbally, she situates herself in authoritative subject positions by assuming several professional aliases, posing as a conservation anthropologist, a palaeontologist, an environmental economist, a biologist, a journalist, a captive breeder, a professor of religion, and several historians. She writes:

> I am interested in the way information and ideas get legitimized by [scientific and academic frameworks] and how these legitimized ideas become incorporated into the ideology of culturally dominant (centralized) groups. My intention through the obeast work is to adopt the perspective and voice of the dominant group and satirize its systems by participating in them, straight-faced, within the parameters of a preposterous pretense.[102]

Herrick suggests that science derives its authoritative power, or legitimacy, from its alleged neutrality, as it claims to reveal objective truths about a knowable reality. "We trust those truths and orient our belief systems around them," she writes, because, "after all, how can one argue with objective findings?" [103] Jennifer Denbow elaborates on the relationship between science and stigma by suggesting that the conflation of health and morality (or healthism) imbues scientific findings with moral judgments; because fat is unhealthy, it must be immoral. "Obesity" science, she continues, is largely responsible for fat stigma because expert opinion is equated with truth and accepted as factual:

> The partial perspective and situated knowledge of the expert is obscured because the expert's conclusions appear to represent universal, transcendent truths. The existence of an obesity epidemic and the unhealthy, immorality of fat are taken for granted as obvious facts of nature [that are] beyond critical examination.[104]

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[102] Herrick, "Museum," 69-70.
[103] Herrick, "Museum," 79-80.
[104] Jennifer Denbow, "The Obeast's Challenge to Expert Knowledge," in *Obeast: A Broader View*, ed. Rachel Herrick (Portland: Publication Studio, 2013), 51.

Thus by performing both the obeast and various representatives of the dominant group, Herrick embodies the oppressor and oppressed, self and other, scientist and specimen, which enables the artist to more fully explore the power dynamics involved in weight discrimination. The diversity of the essays included in *Obeast: A Broader View* attest to the complexity of MOCS: the authors note the ways in which the project operates as a critique of both fat stigma[105] and of the scientific institutions that construct and support such stigma,[106] and also consider Herrick's effective use of satirical humour[107] to explore the complexities of fatness and fat activisms (both pro-fat and anti-fat).[108]

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History* (which I will hereafter refer to simply as *Obeast*) functions as an "exercise in absurd literalness"[109] that parodies fat stereotypes in order to expose them as social constructs, grounding my analysis Judith Butler's theorizations of gender, parody and drag. I will compare MOCS with two works by the disbanded fat activist performance group Pretty Porky and Pissed Off (PPPO), *Queen Sized on Queen Street* and *Cake Dance*, which the troupe's founder, Allyson Mitchell, has characterized as "fat drag." I will consider Kathleen LeBesco's theorization of fat suits, Jerry Mosher's discussion of male televisual fat performativity, and Joyce L. Huff's analysis of fat drag in *The Woman in White* to suggest a definition of fat drag as the parody of

[105] Renowned fat activist Marilyn Wann argues that MOCS makes "the villainy of fat hate visible;" Marilyn Wann, "I am an Obeast," in *Obeast: A Broader View*, ed. Rachel Herrick (Portland: Publication Studio, 2013), 3.
[106] In addition to Denbow, Stefanie Snider discusses the ways in which scientific institutions relate to fat phobia. Specifically, she argues that Herrick's appropriation of the natural history museum and its related politics of display position the obeast (and the "obese") as Other, thereby likening the relationship between fat phobia and size discrimination to that between colonist ideologies and racism; Snider, "An Obeast Walks into a Museum," 8.
[107] Comedian Jenny Hagel suggests that Herrick's satire is not only funny, but thought-provoking, and derives its activist value from its ability to lead viewers to "think about why it's funny and what that means;" Jenny Hagel "In Defense of Comedy," in *Obeast: A Broader View*, ed. Rachel Herrick (Portland: Publication Studio, 2013), 45.
[108] Carl Dyke, "Obeasts, Meta-activism and Big Bothering," in *Obeast: A Broader View*, ed. Rachel Herrick (Portland: Publication Studio, 2013), 55-61.
[109] Rachel Herrick, "The Skinny," in *Obeast: A Broader View*, ed. Rachel Herrick (Portland: Publication Studio, 2013), ix.

what I call "size norms" that both exaggerates and resists stereotypical fatness. Focusing on the artists' uses of fashion (particularly, on PPPO's and Herrick's respective rejection and embrace of the muumuu), I will argue that PPPO's fat drag closely aligns with the more conventional activist strategies outlined in the introductory chapter of this thesis that seek to disprove negative fat stereotypes by creating a fat-positive visual subculture, while Herrick's drag deviates from such strategies by exaggerating fat stereotypes in ways that re-signify fatness as a desirable embodiment.

MOCS as Parodic Image

Humour abounds in *Obeast*. I chuckled at the sight of the *Obestus Rex*, smirked at the "restored" circus poster advertising the spectacle of the "Man-Eating Obeast" (2.7), and laughed out loud at an illustration of the obeast mating position (2.8). But this is not humour for humour's sake; this is political. In her MFA thesis, Herrick positions MOCS within a legacy of activist efforts that utilize humour to expose and prompt public discourse about social problems. She cites Donna Haraway's writings about hoax and Andre Breton's concept of black humour as especially formative influences on her work, and indeed, *Obeast* can be understood as a kind of hoax (penned, as it is, by the artist under various pseudonyms)[110] filled with darkly humorous imagery (such as a black-and-white photograph depicting two shotgun-wielding park rangers looming over the sprawling body of a dead obeast whom they presumably shot, 2.9).[111] I contend that *Obeast* is also parodic.

Defining parody as "language beside itself," communications scholar Robert Hariman argues that the fundamental condition of parody is that it creates an image of its referent; it is an

[110] Herrick also credits Lindsay Anderberg and J. R. Hustwit (penname Barnabus T. Pike) as contributors to *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History*.
[111] Herrick argues that this photograph uses "the taboo of murder to both illustrate the obeast's historical past and satirize the value of fat people." Herrick, "Museum," 71.

imitation, a doubling, a mime of something else.[112] This alone is potentially subversive, he argues, for when "the weight of authority is converted into an image," critical thinking about and consequent resistance against the authoritative original become feasible.[113] *Obeast* can be understood as the image of an academic journal because Herrick replicates its distinctive forms (such as the articles' citations and footnotes) and echoes the narrative voices that characterize different scholarly disciplines (the "palaeontologist," for example, demonstrates scientific objectivity with concise, factual writing, while the "captive breeder" opens her exploratory research on obeast mating behaviours with an autobiographical anecdote). According to Hariman, this kind of parodic replication brings the original into focus as "an object of one's attention rather than a transparent vehicle for some other message."[114] Here, the structure and content of *Obeast* parody academic publications in a way that foregrounds the authority of academia and problematizes its role in the creation and perpetuation of fat phobia. For example, the article on obeast mating behaviours that Herrick writes under the guise of Belva O. Longfellow, the fictional Director of Captive Breeding at the Chicago Zoological Park, is reminiscent of scientific research investigating sexual function, desire, and practices among "obese" populations that frame fat bodies as abnormally hypo-sexual and seem to implicitly paint fatness as sexually unappealing and inadequate.[115] Similarly, the figure of the obeast is the

[112] Robert Hariman, "Political Parody and Public Culture," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 2 (2008): 249.
[113] Ibid, 254.
[114] Ibid, 253.
[115] According to Herrick/Longfellow, obeast cows are sexually fickle creatures that bulls must pursue with tenacity in order to reproduce; they must secure and fortify shelter, meticulously groom their pelts and facial markings, gather an immense food supply, and transmit bioseismic signals to communicate their whereabouts. Once approached by a cow, the bull must offer her food and subject himself to her repeated head butts, which are believed to test his strength and vigor. Brief coitus results only after hours of such "testing and bonding" rituals. The cow is prone to reject the bull at any point if she is unimpressed by the shelter, the food offering, his physique or disposition. Even more incredibly, "a cow will not typically allow herself to ovulate until she is comfortable with the pair bond and can voluntarily terminate dangerous or genetically undesirable pregnancies." Thus female obeasts copulate infrequently and methodically, displaying no sex drive beyond that which is required for ideal reproduction. Herrick, *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History*, 27. This article parodies scholarly research on the sexual abilities and behaviours of fat bodies, which tend to similarly treat these bodies as pathological objects of

parodic image of fat stereotypes that, Herrick explains, "performs fat as our culture represents it: simple-minded, undisciplined, endangered yet threatening."[116] As an "opportunistic omnivore,"[117] the obeast eats everything edible within its reach, sometimes feeding for ten consecutive hours; it is an aloof, solitary animal that not only avoids human contact but rarely interacts with other obeasts; it typically moves very slowly, and sleeps through the winters (although it does not truly hibernate); it is hypo-sexual by human standards, copulating only to reproduce. Is this not an absurdly exaggerated image of the gorging, awkward, lonely, sluggish and asexual fat bodies that populate the pop-cultural landscape (as seen, for example, in reality television programs like *The Biggest Loser*)? Herrick may describe MOCS as "an exercise in absurd literalness,"[118] but I would argue that we read it, rather, as an example of political parody.

"Parody" is, of course, a rather fluid term that has been used since antiquity to describe a staggering array of cultural forms and mimetic gestures, and can therefore be tricky to pin down. Theories of parody abound; it has been defined, for example, as the mechanization of an organic original,[119] as the "trans-contextualization" of canonical art forms,[120] and as the linguistic allusion to precursor texts.[121] The theorization of parody that Judith Butler puts forth in her groundbreaking text, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, is arguably the most influential within both feminist and queer scholarship, and, by extension, fat studies. The

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study; see, for example, Ronette L. Kolotkin, Christie Zunker and Truls Østbye, "Sexual Functioning and Obesity: A Review," *Obesity* 20, no. 12 (2012): 2325-2333, a research review that emphasizes studies finding a positive relationship between BMI and sexual dysfunction (particularly those that have found a stronger relationship among women) over other studies that find no relation between size and sexual ability; see also Eleonora Poggiogalle, Luca Di Lazzaro, Alessandro Pinto, Silvia Migliaccio, Andrea Lenzi and Lorenzo M. Donini, "Health-Related Quality of Life and Quality of Sexual Life in Obese Subjects," *International Journal of Endocrinology* (2014): 1-7, which studies sexual function in relation to BMI, waist circumference, gender, age, psychological status, and disability.

[116] Herrick, "The Skinny," x.

[117] Herrick, *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History*, 10.

[118] Herrick, "The Skinny," ix.

[119] Margaret A. Rose discusses Russian formalist theorizations of parody in *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 119.

[120] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 7.

[121] Simon Dentith, *Parody* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 6.

primary aim of this work is, as its title suggests, to trouble gender constructions – specifically, to destabilize the gender binary by questioning the "compulsory order of sex/gender/desire,"[122] or heterosexual coherence, which is the linear mapping of male/female sex onto masculine/feminine gender identity, respectively, and then onto heterosexuality. Butler rationalizes this approach by explaining that the gender binary depends on the logic of heterosexual coherence because it comprises mutually exclusive subjects (masculine males and feminine females) who comply with the compulsory order of sex/gender/desire and who can therefore be understood as coherent. She initially challenges this idea of a coherent subject by invoking the feminist distinction between sex and gender, which positions anatomical sex as the "prediscursive,"[123] apolitical surface on which gender is culturally inscribed. This distinction subverts the gender binary, she explains, because when "the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice."[124] Divorcing gender from sex thus opens up the possibility of multiple genders. Butler further discredits the gender binary by questioning the naturalness of sex in two ways: first, by arguing that sex is inescapably bound to culture because heterosexual coherence dictates that it determines gender and thus demands that it be interpreted through a cultural lens;[125] second, by arguing that it is in fact *created by gender*.[126] She models this latter argument after Michel Foucault's assertion that institutions of power create particular subjects that naturalize the premises of such institutions and thus legitimize them. For example, the establishment of law creates criminals, whose defiance of the law, in turn, justifies the legal

[122] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990): 9.
[123] Ibid, 11.
[124] Ibid, 10.
[125] Butler insists that "there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a prediscursive anatomical facticity;" ibid, 12.
[126] By questioning the naturalness of sex, Butler somewhat paradoxically critiques the feminist distinction between sex and gender.

system.[127] Similarly, gender is "the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive,' prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts."[128] Sex does not determine gender; rather, gender creates the illusion of sex. This raises several questions: What *is* gender? How does it work? How, exactly, does it relate to culture? And it if is a "free floating artifice," how does it relate to the body? It is in exploring and answering these questions that Butler develops her theories of performativity, parody, and drag.

She begins by contesting the idea that gender is "true," meaning that it exists within the body as definitive of the self, on the basis that this construction of gender is central to the heterosexually coherent subject. Coherence, she explains, is contingent on the existence of boundaries that separate what belongs in the ordered structure from what does not. Heterosexual coherence, for example, comprises male and female sexes, masculine and feminine genders, and heterosexuality; all sexed, gendered, and sexual deviations are excluded and rendered taboo because they disrupt order and threaten coherence (significantly, because these taboos are experienced as transgressive, they naturalize heterosexual coherence).[129] Likewise, the coherent subject defines him/herself by what s/he is not; to comply with the compulsory order of sex/gender/desire, s/he must internalize male/female sex, masculine/feminine gender, and heterosexuality while simultaneously expelling potential sexed, gendered, and sexual deviations beyond the borders of the self. The coherent subject is thus dependent on, and constituted by,

[127] Jennifer Denbow articulates a more pertinent example when she claims that the "category of obesity does not exist independently of the expert study of obesity. Rather, […] medicine and its paradigm play a role in constructing notions of health and obesity, both of which are understood as independent truths." Denbow, 50.
[128] Butler, 11.
[129] Butler describes heterosexual coherence as a "regulatory ideal […] a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe." Ibid, 173.

boundaries separating the inner body and outer world.[130] In this way, "'inner' and 'outer' constitute a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject."[131] Thus to challenge the coherent subject, as Butler does, is to challenge the existence of an inner self, and more specifically, of an internally gendered self. "If the 'inner world' no longer designates a topos," she explains, "then the internal fixity of the self and, indeed, the internal locale of gender identity, become similarly suspect."[132] Gender cannot, therefore, be understood as expressive of an internally gendered core. She instead posits that gender is "performative,"[133] it is something that we *do*, rather than something that we *are*. Parody operates within this framework as a means to reveal the true, performative nature of gender. She focuses specifically on drag, cross-dressing, and butch/femme lesbianism as gender parodies that reveal gaps between anatomy (in the case of a drag queen, for example, male), gender identity (feminine), and gender performance (hyper-feminine) and thus invalidate the "heterosexual coherence"[134] between gender, sex, and desire.

Fat Drag

I have argued that *Obeast* can be classified as political parody because it is the parodic image both of academic journals and of the fat stereotypes that are constructed and supported by scholarly research, but the obeast can also be understood in terms of Butlerian performativity. Butler illustrates the subversive potential of gender parody by considering cross-dressing and drag, and I follow suit, so to speak, by examining Herrick's use of clothing in her construction of

[130] Butler draws upon the work of Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva to consider how the social regulation of bodily boundaries and consequent inner/outer distinction constitute the subject. Mary Douglas suggests that boundaries are defined and constituted by taboos, while "Kristeva's disucussion of abjection […] begins to suggest the uses of this structuralist notion of a boundary-constituting taboo for the purposes of constructing a discrete subject through exclusion." Ibid, 169.
[131] Butler, 171.
[132] Ibid, 171.
[133] Ibid, 173.
[134] Ibid, 175.

the obeast; specifically, her appropriation of the muumuu as obeast pelt. In her MFA thesis, Herrick explains that her first step towards embodying stereotypical fatness (before she even devised the obeast) was to sew a wardrobe of home-made muumuus. She selected this particular garment to be her daily uniform because it is emblematic of extreme fatness; it signifies the inability to fit into other (smaller, tailored) clothing items. This is evident, she argues, in pop-cultural representations of muumuus such as the "King-Size Homer" episode of *The Simpsons*, in which the infamously lazy Homer Simpson purposefully gains enough weight to be declared "morbidly obese" so that he can work from home, and wears an effeminate, flower-printed muumuu after outgrowing all of his other clothes. With this example, Herrick suggests that the muumuu's symbolic function in the cultural imaginary is to code for extreme (feminine) laziness, incompetence, and slovenliness. Furthermore, she argues that the muumuu connotes self-consciousness and bodily shame, both remnants of its historical legacy as a garment originally created by Victorian missionaries who sought to teach traditionally semi-clothed Hawaiian natives about Christian modesty.[135] By donning the muumuu, Herrick cloaks herself with a cultural signifier for extreme, hyperbolic fatness, and thus aligns her (concealed) body with its stereotypes. In this way, wearing the muumuu is analogous to wearing cultural signifiers for gender (such as the feminine markers of lipstick and high heels) in that it enacts a kind of corporeal performativity, a way of "doing" the body, of "doing" fatness, that is read in culturally specific ways.

To explore how *Obeast* opens up fresh possibilities for fat activism, it is useful to compare Herrick's performative use of fashion with that of the now-disbanded Canadian performance troupe Pretty Porky and Pissed Off (PPPO). Originally founded in 1996 by Allyson

[135] Linda Arthur, "Cultural Authentication Refined: The Case of the Hawaiian Holoku," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 15, no. 3 (1997): 129-139.

Mitchell, Ruby Rowan and Mariko Tamaki, PPPO sought to raise public awareness about fat discrimination in the Toronto area. To this end, the group organized demonstrations such as *Queen Sized on Queen Street*, in which they carried "FAT!" banners, distributed candy and informative leaflets to passersby, and wore outrageous, eye-catching outfits (such as skin-tight, hot pink dresses with feather boas) in order to claim space for fat bodies and fat fashion in the infamously exclusive Queen Street shopping district, which caters to what Mitchell describes as the "teeny-tiny-little-bitty-skirts-and-tops crowd"[136] (2.10). In an essay entitled "Pissed Off," she stresses the role of fashion in PPPO's body politics:

> We started dressing to "perform our fat" – blow it up larger than life.
>
> Sometimes this means extra-tight cardigans with one trembling button restraining our cleavage.
>
> Sometimes it means wearing teenybopper pop culture fashion like hip-hugger jeans and T-shirts ripped into little tank tops made on our own sewing machines to fit our big childbearing hips and fabulously flabby arms.[137]

Mitchell then proclaims that such proud and brazen displays of fat allow PPPO to

> smash stereotypes. We explode the ideas that fat women are victims or that girls have to be skinny in order to get a boyfriend or that fat chicks gotta [*sic*] wear muumuus.[138]

So whereas Herrick embraced the muumuu as a means to live the stereotype, PPPO shunned the dreaded garment in favour of sexier and more fashionable attire. This is perhaps because, as Herrick points out, the baggy, shapeless dress suggests an investment in hegemonic conceptions of beauty (read: thinness) and consequent shame for failing to measure up to such impossible body standards; by wearing muumuus, she suggests, fat women "demonstrate their contrition

[136] Allyson Mitchell, "Pissed Off," in *Fat: the Anthropology of an Obsession*, eds. Don Kulick and Anne Meneley (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2005): 217.
[137] Ibid, 213.
[138] Ibid, 217.

about their deviant bodies." [139] By refusing to do so, the members of PPPO were ahead of their time. There has since been an explosion in "fatshionista" websites in which self-identified fat bloggers post photographs of themselves in trendy outfits to combat stereotypes of fatness as unstylish and unattractive and, more generally, to disrupt normative beauty standards that valorize thinness.[140] In their analysis of fat-positive fashion blogs, Lauren Gurrieri and Helene Cherrier argue that fatshionistas "flaunt" their fat, meaning that they draw attention to their (hyper)visible stigma by refusing to cover their flesh or deny their size.[141] I would suggest that the members of PPPO similarly flaunted fatness while performing *Queen Sized on Queen Street*, especially when asking passersby: "Do you think I'm fat?"[142] Such flaunting has been characterized as a strategy of inclusion into the normative mainstream (wearing a bikini, for example, draws attention to one's fatness, but it is also a means to participate in a social practice from which fat bodies are typically excluded),[143] but in the case of PPPO, flaunting seems to simultaneously assert bodily difference. Indeed, Mitchell describes the demonstration as "a coming out – a proclamation that WE ARE HERE [*sic*]."[144] Notice, however, Mitchell's choice of words: PPPO does not "flaunt" fat, but "performs" it. This hints at an engagement with Butler that she later makes clear in her description of the group's first cabaret performance:

> This performance was the unofficial birth of Pretty Porky and Pissed Off's "fat drag." We call it drag to highlight the made-up nature of fat. Think about how drag queens "perform" femininity. They exaggerate it. They parody it, partly to show how femininity is something constructed, something made up.
>
> This is how we do fat drag.

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[139] Herrick, "Museum," 74.
[140] Lauren Gurrieri and Helene Cherrier, "Queering Beauty: Fatshionistas in the Fatosphere," *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 16, no. 3 (2013): 278.
[141] Ibid, 286.
[142] Mitchell, 219.
[143] Abigail C. Saguy and Anna Ward, "Coming Out as Fat: Rethinking Stigma," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (2011): 68.
[144] Mitchell, 217.

Think larger than life.[145]

PPPO claims to parody fat in order to expose it as a cultural construct, but Mitchell's vague wording makes it difficult to determine exactly what she means by "fat;" what it is she claims to parody. Is she referring to shifting and ambiguous definitions of the amount, distribution, and/or proportion of adipose tissue that render a body "fat"? Is she referring to the fat stereotypes that she is determined to smash, or perhaps to fat identity? It seems that fatness *itself* is not parodied by PPPO, as the performers do not actually enlarge their bodies, but rather exaggerate their flesh with skimpy and tightly fitted clothing. Mitchell's ambiguity leads me to wonder: What is the subject of fat drag?

Kathleen LeBesco's theorization of fat drag considers body enlargement vis-à-vis fat suits, the foam and latex costumes used in film, television and theatre to make thin actors appear fat, usually for (fat phobic) comedic effect (2.11). This is perhaps a closer analogy to the drag performances described by Butler than PPPO's fat drag, because in the case of fat suits, the anatomy of the performer (thin) is at odds with that of the performed body (fat). However, LeBesco argues that this incongruity does not denaturalize the thin imperative in the same way that parodic gender performances subvert gender essentialism because the audience is reassured of the actor's thinness, which is either visible in the same movie or TV episode that features the fat suit (Gwyneth Paltrow, for example, flip-flops between thin and fat embodiments in *Shallow Hal*) or in other popular media outlets (such as film premiers or press junkets), and thus reassured of the actor's compliance to hegemonic bodily norms.[146] While LeBesco defends the

[145] Ibid, 219.

