

ABSTRACT

Jenny Kirk

To present in a feminine manner according to heteronormative patriarchal ideals is often to perform, to be aware, and to be at risk of consumption. As a queer individual who has spent their life presenting in such a way, I have a deep understanding of the potential of violence which faces heteronormative femininity, particularly in a world which is panopticonal and built off the male gaze, and the ways in which the general public feels welcome to looking, staring, and consuming through the eyes. This work is an exploration into the ways this occurs, what can be done to disrupt the modern norm which allows it, and how the queering of feminine gender and the unveiling of femininity as a performance works to elevate the self from typical social order.

The heart of this thesis is performance art, in which I interact with the world while wearing exaggerated makeup, somewhere between clown and drag, intended to embody hyper-femininity. I explore how I am treated when I present as something that does not adhere to patriarchal beauty standards—even which potentially satirizes them—and compare it to how I am treated when I present the way society intends me to, secretly filming myself throughout the process. Collections of projected videos, collages, and makeup wipes imprinted with my makeup each bolster this work, as they investigate a different element of, or background behind, this performance of hyperfemininity. These elements are the shifting into a new presentation, the vulnerability I refuse to confront, and a selfhood that becomes hidden behind the mask of makeup. Each of these elements of exploration are deeply informed by the work of artists Nan Goldin, Leigh Bowery, Sin Wai Kin, and Sophie Jung, each of whom unpick what it is to know the self, to know others, and to be seen through it all. I attempt to force the viewer, within my own work, to see me and interact with me, and to confront themselves as a voyeur. Within this, in making myself an intentional spectacle in an attempt to cover the self underneath, this begs the question: if I consent to being seen, am I still consumable?

Inedible Girl:
To be Vulnerable is to be Consumed

Jenny Kirk

Department of Art Studio
Mount Holyoke College

Art Studio Honors Thesis

2024

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to each of my thesis committee who have supported me all the way through:

To Dixon Williams for encouraging me to pursue a thesis in the first place, for cheering me on through the entire process, and for helping me shift my view and turning the impossible into the possible. All of your advice from this process will continue to alter my practice and my life long after graduation.

To Ligia Bouton for motivating me to keep working and to create more and more and more, and for forcing me to meet my potential. I am endlessly grateful for your guidance and hope to become a fraction of the artist you are.

To Kate Singer for introducing me to new ways of thinking, for honing my writing skills, for supplying me with all the sources I could not find on my own, and for lending me your edition of *Stone Butch Blues* for an entire academic year.

Thank you to Alexandra Finch, for truly carrying me throughout this thesis process even while you completed your own; this would not have happened without you.

Thank you to Carmen, Brynna, and Darwin, for being my family, and for listening to every element and piece of material for this work long before it became a thesis.

Thank you to Alex Fridell, for grounding me as often as you inspire me; always.

And thank you to all of my loved ones at Mount Holyoke; I am irreversibly changed.

Within the modern heteronormative society of American culture, femininity is inherently a performance that requires significant effort in order for the performer to exist. Adhering to this social norm allows the performer to function completely; however, to present femininity within a patriarchal, hetero-typical society is to exist on the same plane as that which allows violence towards those who appear feminine. I have no memory of a time in which this violence did not play a part in my life, and this awareness increased drastically after the end of an unhealthy relationship that was rooted in my exploitation as a young feminine person. I turned to the women in my life for support, but it was shortly after this that my mother passed, and with no female relatives nearby for me to lean on I began to navigate the world on my own. This marked the beginning of a spiral into a fear of my own femininity and vulnerability, triggering an increased complication of my relationship to gender and internal self. Because my presentation of hetero-complicit femininity had played a large part in my being taken advantage of, as it had made me desirable, I became uncomfortable in the presentation which allowed that violence. I was suddenly aware, not only of the all-seeing nature of modern society, but also of my role in it.