[146]Kathleen LeBesco, "Situating Fat Suits: Blackface, Drag, and the Politics of Performance," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 15, no. 2 (2005): 233. LeBesco suggests that "the power and possibility of fat drag […] comes in denaturalizing the thin 'original' body of the actor," and that that may be possible with the deployment of camp; ibid, 233. Although she offers Esther Newton's somewhat vague definition of camp as a

subversive potential of drag, aligning herself with Butler against its critics who argue that it reifies oppressive gender norms, she finds little such potential in fat drag, which seems, instead, to uphold fat phobia.[147] To illustrate this point, LeBesco draws a sweeping comparison between fat suits and the problematic tradition of blackface, arguing that "crossing-to-fat," like "crossing-to-black," expresses acute cultural anxieties about Otherness.[148] For her, both practices ridicule visibly marked (fat and black) Others who symbolically threaten dominant social orders (which privilege thinness and whiteness), and therefore function in the service of oppressive (sizist and racist) ideologies. Most strikingly, she draws upon John Blair's argument that minstrelsy united upper- and lower-class whites against African Americans to suggest that fat suits function "not so much to highlight the preposterousness of some stereotypes about fatness, but instead to unite races against the common enemy of fatness."[149] Thus fat suits are instruments of fat phobia, rather than fat activism. LeBesco's essay seems to just scratch the surface of this incredibly complex, and potentially fraught, comparison of the use of fat suits and the tradition of blackface, and yet it is a compelling analysis of the former's cultural impact. Her analysis falls short, however, as a theorization of fat drag, which she rather simplistically equates with the wearing of fat suits by thin bodies. She hovers over another possible form of fat drag that seems to resonate with PPPO when she describes Lisa Anderson's concept of "signifyin" as "a type of double-consciousness that allowed black minstrels to perform blackness while simultaneously

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"strategy for a situation" that can deal "with an identity that is well defined but loaded with contempt," LeBesco does not theorize fat camp in any depth or provide any illustrative examples; Esther Newton quoted in ibid, 233.

[147] Butler asserts drag's ability to undermine heterosexual coherence, yet she recognizes that drag is not inherently subversive because parodic gender performances can, at times, reinforce hegemony. LeBesco's analysis reflects this ambiguity, for although she almost exclusively focuses on the injurious potentialities and effects of fat suits, she does concede one source of potential subversion: "In fat suits, we certainly see an attitude of contempt and hatred for fat people – but what else is at play here? Unencumbrance, a lack of restraint, the possibility of transgression – it's fun!" Ibid, 239.

[148] Ibid, 237.

[149] Ibid, 240.

critiquing white notions about black folks,"[150] but does not seem to recognize this as a potential model for fat drag, as she quickly resumes her fixation on body size and apparent assumption that fatness can only be parodied by non-fat bodies. Butler, in contrast, does not argue that drag necessitates gender crossing; the lipstick lesbian, for instance, is an anatomical female who parodies femininity, yet who still disproves heterosexual coherence by desiring other women. Likewise, PPPO claims to perform fat drag, even though they do not cross-to-fat; they are fat already. Again, this raises the question: What is parodied in fat drag, if not fatness itself?

LeBesco hints, in her use of John Blair, that fat drag could parody fat stereotypes, but glosses over this possibility to again resume her focus on size. Jerry Mosher, on the other hand, suggests that fat performativity is not about body size per se, but is rather about the repetition of socialized bodily norms that constitute the fat subject.[151] He argues that televisual representations of the fat male body provide insight into such norms because TV programs and their characters are "fictive-discursive constructs" shaped by prominent social and cultural ideologies.[152] While he suggests that stereotypical characters such as "the bumbling oaf," "the effete servant," and "the discriminating gourmet" shed light on specific constitutive norms,[153] Mosher identifies a number of more general "performativities" that are expected of fat, white, male bodies, such as an "insecure male performativity" that encapsulates notions of emasculation (softness, impotence, powerlessness, femininity, weakness) and thus reflects a decline of patriarchal

[150] Ibid, 237.
[151] Jerry Mosher, "Setting Free the Bears: Refiguring Fat Men on Television," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression,* eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001): 167.
[152] Ibid, 171.
[153] Ibid, 171. Together, these stereotypes paint a contradictory picture of fatness as paradoxically crude and posh, but I believe such a contradiction may be productive if it suggests a complex and multidimensional fat subjectivity. It seems, however, that such productive juxtapositions would be exceptional, as these stereotypical figures rarely, if ever, appear alongside one another.

power.[154] I find that such performativities, which seem to refer to categorized modes of being, mark a rather significant departure from Butler's definition of performativity as the unconscious citation of culturally meaningful gender norms,[155] but concede that Mosher's discussion of John Goodman's performance as Dan Conner on *Roseanne* is nevertheless a helpful illustration of how televisual representations of fatness can subvert culturally constructed notions of fat embodiment. Mosher asserts that Goodman's repeated sensual gestures, such as "the expressive use of his jowls, the emphatic waving of his bearlike paws, the suggestive movements of his girth,"[156] defy what he calls "the performativity most expected from fat": sexual invisibility.[157] That is not to say that sexual invisibility is a norm that fat subjects (or in the case of Dan Conner, fat characters) repeatedly re-enact, but rather that sexual invisibility encompasses stereotypes of flaccid impotence that are specific to fat men. Mosher is arguing, then, that Goodman's sensual physical performance refutes problematic stereotypes about fat (hypo)sexuality. But if we were to describe Goodman's performance in terms of Butlerian performativity, it would seem more accurate, to me, to suggest that his sensual gestures constitute a subversive "failure to repeat"[158] the norm of sexual invisibility; he instead makes his character's sexuality visibly palpable. So although I take issue with Mosher's theorization of performativities, I agree with his basic premise that a Butlerian fat performativity would cite social norms that constitute the fat subject. If this were the case, fat drag would parody these norms, which I will refer to as "size norms."

[154] Ibid, 169-170.
[155] Mosher's view of performativity seems to differ from Butler's not only because he introduces his concept of "performativities" as modes of being, but also because he uses the term performativity to describe the (in)actions and (in)abilities of fictional fat characters that are imposed onto fat actors by script writers, rather than the repeated and unconscious citation of norms by living, breathing subjects.
[156] Ibid, 181.
[157] Ibid, 171.
[158] Butler, 179.

At first glance, Mitchell's assertion that one can still identify as fat after losing weight seems to support the idea that fat drag could parody size norms because this claim seeks to undermines the coherence of the fat subject. She writes,

> It isn't something you can shake; once you are fat, you are marked in your psyche along with the stretch marks on your skin. You may have the privilege of passing as normal, depending on body size, but there will always be a part of "fat" that stays with you, that informs how you perceive the world and your place in it. Who you are and who you understand yourself to be is shaped by your bodily experiences.
>
> We learn to move around in the world in a fat psyche.
>
> We are fat regardless of size.[159]

Here, Mitchell draws a distinction between fat embodiment and fat identity that recalls the feminist distinction between anatomical sex and cultural gender. However, unlike sex and gender, which, according to Butler, are "radically independent" of one another, size identity is tethered to physical size, as Mitchell suggests that one develops a fat identity when physically fat. Size identity is not, as Butler describes gender, "a free-floating artifice," but is contingent on at least one moment of fatness in the lifespan. Yet Mitchell asserts that it is still possible to be "fat regardless of size" if one has a thin (or "passing") body as well as a lingering fat identity. This conditional disparity between body and identity challenges the coherence of the sized subject. But Mitchell's logic unravels with her articulation of a "fat psyche," a notion that suggests that sized identities are not performative, but rather expressive of an internally-located fat self. The fat psyche upholds the inner/outer distinction that Butler argues is constitutive of a coherent subject, and thus negates Mitchell's efforts to question and undermine such coherence. If we overlook the fat psyche and focus, instead, on the distinction between fat embodiment and fat identity, it becomes possible to read being "fat regardless of size" as performative. Just as gendered bodies cite gender norms, sized bodies cite size norms. It is here that we can locate the

[159] Mitchell, 215.

subversive potential of fat drag: Butler argues that "gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin,"[160] or, in other words, that gender is a kind of simulacra. Couldn't fat drag do the same?

This is precisely what Joyce L. Huff suggests in her analysis of Count Fosco, the villain of Wilkie Collin's 1860 detective novel, *The Woman in White*. A fat and elderly Italian with a mysterious past, Fosco is an enigma whose seemingly contradictory personality traits simultaneously exaggerate and defy fat stereotypes and therefore confuse both his fellow characters and his readers. For example, he is a "consummate consumer"[161] whose voracious sweet tooth and taste for fine clothing render him effeminate in the eyes of his contemporaries (supporting the beliefs that fat bodies are both feminine and weak-willed), yet his charming and temperate nature displays (masculine) self-mastery and an ability to control women. As Huff points out, however, these contradictions are seemingly resolved when it is revealed that Fosco is an incognito spy evading the wrath of the Brotherhood, an Italian secret society that he jilted and whose members eventually murder him in retribution. Huff argues that, on the one hand, the exposure of Fosco's true identity suggests to Victorian readers that "the 'real' Fosco appears to be the thin spy within, a man of iron will, who imperfectly counterfeits a stereotypical fat man."[162] On the other hand, since Fosco asserts that it is the body that determines the mind, and

[160] Butler, 175.
[161] Joyce L. Huff, "Fosco's Fat Drag: Performing the Victorian Fat Man in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*," in *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture*, ed. Elena Levy-Navarro (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010): 96.
[162] Huff explains that body dualism reigned supreme in Victorian England; mind and body were considered separate entities, whereby the "interior self […] could and should exercise control over (the) body." Fatness was therefore evidence of a weak will, or, more precisely, as "one of the 'diseases of the will' in Victorian psychology;" ibid, 94. In light of this, Katharina R. Mendoza's work on fat suits forms a potential link between Huff's and LeBesco's respective characterizations of fat drag (although she only cites LeBesco in her analysis). Mendoza classifies films that employ fat suits as "'disguise' narratives" that utilize "the 'inside every fat person is a thin person' trope so often found in weight loss discourse." Katharina R. Mendoza, "Seeing Through the Layers: Fat Suits and Thin Bodies in *The Nutty Professor* and *Shallow Hal*," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 281. Huff argues that certain narrative details of *The*

not vice versa, the story suggests that "the controlling will itself is an effect of his performance,"[163] just as the myth of an internalized, gendered self is an effect of repeated gender performativity. Either way, Fosco exposes fat stereotypes to be cultural constructs. Huff's analysis is useful here because she points to the *flexibility* of fat drag; Fosco both exaggerates *and* counters fat stereotypes, and thus supports Butler's assertion that bodily performativity can be repeated in unexpected ways to produce unexpected results. Fat drag cannot, therefore, be limited to the *exaggeration* of fat stereotypes, but should also include "alternative, subversive, or incorrect citation"[164] that leads to a resignification of fatness.

PPPO's fat drag falls exclusively into this latter category. Mitchell's self-professed intention is not to exaggerate fat stereotypes, but to instead "smash" them, to prove them wrong. As we have seen, this is manifest in *Queen Sized on Queen Street*, as PPPO challenged widely held beliefs that fat bodies are either disinterested or incapable of participating in fashion culture by refusing to wear dowdy clothing. Mitchell's description of PPPO's sassy *Cake Dance*, however, paints an even clearer picture of the group's subversive fat drag. For this performance, Mitchell, Tamaki, Abi Slone and Lisa Ayuso dressed in traditional, tight leotards and danced a choreographed routine set to Henry Mancini's playful tune, "Baby Elephant Walk." Each of the performers showcased their unique fat bodies with brief solos before they all sat down on four birthday cakes and "smushed them with (their) big fat butts."[165] The dancers concluded the performance by offering the ruined desserts to their audience. Like *Queen Sized on Queen Street, Cake Dance* cites a number of fat stereotypes in order to invalidate them. The dancers countered

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Woman in White imply that Fosco may have purposefully gained weight to avoid detection by his enemies, in which case his actual flesh acted as a kind of fat suit; Huff, 99. However, even if Fosco did not deliberately gain weight to conceal his identity, the Victorian reader would have understood Fosco's true, inner self as "thin" insofar has he exerts tremendous discipline and self-control to maintain his disguise.

[163] Ibid, 95.

[164] Huff, 93.

[165] Mitchell, 220.

stereotypical sloth and clumsiness with physical agility and grace, defied fat asexuality by asserting a playful sexuality that appropriated the teasing aesthetic of burlesque, and, perhaps most strikingly, challenged assumptions of greed and habitual overconsumption by destroying, rather than eating, the birthday cakes. Thus in both performances, PPPO cited fat stereotypes incorrectly, even inversely, in order to oppose them.

Herrick's fat drag, in contrast, is reminiscent of Count Fosco's in that the obeast both exaggerates *and* counters fat stereotypes. When examining the organizational structure of *Obeast*, it seems that the obeast's many contradictions can be categorized into three main themes: its biology, social behaviours, and relations with humans. The animal's evolutionary history, for example, parodies the attribution of fatness to a "genetic defect"[166] (and, perhaps, the consequent hunt for a "fat gene"[167]) by exaggerating the genetic difference between thin and fat bodies to the point where they are no longer members of the same species; while the former evolved from apes, the latter evolved from the Obestus Rex. However, the obeast's adiposity is not a genetic defect, but rather an adaptive trait that was naturally selected because it is crucial for the animal's survival. According to the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife report, obeast fat is essential for energy storage, temperature regulation, and bioseismic communication,[168] and also helps to protect the animal's internal organs in the case of predator attacks. Thus the

[166] Huff quotes this phrase from a New York Times article that was published in 1990 in her summary of the recent tendency to frame fatness as genetically determined, which she then compares to a similar heredity-blaming discourse of the 1850s. Huff, 89-90.

[167] Kathleen LeBesco considers the eugenic dangers posed by the search for the fat gene in "Quest for a Cause: The Fat Gene, the Gay Gene, and the New Eugenics," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 68.

[168] According to Lindsay Anderberg, who contributed an article to the project under the guise of a conservation anthropologist, bioseismic communication enables obeasts to communicate with one another over long distances. Like elephants, obeasts stomp on the ground to create seismic vibrations, which then travel across the ground and are registered in the fatty cushions of the foot. The vibrations then spread upwards through the cankle to the pelt's ventral pleats, which amplify the waves. The vibrations are then detected by the head's fatty channel, and are, finally, transferred into the inner ear. Anderberg, "Fat Follows Function: Bioseismic Communication Among North American Obeasts," in *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History* (Portland: Publication Studio, 2013): 18.

obeast's enormous caloric intake (another hyperbolic fat stereotype) is not futile or excessive overconsumption, but appropriate and, indeed, necessary. In fact, their

> gastronomical inquisitiveness is perhaps the characteristic that has best allowed obeasts to thrive in diverse habitats – from verdant forests to mangrove swamps, snowy mountain tops, and even semi-arid deserts.[169]

Food consumption also plays a vital role in the solitary animal's rare social behaviours. Bulls initiate reproduction by offering nuts and berries to potential mates, for example, while obeasts will occasionally congregate by the dozens at farmers' fields to collectively gorge until crops are completely diminished (2.12). This phenomenon – which Herrick, writing as the environmental economist Trevor Jackson, refers to as "clustering" – literalizes ecological panic that "obesity" may wreak havoc on the global food supply. However, clustering may also fulfill an important social function for the animals by forming transient communities, thus creating the dilemma that is articulated by Herrick/Jackson: "Are they merely an occasional catastrophic agricultural blight to be prevented, or are they an integral missing component in current obeast conservation efforts?"[170] In this way, clusterings hint at the fraught relationship between humans and obeasts. On the one hand, humans brought obeasts to the brink of extinction during a period of unregulated commercial exploitation,[171] and generally characterize the animals as either dangerous (because they are prone to attack humans in self-defence or to protect their young and food supplies), or irritating (because they destroy crops or messily rummage through garbage bins in search of food). On the other hand, obeasts hold a special place in American folklore (exemplified by the "old mountaineer's song: *Obeasts in the bower / shimmy and shake /*

[169] Herrick, *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History*, 10.
[170] Herrick, *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History*, 37.
[171] Writing as the economic historian Louise Sutcliffe, Herrick outlines the commoditization of obeasts in Georgian England, in which the highly valued and therefore expensive animals were conspicuously consumed by aristocrats in order to display their wealth; the British elite ate obeast flesh (obeast soup, for example, was a delicacy served in ornate, gold-plated bowls made from the animal's skull, 2.13), applied "beast grease" to perukes, extracted "obvoile" from the animal's perineal glands to create various medicines and perfumes, and kept young obeasts as household pets. Herrick, *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History*, 47-55.

dancing together / make the hills quake"),[172] within New England Protestant sects (whose churchgoers sometimes consumed "beestloaf" during mid-nineteenth century communions), and, of course, within conservationist communities (including not only MOCS but also the more radical Feeding Obeasts, Rejecting Starvation, or FORS, whose members illegally feed the animals to minimize the threat of starvation posed by global warming). The troubled relationship between the two species parodies that between fat and thin bodies within the context of the current "War on Obesity": obeasts are misunderstood and mistreated by humans, who both created the obeast's plight and continually fail in their efforts to aid the endangered animal. Thus Herrick's fat drag not only parodies particular fat stereotypes, but also the social systems that create and perpetuate fat oppression.

Conclusions

In the two PPPO performances considered in this chapter, members opposed the problematic fat stereotype of frumpiness, as well as its connotations of laziness and asexuality, by refusing to wear drab clothing, opting instead for hot pink dresses and feather boas in *Queen Sized on Queen Street* and form-fitting leotards in *Cake Dance*. Both outfits allegedly flaunted the performers' fat bodies,[173] increasing their bodily visibility in a way that enabled them to "come out as fat." PPPO members drew attention not only to their fleshy bodies, but also to the cultural meanings attributed to fatness, for, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick argues, "*coming out as a fat woman*" intervenes the ways in which fat female bodies are read and understood by others.[174]

[172] Herrick, *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History*, 23.
[173] I say "allegedly" here because Mitchell's description of PPPO's use of fashion is at odds with the photograph that she includes in her essay (reproduced here as 2.10), in which very little of PPPO members' flesh is exposed.
[174] Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little-Understood Emotion," in *Bodies Out Of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression,* eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 295.

PPPO renegotiated their "representational contract"[175] with viewing audiences by inversely citing fat stereotypes: they were hyper-visible, rather than invisible; sexy, not chaste; fashionable, not dowdy; athletic, not lazy; political, not apathetic. In this way, PPPO exposed the false and arbitrary nature of fat stereotypes by disproving them.

Unlike PPPO, Herrick does not reject the muumuu as a symbol of fat oppression, but rather embraces it as a symbol of her "sardonic acquiescence"[176] to fat stereotypes. To wear the dress is, ironically, to *flaunt* her fatness – not literally, because the muumuu's draping fabric almost completely covers and obscures her body, but figuratively, because the dress codes for "morbid obesity." This was likely a powerful subversive gesture when Herrick incorporated the muumuu into her daily wardrobe, but her decision to appropriate the dress as obeast pelt further exaggerates its stereotypical connotations. While a fat woman can remove a muumuu at will, the obeast cannot – the muumuu is its pelt, its flesh, and is therefore intrinsic to its physicality. In this way, Herrick's appropriation of the muumuu parallels that of the evolutionary diagram; whereas muumuus are only worn when the body has outgrown all other clothing, and can therefore be understood as a kind of fashion defect, the obeast pelt exists because it has evolutionary value, as is made clear by this excerpt from the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife report:

> The most recognizable feature of the obeast is its loose, fleshy pelt, which in the case of males can be quite colorful and boldly patterned. These colors and patterns are distinct to the different species, as well as to the sexes. Even within species, the pelt hues can vary regionally depending on habitat, a result of selective breeding. For cows and their young calves, the pelts offer camouflage from unwanted predator attention. However, a male's pelt should attract attention: during the autumnal rut, or musth [*sic*], male pelt and facial markings become especially vibrant. As with manes,

[175] Ibid, 295.
[176] Herrick, "The Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies," in *Obeast: A Broader View*, 68.

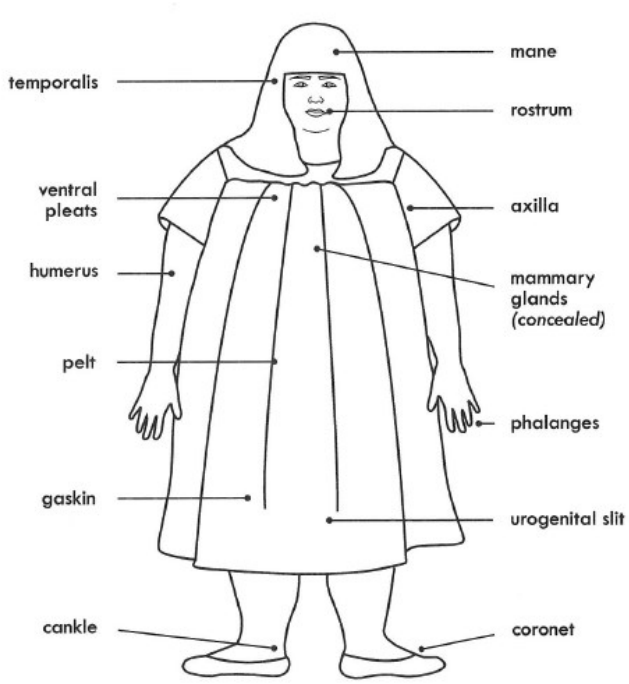
> it is thought that the vibrancy of this display serves as an indicator of the male's virility.[177]

Obeast pelts render the animals identifiable and help to both conceal them from predators and attract potential mates, and are therefore not only advantageous to obeast survival, but are crucial for the perpetuation of this endangered species. Thus while muumuus and fatness are considered fashion and genetic defects in contemporary Western cultures, the obeast's pelt and adiposity are invaluable in *Obeast*. Hence Herrick's fat drag is less straightforward than that of PPPO, for she does not oppose problematic fat stereotypes by simply denying them; she instead exaggerates them in ways that resist their negative associations, thereby disrupting hegemonic "obesity" discourses: the obeast is extremely fat, but this fatness is crucial for its survival; its pelt is a muumuu, but the dowdy garment invites sexual intercourse. In both *Obeast* and in her larger MOCS project, Herrick embraces and exaggerates fat stereotypes in order to both expose their arbitrary nature *and* re-signify fatness as a positive embodiment.

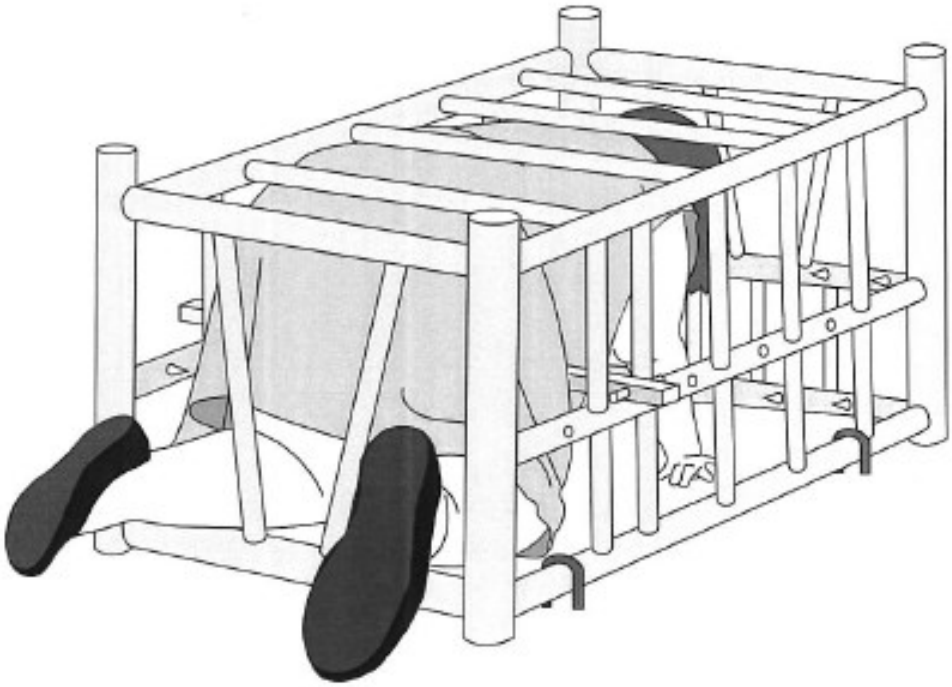
[177] Herrick, *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History,* 10.

2.1 Rachel Herrick, *A Guide to the North American Obeast*, two-part book set featuring *Obeast: The Natural and Unnatural History* and *Obeast: A Broader View*, 2013.

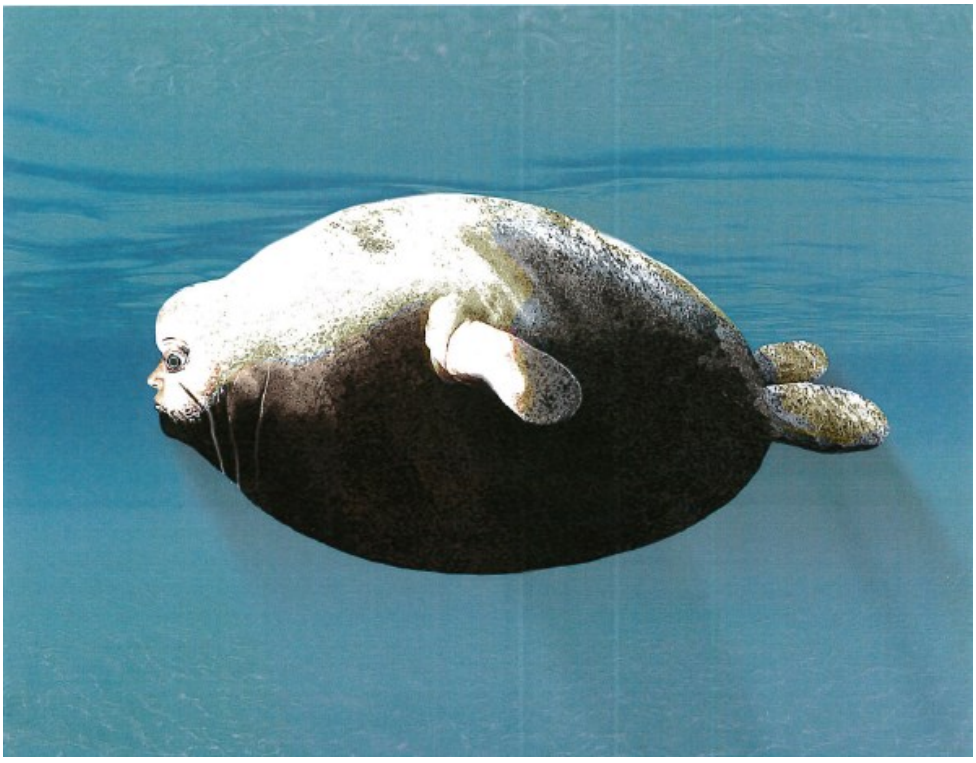
2.2 Rachel Herrick, *Untitled (Species and anatomy drawing courtesy of MOCS)*, 2013.



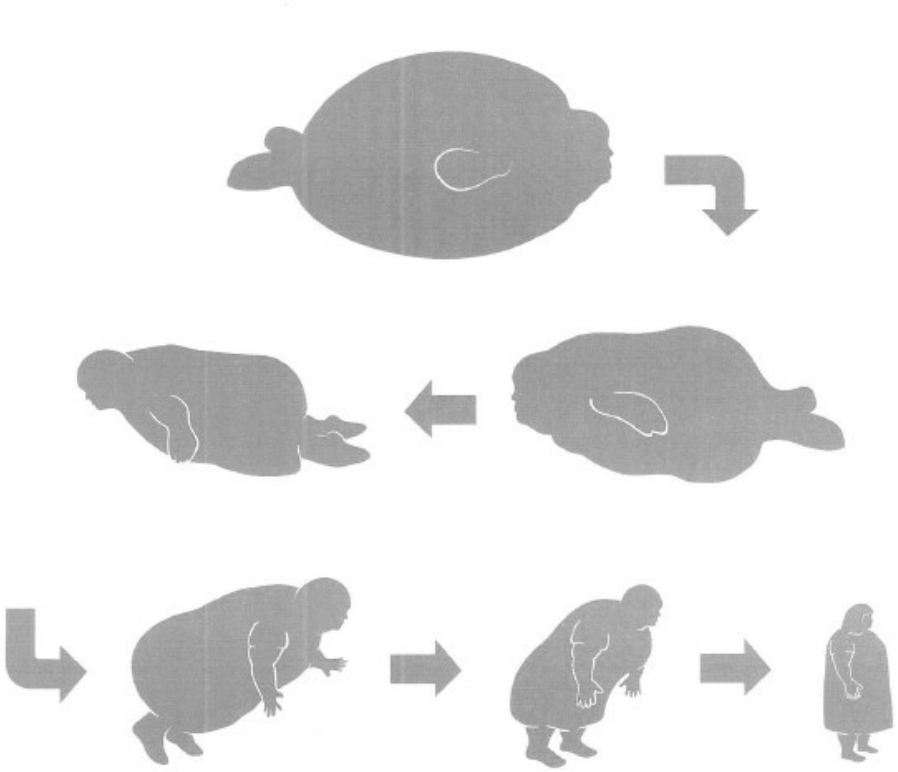
2.3 Rachel Herrick, *18th Century Obvoil extraction cage, drawing by Radul Hendrick*, 2013.



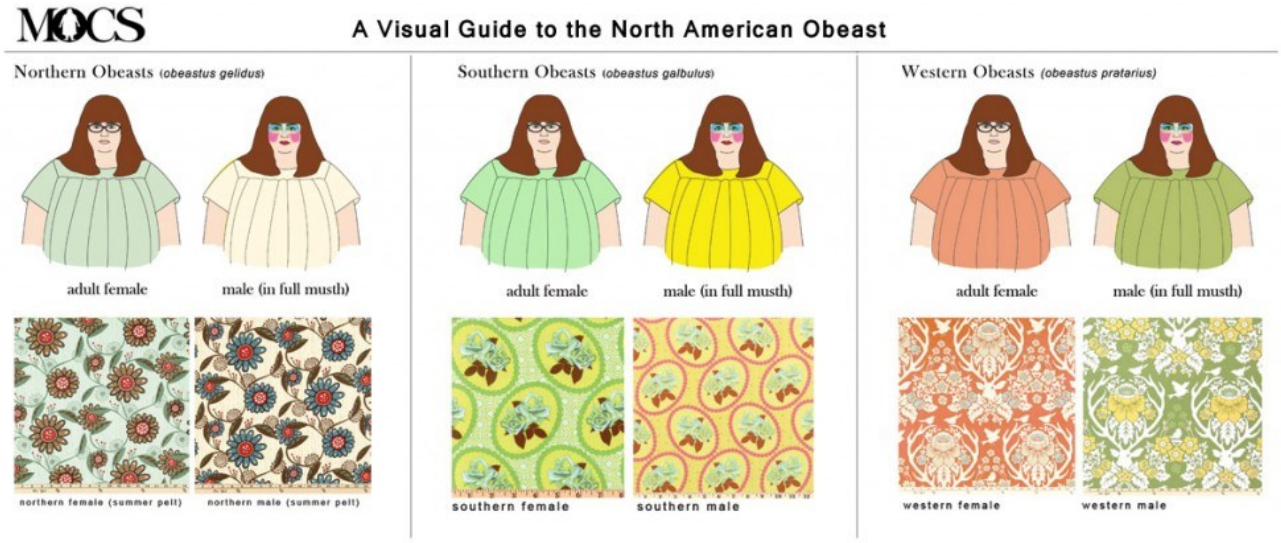
2.4 Rachel Herrick, *Obestus Rex, Artist's Rendering by Radul Herrick*, 2013.



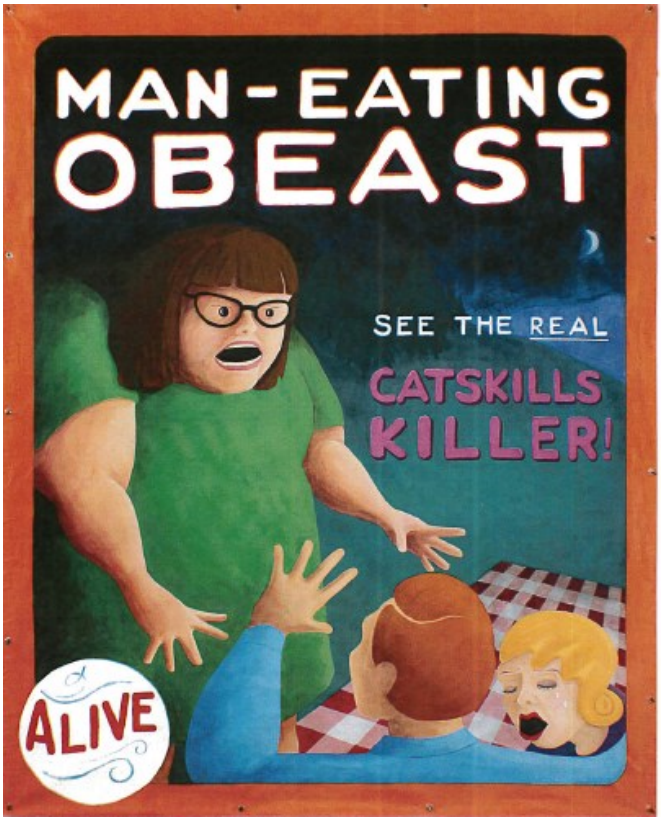
2.5 Rachel Herrick, *Obeast Evolution chart showing physical changes from Obestus Rex through modern obeast*, 2013.



2.6 Rachel Herrick, *A Visual Guide to the North American Obeast*, 2013.



2.7 Rachel Herrick, *Restored "Man-Eating Obeast" Banner Featured in Parail Brothers Circus 1917-1942, Courtesy of the World Circus Museum*, 2013.



2.8 Rachel Herrick, *Obeast Mating Position, by Radul Herrick*, 2013.

2.9 Rachel Herrick, *Rangers in the Adirondacks Stand Over a Dead Obeast, Photo Courtesy of MOCS*, 2013.

2.10 Pretty Porky and Pissed Off, *Queen Sized on Queen Street,* June 12, 1996.

2.11 Photograph of special effects professional Tony Gardner creating a fat suit for John Travolta's character in the 2007 film, *Hairspray*.

2.12 Rachel Herrick, *Chester Norfolk's photo courtesy of MOCS and the Norfolk Family*, 2013.

2.13 Rachel Herrick, *Obeast Soup Bowls, photo courtesy of the Albert & Victoria Museum*, 2013.

Kimberly Dark's New Lipoliteracy

Introduction

It was June, 2012. I had snuck into the third annual Canadian Student Obesity Meeting, a graduate student conference that addressed the causes, consequences, and potential treatments of "obesity," and was sitting in a packed auditorium at the University of Alberta, waiting. I sat low in my seat, trying to blend in amongst those young researchers who had actually paid the pricey registration fee (who were easily identified by their eye-catching bright blue lanyards and laminated name cards), feeling both guilty and slightly exhilarated for trespassing. Although I was wary of the many researchers who classified fatness as inherently problematic and sought its elimination, I had nevertheless come to see the California-based performance artist, Kimberly Dark, who was scheduled to participate in both the conference itself and its corresponding art exhibition, *The Big Idea*. I continued to wait, shifting anxiously in my seat, and then, finally, the conference began. The organizers greeted us, thanked their supporters, and then introduced Dark, who stood in front of the podium and proposed: "Instead of just telling you things about what I do, why don't I tell you a story, how's that?"[178] With the crowd nodding and murmuring a subdued approval, she carefully opened the thick hardcover book in her hands to a marked page, and uttered the title of her first story, *Big People on the Airplane*. Then, with a spark of energy, Dark reached out to her viewers and asked for a show of hands, demanding to know who among us had travelled to the conference via airplane (3.1). Hands shot up. "Oh, that's a lot of people. I got on an airplane too; but even if you haven't been on one recently, you can probably remember

[178] Dark positions the feminist tradition of storytelling as central to her activist artistic praxis. "We need more stories," she explains. "If we are to unravel current systems of oppression, exploitation and privilege, we must learn to hear and see more stories. That's how we create new stories. That's how the world changes." Kimberly Dark, "What is Artistic Activism?" *Kimberly*, last modified April 22, 2013, http://kimberlydark.com/artistic-activism/.

the tiny little space in which you sat for many hours." She paused, took a deep breath, and then, with a markedly theatrical tone of voice, began:

> I *swear* to you he must measure a full six feet, five inches. Legs like *tree trunks* latch into a strong torso with muscular shoulders *so wide*, there is *no way* he can stay in his own seat. He has a full head of tousled blond hair, and a still-boyish thirty-something face, and it makes me *smirk* to think of the effort he must spend to have a quiet evening home alone. But what do *I* know? I mean clearly he's spent some time at the gym; those shoulders are so shapely. He can't miss much work out time.
>
> It's a long flight. I look at people. I talk to people. I mean, what else is there to *do*? People are *interesting* when they're forced into close proximity after all. I'm not the only one who thinks so – we are a *lookin'-at-each-other kinda culture*. We *imagine* others' stories, others' experiences. We *amuse* ourselves with their prospective lives. Oh, but most of us don't merely imagine, do we? We also envy, or pity. We *lust*, we *judge*.
>
> Now *clearly*, this man's physique is a combination of genetic propensity and personal choices. His behaviours have enhanced his natural appearance, and it's caused him to *not fit so well* in the space that the airline has sold him. His *seatbelt* seems to fit fine. But his legs and his shoulders, they *outgrow* the space, they push him into the seat next to him and into the aisle. And *yet*, his seatmate does not seem *disturbed*. She seems *impressed.* She's an older woman who looks up at him, [gasp] admiringly. She makes space for him so he can be more comfortable. Flight attendants seem neither worried about the weight he adds to the aircraft, nor how he inconveniences them when they go by with the cart each time and say, 'Watch your shoulders!'
>
> See I note other people's bodies. We *all* do, whether we're conscious of our constant assessments or not. It's the relative privilege, merit, disdain or *hatred* that we give them that I find worthy of discussion. It's the ways we *bestow* or *revoke* privilege in subtle ways without even knowing we're doing it. Moreover I'm interested in how privilege comes to feel *normal* to a person, so invisible they don't even *notice* when other people are *not* privileged.

Dark continued, "See, I fit into the space that the airline has sold *me* only a *little better* than the handsome gentleman across the aisle from me on this flight." His broad shoulders stretched beyond the width of his chair, she explained, just as her wide hips and thighs filled the expanse of her seat. They both lived "on the edge of comfort" in these cramped conditions, yet Dark was not treated with as much compassion as he for their shared predicament, despite the fact that her body, like his, is "a combination of biology of personal choices." She admitted that she is not

only "predisposed to physical grandness" (her father and grandmother were "big, fat folks too"), but that she also eats "too much chocolate" and sometimes has "a little ice cream at the end of the day to take the edge off" – eating habits that she described as "usual in (her) culture," followed even by her thin friends who "can *cake (her) under the table and never gain an ounce*." The problem, for Dark, is not that people indulge in fattening foods, but that "some people are punished for looking like they eat too much ice cream *even if they don't*," while (thin or muscular) others "will never see judgement on another's face because of what they have chosen to eat." Fat (female) bodies receive similar differential treatment within the context of the flight: Dark noted the "angry opine that fat people shouldn't be allowed to fly on commercial airlines" because they are "lazy, weak, inconsiderate slobs" who "shouldn't be *allowed* to infringe on others, make the plane too heavy, use additional fuel, *drive up prices for everybody else!*"[179] And while these problematic arguments could be laid against non-fat large bodies as well, an incredulous Dark observed the contrary, as the "other passengers and flight attendants (offered) this hulking fellow on this flight *sympathy* for what he (had) to endure in the *tiny seat* that *just wasn't made for someone like him*." She concluded by encouraging her audience to relinquish judgement and extend kindness to all others:

> I'm just looking. Speculating. We watch each other for amusement, especially when we're in tight spaces and entertainment is scarce. Looking is one thing, but *judging some people worthy of human dignity and other peoples not*? Well that's a *worry*. Ah, how much space should judgement take up in each of our minds, I don't know! But I know that I am happiest when I spend less time wondering what makes other people less worthy of life's rewards than I. Here's to all of us finding more healthy pastimes, like listening, and love, and looking for the best in one another. After all, it couldn't help – it couldn't hurt [*sic*] to treat other people *like they're golden*.

With that, Dark closed her book and set it on the podium behind her.

[179] There is an abundance of evidence for such attitudes on the Internet. For a content analysis of several travel blogs and forums whose contributors express frustration and animosity towards fat passengers, see Jennie Small and Candice Harris, "Obesity and Tourism: Rights and Responsibilities," *Annals of Tourism Research* 39, no. 2 (2012): 694-695.

Big People on the Airplane is a complex narrative that explores the differential treatment of two large bodies – the revered muscular body and the despised fat body – to reveal the underlying privileges and prejudices that inform such difference. Dark skilfully weaves together a number of discursive threads to construct her story (including those pertaining to health,[180] gender inequality,[181] and economics[182]), but these discourses ring familiar, rooted, as they are, in fat activist tradition. I therefore turn my attention to an aspect of Dark's performance that I believe is under-utilized in the size acceptance movement: her exploration of *visuality* – the historically and culturally specific ways that we learn to see. I argue that together, *Big People on the Airplane* and Dark's second narrative, *Here's Looking at You*, suggest that those of us living in fat-phobic cultures learn two visual modes that perpetuate the stigmatization of fatness: first, we learn to look at socially privileged bodies and ignore marginalized others, rendering the former "visible" and the latter "invisible;" second, we learn to "read" fat as evidence of particular (in)activities, (ill) health, and (im)morality, a skill that the anthropologist Mark

[180] Dark suggested that some fat-phobic individuals engage in health talk as a way to articulate their weight biases: "Now I've heard people speak ill of fat all my life! Some people say it outright, others talk about *health* and *fitness*, but they do it in a way that makes their *disdain* for fat people plain." She went on to reject healthism – or the moralization of physical health – when she described herself and her family members as "big, fat folks" who are "fit and active": "Now to some," said Dark, "the latter will excuse my physical size. But let's just say I *weren't active*." She shrugged. "Would that make me any less worthy of respect and comfort? *Really?*" Dark thus implied that one's social value should not be predicated on health, nor should it be bolstered by health-seeking behaviours like exercise. She ultimately suggested that Western culture is more concerned with the *appearance* of health than health itself: "Sometimes health is a euphemism for standardized appearance. Plenty of trim people aren't *necessarily* healthy, but that can be overlooked, as long as they appear that way." Dark's arguments recall those of Charlotte Cooper, who famously asserted that "fat people have as much right to be greedy lazy, unfit or smelly as thinner people;" Charlotte Cooper, *Fat and Proud: The Politics of Size* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1998), 43.

[181] Dark framed the juxtaposition of her body against the muscular passenger's body not simply as fit versus fat, but as masculine musculature versus feminine fatness. "Now of course, our cultural views on *too fat* shift with time and culture," she explained. "But for a *man* in this culture – *too muscular*!? That's pretty much impossible."

[182] Dark suggested that fat phobia has economic value and that it is therefore in the airline industry's best interest to support its perpetuation: "If the airline can encourage *trim passengers to focus on the fat passengers in the next seat*?! Then that takes the focus off of how this conveyance is organized and structured. The focus on the fat passenger may fuel a little animosity, a little hatred, but it won't be toward the airline, and that's good for business." For a more in-depth analysis of airline industry's role in marginalizing fatness, see Joyce L. Huff, "Access to the Sky: Airplane Seats and Fat Bodies as Contested Spaces," in *The Fat Studies Reader,* eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 176-186.

Graham refers to as "lipoliteracy."[183] I will argue that Dark resisted both of these visual modes by engaging in a politics of visibility, drawing visual attention to her body in the lecture hall to offset her invisibility within the airplane, and asserting her athleticism to disrupt the reading of fat bodies as lazy and unfit. This alone is not particularly novel, as many fat activists engage in visibility politics, but I argue that Dark's efforts are unique within size acceptance activism because she acknowledged that this politics is sometimes impeded by our limited capacity to read fat bodies in ways that contradict the teachings of hegemonic "obesity" discourse, and because she attempted to overcome these limitations by foregrounding lipoliteracy within her performance, shedding light on perceptual practices that typically evade critical analysis. Finally, I argue that Dark sought to disrupt lipoliteracy by revealing its inaccuracy and by presenting an alternative mode of reading body fat as a sign of one's relative social privilege.

Looking at *Big People on the Airplane*

Dark described the act of looking several times in *Big People on the Airplane*. She opened her monologue by looking at the handsome passenger and describing his muscular body in detail, noting the breadth of his shoulders, the length of his legs, the thickness of his hair and the youth of his face. His impressive stature drew others' visual attention as well, as Dark observed that his elderly seatmate looked up at him with admiration, the flight attendants looked out for his broad shoulders whilst passing him with their refreshment carts, and other nearby passengers looked at him from their seats:

> Oh, that big guy next to me… He may have a much more interesting story than I can even *imagine* as I sit here looking at him, and watching other people, *look at him*."

[183] Mark Graham, "Chaos," in *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*, eds. Don Kulick and Anne Meneley (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2005): 169-184. Graham also uses the term "lipoliteracy" to describe the act of learning about fat and fatness.

Dark thus framed the viewing economy within the airplane as centred on the muscular passenger. Despite her claims that she often looks at people (plural) and observes others' bodies (plural) within confined social settings, she only looked at *him*, she only observed *his* body. Other figures were acknowledged only when they interacted with the muscular passenger, and even then, Dark described their admiring and compassionate gazes rather than their bodies. It is tempting to suggest that the muscular passenger attracted so much visual attention because his immense physicality rendered him hyper-visible, especially because Dark verbally embellished his size to stress the fact that his large body dominated both the physical and visible space within the airplane (his legs, for example, were as long and strong as "*tree trunks*"). However, despite its similarly large physique, Dark's fat body was not looked at – or, at least, she did not describe the ways in which her fellow passengers looked at her body. This is a telling erasure that hints at the politicized nature of looking, raising questions such as: What does it mean to look? To be looked at? What does it *mean* when others refuse to look at you, at your body?