The modern panopticon, particularly in terms of gender, “forces [individuals, predominantly queer and femme individuals] to internalize their gender performance and conform to patriarchal standards...in order to prevent social punishment that could arise from a lack of adherence to gendered norms.” (Barkely, 10). In policing myself and complying with the patriarchal role of perceived femininity, I am inevitably watched, and in successfully playing a part, I become a victim of this surveillance. Due to my lack of feminine support and my inability to trust help of any other kind, I spent much of my time alone—and the more time I spent alone

with myself, the more I was forced to confront my grief. For the first time, I was aware that things had been taken from me that I was incapable of retrieving.

This is the rhetoric that most feeds my thesis, *Inedible Girl*, a collection of pieces that include projection work, self-portraiture, performance, video, audio, and installation. The heart of the thesis is performance art, in which I interact with the world while wearing exaggerated makeup, somewhere between clown and drag, intended to embody hyper-femininity. I explore how I am treated when I present as something that does not adhere to patriarchal beauty standards—even which potentially satirizes them—and compare it to how I am treated when I present the way society intends me to, filming myself throughout the process. Collections of projected videos, collages, and makeup wipes imprinted with my makeup each bolster this work, as they investigate a different element of, or background behind, this performance of hyperfemininity. These elements are my shifting into a new presentation, the vulnerability I refuse to confront, and a selfhood that becomes hidden behind the mask of makeup. This work forces the viewer to see me and interact with me, and to confront themselves as a voyeur.

This was the original sentiment that began my experimentation with presentation. Makeup, historically a way of meeting beauty standards, became a tool to take control of how I was watched and to find a way to transform the physical presence of the self. Altering my appearance into an exaggerated production of femininity—more a concept than a real portrayal—I was able to disconnect from the rules of typical reality, thus disconnecting from the discomfort that came with it. To become the idea of femininity was to become barely human, much less a teenage girl.

Dissolving the self from existence and transforming into an idea of gender when alone is a performance for the self, but to become something so different from the norm when within the

public sphere is something else entirely. The plane of public society requires being seen, spoken to, and generally proven to be within existence—something I was hoping to avoid, but which is constant in modern society. I had no consideration for how to handle this, but ultimately I left my solitary grieving and re-entered the public sphere under the guise of these performances, unintentionally making myself known in the public eye as something completely different. My presentation, which did not adhere to social rules, allowed me to consent as a spectacle, rather than forcing me to be seen as a girl. With a level of control over my identity as subject rather than object, I became capable of controlling the very public that had previously controlled me. My presentation turned the public into a collection of voyeurs, who watched in a way I could predict, and who looked away when I looked back. I exceeded social norms, was unimaginable to interact with, and proved the rules of typical society were easily breakable.

Most importantly for myself, in becoming removed from normative society, I was free from interaction with men who viewed me as something to be consumed. The previous years had been filled with honking from cars and up-and-downs in grocery lines—interactions that proved the vulnerability of my youth and gender—and revealed that my past relationship had treated me the way he had seen me: edible. However, my exaggerated performance of femininity removed the legibility of my ‘true’ gender, and thick makeup made it difficult to read my age. These illegibilities made me something shameful to make advances on. To reclaim feminine presentation is to be no longer consumable, and to decline the rules in place. I was no longer subject to male fantasy in a way that was easy to see and impossible to control, and instead I had true agency.

My performance work, recorded in a series of videos through 360 GoPro camera video, *Stare*, and the resulting video stills, *Stare Stills*, is an exploration of what occurs when I enter the

plane of public society while made-up as this exaggerated idea of femininity. To accomplish this I cover my face with white grease paint, colorful eyeshadow, overlined lipstick, and lots of blush, and then interact as one would normally do in community spaces, like cafes or supermarkets. I took the 360 GoPro videos surreptitiously to allow authentic interactions with the general public, and the resulting video clips are projected looped as a grid, like a surveillance camera monitor. Viewers watch these videos through an omniscient lens, forcing them into the role of a voyeur. As a result, this work explores not only the intricacies of modern human interaction through someone who is othering themselves, as well as queerness and interpersonal versus intrapersonal connection, but also how this interacts with the phenomenon of the gaze and constant surveillance. Because my makeup is a performance of femininity exaggerated, and even shifts the social rules of gender presentation, my gender underneath the makeup is rendered ambiguous and even superfluous. The makeup, something intended to be looked at, becomes a decoy that is constantly surveilled, meaning that whatever exists behind it is unviewable and beyond social navigation.