Looking is certainly a meaningful – rather than simply biological – activity, as has been demonstrated by the many scholars who explore the social, cultural, and historical specificities of sight.[184] John Berger, for example, opens his four-part BBC television series, *Ways of Seeing*, by asserting that "the process of seeing paintings, or seeing anything else, is less spontaneous and natural than we tend to believe."[185] Looking is not exclusively the function of visual anatomy; it is also the product of social "habit and convention."[186] To illustrate, he suggests that one such convention that is deployed in Western art is that of linear perspective, which utilizes

[184] Hal Foster acknowledges several prominent thinkers who had already complicated biological accounts of vision in the decades preceding the 1988 publication of his text, *Vision and Visuality* (which arguably launched contemporary studies of visuality), namely: Erwin Panofsky, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Lacan and Frantz Fanon. Hal Foster, "Preface," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988): xiv.
[185] Episode 1," *Ways of Seeing*, first broadcast 1972 by BBC, produced by Mike Dibb and written by John Berger.
[186] Ibid.

mathematics to create a realistic representation of the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface. "Perspective," Berger explains, "makes the *eye* the centre of the visible world."[187] He goes on to suggest that before the invention of the camera, this perspectival system aligned with real-world viewing experiences, as one could only see what was directly in front of one's eyes. In order to view a religious icon, for example, pilgrims had to physically travel to the particular church in which it is housed. But because looking is based on convention, it is subject to change, and indeed "with the invention of the camera, *everything* changed."[188] The camera reproduces and mobilizes sights, enabling, in this example, many worshippers to see the image of the icon from different locations. Berger's arguments are largely based on Walter Benjamin's canonical essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in which the author suggests that the mode of perception created by the camera reflects a middle class ideology, one that privileges the masses and maintains a "sense of the universal equality of all things."[189] Thus the way that we look at the world is circumscribed. Cultural forces such as technology and ideology shape "how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see."[190] It is this conception of looking that the art historian Hal Foster has dubbed "visuality." Visuality is not a static, timeless, and universal biological phenomenon, but is rather fluid, fluctuating across historical time and cultural space.[191] This has been made evident by the work of visuality scholars such as

[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Mechanical reproduction strips images of their special "aura," or essential uniqueness, and renders them available for mass consumption. Benjamin likens modern perception with the theoretical underpinnings of statistical science, implying that they are connected by a middle class ideology: "The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007): 223.
[190] Foster, ix.
[191] Foster distinguishes vision from visuality: whereas the former positions sight as an anatomical function, the latter re-considers sight as a social construct. However, he is careful to point out that vision and visuality are not mutually exclusive, as vision, too, is historical, and visuality embodied.

Martin Jay, Jonathon Crary, and Svetlana Alpers, who have mapped out various "scopic regimes" that inform the ways in which people look at the world.[192]

Cultural ideologies also shape the ways in which subjects look at and understand one another. This particular form of visuality is referred to as the gaze, a term popularized by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her enormously influential study of gendered looking relations within the movie theatre, entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In this essay, Mulvey draws upon the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to theorize the "male gaze," an unconscious visual mode that is produced by, and operates in service of, heteronormative patriarchy by idealizing male screen actors and objectifying and/or symbolically controlling female actresses.[193] Mulvey's ground-breaking work has launched

[192] Ibid, ix. Martin Jay argues that "the scopic regime of modernity may best be understood as a contested terrain" between the dominant Cartesian perspectivalism (which "best expressed the 'natural' experience of sight valorized by the scientific world view" by privileging rational and mathematical conceptions of space), Baconian empiricism (a "nonmathematical impulse" that attends to "the fragmentary, detailed, and richly articulated surface of a world"), and a baroque visuality (which is haptic in nature, engaging the bodily senses with a "dazzling, disorienting, ecstatic surplus of images"); Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988): 4, 13, 16. Jonathon Crary argues that processes of modernization transformed visuality in the 1820s and 1830s such that the model of the observer shifted from the camera obscura (rigid, fixed, organized by linear optics and by an inner/outer distinction) to the human body (mobile, autonomous, temporal), enacting "a decoding and deterritorialization of vision;" Jonathon Crary, "Modernizing Vision," in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988): 42. Finally, Svetlana Alpers distinguishes the visual mode that characterized Italian Renaissance painting from that of the Northern Renaissance, specifically in the Low Countries; while the former is "narrative" – recreating a three-dimensional reality for pictorial storytelling – the latter is "descriptive" – focusing on texture, light, and surface; Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983): 8.

[193] Laura, Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 57-65. Mulvey asserts that deconstructing the various pleasures produced by the cinematic experience is a politically subversive act because these pleasures can reveal something about the workings of the dominant social order. She identifies two psychoanalytic pleasures: the (Freudian) sexual pleasure of scopophila and the (Lacanian) narcissistic pleasure of ego formation. The former, which Freud described as the pleasure of "looking at another person as object," is encouraged by the cinematic viewing context, which Mulvey describes as a voyeuristic spectacle in which audiences sit in darkened theatres and look at screen actors who cannot return their gaze; Mulvey, 59. The latter is invoked because the cinema models the Lacanian mirror phase of childhood development, in which the infant recognizes his reflection but envisions this mirror image to be the more complete, ideal version of himself (because the child has not yet mastered his motor skills). Together, these two psychoanalytic processes cause the viewer to simultaneously objectify and self-identify with filmed bodies. This "contradiction between libido and ego" is resolved, however, by the patriarchal logic of cinematic fantasy; Mulvey, 60. Because Hollywood films are typically phallocentric in their narratives (the male protagonist actively propels the film plot) and in their cinematography (the camera typically lingers on the body of the female protagonist), they force the audience to adopt a male gaze, regardless of gender. From this perspective, the male actor is identified as

nearly forty years of feminist research that conceptualizes interpersonal viewing relations as enmeshed in ideological power structures. Scholars have since suggested a number of oppressive gazes that disempower non-normative bodies (for example, the xenophobic gaze that is targeted at cultural others),[194] but have also recognized that looking is not the exclusive prerogative of the socially privileged – we can all look – and have thus worked to understand how visuality is shaped by race, gender, sexuality, and class; or, in other words, how our social identities affect the ways in which we see and interpret the world. This, in turn, has led some to reformulate the gaze as a site of agency and resistance against social inequities. Judith Halberstam, for example, explores how director Kimberly Pierce enables her audiences to adopt a "transgender gaze" in her critically acclaimed film, *Boys Don't Cry*, to disrupt heteronormativity.[195] Similarly, critical race theorist bell hooks suggests that black female spectators view popular visual culture with an "oppositional gaze" that defiantly critiques mainstream representations of black womanhood. For her, "one learns to look a certain way in order to resist."[196] Thus to look is not only to oppress

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the viewer's idealized screen counterpart. The female body of the actress, in contrast, is characterized by sexual difference and therefore presents a symbolic threat of castration. This threat is neutralized either through fetishistic scopophilia (the aesthetic appreciation of physical beauty as object-in-itself) or voyeurism (an extreme form of scopophilia that involves sadistic processes of control and punishment). Berger makes similar claims in his book adaptation of *Ways of Seeing*, arguing that in classical nude portraiture "*men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." Here, gendered viewing relations are positioned as dichotomous, whereby the looking male objectifies the looked-at female. According to Berger, this dichotomy is not troubled by women looking at themselves (for example, when painted female nudes gaze at their reflections in the mirror). He writes: "The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight." He does not discuss women looking at men, or men looking at themselves, thereby skirting the possibility of male objectification. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972), 47.

[194] See Alison Donnell, "Visibility, Violence and Voice?" in *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*, eds. David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, and Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2003): 123.

[195] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 86. According to Halberstam, the gaze of the transgendered protagonist, Brandon, is unique from the male and female gazes presented in *Boys Don't Cry* (which privilege the "truth" of the Brandon's female biological sex and that of his presented, masculine gender, respectively) in that it is inherently multiple, "a look divided within itself;" ibid, 88. She suggests that Pierce "keeps the viewer trained on the seriousness of Brandon's masculinity and the authenticity of his presentation" in order to solicit viewer empathy, which allows audiences "to look *with* the transgender character instead of *at* him;" ibid, 89, 78.

[196] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1995), 116.

and objectify the Other; to look (back) is to resist such oppression and objectification. Furthermore, as E. Ann Kaplan points out in her study of international cinema, the ways in which we look at one another symbolize and enact complex social relations that extend beyond oppression and resistance, including, for example, those characterized by wonder, desire, fear, and disgust.[197] To paraphrase Dark, to look is to envy, to pity, to lust, and to judge.[198]

The viewing dynamics in *Big People on the Airplane* are reminiscent of those described by Mulvey – specifically, between the film-goer and male protagonist – because looking functioned to uphold the bodily status quo without objectifying the looked-at body. By looking at the muscular man with approval and admiration, the airline passengers validated his (presumably) healthy, athletic, masculine figure as the embodiment of the cultural ideal. The exception to this rule was Dark's own gaze. She surveyed the viewing economy within the airplane, looking at others who were looking at the muscular passenger, and conveyed, in her performance, a sense of awareness that others' recognition of his body was yet another form of body-type privilege. For example, she hinted that while nearby passengers and flight attendants observed and then alleviated his obvious discomfort within the narrow airplane seat, they were either ignorant of or indifferent to her similar plight: "They have sympathy for his endurance of this seat – the same size seat that the airplane sold to *me*." The implication here is that because Dark was not looked at, her fat body and embodied experiences were neither recognized nor validated by her fellow passengers. She occupied a marginalized social position within the

[197] E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze* (New York: Routledge, 1996): 299.

[198] As noted, the feminist and queer theories of the gaze that I cite largely stem from Mulvey's theorization of the male gaze, which is (loosely) grounded in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. However, none of these essays directly engage with Lacan's theory of the gaze, which he articulated in his 1964 lecture series, "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*." These feminist and queer theories also differ from Michel Foucault's influential poststructuralist theory of the gaze as an institutional construct deployed in specific contexts to inspect, normalize, and discipline the subject (the clinical gaze, for example, exerts power over the medical subject); see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

airplane, invisible to others not because they could not see her, but because they *would* not see her; they did not look at her, they did not notice her bodily discomfort, and they did not offer her either kindness or compassion.

Dark resisted this invisibility by verbally and physically drawing attention to her body within the lecture hall. For example, she described, in some detail, how her body fit into the airline seat:

> See, I fit into the space that the airline has sold me only a *little better* than the handsome gentleman across the aisle from me on this flight. My hips are wide and I'm bigger through the midsection, so my thigh and hip touch the person next to me, just as his shoulder and leg make constant contact with the neighbouring passenger. My seatbelt fits on this flight, but *barely*.

While giving this description, Dark waved her free hand up and down the side her body and then across her waistline in order to direct the audience's gaze towards her torso, thighs and hips. Later, when arguing that she, too, is "predisposed to physical grandness," Dark fully extended her left arm and swelled her chest so that her upper body took up as much space as possible (3.2). Furthermore, the performance was staged so that even when Dark was not actively encouraging her audiences to attend to her fat body – when she addressed other topics and stood relatively still – she nevertheless constituted the centre of the viewing economy within the university lecture hall because, as the sole performer, all eyes were on her (3.3). Contrary to her (partial) invisibility within the narrative, she was hyper-visible in the space of her performance, a fact that Dark explicitly pointed out to her audience in the interlude between her two stories (in which she addressed viewers directly, without holding the hardcover book or speaking with a theatrical tone of voice):

> The body matters. This is part of why I'm telling you this story *not behind the podium*, because the body is actually the significant artefact, right? So what does "artefact" actually mean? It is a human-made thing suitable for future uses […] So, here I am, the significant artefact in front of you.

In this highly gestural speech, Dark literally presented herself to the audience ("here I am […] in front of you") as a body in motion: she leaned far forward and extended her right arm behind her to gesture towards the podium before broadly opening her arms towards the audience; she repeatedly raised and lowered her arms up and down the sides of the body, pointing at herself (the artefact) with her index fingers (3.4); she moved her hands in large circular motions in front her body when defining the artefact, and waved her right hand laterally to suggest temporal progression. These exaggerated gestures exceeded typical body language, functioning not only to communicate her ideas, but also to invite visual attention (3.5). Which leads me to wonder: how might Dark's efforts to increase her bodily visibility have functioned to serve her fat activist agenda? Could it be that by creating viewing conditions whereby the audience had nowhere to look but at Dark's fat body, by talking about and pointing to her body, and by taking up as much physical and visible space as possible, Dark was encouraging the audience to recognize and validate her fatness?

The Politics of Visibility, Identity, and Representation

If so, hers' would not be an unusual strategy. As we have seen, many fat activists combat size discrimination by increasing the (positive) visibility of the fat body (Lauren Gurierri did so, for example, by creating the Stocky Bodies image base, as did Pretty Porky and Pissed Off in their *Cake Dance*). This effort can be understood in relation to a particular conception of visuality that is informed by identity politics; or more specifically that has been, as Christine Ross describes, "fundamentally shaped by the growing awareness that gender, race, and sexuality are intrinsic to representation, recognition, and reception."[199] Identity politics is

[199] Christine Ross, "Introduction: The Precarious Visualities of Contemporary Art and Visual Culture," in *Precarious Visualities*, eds. Olivier Asselin, Johanne Lamoureux, and Christine Ross (Montreal: Queens-McGill University Press, 2008): 4.

imbricated with visuality not only because race, gender, and other aspects of one's identity shape the ways in which we look at the world, but also because social identities are often marked on the surface of the body and are visible to others.[200] We can typically look at someone and discern their sex, race, and size, as well as approximate their age, class, sexuality, and ability (although, of course, all of these identity markers can be ambiguous, modified, and/or concealed, and are therefore not always easily legible). This is politically significant because, as Linda Martín Alcoff argues, the visibility of social identities is a double-edged sword, "both the means of segregating and oppressing human groups and the means of manifesting unity and resistance."[201] That is, while visible identity markers facilitate the classification of bodies and subsequent organization of social hierarchies, they can also be utilized to disrupt the status quo.[202] Alcoff observes that many activists either accentuate bodily differences (such as race and gender) or create visible identity markers (such as group-specific dress codes, hairstyles, or tattoos) in order to highlight political or cultural affiliations, promote activist agendas, and, ultimately, attain social currency and political influence.[203] Visibility is therefore a multivalent politic. To be visible is not only to be physically seen, it is to be noticed, to be heard, to be socially and politically understood.[204] It is no wonder, then, that increasing visibility on one's own terms is such an attractive strategy for identity-based political movements.[205] Within size acceptance

[200] Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): 4.
[201] Ibid, 3.
[202] In this sense, visibility is reminiscent of the gaze, as it can be used to either uphold or disturb unequal power relations.
[203] Alcoff, 3.
[204] Snider argues that visibility has been seen as an important "step toward social intelligibility" for many fat activists (as well as for lesbian and feminist socio-political groups) since the 1970s; Stefanie Snider, "Envisioning Bodily Difference: Refiguring Fat and Lesbian Subjects in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture, 1968-2009" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2010), 118.
[205] bell hooks suggests that seizing control of one's own visual representation is the key to social change: "Unless we transform images of blackness, of black people, our ways of looking and our ways of being seen, we cannot make radical interventions that will fundamentally alter our situation." hooks, 7.

activism, I would suggest that this involves raising consciousness about the extensive damage caused by fat phobia, asserting a fat-positive and size-accepting political identity by coming out as fat, and, of course, increasing the visibility of fat bodies via representation. Together, these strategies increase the political, social, and bodily visibilities that are crucial to the size acceptance movement by raising awareness about fat liberation, heightening the public profile of fat activists, and reducing the visual novelty (or shock value) of fat flesh.

On one level, Dark engaged in a rather straightforward politics of visibility with *Big People on the Airplane.* As we have seen, she exposed the differential treatment of fat and muscular bodies to make her audience aware of body-type privilege, and foregrounded her physicality within the lecture hall in order to combat her invisibility within the narrative. She also subtly identified herself as a size-accepting fat woman when she claimed that she and her cake-eating thin friend are "both fine human beings" who "deserve equal doses of respect," regardless of body size.[206] Dark complicated this politics, however, by choosing not to focus exclusively on her own visibility, opting instead to explore the broader visual dynamics within the airplane, in which her fat body was ignored whilst the muscular passenger's athletic body was looked at with admiration and concern by his seatmate, the flight attendants, and nearby passengers. This comparison enabled her to pinpoint the visible/invisible divide that separates privileged and stigmatized bodies, but more importantly, it paved the way for Dark to suggest that these remarkably consistent visual (in)activities are *learned* social constructs. This, I argue, is the dominant theme of her second story, *Here's Looking at You.*

[206] In an interview with Domnica Radulescu, Dark explains the function and value of coming out as fat to her audiences: "When a fat person is publicly displayed, people are accustomed to laughing. (More specifically, people feel entitled to laugh – and often do.) Alternately, if it becomes clear that the fat is not the funny part, people want to ignore it. I try to offer a third alternative: in some of my work I 'come out' as fat – that is to say, I let the audience know that it's okay to see me as a fat person. […] And from there, we can laugh at the absurdity of putting anyone into rigid categories that don't allow for full humanity." Dark quoted in Domnica Radulescu, *Women's Comedic Art as Social Revolution: Five Performers and the Lessons of their Subversive Humor* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2012), 180-181.

Foregrounding Lipoliteracy in *Here's Looking at You*

"Let me tell you another story," said Dark as she turned to pick up her red hardcover book from the top of the podium. "You know, when we start talking about health we usually get around to this particular social setting […] We usually get around to talking about gyms, or exercise, or fitness settings, right?" She opened her book. "In this case, it's a story about a yoga studio." Raising her arm, she asked, "How many of you have ever done any kind of yoga class, anybody?" Hands shot up. "Loads of people, right? Because yoga is like [*sic*] taking over as one of the new ways that we do the fitness thing in Western culture. This is called *Here's Looking at You*":

> Okay, she was checking me out. You can feel that sort of thing, right? Her gaze *lingered* as I walked into the yoga studio, just that split-second longer than usual acknowledgement. She caught my eye as I rolled out my mat. She looked me up and down – quickly, not in a creepy kind of way – and then she smiled broadly. Then as I was picking up my blanket and block I felt her *eyes follow me*.
>
> So, was there some kind of *come on* coming? Some sort of yoga studio *romance* to ensue? I can tell you from experience that this glance likely had a different origin than erotic motivation. And if she hadn't been looking at *me*, I'd have likely been looking at *her* for the same reasons. *We are fat women in a fitness setting*. I *know* the look. I've experienced it for more than twenty years now at yoga studios, at gyms, at aerobics classes. I'm *accustomed* to being looked at because I'm *surprising. Shocking*, even! I'm a *large* woman, and dare I say it, *relatively fit*, despite being over one hundred pounds overweight by insurance chart standards.

Dark suggested that the shocked expressions that are so commonplace in exercise settings contribute to the exclusionary and "daunting environment of fitness fanaticism" that characterizes many upscale yoga studios, but noted that sometimes, in spite of this, "the noble fat person can sneak through." "Now this is the *beginner*," she explained, "who is assumed to be fighting the *good fight against his or her flab*. That person can be jovially accommodated and feel a little bit of love," unless, over time, they remain fat. In this case, "there's another layer of failure to feel in the glances of the fitness-faithful onlookers," who presumably believe that

regular physical activity should result in weight loss. "We want to hop on the yoga conveyer belt and then plop off the end looking rested, flexing hot buns and deserving a martini," but, as Dark pointed out, "it's not that simple, despite our desire to just pay, participate and make it so." She thus felt "called to disrupt the idea that body-type privilege is an earned trait" by becoming a yoga instructor. "I've noticed that I'm often of assistance" to women who doubt their fitness worthiness, she explained, "just by showing up and living large." It is therefore imperative, for Dark, that non-normative bodies "model difference" within the yoga studio:

> See we need more fat yoga teachers, fitness instructors, aerobic teachers. And *old* yoga teachers, and *disabled* yoga teachers and *anyone with a different body than you were taught to believe you want*.

Hinting that this necessity extends to student bodies as well, Dark concluded by encouraging her audience members to promote bodily diversity:

> So, if you're thinking about going to a yoga class and you're afraid you won't fit in? Go anyway! Maybe you don't look the part or you're not bendy enough – aw [*sic*], you and everyone else in the room will be better for it. And if you have a body that gets *stares*, and not always in that *good way*, and you want to teach? I encourage you. […] Just remember, you may as well stand up in front of those other folks and demonstrate the poses, because they're all checking you out, anyway.

The opening segment of *Here's Looking at You* supports the implicit argument of *Big People on the Airplane*, which is that looking validates the looked-at body, whereas the refusal to look marginalizes the ignored body. Here, however, it is *Dark's* body that is validated by the prolonged gaze of a fellow fat yogi, a look so warm that it could be mistaken for sexual interest. Dark interpreted this woman's kind gaze and broad smile as an expression of camaraderie stemming from their shared minority status within fitness settings, explaining that "part of the reason we find solidarity with one another is because we're *scarce*, at least at swank studios like *this* one." She also read the fat yogi's friendly gaze as evidence of a shared affinity for size

acceptance; Dark considered her kindred, someone who, like her, took pleasure in seeing another large woman defying cultural expectations by engaging in physical activity:

> We were both at peace, happy to see one another. […] Perhaps we were having the same thought: 'Wow, how wonderful! She's living her life, using her body as she chooses, despite what others might think.'

This seems to be the exception, rather than the rule, however, as some of Dark's former, fat classmates have refused to look at her body. Given its hyper-visibility within the yoga studio (rendered thus by her "flagrant display of largess"), such refusals are seemingly deliberate and suggest that these women had been disturbed by the sight of fat flesh; the aversion of their eyes implies a deeper aversion to fatness. In this way, these fat classmates, like the airplane passengers, perpetuated the marginalization of fatness, whereas the fat yogi's admiring gaze subverted fat phobia by validating Dark's non-normative figure. For Dark, "the looking is better than the *not* looking."

Dark's decision to become a yoga instructor could be construed as another example of her more straightforward visibility politics; by asserting authority and demonstrating athleticism within the yoga studio, she exposed her students to a lived reality that counters popular representations of fat bodies as meek, sedentary, and unfit, with the ultimate goal of broadening the narrow definitions of the "typical" or "ideal" body of the yoga teacher. But Dark brought the limitations of this politics to light by describing some of the ways in which her students have reacted to her size:

> Now I've had students – in the more fitness-oriented places where I've taught – see me, look *aghast*, and walk right out of the class. I've also subbed for classes where students see me and ask *if it's going to be a gentle class today*.

The mere sight of a fat yoga teacher was not sufficient for these students to relinquish their size prejudices. Rather, they visually assessed Dark's body in order to evaluate her teaching ability

and found her lacking; if not completely incompetent, then certainly less capable than the regularly scheduled instructor (who is ostensibly thin). The subversive potential of Dark's physicality was trumped by the quality of her students' lipoliteracy; by their ability to "read" fat – or more specifically, to read the culturally specific messages that are conveyed by the presence or absence of body fat. In this case, the students read Dark's fatness as evidence of her inferiority, as proof of her failure to master yogic practice and consequent inability to teach. Thus while Dark repeatedly touted visibility politics as an important step towards breaking down systems of oppression, she acknowledged that her efforts are sometimes thwarted by the looking practices of fat-phobic students.

Dark traversed the limitations of visibility politics, however, by foregrounding lipoliteracy within the space of her performance. This was accomplished, first and foremost, by making her audience aware that (to borrow Hal Foster's words) "we are able, allowed, or made to see" fat bodies in culturally-specific ways. When imploring the need for diversity within the yoga classroom, for example, she asserted that we are *taught* to believe that we want to be thin, young and able-bodied; that we are *made to see* fat bodies as undesirable. She supported this claim by describing the remarkably consistent ways in which people typically look at and interpret her body, explaining that fitness enthusiasts are often surprised by her presence in yoga studios, gyms and aerobics classes because they, like those students who are unable to see her as a qualified yoga instructor, read her body fat as evidence of inactivity. Declaring that she has grown so accustomed to receiving shocked and bewildered stares over the past two decades that she now considers herself an expert who could "make a *study*" on the subject, Dark implied that lipoliteracy is a social phenomenon rather than an individual tendency. We all learn, in fat-

obsessed cultures, to pay close attention to fat, to understand it as a meaningful source of information about bodies, and to interpret this information accordingly.[207]

Dark also drew attention to lipoliteracy by considering its process (how we read body fat) and outcomes (what information is ascertained by this practice). The former she rather subtly described when recounting her students' horrified reactions to her size, as the immediacy with which they left the yoga studio upon seeing her body suggests that they did not consciously interpret the meanings of her fat. Rather, their lack of hesitation implies that lipoliteracy is such a well-learned skill that it does not necessitate active or deliberate analysis; it is instead an automatic process. Dark repeatedly suggested that the outcomes of lipoliteracy are informed by hegemonic obesity discourses that position fitness and fatness as mutually exclusive embodiments. Her yoga students, for example, read her body fat as evidence of incompetence because they had been socially conditioned to believe that a fat woman such as Dark cannot be athletic enough to teach a yoga class (or at least not a difficult one). They could not read a fat body as one that is qualified to occupy a position of authority within the context of physical fitness. Similarly, Dark observed that the "noble fat person" who "sneaks through" the institutional sizism of upscale yoga studios is typically presumed to be an inexperienced beginner who is trying to lose weight. Here, body fat is read as a source of information about one's physical condition (unfit), typical behaviours (sedentary), and internal desires (a wish to become thinner). Perhaps most significantly, Dark reflected that fitness enthusiasts often read enduring fatness as a sign of personal failure. After arguing that fat bodies are read as novices, she asked,

[207] Lipoliteracy is not inherently fat-phobic, however. Graham's essay, for instance, addresses lipodystrophy, a facial wasting syndrome caused by certain HIV treatments, and the ways in which some "lipoliterates" read the presence or absence of facial fat for information about one's HIV status. In this case, the *absence* of fat is a stigmatizing physical characteristic; ibid, 176.

> But what of the average plodder who does a regular practice and *never looks fit*? Well, sometimes, it's so uncomfortable, the group support and individual instruction offered by the beautiful studios is forfeit. And even if the fat yogi persists through the initial discomfort and *becomes a regular?!* The feeling of being an outsider can persist. See if you do athletic stuff, and *still remain fat?!* There's another layer of failure to feel in the glances of the fitness-faithful onlookers.

The fat yogi's regular attendance and sustained, active participation in fitness culture contradicts the hegemonic notion that fitness and fatness are incompatible, but her classmates are seemingly blind to this contradiction. As lipoliterates, they are trained to read fat as evidence of particular behaviours that are generally condemned by fat-phobic cultures, and this narrative implies that they may have made sense of the apparent disconnect between the fat yogi's demonstrative commitment to physical activity and her stable body weight by reading her fat as evidence of another kind of so-called "failure," such as overconsumption. Thus Dark suggested that lipoliteracy is fixed; we learn to read fat in very specific ways that fit within the narrow confines of hegemonic obesity discourses, even, sometimes, in spite of conflicting evidence.

In her phenomenology of racial embodiment, which theorizes racism as a learned perceptual practice, Linda Martín Alcoff offers several reasons why harmful visualities can be so resilient. Like Dark, Alcoff argues that racial attributions are automatic and unconscious, and thus escape notice. "Our experience of habitual perceptions is so attenuated as to skip the stage of conscious interpretation and intent," she writes. "Indeed, interpretation is the wrong word here: we are simply perceiving."[208] To illustrate, she analyses an entry of Jack Kerouac's personal diary in which he expresses his wish to "exchange worlds with the happy, true-minded, ecstatic Negroes of America"[209] whom he sees one night while on a walk through a

[208] Linda Martín Alcoff, "Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," *Radical Philosophy* 95 (1999): 21. Alcoff draws upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of perceptual habit to develop her arguments; see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012 [1945]): 152-153.
[209] Jack Kerouac quoted in ibid, 20.

predominantly African American neighborhood in Denver. Kerouac presumes to be able to "see" the residents' affects and characteristics immediately upon seeing their skin colour, but does not recognize this automatic perception to be a learned social skill, believing instead that it is a natural observation of reality. Visuality typically evades detection, Alcoff continues, because perception is "defined as access to truth;"[210] it is understood to be an objective source of information about the external world and is therefore believed to facilitate the production of knowledge. Ludmilla Jordanova reveals the extent to which vision is conflated with knowledge by pointing out that the common phrase "I see" is synonymous with "I understand."[211] Vision's revered status makes it very difficult to challenge its validity or truthfulness. What's more, Alcoff suggests that the information gleaned from racial perception is experienced as "obviously true" because it is informed by deeply held and seemingly unshakeable common sense beliefs.[212] Kerouac presumes to see the inner qualities of black bodies, for example, because these bodies have been historically constructed as the knowable Other.

Alcoff's theorization of racial perception as a learned yet tacit visuality helps explain why Dark's visibility politics were impeded by her students' fat-phobic lipoliteracy. Like Kerouac, the students looked at Dark's body and instantly presumed to know something about her; when they saw her fat, they saw incompetence. Thus lipoliteracy is, as Alcoff describes racism, "inseparable from perception."[213] And because perception is defined as access to truth and rooted in commonsense beliefs, the students believed that what they *thought* they saw – that Dark was unfit and unqualified – was indisputably accurate.

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[210] Merleau-Ponty quoted in ibid, 20-21.
[211] Ludmilla Jordanova, *The Look of the Past: Visual and Material Evidence in Historical Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.
[212] Ibid, 19. "Racial knowledges exist at the site of common sense," she argues, drawing upon Antonio Gramsci's Foucauldian theory of common sense as "formed, not as a false consciousness is imposed from above, but by the sediment of past historical beliefs and practices of a given society or culture;" see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).
[213] Ibid, 21.

Here's Looking at You includes another anecdote that resonates with Kerouac's diary entry in a way that uncovers the troubling power dynamics enacted by lipoliteracy. To articulate her frequent sense of marginalization by her classmates, Dark explained that

> Even as a regular participant in a fitness setting, it's hard to find community. As a stranger recently said to me in a class I was attending while travelling, "Just keep coming, you'll lose the weight!" *Thankfully*, most people keep those *helpful* comments to themselves, but I've heard similar things often enough. She was articulating the two big assumptions many people have about fat folks in a fitness setting: first, that we are beginners at fitness; second, that we're there to lose weight.

Although the lipoliterate stranger misread Dark's body, she was so convinced that she knew certain truths about Dark's physical health and personal goals that she felt confident asserting her knowledge in the form of weight-loss advice. This decision suggests that the stranger presumed, furthermore, to know something about Dark that *Dark herself did not know*: that if she were to exercise regularly, she would no longer be fat. While Dark's sarcastic dismissal of the stranger's "*helpful* comment" hinted that she is indeed well acquainted with diet rhetoric, such a presumption is nonetheless problematic because it constitutes what Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick call a "privileged narrative" of fatness. They write,

> in this society, everyone who sees a fat woman feels they know something about her that she doesn't herself know. If what they think they know is something as simple as that she eats a lot, it is medicine that lends this notionally self-evident (though, as recent research demonstrates, usually erroneous) reflection the excitement of inside information; it is medicine that, as with homosexuality, transforming difference into etiology, confers on this rudimentary *behavioral* hypothesis the prestige of a privileged narrative understanding her *will* (she's addicted), her *history* (she's frustrated), her *perception* (she can't see herself as she really looks), her *prognosis* (she's killing herself).[214]

Moon and Sedgwick argue that the kinds of suppositions that the stranger made about Dark are paradoxical, experienced both as common sense and as "inside information" privy only to non-

[214] Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little-Understood Emotion," in *Bodies Out Of QBounds: Fatness and Transgression,* eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 305-306, original emphasis.

fat bodies. That Dark was out of shape and desired to be thin was *obvious* to the stranger; the confidence with which she vocalized her assumptions implies that she did not perceive them as assumptions at all, but rather as factual observations. Whether or not the stranger believed (as Moon and Sedgwick suggest she would believe) that such "facts" were incomprehensible to Dark herself, I argue that they still constitute a privileged narrative because they create an illusion of transparency that situates Dark as the knowable, or legible, Other, akin to the African American bodies that Kerouac saw and spontaneously "knew" in Denver.

Disrupting Lipoliteracy

Dark's performance reveals lipoliteracy to be a robust visuality, one that is shaped by cultural and historical circumstance yet, as an unconscious perceptual mode, is experienced as natural and is therefore difficult to detect. Her efforts are of critical importance to size acceptance activism because raising consciousness about lipoliteracy opens up the possibility of its disruption. And indeed, Dark worked hard to disrupt lipoliteracy in both *Big People on the Airplane* and *Here's Looking at You.* This primarily involved invalidation. She discredited lipoliteracy by describing the ways in which her body is consistently *mis*read by her students (she is an experienced, rather than incompetent, yoga teacher), by fellow gym-goers (she is active and athletic, not sedentary and unfit), and by airplane passengers (she is not the "lazy, weak, inconsiderate slob" they imagine her to be). Dark thus insisted that the information ascertained with lipoliteracy is often, in fact, *misinformation*. This has serious implications for the ways in which we interpret fatness, for if what we see when we look at fat bodies is inaccurate, than the logic that structures such perceptions must be flawed. Dark undermined such logic throughout her performance, taking special care to unravel that which presumes that personal behaviours, body size, and health map onto one another in a linear and predictable

fashion (logic not unlike that of the heterosexual coherence between sex, gender, and desire described in the previous chapter). In *Big People on the Airplane*, for example, she revealed the dissonance between consumption and size by observing the similarity between hers' and her thin friends' eating habits, stressing one friend's ability to "*cake (her) under the table and never gain an ounce*." Likewise, in *Here's Looking at You*, she identified herself as one of many women who works out regularly without losing weight. Hence personal behaviours do not directly translate into body size; just as eating high-calorie treats does not guarantee fatness, exercising habitually does not guarantee thinness. Body size, in turn, does not determine health; Dark explicitly argued that "plenty of trim people aren't *necessarily* healthy" and insisted that fat people *can* be fit. Thus she was adamant that the relationships between behaviours, size, and health are neither straightforward nor coherent, and worked hard to prove that the hegemonic discourses that describe these relationships do *not* describe every body's lived reality. In doing so, she thoroughly discredited lipoliteracy as inaccurate, unreliable, and invalid.

Dark complemented her critical analysis of fat-phobic lipoliteracy with a suggestion for an alternative mode of reading body fat, not as evidence of inactivity or overconsumption, but rather as indicative of one's social privilege. After describing her encounter with the lipoliterate stranger who offered weight-loss advice at a yoga class, Dark reflected upon her comments:

> She was articulating the two big assumptions many people have about fat folks in a fitness setting: first, that we are beginners at fitness; second, that we're there to lose weight. And *wow!* There's some *sneaky* circular reasoning going on there, *isn't there?* I mean you take a look at a gym full of hard bodies and it's *easy* to assume that those people got that way by *doing that gym stuff*! But people *less often* wonder if those people have congregated in part because they *share* a really laudable body type! I mean, it's especially *comfortable* to be around others who all share the same social privilege after all! This phenomenon is visible with race, and with class, but *yeah,* body type privilege – it's the *same*. Hard body slender types. They like to *celebrate* together. They like *date* and *marry* one another. They discuss their righteousness and their privilege in similar company, whether or not they actually exercise any more often than someone like, *me*.

Here, again, Dark undermined the belief that personal behaviours determine body size by challenging the assumption that exercise precedes and is responsible for slimness. Not all "hard bodies […] got that way by doing that gym stuff;" some bodies are hard before entering, or congregating in, gyms. She likened these "hard body slender types" with (white and wealthy) people who enjoy racial and class-based privileges because, as she illustrated in *Big People on the Airplane*, trim and/or muscular physiques function as social currency. This currency, however, cannot be earned, as those who enjoy body type privilege do not necessarily exercise more frequently than those who, like Dark, are not privileged. Her message is clear: the absence of body fat cannot be read as evidence of regular physical activity (or other personal behaviours), but it *can* be read as a marker of social privilege. She thus offered viewers an alternative lipoliteracy that reads body fat as indicative of social status.

Conclusions

Within the half hour space of her performance at the Canadian Student Obesity Meeting, Kimberly Dark deployed, critiqued, and overcame the limitations of visibility politics. Her monologue included all three of the tactics that encompass visibility politics as it operates within size acceptance: she explicitly raised consciousness about body-type privilege, and, implicitly, about fat phobia and size discrimination; she "came out as fat" by repeatedly acknowledging her size, staking claim in respect, resisting diet culture, and expressing feelings of camaraderie with the seemingly size-accepting fat yogi; she increased her physical visibility within the lecture hall by instructing viewers to look at particular parts of her body, and within the yoga studio by occupying the highly-visible and authoritative position of the teacher. But Dark acknowledged the limitations of this politics by describing the ways it has failed her in the past, sharing anecdotal evidence that her attempts to disrupt the belief that fitness and fatness are mutually

exclusive by teaching yoga, and thus increasing the visibility of athletic fat bodies, are sometimes impeded by the ways in which her students look at and understand her body fat. Visibility politics, in other words, can be curtailed by lipoliteracy, a fat-specific visuality. This is incredibly problematic because lipoliterates interpret fat unconsciously and experience their interpretations to be natural observations of reality, and the automaticity and apparent truthfulness of lipoliteracy render it nearly impossible to detect and very difficult to unsettle. However, Dark worked to overcome these limitations by foregrounding fat-phobic lipoliteracy, exposing its inaccuracies, and presenting an alternative mode of reading fat as a marker of (low) social status. Dark's proposed lipoliteracy is not only a closer reflection of fat subjects' lived realities, it also dissuades size discrimination by recognizing body type privilege and discounting fat-phobic stereotypes. Thus although her performance is rooted in visibility politics, it complicates this mode of resistance and demonstrates the subversive potential of visuality. Whereas visibility politics works, in part, to refute fat phobia, visuality exposes and discredits fat phobia as a deeply flawed cultural construct. Dark increased the visibility of athletic fatness to challenge the fat phobic notion that fat bodies are fat because they are inactive, but drew attention to the ways in which we look at and understand fatness to challenge the fat phobic ideology that underpins lipoliteracy as a learned visuality.

3.1 Kimberly Dark, *Big People on the Airplane*, 2012.

3.2 Kimberly Dark, *Big People on the Airplane*, 2012.

3.3 Kimberly Dark, *Big People on the Airplane*, 2012.

3.4 Kimberly Dark, *Big People on the Airplane*, 2012.

3.5 Kimberly Dark, *Big People on the Airplane*, 2012.

Jenny Saville's Transformative Violence

Introduction

I am sitting in the downtown library of the Seattle Art Museum, poring over the Gagosian Gallery's beautiful catalogue for Jenny Saville's *Closed Contact*. This series of large-scale photographs, exhibited in the Los Angeles Gagosian in early 2002, is reproduced here in high-gloss, and I take care to pry the sticky sheets apart without damaging them. The first eight pages of the catalogue are filled with black-and-white photos, some of which are easily discernible (for example, the image of a finger pulling down on the outer corner of an eye), but most of which are not. With time, I recognize a hand here, lips there; the majority of images, however, remain unintelligible. Fingers dig into flesh, but it is impossible to determine *which* flesh, which part of the body is being pulled and prodded. Flipping past these obscure, monochromatic close-ups, I find the first full-colour reproduction in the catalogue, *Closed Contact #11* (4.1), which offers relative clarity: a naked Saville lies face-down on a sheet of glass, her knees are bent so that only the thighs are visible, while her arms extend above her head, reaching past the limits of the frame. Her belly fat folds into two long creases, one that descends from her navel, and another that slants upwards towards her left breast. The pressure of the glass pushes her breasts to the side and her nipples inwards. Her left eye is forced shut, her nose is shoved sideways and squishes her nostril, and her mouth is pried open. She does not look comfortable. And yet, she looks out at the viewer with her right eye (a rather startling detail). I turn the page and find *#16*, a close-up photograph of Saville's face pressed against the glass, this time with her teeth exposed, saliva drooling down the edges of her lip (4.2). I turn the page again to find *#3* and *#4*, two of the better-known images from the series, displayed side-by-side. *#3* (4.3) is reminiscent of her famous painting *Branded* (4.4), as Saville grabs a fistful of flesh from her stomach. Here, however, she cannot pull her belly fat outwards and visually offer it to the viewer, as the figure

in *Branded* does, because the glass pushes her hand inwards and folds her flesh in on itself. *Closed Contact #4* (4.5) is a more violent contortion of Saville's twisted torso; she claws at her stomach and digs into her breast, whose dimpled skin reveals the force that she exerts on herself. A couple of pages later, I am taken aback by *#2*, in which Saville tears at her breast with both hands as though she trying to rip it apart (4.6). What is going on here?

Katherine Dunn provides some insight in her catalogue essay, which features a helpful description of Saville's image-making process. While living in New York City in 1994, Saville was fascinated by the body-in-transformation and frequently observed plastic surgery operations. She began to imagine glass as a tool for such metamorphosis while riding the subway: "I'd see all these people pressed against glass dividers and I got this notion that if I pushed my body on glass, maybe I'd be able to get the same sort of malleability… a body in the process of change."[215] Inspired, she swapped the wooden flooring of her painting platform (which she uses to reach the tops of her enormous canvases) with plastic glass, and eventually recruited fashion photographer Glen Luchford to capture the images from beneath the scaffold. The pair darkened the windows of Saville's studio and used artificial neon lights to cultivate a medical aesthetic that both mimics the lighting effects of operating theatres and alludes to pathology museums. "We wanted to make it look like they were bodies in water," Saville explains. "(W)hen you see a body, like a fetus in a tank or a jar, they're amazing. In a teratology department you see these monstrous births, they look so serene. I wanted that mixture of terrible beauty."[216]

[215] Saville quoted in Katherine Dunn, "Closed Contact," in *Closed Contact: Jenny Saville, Glen Luchford: January 12-February 9, 2002, Gagosian Gallery* (Los Angeles: Gagosian Gallery, 2002): 28.
[216] Saville quoted in ibid, 27.

It is this terrible beauty that gives Dunn a sense of "visceral uneasiness"[217] when looking at *Closed Contact*. "The discomfort is complicated," she writes, "triggered partly by our sense of the instantaneous monstrosity of a normal human transformed by the pressure of the glass."[218] Indeed, the glass obscures Saville's body beyond recognition, contorting its contours and opening its orifices. But while Dunn finds Saville's flattened and distorted flesh menacing, other scholars suggest that it may (also) be politically subversive. Marsha Meskimmon, for example, suggests that the monstrous imagery of *Closed Contact* serves a feminist political agenda because it opens up the possibility of imagining new female subjectivities that do not construct woman as the inferior counterpart to man, as Other.[219] Monsters, she explains, are inherently ambiguous creatures that lack the clear boundaries that define so-called "normal" bodies – they are massive, multiple, hybrid, and/or in flux[220] – and are thus theoretically linked to the grotesque and the abject in that they, too, can disrupt the dichotomies that distinguish self from other, subject from object, and man from woman.[221] For Meskimmon, Saville's monstrous bodies "create new relationships between viewers and makers" that disrupt the gendered status quo.[222] Luchford, on the other hand, suggests that *Closed Contact* is subversive because it

[217] Ibid, 26.
[218] Ibid, 26.
[219] Marsha Meskimmon, "The Monstrous and the Grotesque," *MAKE* 72 (1996): 8-9.
[220] Meskimmon references both contemporary and classical definitions of monsters to verify their ambiguous nature, complementing dictionary and encyclopedia definitions (which, she writes, "emphasize the lack of clear limits or boundaries to these forms: they are multiple and huge, or mixed and in-between") with the archaic "monstrum" (defined both as a "divine portent or warning" as well as "a prodigy, a marvel") and its Greek root word, "teras" (which translates to both "horrible" and "wonderful"); ibid, 7-9. Although Dunn also traces "monster" to "monstrum," she only offers the former definition ("divine portent or warning") in order to highlight its ominous quality and explain her consequent viewing discomfort; Dunn, 26.
[221] Ibid, 8-10. Meskimmon references the scholarship of Mikhail Bakhtin, Barbara Creed, Julia Kristeva and Elizabeth Grosz to draw parallels between the monstrous, the grotesque, and the abject as ambiguous and subversive concepts.
[222] Ibid, 10. Meskimmon is careful to note, however, that for *Closed Contact* to function in this subversive manner the images must be experienced as grotesque rather than freakish. Paraphrasing Mary Russo, she explains that the grotesque "offers inclusion through a surrender of boundaries" whereas the freak remains "a distanced spectacle" that is scrutinized by the jaded, and potentially repulsed, viewer. It is only the grotesque, Meskimmon insists, that brings "an articulation of difference in which subject and object are dissolved." Ibid, 10.

undermines the beauty ideals of thin-obsessed cultures that he, as a fashion photographer, helps build. As he explains in his interview with Dunn,

> we have such stupid paranoia about being overweight and being fat and being too hairy, and all these funny, obsessive things we have about our bodies, and these images really draw you in. You're forced to look at the flesh and to see the way that it folds. They're distorted, but it's another kind of view. […] I do believe the fashion industry over the years has definitely shaped the female form in a way that's probably not that healthy. […] But of course Jenny and these pictures that we've done are fighting against that. They're going against the grain.[223]

Luchford is drawn to Saville's fleshy folds, hinting that they are extraordinary, if not beautiful. He, like Meskimmon, finds *Closed Contact* visually compelling, but whereas Meskimmon would likely argue that these undulating rolls of flesh render the bodies of *Closed Contact* monstrously unstable, and thus suggest that they might elicit ambiguous viewing reactions (such as simultaneous attraction and repulsion), Luchford shies away from such recognition of ambiguity, focusing instead on the work's critique of popular media representations of the female body.[224] Yet as Michelle Meagher points out, Saville's works do not constitute a "straightforward redefinition of beauty;"[225] yes, they critique diet culture,[226] but they also explore the *difficulties* presented by fatness, such as the challenges of living in and looking at bodies that, in fat-phobic cultures, are construed as disgusting and are therefore despised.[227] Meagher describes her own

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[223] Luchford quoted in Dunn, 29. Richard Jevons also praises *Closed Contact* for successfully subverting beauty standards, calling the photographs "UGLY UGLY UGLY;" Richard Jevons, "The Ugly Show/Vile Bodies: Photography and the Crisis of Looking by Chris Townsend," *Body and Society* 5, no. 4 (1999): 88.

[224] In this way, Luchford echoes past scholarship on Saville's feminist interventions of classical nude portraiture. See, for example, Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Beauty Unlimited* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012); Linda Nochlin, "Floating in Gender Nirvana," *Art in America,* March 2000: 95–97; Alison Rowley, "On Viewing Three Paintings by Jenny Saville," in *Generations and Genealogies in the Visual Arts,* ed. Griselda Pollock (New York and London: Routledge, 1996): 115-145.

[225] Michelle Meagher, "Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust," *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (2003): 28.

[226] Meagher notes that Saville often articulates her desire to interrogate the West's cultural obsession with weight loss, quoting the artist's interview with Catherine Milner: "Everyone I know, for instance, goes on a diet, and a lot of people I know have been seriously ill because of it. They draw lines on their legs with a biro to mark the place where they wished their flesh stopped. And I find all that deeply disturbing… Why are we doing this to ourselves?" Quoted in ibid, 27.

[227] Meagher quotes Saville's interview with *Los Angeles Times* reporter Drohojowska-Philp: "I don't make paintings for people to say we should look at big bodies again and say they are beautiful. I think it's more that they are difficult. Why do we find bodies like this difficult to look at?" Ibid, 24.

difficulty looking at Saville's portraits of fat female bodies by voicing her profoundly visceral reactions to paintings such as *Branded*, and engages with these affects on a much deeper level than Dunn, insisting that they provide insight into how individuals are shaped by, and interact with, their social world.[228] Upon interrogating her initial aversion to Saville's works, Meagher concludes that neither the paintings nor the bodies they depict are disgusting, but rather that "disgust might emerge from the recognition of a system of cultural ideals that often compels women to see their bodies in a distorted and negative manner."[229] Dunn, in contrast, doesn't articulate such a cultural critique, instead attributing her discomfort to the monstrosity and violence of the imagery, which, she writes, creates the "unnerving impression that the glass has literally sheared off flesh, leaving a visible cross-section."[230]

I generally do not experience a sense of dis-ease when viewing Saville's artworks, but when I do, it more closely parallels Dunn's discomfort than Meagher's. The first time I felt discomposed by Saville's work was at her solo exhibition at Modern Art Oxford, when I stumbled across *Study for Witness* and was stunned by the brutality of the image of a car accident victim's mutilated mouth (4.7). The second time this happened was at the Seattle Art Museum library, when I was taken aback by the violence of *Closed Contact #2*, and then again by that of *#5,* in which Saville takes hold of her breast and yanks it down with such force that her whole torso tilts to the side (4.8). My uneasiness seems to stem not from fleshy excesses or bodily distortions, but rather from stark representations of violence and bodily pain. I am aware that cutting open one's lips or ripping at one's breast would hurt, and so I cringe.

[228] Ibid, 29. "Disgust," Meagher argues, "reveals the ways in which social and cultural paradigms are experienced as personal preoccupations;" ibid, 33.
[229] Ibid, 25.
[230] Dunn, 26.

Dunn touches on the subject of pain several times in her catalogue essay, as she, too, recognizes that Saville must have been hurting herself while posing for the photographs, and notes that, as a result, the artistic duo had to work very quickly. Her discussion does not, however, venture beyond the realm of description. Saville's interview, on the other hand, suggests that violence was an essential component of *Closed Contact* because the painful poses enabled the artist to "almost bring the inside of the body outside," to render "the texture, the fabric of the body" visible.[231] Here, Saville positions pain as an unavoidable condition of her bodily manipulations, and violence as a tool that serves her larger purpose of creating a grotesque, monstrous aesthetic. Elsewhere in her interview, however, Saville hints that pain and violence may have played more significant roles in the creation of the series, as she was inspired by a grainy, black-and-white photograph documenting the torture and execution of an unnamed Chinese criminal by *lingchi*, or "death of a thousand cuts" (4.9). "He's administered opium to keep him alive longer," Saville explains to Dunn,

> I've had this image for years, and thought, my god, this is just an amazing image because of the look of ecstasy on his face while his body is being cut apart and this crowd of people around him are all watching... I felt, there's something about this. If I frame it in a different way, if I abstract the form, there's something violent and serene at the same time. That's what I tried to get.[232]

Pain and pleasure, violence and serenity, monstrosity and beauty: these are the tensions that Saville sought to explore with *Closed Contact*. In this chapter, I consider how these and other ambiguities (which, I believe, are manifest in the series' representations of pain and violence) might open up new possibilities for size acceptance activism that expand beyond the trope of the fat grotesque, which is currently the most popular vehicle for theorizing ambiguity in fat studies. I begin with a brief comparison of two contrasting readings of the *lingchi* photograph

[231] Saville quoted in ibid, 27.
[232] Saville quoted in ibid, 28.

in order to suggest that 1) violent imagery is not unequivocally destructive, and 2) it can be valuable if it evokes empathy and curiosity in viewers. Reflecting upon my own viewing reactions, I suggest that *Closed Contact* is productive because it is inherently ambiguous, in part due to the glass' ability to transform Saville's body in ways that disrupt the dichotomies that differentiate visible from invisible, interior from exterior, and subject from object. I identify Saville's bodily manipulations as examples of transformative violence and consider Doreen Fowler's argument that such violence can be subversive if it troubles the binary distinctions that structure society. I then suggest that the transformative violence and resulting ambiguities of *Closed Contact* blur the imagined distinction between body and fat, a false but powerful dichotomy that fuels fat phobia by positioning fat as antithetical to flesh. After differentiating transformative violence from the kinds of violence that support the Western thin ideal (such as disciplinary violence that controls fat in order to minimize its appearance on the body and exclusionary violence that actually excises fat from body), I suggest that transformative violence presents an exciting alternative to the grotesque as a means of theorizing ambiguity in fat studies.

Thinking Through Representations of Pain and Violence

Let us turn, for a moment, to the horrific photograph of *lingchi* torture that inspired Saville. Here we see a skeletal Chinese man bound to a large bamboo branch. His arms, at first, seem to be wrenched behind him, wrapping around the bamboo to hold him upright, but upon closer inspection it becomes clear that his left arm does not smoothly curve behind his body, but ends in a blunt stump – it has been amputated. The criminal is instead fastened to the bamboo by rope, which tightly hooks underneath his armpits. He has two massive egg-shaped chest wounds that expose three of his left ribs and, it seems, his right lung, causing a surprisingly small amount of blood to trickle from his chest cavity, down his stomach, to his genitals. An executioner bends

over to saw at the prisoner's left knee, cutting through layers of flesh and fat to expose bone. The right leg is concealed by another executioner who crouches down, possibly to immobilize the victim's foot, allowing for a cleaner, more precise cut. Two other executioners – who are made identifiable by their prominent, circular hats – stand on either edge of the image and calmly oversee the procedure, while a crowd gathers behind the criminal (and, presumably, behind the cameraman as well) to witness this public execution. On the right, we see two men leaning over, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the gory dismemberment. Neither their facial expressions nor those of the executioners betray any sense of horror or dismay; instead the spectators seem curious, and the executioners, almost bored. In contrast, the victim looks, as Saville describes, ecstatic. His head is lifted towards the sky, his eyes seem to roll back into his head, and his lips are parted yet relaxed.

French philosopher Georges Bataille famously concludes his history of eroticism, *The Tears of Eros*, by reflecting upon this particular image of *lingchi* torture. "This photograph," he writes, "had a decisive role in my life. I have never stopped being obsessed by this image of pain, at once ecstatic(?) [*sic*] and intolerable."[233] Bataille used this photo as a contemplative aid, a tool with which to develop his philosophical views on human nature. In *The Tears of Eros*, he asserts that there is a fundamental connection between sex and death, or more specifically, between eroticism and awareness of one's mortality, because they separate human beings from other animals and because they provide access to the sacred. Prohibited sex and violence emit a "religious glow," or a sense of divine ecstasy, that "opens in (Bataille) an infinitely joyous laughter."[234] The *lingchi* photograph is important in this context because its horrendous violence,

[233] Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989): 206.
[234] Ibid, 67-68. Ecstasy, for Bataille, results from the doomed effort to understand what he calls "unknowledge" (that is, the unknowable, or that which is impossible to know). It is a state that he defines as "feeling gay but anguished –

coupled with the victim's euphoric facial expression, illustrates the connection between divine ecstasy and (sadistic) eroticism. It is an image that, for Bataille, reveals an essential truth, or fundamental ambiguity, about human nature: that ecstasy is inextricably linked with horror.[235] Susan Sontag takes issue with this reading of the *lingchi* photograph in her sweeping survey of the history of war photography, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, in which she positions violence as a purely negative and destructive force, and thus views images of suffering, injury, mutilation, torture, and death with uncompromising solemnity. For her, Bataille exemplifies the "prurient" tendency to experience violent images as appealing, which she deplores as a "despised impulse" that counters conscious reason and sound morality.[236] Her own viewing impulse, she insists, is to mourn the depicted atrocity; to do otherwise – to find some other value in images of suffering, as Bataille does – is exploitative (she is careful to point out that the *lingchi* victim is, after all, a real person enduring actual torture that eventually causes his death). Sontag also finds fault with Bataille's reading of the *lingchi* photograph because it is informed by religious logic that "links pain to sacrifice, sacrifice to exaltation – a view that could not be more alien to a modern sensibility,"[237] which instead understands pain as "Something to be fixed. Something to be refused."[238] She therefore dismisses Bataille's view as inaccessible to the vast majority of viewers, for whom "the image is simply unbearable."[239] Saville, in contrast, describes the photograph as amazing – violent, yes, but also serene – thereby suggesting that Sontag may have

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from my immeasurable stupidity." Bataillian ecstasy thus produces laughter, or "anguished gaiety," when confronting the unknowable. In *The Tears of Eros*, he recalls that the violence of the *lingchi* photograph (of which he "cannot imagine a more insane, more shocking form") stunned him into ecstasy, presumably because the cruelty of this particular form of torture is beyond comprehension. Ibid, 206.

[235] Ibid, 206-207.

[236] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003): 97.

[237] Ibid, 99. Ironically, when describing the horror of the image, Sontag compares it to Italian Renaissance paintings of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, who is often portrayed expressing feelings of ecstasy while his body is pierced with arrows. Ibid, 98.

[238] Ibid, 99.

[239] Ibid, 98.

been too quick to dismiss Bataille.[240] Indeed, Saville neither fixes nor refuses bodily pain in *Closed Contact*. Quite the opposite, in fact, as pain is purposefully self-inflicted and framed as a kind of visual spectacle. She squeezes, twists, and digs into her skin and fat, violently contorting her flesh to achieve the desired visual effects that are striking in and of themselves, but are further dramatized by the fluorescent, neon lighting (which, Luchford explains, creates the illusion of three dimensionality) and by the immense scale of the displayed works (which, according to the dimensions listed in the Gagosian Gallery exhibition catalogue, would likely have loomed over the average viewer). Saville thus privileges pain and violence in *Closed Contact*, suggesting that she, like Bataille, finds value in such imagery. But what exactly is this value? How might her forceful bodily contortions be considered productive, particularly within a fat activist context?

The simple answer, for me, is that *Closed Contact* is affective – it makes me cringe, or at least it did the first time I laid eyes on the Gagosian Gallery catalogue. *Closed Contact #2* and *#5 still* affect me almost a year later. These photographs, which are arguably the two most violent images of the series, make me very aware of my own body and have often led me to imagine how it would feel if it were my hands ripping my nipple apart and seizing my breast with such alarming fervor. I cannot help but notice my own materiality when I look at these pictures.[241] This is interesting because pain is more often described as an affirmation of the body that is

[240] Sontag's condemnation of Bataille seems especially problematic in light of Louis Kaplan's claim that she both misrepresents and misuses his writings when discussing the *lingchi* photograph. This is evident, for example, when she misquotes *The Tears of Eros*, writing that Bataille characterized the image as simultaneously "ecstatic and intolerable," rather than "ecstatic(?) and intolerable." For Kaplan, Sontag's omission of the parenthetical question mark drastically alters Bataille's intended meaning. On the one hand, this erasure denies his sense of uncertainty about applying the term to the depicted torture victim (whose apparent ecstasy may be opium induced). But more importantly, Kaplan suggests that the question mark references several crucial strands of Bataillian thought (such as unknowledge and anguished gaiety), and that to exclude it, as Sontag does, is to dismiss those ideas. Louis Kaplan, "Sontag's *Regarding* and Bataille's *Unknowing*," in *Representations of Pain in Art and Visual Culture*, eds. Maria Pia Di Bella and James Elkins (New York: Routeledge, 2013), 54-56.

[241] Meagher similarly argues that Saville's painted nudes "force us to confront our bodily existence" because they invoke disgust, a visceral viewing reaction that is perhaps not very different from my own to *Closed Contact*; Meagher, 24.

actually *in* pain. Kathy Smith writes, for example, "to feel pain is to feel alive, to feel a sense of embodiment, a confirmation of the material body."[242] Jeanie Forte similarly asserts that the body demands attention when experiencing pain,[243] and Elaine Scarry, the preeminent scholar of this subject, insists that "the most crucial fact about pain is *its presentness* [*sic*]."[244] The experience of pain can be understood as an assertion of one's physicality. But what of witnessing another's pain? Can this also confirm one's embodiment? Although I cannot hope to consider this question in depth here,[245] I am interested in the effects of looking at artistic representations of pain and violence. Several scholars suggest that violent artworks can evoke a kind of visceral empathy that is perhaps akin to my initial viewing reaction to *Closed Contact*. Sontag, for example, secedes from her harsh critique of looking at violent imagery when considering the Western art historical canon, which, she notes, is littered with brutal portrayals of physical suffering. Works depicting violent Christian or mythological narratives, she writes, "are surely intended to move and excite, and to instruct and exemplify."[246] Gruesome representations of the Passion of the Christ, for example, invite commiseration and thus invoke piety, engaging audiences on both physical and spiritual levels. In the mid-twentieth century, performance artists such as Chris Burden and Marina Abramović began to enact or invite violence in order to question and

[242] Kathy Smith, "The Body in Pain: Beckett, Orlan and the Politics of Performance," *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 25, no. 1 (2005): 44.
[243] According to Forte, pain and performance constitute "two cases when the body must be acknowledged, when it becomes visible/palpable through inhabiting temporally a process that depends fundamentally on its presence;" Forte quoted in ibid, 33.
[244] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 9, original emphasis.
[245] Scarry considers this question more fully in *The Body in Pain*, suggesting that the potential for understanding another person's pain depends on the mode of communication. Verbal descriptions are insufficient, she argues, because it is nearly impossible to describe pain, a sensation that has no grammatical referent (one does not have pain *for* or *of* any particular object, one simply *has* it). Indeed, Scarry famously asserts that to "have pain is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to have *doubt*;" Scarry, 13, original emphases. She does, however, believe that pain can be effectively communicated in the visual register: "If the felt-attributes of pain are […] lifted into the visible world, *and if the referent for these new objectified attributes is understood to be the human body*, then the sentient fact of the person's suffering will become knowable to a second person;" ibid, 13, original emphasis.
[246] Sontag, 40.

renegotiate artist-viewer relations, an incredibly influential practice that continues to shape contemporary performance art. Helge Meyer argues that such painful performances (as well as their photographic documentations) create a "special exchange" with audiences because they can produce compassion unmatched by other kinds of performance art.[247] Smith also suggests that violent imagery can collapse the distance between artists and viewers, quoting Orlan, the French artist best known for her ongoing *The Reincarnation of St. Orlan* in which she streams live footage of herself undergoing plastic surgery without anesthesia (but with an epidural block), who insists that "in fact it is really my audience who hurts when they watch me and the images of my surgeries on video." [248] And indeed, my experiences support these assertions, for when looking at *Closed Contact*, I have little doubt that Saville was in pain and cannot help but (literally) feel for her.

My visceral viewing reaction has led me to reflect upon my own fat in a distinctly physical way. This has sometimes been unconscious: I cannot count the number of times, over the course of writing this chapter, I found myself absentmindedly pinching the fat that hangs from my arms, feeling the pressure slowly transform into a dull ache. It occurred to me, once, that this sensation (which I hesitate to call "pain" because it does not really hurt; it is just unusual) is not uniquely located in the skin, as with a scratch, or in the muscle, as with a cramp, but is felt in the fat itself. This violence, such as it is, makes me feel my fat and, more importantly, *makes my fat feel*; I feel my fat harden between my fingertips as I squeeze them together, but I also feel the effects of the increasing pressure *within* the fat. At other times I have

[247] Helge Meyer, "*Empfindnis* and Self-Inflicted Pain in Performance Art," in *Representations of Pain in Art and Visual Culture*, eds. Maria Pia Di Bella and James Elkins (New York: Routeledge, 2013), 39.
[248] Orlan quoted in Smith, 38. Orlan has coined the term "Carnal Art" to describe her work. "Unlike Body Art, from which it distinguishes itself," she explains, "Carnal Art does not desire pain, does not seek pain as a source of purification, and does not perceive pain as Redemption. Carnal Art is not interested in the final plastic results, but in the surgical operation-performance and the modified body, as venue for public debate;" Orlan quoted in ibid, 38.

more purposefully reenacted Saville's violence, grabbing my belly fat by the fistful as she does in *Closed Contact #3* or clawing at it as in *#4*. In these cases I would look down to examine my stomach and see a very different arrangement of flesh than its usual, undisturbed state. When clawing at myself, for example, I would create folds that envelope the surfaces of my skin, forcing them to touch in ways they normally do not. Although these were benign and fleeting mutations, they nevertheless created a sense of ambiguity between the different parts of my flesh that I could and could not see, and between those that I could and could not feel. This violence transforms the body, however superficially and temporarily, into an ambiguous form that blurs the distinctions between visible and invisible, interior and exterior.

Closed Contact #1 (4.10) is similarly amorphous. Here we see Saville's torso manipulated in three ways: her right hand descends from the top of the frame to rake her stomach skin upwards; what appears to be her left arm squeezes her breasts together, yet curves away from them at a seemingly impossible angle; the pressure of the glass flattens her breasts, elbow, and hand, but also warps her torso into a series of dents, rolls and crevices. Together, these three forces create a body so ambiguous that it is difficult to decipher, and I believe that this, too, is valuable. Remember that the value of the *lingchi* image, for Bataille, lies in its ambiguity and consequent ability to trouble binary oppositions like divine ecstasy and extreme horror;[249] indeed, its ambiguity ultimately inspired his unorthodox philosophy of the human condition.[250] According to Bataille, such subversive ambiguity is made possible through transformative violence. "Laughter is not so much the contrary of tears as it may seem," he explains, for "the object of laughter and the object of tears are always related to some kind of violence which

[249] Kaplan, 56.
[250] Jessica Tooker suggests that violence is productive when it causes the witness to alter his or her worldview. "Violence serves as a catalyst for the witness's reconceptualization of the world," she writes, "and it is through the imperfect articulation of its display that it becomes a potential agent of transformation." Jessica Tooker, "Productive Violence in *Titus Andronicus*," *Renaissance Papers* (2011): 32.

interrupts the regular order of things, the usual course of events."[251] It seems to me that the violence of *Closed Contact*, which disrupts the regular order of Saville's body, creates ambiguity that similarly demands a new outlook, a new mode of seeing, perceiving and understanding the body.

Doreen Fowler explores this possibility in her analysis of Flannery O'Connor's short story, "Greenleaf," in which the central character, a Southern American farm owner named Mrs. May, is brutally impaled by her farm hands' (the Greenleaf twins') family bull. Throughout the story, May struggles to assert authority over her predominantly lower class and Black staff, often resorting to classist and racist language to establish dominance. Fowler identifies her verbal abuse as violence that upholds social hierarchies predicated on notions of difference, such as sexism and racism. "The marginalization or violent suppression of one term in a binary guarantees the ascendancy of its opposite," she explains; the subjugation of women, for example, bolsters male authority.[252] Fowler likens Mrs. May's incessant efforts to differentiate herself from her employees to the process of subject formation as described by Julia Kristeva, who suggests that subjectivity first develops when the infant learns that his/her body is distinct from that of the mother. As the infant becomes a subject, the mother becomes an object and is reduced to the status of 'other.' According to Kristeva, the infant's newfound subjectivity is neither fixed nor stable and must therefore be actively reinforced throughout the lifespan by repeatedly distinguishing himself from various others (or non-subjects). Mrs. May similarly asserts her relative privilege as a higher class, white woman by disparaging the lower class Greenleaf twins for their lack of etiquette and by hurling racial slurs at their African American subordinate.

[251] Bataille, 32-33.
[252] Doreen Fowler, "Flannery O'Conner's Productive Violence," *Arizona Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2011): 127-128.

Fowler suggests that for Mrs. May, "autonomy is contingent on domination."[253] For the identical Greenleaf twins, however, individuality can exist within similarity. Described as "one man in two skins,"[254] E.T. and O.T. Greenleaf are indistinguishable to Mrs. May, who is perplexed by their seemingly non-hierarchical relationship. Unlike their boss, neither twin forms his subjectivity at the expense of another, and so the Greenleafs defy the logic of difference that supports sexist, racist, and classist oppression. Fowler suggests that the Greenleaf twins instead embody Kristeva's notion of the abject, which threatens one's clearly defined subjectivity by blurring the distinction between self and other, or between "me" and "not-me." Bodily fluids such as vomit and snot, for example, are both "me" because they are produced within the body, and "not-me" because they are eliminated from the body as waste. These substances reveal the porosity of the body, and, by extension, the fragility of the potentially ambiguous subject. The abject, in other words, threatens the logic of difference that structures subjectivity, and so the subject must fortify his bodily boundaries through the process of abjection, or the expulsion of the abject. Kristeva suggests that this process functions as a metaphor for maintaining unequal power relations, suggesting, for example, that patriarchy (the subject) is a frail social construct that must be actively maintained by oppressing women (the abject).[255] Fowler implicitly suggests that Kristeva's abjection is akin to the exclusionary violence enacted by Mrs. May. Her gruesome impalement, on the other hand, represents another kind of kind of violence, one that unites, rather than separates, the story's characters. Indeed, Fowler reads Mrs. May's gory demise as a victory over abjection, claiming that her death represents "the erosion of difference between me and not-me that the Greenleaf twins model and that Mrs. May has resisted all her

[253] Ibid, 138.
[254] Ibid, 138.
[255] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 70-74.

life."[256] The penetration of the bull's horns into Mrs. May's heart is a clear physical transgression of her bodily boundaries, but it is also a symbolic transgression of the boundaries that define her carefully constructed subjectivity, piercing the distinctions between her white, wealthy self and the poor, black farm workers. In this way, violent collisions "constitute a transformative blurring of the self and other that enables social change."[257] Violence, in other words, can break down the distinctions that structure society. The violence of which Fowler speaks, however, is between two or more distinct subjects: literary characters separated by race, class, and gender, for whom violent confrontations disrupt existing social relationships that are defined by marked power differentials. The violence of *Closed Contact*, on the other hand, is self-imposed, aided by the glass but ultimately inflicted by the artist upon her own body. How, then, can we make sense of the photographs' ambiguity? What "self" is blurred with what "other"?

Disrupting the Body/Fat Distinction

I suggest that *Closed Contact* obscures the imagined distinction between body and fat that lies at the heart of fat phobia. We are taught, in the West, to fear fat as we would a contagion because panicked discourses surrounding the "obesity epidemic" construct fat as a kind of plague that threatens to infect the entire Western populace before spreading throughout the world (as "globesity"). Such rhetoric positions fat as external, even *antithetical*, to the body; we are taught that fat clogs arteries, strains livers, damages heart valves, that "obesity" signals bodily decay, disease, and impending death. Fatness is equated with physical failure, which, I believe, frames fat as somehow incompatible with flesh. And indeed, this distinction between body and fat is deeply embedded in our cultural imaginary. Joyce Huff traces its emergence to the 1864

[256] Ibid, 139.
[257] Ibid, 129.

publication of William Banting's popular weight loss pamphlet, *A Letter on Corpulence*, in which he likens fat to "the parasite of barnacles on a ship" as a destructive appendage that must be eradicated.[258] In the Victorian era, fat was not considered part of the body, but rather a kind of foreign sediment or residue that defiled the body by transgressing its boundaries. Fat, in other words, was constructed as a bodily pollutant,[259] an abject substance that sullies what Kristeva calls the "clean and proper" status of a self-contained and uncontaminated body.[260] Moreover, fat was constructed as separate from the *self*, or rather from the privileged subjectivity of the middle-class white man. Nineteenth-century evolutionary theorists believed that measurable physical characteristics such as facial features, the shape and size of one's skull, and bodily proportions revealed one's relative position on the evolutionary scale, which was hierarchized in accordance to the Northern European, masculine ideal.[261] Amy Erdman Farrell observes that within this framework, fatness was devalued as feminine, primitive, and low-class, and thus functioned as a marker of inferiority – specifically, of inferior biology, inferior cultural practices, and/or "inferior will."[262] To gain weight, she explains, was to literally devolve. This theory remains influential despite having been discredited, as fat is still associated with women, visible

[258] William Banting quoted in Joyce Huff, "'A Horror of Corpulence': Interrogating Bantingism and Mid-Nineteenth Century Fat Phobia," in *Bodies Out Of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression,* eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 44. Huff is careful to note that Banting's was one of many competing views on fatness in the mid-nineteenth century, as "no single voice had attained hegemony, and the position of the corpulent body was much more hotly contested than it is today;" ibid, 42.

[259] Ibid, 44. According to Huff, the Victorian body was a dynamic one, in a constant state of decay and thus reliant upon external material for rejuvenation. "In the physical economy of the dynamic body," Huff explains, "fat was 'out of place,'" belonging to the outside world yet manifest on the body. In the mid-nineteenth century, a time when the categories of self and world "were seen as essentially and necessarily separate," fat constituted what Mary Douglas calls "symbolic pollution;" misplaced matter that corrupts the classification systems maintaining social order; ibid, 43-45. The "proper" Victorian body, in contrast, was thin, well managed, and untainted by the outside world; ibid, 52.

[260] Kristeva, 70. Although fat does not reveal the porosity of the body in the same fashion as urine, feces, menstrual blood, and vomit (to name a few of Kristeva's examples of abject bodily substances), fat nonetheless must be expelled from the body in order to fortify its boundaries.

[261]Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011): 63-64.

[262] Ibid, 80.

minorities, and the lower classes. Thus to gain weight, today, not only debases one's physicality, it also weakens the privileges afforded to certain subject positions.[263] In this light, we can understand fat as an abject "other" that must be disavowed in order to create and maintain socially desirable subjectivities, in addition to a clean and proper body. This disavowal is partly ideological, involving a widespread cultural rejection of fatness, and partly physical, necessitating particular forms of violence that excise fat from the body, including invasive surgeries (such as liposuction and gastric bypass,) harmful weight loss practices (such as extreme dieting and exercise), and the use of restrictive shape wear (such as Spanx). But because the complete elimination of fat is, of course, impossible, fatness is perceived as a "slippery stigma"[264] for which we are all liable, and so the stubborn presence of fat within the body is a source of acute cultural anxiety. Indeed, Bordo suggests that a preoccupation with body size

> may function as one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of our century, insuring the production of self-monitoring and self-disciplining 'docile bodies' sensitive to any departure from social norms and habituated to self-improvement and self-transformation in the service of those norms.[265]

Those who seek normalcy do everything in their power to eliminate fat from the body because in Western cultures, it is "normal" to see fat as unhealthy and undesirable, as something that debases one's physicality and social status. To instead see fat as intrinsic to human anatomy, as something to be embraced rather than eliminated, is, on the other hand, radically subversive.

One way in which Saville blurs the distinction between body/self and fat/other with *Closed Contact* is by evoking empathy. Looking at these photographs and imagining how it

[263] Farrell suggests that fatness is not only stigmatizing in and of itself, it also exacerbates the problems faced by individuals with other stigmatized traits, such as women and people of colour, by suggesting an incapacity for self-mastery. For this reason, fatness is *hyper*-stigmatized as a "discrediting attribute" that threatens one's access to full citizenship. To demonstrate one's deservingness to occupy more privileged subject positions – such as voters (in the case of women) or world leaders (in the recent case of Barrack and Michelle Obama) – fatness must be actively disavowed; ibid, 118.
[264] Huff, 52.
[265] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 186.

would feel to enact such violence on my own body led me to realize that I can feel pain *in* my fat; my fat feels, just as my body feels. This sensation is, as Smith suggests, a confirmation of embodiment, proof that my fat is truly a part of my body. Rachel Colls suggests another way in which Saville blurs this distinction in her analysis of *Branded*, the painting that is reminiscent of *Closed Contact #3* in which an enormous, naked woman clutches a handful of her belly fat to present it to the viewer, with whom she locks gazes with an unapologetic and almost confrontational stare (4.4). Colls suggests that the painting begs consideration of what she calls "intra-body relations," or the ways in which bodies touch themselves.[266] Situating herself in a field of geography that investigates haptic relations with the world, Colls is interested in how intra-body relations open up the possibility of "reconsidering the relationships between subject-object, self-other and interior-exterior relations as they are present within and upon specific bodies," such as fat, female bodies.[267] Touching oneself, she argues, blurs the distinction between touched and "toucher" because the same body is both the active subject and passive object of touch. Furthermore, because each body part feels the touch of the other, even the distinctions between active and passive, subject and object become troubled.[268] As I squeeze my underarm fat, for example, my fingers feel the smooth skin on my arm, but my arm also feels the pads of my fingertips. These ambiguities are especially murky in intra-body relations that are nearly uninterrupted, such as those between fat folds. In *Branded*, for example, we see, on the figure's waist, two rolls of fat gently resting on top of one another. Neither one of these rolls can be described as actively reaching out and touching the other (as my fingers extend to touch the

[266] Rachel Colls, "BodiesTouchingBodies: Jenny Saville's Over-life-sized Paintings and the 'Morpho-logics' of Fat, Female Bodies," *Gender, Place and Culture* 19, no. 2 (2012): 176.
[267] Ibid, 189.
[268] Ibid, 179. To support her argument, Colls cites Iris Young, who argues that through touch, "the subject (is) in fluid continuity with the object, and for the touching subject the object touched reciprocates the touching, blurring the border between self and other;" Young quoted in ibid, 177.

underside of my arm), and so they further defy the active/passive binary, instead coming together to create a fold. Each of these rolls is subject and object, toucher and touched. For Colls, this kind of self-touching is "useful for considering fat as something more than a temporary layer of flesh upon the body that is disavowed and in need of removal"[269] because it resists the classification of fat as "other."

Colls' analysis of *Branded* suggests that violence is not prerequisite for the ambiguities that trouble oppressive binary relations, for self-touch alone confuses the boundaries separating self from other, subject from object. I do not disagree. However, I think violence adds greater magnitude – or visceral punch – to these ambiguities. That is, while I can understand on an intellectual level that fat folds unsettle the distinction between self and other, this touch is so gentle and commonplace that it is easily overlooked. In contrast, grabbing hold of a roll of fat and squeezing it tight demands attention. Colls seems to agree, for when addressing this intra-body relation as it appears in *Branded*, she writes:

> Whilst the hand grabs the fat on the body in a way that could indicate a relationship of domination or violence, it does not take control of the flesh in order to police its materiality; instead, the fat speaks back in a way that emphasizes its place upon the body.[270]

The fat does indeed "speak back;" it is not a lifeless, passive object, but asserts itself, *in violence*, as a living, active subject, as much a part of the body as the hand that grasps it. Thus Colls is wrong, I think, to equate violence with domination. This touch *is* violent, but not disciplinarian; it is a transformative violence that embraces fat rather than an exclusionary violence that expels or minimizes the appearance of fat. Consider, in contrast, Saville's *Trace* (4.11). This painting depicts the backside of a woman's torso, from the tops of her shoulders to the bottom of her buttocks. She is naked, and evidently recently undressed, as thin reddish-brown lines "trace" the

[269] Ibid, 181.
[270] Ibid, 184.

impressions on her skin that were created by a very tightly fitted bra, underwear, and pantyhose. These marks are visibly painful, as Saville carved into the painted flesh with a knife to create literal indentations in the figure's skin. Unlike *Closed Contact* and *Branded*, *Trace* explores the disciplinary violence of docile bodies. The incredibly tight fit of her undergarments suggests that this figure is attempting to contain the limits of her flesh, to smooth out rolls and flatten bulges, in order to conform to Western compulsory thinness. Indeed, when writing about her experiences shopping for control top underwear, which similarly left her body covered in painful red welts, Samantha Murray identifies the panties as a tool of normalization that helps the wearer "*pass-as-thin*."[271] Themes of surveillance and control resound in the painting's cramped format as well, as the figure squeezes her arms firmly by her sides to contain herself, as much as possible, within the narrow limits of the frame, and turns the palms of her hands backwards so that they face the viewer; two gestures that imply and invite inspection by facilitating bodily scrutiny. This pose, coupled with the fresh welts on the figure's skin, seems to demonstrate compliance to the thin ideal. The poses of *Closed Contact*, on the other hand, defiantly distort Saville's body in ways that exaggerate her size and fleshiness. In *#4*, remember, Saville claws at her stomach to create several rolls and folds of fat (4.5). She also enlarges all of the photographs to immense proportions so that her body appears much larger than life, a distortion that is bolstered by the careful ways in which she crops the images to suggest that the expanses of her body extend far beyond the frame. Unlike the figure in *Trace*, Saville is not trying to pass as thin in *Closed Contact*; she enacts violence on her body to emphasize, rather than discipline, her fat. Thus her violence, in sum, is transgressive, not only because it blatantly rejects the thin imperative but

[271] Samantha Murray, "(Un/Be)Coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics," *Social Semiotics* 15, no. 2 (2005): 155, original emphasis. "The imprints left by the control top underpants were like a branding on my body," she writes. "The offensiveness of my fat body was literally *etched into the flesh*." The welts, for Murray, are violent manifestations of social control, and "a representation of society's disgust" for the fat body; ibid, 156.

also because it more subtly undermines the logic that supports fat phobia by resisting the classification of fat as "other" in a way that, I think, is more powerful than through self-touch alone.

Transformative Violence versus the Grotesque

I believe that the transformative violence of *Closed Contact* poses an exciting alternative to the grotesque as a means of theorizing ambiguity in fat studies. The grotesque has served as the primary theoretical tool for considering questions of ambiguity in this field since the 2001 publication of *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (the anthology initially discussed in the Introduction, see pages 17-22), in which approximately half of the contributors invoke Mikhail Bakhtin and Mary Russo's theories of the grotesque to either suggest, or make sense of, dissident fatness. Bakhtin put forth his definition of the grotesque in his dissertation, *Rabelais and his World*, which explores the subversive potential of the carnivalesque, a counter-cultural mode that favours "a view of the world from below,"[272] manifest, for him, in Renaissance carnival celebrations that privilege the baseness of popular culture over the lofty formality of authoritative institutions such as the Catholic church. Central to this theorization is the grotesque body, which Bakhtin describes as the open, fluid, and mutating counterpart to the closed, solid, and fixed "classical" body. The grotesque body is unstable and incomplete, always in the act of becoming, always changing. It is inescapably fleshy, in part because, as Simon Dentith points out, "Rabelais is famous […] as the writer who celebrates the body which eats, digests, copulates, and defecates, but who does so in a wild, exaggerated and grotesque way."[273] Its constant material interaction with the world links the grotesque body with both degradation

[272] Angela Stukator, "'It's Not Over Until the Fat Lady Sings': Comedy, the Carnivalesque, and Body Politics," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 201.
[273] Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 65.

and renewal, and thus renders it inherently unstable and ambiguous.[274] Indeed, the grotesque is embodied, for Bakhtin, in Kerch terracotta figurines of senile, pregnant, and laughing hags who are simultaneously evocative of life and death. It is this ambiguity that imbues the grotesque with subversive potential, for just as the pregnant hag blurs the boundaries between life and death, young and old, the grotesque disrupts the distinctions that structure the social order; within the space of carnival, for example, the grotesque debases the sacred to create a collective culture.[275] The grotesque is therefore an important utopian symbol for Bakhtin. Mary Russo re-conceptualizes the grotesque through a feminist theoretical lens, defining it as that which exceeds social (particularly gendered) norms[276] and lauding it as a tool of political subversion, suggesting that by breaking up the homogeneity of social order, it provides "room for chance" within "the very constrained spaces of normalization."[277] Expanding beyond Bakhtin's historical specificity to consider a number of twentieth-century performances that are characterized by risk, excess, and movement (performances that she identifies as grotesque because they defy patriarchal constructions of womanhood as meek), Russo shifts focus from body to behaviour, from ambiguity to action. She does, however, pinpoint the Fat Lady – a staple figure of carnivals and freak shows – as a stereotypical example of the female grotesque because her ample flesh exceeds bodily and gendered norms. Many fat studies scholars agree that fat women epitomize grotesquerie, often stressing themes of excess, unruliness, and ambiguity (thus drawing upon both Russo and Bakhtin) to suggest the subversive potential of the fat, female body. Angela Stukator, for example, suggests that the fat woman can be understood as unruly because her fat is

[274] Ibid, 65.
[275] Russo helpfully paraphrases Bakhtin's conception of carnival and the grotesque: "The masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society." Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 62.
[276] Russo argues that the grotesque emerges "only in relation to the norms it exceed(s);" ibid, 3.
[277] Ibid, 11.

associated with certain characteristics (such as greed and lack of discipline) that flagrantly disregard the social norms that govern her sex; her size renders her "defiant, wild, rebellious, undisciplined, trouble" and thus capable of gender subversion.[278] But Stukator is careful to note that the fat woman, as she is often constructed in mainstream comedy, is not exclusively nonconformist, but rather "functions as a symbol of ambivalence" that is both "disgusting and delightful, attractive and repulsive, normal and deviant."[279] This ambivalence is the true source of her disruptive power, she continues, because whereas a straightforward inversion of gender norms ultimately upholds such categories of identity, a more ambiguous troubling of gender can break down the definitions of the masculine and the feminine.[280]

As we have seen, Meskimmon theorizes *Closed Contact* in terms of the monstrous and the grotesque, exploring the ways in which the series' aesthetic refutes patriarchal artistic traditions.[281] Her arguments are echoed by Loren Erdich, who notes that grotesquerie characterizes Saville's larger oeuvre.[282] It is tempting to agree with these assessments because the ambiguity of *Closed Contact* is undeniable. *#15* (4.12) is especially evocative of the open and mutating grotesque body, as the pressure of the glass breaches several boundaries on Saville's face; it squeezes a teardrop from her eye that sits on her lashes in a way that confuses the margin separating her lids, it pries her mouth open to expose spit bubbles that drool down the edges of her lower lip, and it crumples her nostril to form a deep crease that mimics the fleshy folds of

[278] Angela Stukator, "'It's Not Over Until the Fat Lady Sings': Comedy, the Carnivalesque, and Body Politics," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 199.
[279] Ibid, 202.
[280] Ibid, 207.
[281] "The way the body seems too large for definition and refuses any closure or symmetry marks this as 'monstrous,'" writes Meskimmon, "and the visceral nature of the image links it again to the feminine and the grotesque;" Meskimmon, 9. She suggests that this might resist patriarchal artistic traditions: "The low and grotesque was 'other' to the western fine art tradition which centred upon the monumental, beautiful and universal. Clearly, both in theory and practice, the grotesque was feminine and marginal while the universal was masculine and central;" ibid, 8.
[282] Loren Erdich, "I Am a Monster: The Indefinite and the Malleable in Contemporary Female Self-Portraiture." *Circa Art Magazine* no. 121 (2007): 48.

#11. Upon impact with the hard, plastic glass, Saville's soft flesh opens to seep fluids and collapses to create folds that hide what was once fully external. This is a far cry from the closed, static, and impermeable classical body described by Bakhtin. I take issue, however, with these authors' inattention to the palpable violence of *Closed Contact*, as neither Meskimmon nor Erdich acknowledge the transformative violence that actually *creates* the series' monstrous aesthetic. Only Dunn mentions this aspect of the work in her catalogue essay, describing the close-ups of Saville's face with hyperbolic flair:

> Road kill. Flagrant evidence of a crime. The results of catastrophic mayhem. That's the first impression. No face could look like this and live.[283]

But again, Dunn does not consider the significance of violence, noting only its visual effects.

Kelly Baum, in contrast, draws a connection between violence and grotesquerie in her analysis of Ana Mendieta's *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)*, produced in 1972. To create this series, Mendieta photographed herself standing naked before a simple white background as she pressed glass against her face, breasts, pelvis, and buttocks. One of these images bears striking resemblance to *Closed Contact #15*, as Mendieta drags a square pane of glass across her face, forcing her nose and lips sideways so that they smear across her right cheek (4.13). Like Saville, Mendieta performed unmistakably painful bodily contortions to create *Untitled*, and this imagery stirs in Baum a visceral reaction not unlike those articulated by myself and Dunn in response to *Closed Contact*.[284] Situating the violence of *Untitled* within Mendieta's larger oeuvre and the contemporary art historical period,[285] Baum suggests that it serves two purposes: 1) to critique

[283] Dunn, 27.
[284] "To describe *Untitled* as disquieting is an understatement," writes Baum. "To say that it elicits both revulsion and empathy more closely approximates its true impact." Kelly Baum, "Shapely Shapelessness: Ana Mendieta's *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints – Face)*, 1972," *Record of the Princeton University Art Museum* 67 (2008): 81.
[285] Baum asserts that the violence of *Untitled* is not uncharacteristic of either Mendieta's oeuvre (she produced many works that address domestic and sexual violence, such as the disturbing *Untitled (Rape Scene)*) or of the art

the beauty industry,[286] and 2) to create grotesque figures that problematize the construction of the non-white female body as Other. She attributes the grotesquerie of *Untitled* to the Latina artist's lived body as well as to her fleshy contortions, explaining that the grotesque is historically and theoretically connected with various categories of Other: "Since its inception as a concept, the grotesque has been associated by its detractors with all that is exotic, foreign, and primitive on the one hand, and all that is decorative, artificial, and feminine on the other."[287] Baum suggests, in other words, that Mendieta's non-white, female body is already a kind of grotesque "other," and that her violent bodily distortions exaggerate this otherness to render racial and gender biases salient.[288] But although Baum draws this connection between (transformative) violence and the grotesque, she implies that the former is only important insofar as it creates the latter, insisting that the "grotesque is Mendieta's primary tool" of resistance.[289]

Once again, the transgressive potential of transformative violence is overlooked, either dismissed as inconsequential (by Baum) or completely ignored (by Meskimmon and Erdich). This is problematic for two reasons. First, the grotesqueries of these series are arguably contingent on violence. Unlike Baum, I would not identify Mendieta's body as inherently grotesque by virtue of her race and sex (despite the grotesque's historical and theoretical linkages to gendered and racialized others) because when undistorted, it is unambiguous; the boundaries separating visible from invisible and interior from exterior are easily decipherable on those parts

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historical period (which is well remembered for the masochistic works of performance artists such as Chris Burden and Vito Acconci); ibid, 81-83.

[286] Baum pinpoints Mendieta's appropriation of the headshot – "the photographic genre most closely associated with the beauty industry" – as evocative of "the violence inflicted on women by the fashion and cosmetics industries," which support heterosexist patriarchy by "reducing women to their appearance," thus rendering female subjects "the ideal objects of masculine desire;" ibid, 83. "*Untitled*," for Baum, "represents a hideous, wounded face, a face that flaunts every flaw, laying waste to male fantasies and mocking male desires in the process;" ibid, 84.

[287] Ibid, 87.

[288] "Mendieta 'others' herself," writes Baum, "but only in order to 'other' us – more specifically, to denature the racial and gender biases we harbor;" ibid, 88.

[289] Ibid, 86.

of her body that are not in contact with the small pane of glass. Although I would not go so far as to describe Mendieta's undistorted body as strictly "classical," for such a static and stable body is an unrealistic theoretical type, it is certainly legible and familiar. Second, and more importantly, I question the very designation of *Closed Contact* as grotesque because even though its figures are ambiguous, excessive, and seemingly uncontainable, they are *not* unruly. They are in fact *hyper*-controlled, as Saville squishes, twists, and flattens her flesh with methodical precision to achieve her desired visual effects. Nowhere is the violence of *Closed Contact* more undeniably deliberate than in those images that feature the artist's hands pulling, squeezing, and digging into skin and fat, hands that betray Saville's status, as Dunn describes, "not as victim, but as perpetrator."[290] I want to resist reading *Closed Contact* as yet another example of unruly, grotesque fatness because its ambiguous figures are created by a transformative violence that is as systematic and purposeful as the disciplinary and exclusionary violence that is used to create docile bodies that (seek to) conform to the thin ideal.

This is very promising from a fat activist perspective because the grotesque can sometimes reinforce the problematic stereotype of out-of-control fatness. Stukator warns, for example, that neither comedy nor carnival is inherently subversive, for both may "redeploy the grotesque to affirm and exaggerate the taboos associated with women's bodies" as a form of social control.[291] Representations of wild, uncontrollable women of size can justify stigma by validating popular beliefs that such women are fat because they cannot control their appetites or behaviours, because they lack discipline and willpower, and because they are selfish, stupid, and overindulgent. Petra Kuppers agrees that the grotesque may not be the ideal political weapon for size acceptance because fat women's bodies are made intelligible by a lipoliteracy that reads fat

[290] Dunn, 27.
[291] Stukator, 203.

as unruly; the "vocabulary of the fat female body tells not of agency," she writes, "but of loss of control."[292] She suggests that it is imperative that we find alternative means of contesting size discrimination that do not rely upon existing tropes of fat as animalistic, wild, and excessive.[293] I believe that transformative violence, as it exists in *Closed Contact*, is more successful than the grotesque because it creates ambiguity (which breaks down oppressive binary distinctions and potentially inspires a new understanding of body fat) in a way that asserts agency and demonstrates bodily control.

Conclusions

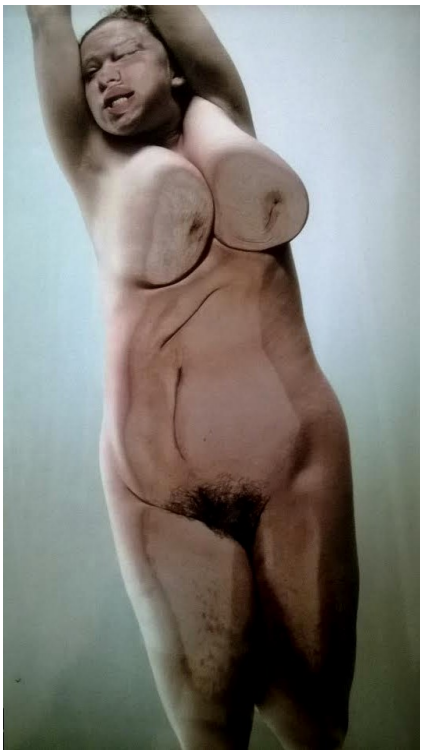
In this chapter I have considered how the violent and seemingly painful imagery of Jenny Saville's *Closed Contact* series may serve the size acceptance movement. I have found that these photographs arouse a strong, visceral sense of empathy as I squirmed at the sight of Saville's forceful bodily manipulations, wincing at the pain that I presumed her to experience whilst grabbing and pulling at her fat. This empathy, coupled with curiosity, led me to physically explore my own fat by reenacting Saville's self-inflicted violence, which, in turn, has led me to believe that experiencing (or even empathizing with) pain that is located *in* one's fat makes it difficult to ignore that fat is integral to one's physicality. I have suggested that the violence of *Closed Contact* is transformative because it transforms the body in a way that potentially transforms one's conception of fat from something that is "other" to something that is a part of the "self." Unlike disciplinary and exclusionary violence, which work to minimize and/or excise fat and are therefore motivated by fat phobia, the transformative violence of this series

[292] Petra Kuppers, "Fatties on Stage: Feminist Performances," in *Bodies Out Of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression,* eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 278.

[293] Kuppers insists that "we must find a way to talk about women and acknowledge their culturally devalued difference (here, size) without reducing them to the pool of images available within our culture to express that difference (here, nature out of control, grossness, excess);" ibid, 280.

foregrounds fat as fundamental to the body. Finally, I have suggested that Saville's body, as altered by this latter violence, cannot be described as grotesque because it is not unruly, and that as a result, transformative violence may prove to be a more useful theoretical and political tool than grotesquerie because the precision and skill with which Saville manipulates her flesh does not reinforce the problematic stereotype that fat bodies are out of control.

4.1 Jenny Saville and Glen Luchford, *Closed Contact #11*, 1995-1996.



4.2 Jenny Saville and Glen Luchford, *Closed Contact #16*, 1995-1996.

4.3 Jenny Saville and Glen Luchford, *Closed Contact #3*, 1995-1996.

4.4 Jenny Saville, *Branded*, 1992.

4.5 Jenny Saville and Glen Luchford, *Closed Contact #4*, 1995-1996.

4.6 Jenny Saville and Glen Luchford, *Closed Contact #2*, 1995-1996.

4.7 Jenny Saville, *Study for Witness*, 2009-2012.

4.8 Jenny Saville and Glen Luchford, *Closed Contact #5*, 1995-1996.

4.9 Unknown Photographer, *Torture by Lingchi of a Chinese Criminal*, Cutting of the Left Leg, Caishikou (vegetable market) in Beijing, China, 1904.

4.10 Jenny Saville, *Closed Contact #1*, 1995-1996.

4.11 Jenny Saville, *Trace*, 1993.

4.12 Jenny Saville and Glen Luchford, *Closed Contact #15*, 1995-1996.

4.13 Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints – Face)*, 1972.

Conclusion

Erik Ravelo's *Los Intocables* and the Continued Importance of Fat Activist Art

In June, 2013, Erik Ravelo posted *Los Intocables* (*The Untouchables*) to his Facebook page. This photographic series, which shows seven small children hanging, as if crucified, from the backs of seven men, was removed by the social networking website within three months for failing to comply with its decency standards. No stranger to controversy, Ravelo was nevertheless surprised by the censorship, defending the photographs as think-pieces intended to prompt discussion about and action against various atrocities committed against children worldwide.[294] The first image of the series, *Priest* (5.1), features a red-capped clergyman standing with his nose flush against a white wall, his feet together and arms outstretched in the shape of a cross. A young boy hangs from his back in a pose that closely resembles that of the crucified Jesus Christ, with his head bowed, feet crossed, and knees slightly bent. Dressed only in his blue and white underwear, the child, whose face has been pixelated and is therefore unidentifiable, represents the countless victims of sexual abuse at the hands of the Catholic Church. Similarly, *Thailand* (5.2) condemns pedophilic sex tourism and child pornography as a Thai girl is pinned to the back of a camera-wielding tourist. *Syria* (5.3) alludes to young civilian casualties during military conflict, *Brasil* (5.4) to illegal organ harvesting, *U.S.A.* (5.5) to gun violence, and *Japan* (5.6) to the devastation of nuclear weaponry. The final image of the series, *Fast Food* (5.7), features a slightly fat child hanging from the back of Ronald McDonald, the universally recognizable mascot of McDonald's restaurants and undisputed icon of the fast food industry.

[294] Featuring the tagline, "The right to childhood should be *untouchable*," *Los Intocables* was created for Benetton's UN*HATE* Foundation, which is committed to the "fight against hate and the lack of acceptance of diversity." UN*HATE* Foundation, "About," *Projects: UN*HATE *Foundation*, last modified August 2, 2014, unhate.benetton.com/uhate-concrete-projects/.

Facebook's decision to remove *Los Intocables* from their website is perhaps understandable given the sexualized and violent nature of these images of young children. Indeed, this rather complex and disturbing body of work suggests a number of troubling themes that lie beyond the scope of this thesis – including that of childhood "obesity" – and demand to be considered in great depth. For now, however, I am interested in the implications of grouping an image of a fat child with those of victims of sexual abuse, war, gun violence, and other cruelties. To do so is to paint fatness as a sign of victimhood, to equate weight gain with child abuse, murder, and exploitation. Unfortunately, such comparisons are not unheard of. Susan Dentzer, for example, states this explicitly in an article for *Health Affairs*:

> America is guilty of child abuse. […] It is one thing to be a nation that's allowed two thirds of its arguably "personally responsible" adults to become overweight and obese. It's quite another that nearly one in three children now fall into the same category, including kids entering Head Start programs at the ripe old age of four. We also know that the obese among them are predisposed to develop chronic health conditions including diabetes and colon cancer, and to face shorter life spans than their parents'. So what charge would one level against a nation that allowed this to happen, if not a form of child abuse with horrific consequences?[295]

Dentzer goes on to blame child-directed food marketing campaigns for fattening American children, and indeed, some research has shown that product promotion by fast food companies such as McDonald's can affect children's consumption preferences and practices in a way that may hinder parents' abilities to encourage more healthful eating.[296] Such advertisements are one of many reasons why fast food companies are accused of exploiting youth, particularly poor and non-white children who are embodied, perhaps, by the Latino child in *Fast Food*.[297] This image

[295] Susan Dentzer, "The Child Abuse We Inflict Through Child Obesity," *Health Affairs* 29, no. 3 (2010): 342.
[296] Laura McDermott, Martine Stead and Gerard Hastings, "Does Food Promotion Influence Children's Diet? A Review of the Evidence," in *Childhood Obesity: Contemporary Issues*, eds. N. Cameron, N.G. Norgan and G.T.H Ellison (Boca Ration, Florida: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 263.
[297] Research indicates that fast food companies target such populations, as there tends to be a greater density of fast food restaurants in poor, urban neighborhoods; Christopher L. Newman, Elizabeth Howlett and Scot Burton, "Implications of Fast Food Restaurant Concentration for Preschool-Aged Childhood Obesity," *Journal of Business Research* 67 (2014): 1578.

effectively blames the fast food industry for causing childhood fatness by vilifying Ronald McDonald and absolving the child – whose Christ-like pose suggests innocence – of liability for his own weight. Ravelo's implicit focus on accountability is not at all unusual in neoliberal societies that moralize health as a matter of responsible citizenship (a practice demonstrated by Dentzer); indeed, Kristen Bell and her colleagues cite a wealth of academic and public discourse attributing blame to bad parenting, or more specifically, to inept mothers who are believed to enable fatness by either failing to monitor their child's eating practices (neglect) or by providing excessive calories ("overfeeding").[298] Bell critiques this kind of finger-pointing for a number of reasons, arguing that the causes of childhood fatness are not straightforward,[299] that its associated health risks have been overstated, and that the resulting imperative to monitor children's weight is overly stringent in light of inconclusive empirical evidence. Furthermore, she contends that such surveillance is loaded with moral judgments that work to scapegoat the perceived culprit behind rising rates of "obesity," especially poor and non-white mothers.[300] It is tempting to suggest that Ravelo's demonization of McDonald's is less problematic than the condemnation of individual mothers, but this is not necessarily the case because *Fast Food* ultimately supports a fat-phobic ideology; while it does not directly promote discrimination against the fat child, who is depicted as a helpless victim of corporate exploitation, it does paint fatness as tragic and the forces deemed responsible for weight gain as abusive and immoral. By communicating the idea

[298] Kirsten Bell, Darlene McNaugton and Amy Salmon, "Medicine, Morality and Mothering: Public Health Discourses on Foetal Alcohol Exposure, Smoking Around Children and Childhood Overnutrition," Critical Public Health 19, no 2. (2009): 156, 161.
[299] She cites Rolland-Cachera and Bellisle's 2002 literature review, for example, which found very little evidence that "overweight" and "obese" children consumed more calories than their thinner peers; ibid, 159.
[300] Bell identifies these three components of hegemonic childhood "obesity" discourse – exaggerating potential harm, responding excessively, and blaming the mother – as evidence that childhood fatness constitutes a "moral panic" that more accurately reflects cultural anxieties about fatness than the actual danger posed by body fat. She explains that the term "moral panic" was coined by Stanley Cohen in 1972 "to describe a situation in which an identifiable, usually marginalized behavior (or group) comes to stand as a signifier of a generalized social crisis and is represented by hegemonic institutions as threatening or antagonistic to the morals, values or interests of society as a whole;" ibid, 157.

that fat is bad, this work somewhat thoughtlessly (and perhaps unintentionally) perpetuates the mistreatment of fat subjects.

Fast Food is a testament to the strength of hegemonic "obesity" discourses that denounce fatness as unhealthy, immoral, and inferior, and thus demonstrates the need for a strong counter-discourse, particularly one that operates visually. Artworks *can* alter the ways in which we see and understand body fat. Indeed, my own transformation over the course of researching and writing this thesis attests to the subversive power of art. I was first introduced to fat studies in January, 2012 in the context of an anthropology seminar exploring critical perspectives on food, health, and bodies. Prior to this experience I unquestioningly believed that fat is unhealthy, unattractive, and undesirable. I was so fascinated by the ideas put forth by fat studies scholars, which so boldly contradicted nearly everything I thought I knew about fat, that I chose to investigate fat activist art with my thesis within only three months of that initial exposure. I was still, however, a novice to this topic and struggled to adjust my firmly entrenched prejudices about body weight, despite reading an extensive body of conflicting evidence spanning the anthropological, sociological, and medical literatures. Although I still sometimes struggle to let go of such beliefs, I have no doubt that studying art quickened and deepened my transformation into a staunch supporter of size acceptance. Reading fat studies literature, for example, was rather distressing at first because it forced me to realize that I was prejudiced in a way I had never considered before, but viewing Duane Hanson's *Woman Eating* was even more troubling because it made me aware that the fat phobia I had been trying to dispel for about a year still guided my interactions with fat bodies. My acute sense of discomfort seemed no different from that of the nervous schoolgirls who were giggling uncontrollably at the work; as subjects

inextricably bound to, and indeed constituted by, Western discourses about body weight,[301] we understood the woman's overconsumption as transgressive and felt uncomfortable openly gawking at a social taboo. Thus artworks can solidify even some of the most rudimentary teachings of fat studies; in this case, by making them salient in one's personal experiences. But more importantly, artworks can encourage a much more prolonged and dedicated consideration of fatness. I chose to include Herrick's *Obeast: A Natural and Unnatural History*, Dark's performance at the Canadian Student Obesity Meeting, and Saville's *Closed Contact* series in this thesis not only because I admired these works, but because I found them conceptually challenging. It took quite a lot of time and effort to puzzle them out, but this process forced me to learn something about fatness on my own, to make my own discoveries, which led to a much more profound rejection of hegemonic "obesity" discourses. My activism thus began in the classroom, but intensified in the art gallery. To me, *Los Intocables* serves as a bitter reminder of the need for artworks that engage in size acceptance activism, for as I hope to have demonstrated in my previous three chapters, such art can germinate new ideas, new ways of thinking about and making sense of fatness, as well as new modes of resistance against fat phobia and size discrimination.

Suggestions for Future Research

A number of themes emerged over the course of my research that fell outside the scope of (and are therefore omitted from) this thesis that I would like to briefly acknowledge as

[301] Samantha Murray critiques Marilyn Wann's advice to adopt a "flabulous" attitude about one's body as overly simplistic, asking "How can you completely remove yourself from the discourses that *constitute us as subjects*?" To explain the complexities and difficulties involved in such an act, Murray describes her own lived experiences: "I experience myself/my body in ways that shift and vary and contradict each other. As a fat girl, I still found myself choosing the table in the restaurant facing the wall, and cutting the size tags out of my new clothes. Eschewing ingrained body knowledges about the offensiveness of the fat female body was not as easy as *changing my mind*." Samantha Murray, "(Un/Be)Coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics," *Social Semiotics* 15, no. 2 (2005): 159, original emphases. I can relate to Murray's struggle to change her mind, as two short years of studying critical fat studies cannot fully undo the teachings learned in twenty seven years of living in fat phobic cultures.

suggestions for future research. First, I am troubled by the tendency of some fat studies scholars to uncritically reference particular artworks, such as paintings by Peter Paul Rubens and the Venus of Willendorf (5.8), as evidence that fatness has been revered in past eras.[302] These kinds of images are often cited as proof that fat has been considered beautiful or sexy, presumably because art is commonly understood to reflect such tastes.[303] While I fully understand the impulse to dispel the contemporary idea that fatness is inherently abhorrent, it is very problematic to do so by superficially interpreting historical artworks depicting fat bodies as representations of the ideal without further research and analysis.[304] There is some evidence that fatness was *not* a valued embodiment in early modern England, for example, long before the publication of William Banting's diet pamphlet in 1864 (discussed in Chapter 3, see pages 120-121).[305]

I have focused on artworks produced by female artists that address female fatness, in part because this reflects the vast majority of size-related art, and in part because most of the fat studies literature is concerned with the experiences of fat women. There has been a recent shift,

[302] This tendency is, counter-intuitively, sometimes present in "obesity" research as well ; see, for example, Luigi Ferrucci, Stephanie A. Studenski, Dawn E. Alley, Mario Babagallo and Tamara B. Harris, "Obesity in Aging and Art," *Journal of Gerontology* 65, no. 1 (2010): 53-56.

[303] For an incredibly problematic example, see Richard Klein, "Fat Beauty," in *Bodies Out Of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression,* eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 23.

[304] Leah Sweet's very recent article on the role of historical artworks in contemporary fat activism is a promising step towards the kind of research I am proposing, as she challenges the assumption that so-called "Rubenesque" bodies reflect the cultural status of fat bodies in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, noting that Rubens engineered his painted figures from art historical references, rather than from live models, and that his contemporaries' praise for his works focus mainly on his masterful brushwork and lush use of colour to depict life-like, fleshy details such as cellulite dimples, rather than on the portrayed fat bodies themselves; Leah Sweet, "Fantasy Bodies, Imagined Pasts: A Critical Analysis of the 'Rubenesque' Fat Body in Contemporary Culture," *Fat Studies* 3, no. 2 (2014): 139.

[305] See Michael Stolberg, "'Abhorreas Pinguedinem': Fat and Obesity in Early Modern Medicine (c. 1500-1750)," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 43, no. 2 (2012): 370-378; Sarah Toulalan, "'To[o] Much Eating Stifles the Child': Fat Bodies and Reproduction in Early Modern England," *Historical Research* 87, no. 235 (2014): 65-93.

however, towards a more careful consideration of fat masculinities,[306] and indeed, there are a number of interesting works by male artists that investigate issues surrounding body weight and fat, male embodiment. John Isaacs, for example, has produced several sculptures that seem to explore size-related bodily insecurities, such as *I Can't Help the Way I Feel* (5.9). I have also focused exclusively on works produced in the cultural West, but as fat phobia becomes more common throughout the world,[307] fat scholarship would undoubtedly benefit from the study of works by non-Western artists such as Mu Boyan, a Chinese sculptor who has created an entire series of fat, male nudes (5.10). Finally, works dealing specifically with childhood "obesity," such as *Los Intocables*, demand further examination. As the above discussion perhaps suggests, this is an incredibly sticky issue in fat-phobic, healthist cultures, the subtleties and complexities of which might be unpacked through the analysis of related artworks.

Final Thoughts

This thesis has considered the ways in which contemporary art can open up new possibilities for size acceptance activism. As I hope to have made clear in the introductory chapter, size acceptance is a diverse and multifaceted movement that is closely intertwined with fat studies scholarship, encompassing a broad range of activist strategies that both inform and are informed by academic theory.[308] But the movement can certainly diversify further by developing

[306] See, for example, Daniel Farr, "Introduction to the Special Issue: Fat Masculinites," *Men and Masculinities* 16, no. 4 (2013): 383; Lee F. Monaghan and Helen Malson, "'It's Worse for Women and Girls': Negotiating Embodied Masculinities through Weight-Related Talk," *Critical Public Health* 23, no. 3 (2013): 305.

[307] See Alexandra A. Brewis, Amber Wutich, Ashlan Falletta-Cowden and Isa Rodriguez-Soto, "Body Norms and Fat Stigma in Global Perspective," *Current Anthropology* 52, no. 2 (2011): 273.

[308] In brief review, the majority of fat activisms are influenced by feminist and queer theories, as fat activists adopt many of the tactics originally deployed in the context of the women's and gay liberation movements by raising consciousness about size discrimination, situating fat phobia within a larger web of oppressive patriarchal forces, and challenging heteronormative beauty ideals that value thinness, as well as coming out as fat and expressing fat pride. Many activists utilize these strategies in conjunction with fat-positive visual representation to engage in visibility politics, which I described in Chapter 2 as a popular means of increasing the social and political intelligibility of the fat subject. Others combat fat phobia and size discrimination by forming fat-positive social communities, filing lawsuits to secure legal protections for people of size, and engaging in medically-focused

new, and by advancing existing, activisms. Herrick and Dark adopt the latter approach as they complicate particular strategies that enjoy enough popularity within the size acceptance movement to be classified as "conventional" (that is, negating fat stereotypes and engaging in visibility politics) with thus-far underutilized praxes (performing parodic fat drag and foregrounding lipoliterate visuality).[309] Saville, on the other hand, introduces transformative violence as a new mode of resistance that represents a viable alternative to the grotesque as a means of destabilizing the classification of fatness as Other.[310] This thesis, in turn, contributes to the art historical and fat studies literatures by both highlighting and making sense of the nuanced and novel activisms enacted by these three contemporary artists. To date, very few art historians have researched artistic representations of fatness (even fewer have offered critical analyses that challenge hegemonic "obesity" discourses), and although there is a substantial body of fat scholarship devoted to visual culture, only a small portion focuses specifically on so-called "fine art." But more importantly, I have discovered, in my analyses of these artworks, three possibilities for fat activism that, to my knowledge, have not yet been articulated in fat studies academia. The prospect of fat drag has been preliminarily explored by several scholars, but has

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activism by challenging unsubstantiated beliefs about the relation of body fat to overall health and by developing alternative medical paradigms that do not focus on weight loss, such as Health at Every Size. Alternately, some activists align with the disability rights movement, which advocates a social, rather than medical, model of disability, by identifying limiting and exclusionary environments (such as narrow airplane seats) as causes of many of the problems traditionally attributed to the "abnormality" of the fat body. And, more abstractly, fat studies scholars who have considered fatness in relation to the carnivalesque, neo-liberalism, capitalist economic structures, Christian morality, dualist philosophical traditions, and racist and classist ideologies have fortified size acceptance by deepening our understanding of the many forces that converge to create and perpetuate fat phobia.

[309] Herrick and Dark can be situated squarely within the size acceptance framework as they are both self-proclaimed fat activists who create explicitly didactic works that draw upon numerous fat activisms to communicate unmistakably counter-hegemonic messages about fat in educational contexts (a faux academic journal and a graduate student conference, respectively).

[310] Saville's contribution to size acceptance may have been inadvertent because she does not identify herself as a fat activist *per se*, although, as Michelle Meagher notes, there are many parallels between Saville's and fat liberationists' sustained interrogation of diet culture; Michelle Meagher, "Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust," *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (2003): 27. Indeed, Saville's and Luchford's interviews with Katherine Dunn indicate that they sought to challenge normative thinness with *Closed Contact*, but it remains unclear whether Saville conceived of the work as operating within the fat activist movement. Regardless, I contend that the series demonstrates the subversive potential of a novel mode of resistance that could steer size acceptance into new territory.

not yet been satisfactorily theorized as a mode of resistance. I hope to have shown that Rachel Herrick's alternate exaggeration and refutation of fat stereotypes successfully reveals them to be cultural constructs. Lipoliteracy is an increasingly influential concept in fat studies, considered primarily by those who mean to better understand the workings of fat phobia and size discrimination, but with the exception of Mark Graham's original text that coined and defined the term, lipoliteracy has not been the primary focus of any fat studies research. I am the first to have considered, with the help of Kimberly Dark's *Here's Looking at You*, how lipoliteracy can limit the efficacy of visibility politics. Finally, my analysis of Jenny Saville's *Closed Contact* represents the first theorization of transformative violence as a potential form of fat activist resistance. I hope that these ideas will be further developed by other fat studies scholars and will prove inspirational for all size acceptance activists – not just those operating in the visual realm. Indeed, as a staunch proponent of size acceptance, I view this thesis as a political, as well as academic, project that I hope will help broaden future activist efforts.

In the past two years that I have been researching and writing this thesis, I have noticed that size acceptance rhetoric has begun to slowly and subtly infiltrate mainstream forums of public discourse. This past week, for example, the Huffington Post, a popular news website, featured three articles that communicate some of the movement's most basic tenets: "96 Bodies You Won't See on Billboards – But Should" celebrates bodily diversity and touts the importance of increasing the visibility of all bodies,[311] "17 'Fatkini' Beauties Show the World What a Swimsuit Calendar Could Look Like" praises the use of fashion to challenge beauty ideals and

[311] Nina Bahadur, "96 Bodies You Won't See On Billboards – But Should," *Huffington Post*, last modified August 13, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/13/body-love-expose-project-jes-baker-liora-k_n_5672917.html?utm_hp_ref=style&ir=Style.

express bodily pride,[312] themes that are echoed in "6 Surprising Questions With Our Favorite Plus-Size Bloggers," which features interviews with three well known fat activist fashion bloggers who articulate ideas about fat pride, visibility, and beauty using distinctly fat activist terminology (describing their thinner readers as "straight-sized," for example).[313] It seems that size acceptance is no longer a strictly fringe faction of liberal thought, but is gaining traction and becoming increasingly visible in widely recognized and easily accessible online spaces. But of course, this promising momentum is in tension with the enduringly panic-stricken and fat-phobic rhetoric of the "obesity epidemic." For every article I come across that challenges hegemonic notions about body fat, I am confronted with a dozen others spouting weight loss advice and warning of the seemingly endless perils associated with fatness. This tension, however, creates an exciting context for the creation of fat activist art, which is sorely needed but may prove crucial in a cultural moment that is ripe for change. It is my firm belief that activist artworks, and the activisms they inspire, can change the world.

[312] Derrick Clifton, "17 'Fatkini' Beauties Show the World What a Swimsuit Calendar Could Look Like," *Mic*, last modified August 11, 2014, http://mic.com/articles/95704/17-fatkini-beauties-show-the-world-what-a-swimsuit-calendar-could-look-like.
[313] Meghan Blalock, "6 Surprising Questions With Our Favorite Plus-Size Bloggers," *Who What Wear*, last modified August 6, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/06/plus-size-bloggers-advice_n_5655191.html.

5.1 Erik Ravelo, *The Untouchables (Priest)*, 2013.

5.2 Erik Ravelo, *The Untouchables (Thailand)*, 2013.

5.3 Erik Ravelo, *The Untouchables (Syria)*, 2013.

5.4 Erik Ravelo, *The Untouchables (Brasil)*, 2013.

5.5 Erik Ravelo, *The Untouchables (U.S.A.)*, 2013.

5.6 Erik Ravelo, *The Untouchables (Japan)*, 2013.

5.7 Erik Ravelo, *The Untouchables (Fast Food)*, 2013.

5.8 Unknown artist, *Venus of Willendorf*, c. 24,000 B.C.E. – 22,000 B.C.E.

5.9 John Isaacs, *I Can't Help the Way I Feel*, 2003.

5.10 Mu Boyan, *Fatty Untitled No. 2*, 2006-2007.

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