The exploration of makeup and the process of othering oneself is fundamental to the *Stare* series, but the underlying reasons behind why an individual might remove themselves from society are equally important. For myself, grief and vulnerability are unextractable from the performance of *Stare*. The desire to be seen and understood as a person, conflicting with the fear of confronting the internal self while undergoing the process of grieving, are the two most foundational aspects of myself that combined to create such a desire for isolation. *Collages 1-5* explore the internal agitation through a layering of childhood images, excerpts of text from books—*Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Otessa Moshfegh, and *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath—and important symbols within tarot cards and found images. Their

sister series, *Imprints*, documents actions that sheathe vulnerability through makeup imprinted onto wipes, as the makeup displays the action of covering the self. As a pair, with *Imprints* physically covering *Collages*, the works explore how vulnerability can still exist even when repressed. Both force the viewer to interact, whether it be reading the small text in *Collages* or physically touching *Imprints*. In this way, I am further removed from normal society as the viewers interact with these pieces instead of with me. Most importantly, because these works are charged with the vulnerability of emotions or situations that originally inspired them, this installation creates a vital symbiosis between vulnerability and the fear of it. Because each of my works interact with each other, this becomes true for the entirety of *Inedible Girl*.

This investigation into vulnerability is something that is not new, and has been pursued by many artists whose work I consider admirably open and unshielded. Nan Goldin is the most notable example of this, with her most famous collections, “The Other Side” and “The Ballad of Sexual Dependency.” Both collections of photographs document Goldin’s real life in her relationships, with her friends and lovers, as well as with the queer community she surrounded herself with. Her images span the range of human emotion, one of the most famous examples being her photograph, *Nan and Brian in Bed*. Here Goldin lies in bed next to Brian, her long-time lover and abuser, who sits on the bed smoking a cigarette. She regards Brian with an intense and intimate gaze while Brian is unreadable, back to the camera, looking away. When Goldin describes her portfolio as a “diary [she] lets people read” (Moma), she expresses the candor evident in all her art. Goldin displays her life with such openness and with such intention—it is impossible to not see oneself when regarding her work. She shows that it is possible to live and feel as she has lived and felt. The complexity of emotions on her face juxtaposed with Brian’s lack of interest, evident in his anonymity, portrays a complicated

romance; potentially unrequited, imbalanced, overly physical, and clearly painful. This photograph is a mirror through which viewers can read their own lives as they relate. Her vulnerability becomes the viewer's vulnerability, because in becoming a viewer one becomes irrevocably complicit. One connects with Goldin's photos because one sees themselves within them.

My work contrasts with Goldin's vulnerability, as I have intention in my inscrutability, rather than allowing it to be easily accessible. In *Stare*, the act of wearing makeup is both an act of moving away from vulnerability and a method of discouraging the public from asking for it. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes about this interaction between 'starers' and 'starees' in conversation with the topic of disability, discussing the general public's desire to stare at that which falls out of the social norm, and their fear of being caught staring. She notes the story of a girl who was forced to interact with intense public scrutiny as a result of visible jaw surgeries and the way she made decisions to interact back. "Gealy...possessed a certain power because people noticed her...I, [Gealy,] discovered that people were embarrassed when I caught them looking at me. I stared right back at the strangers" (Garland-Thomson, 84). The word "power" is important within this context, because although Gealy has no choice in her disability, she does have command over her interactions with the public. In the same chapter, Dr. Len Sawswich describes the different actions taken depending on different starers—children vs adults, furtively glancing vs gawking, or even embarrassed vs entitled. Some provoke a conversation, and some require inaction in the name of safety. Each interaction is different, but is inevitably produced by the starers reaction to the staree.

It is crucial to note the deep privilege in the temporality of my makeup—the predominant thing that others me. This, as well as the intentionality evident in the painting of my face, proves

my role as a staree different than that within the context of disability, like Gealy's. I was similarly interested in my ability to take social control over those around me, and, also like Gealy, I found this fascinating as a girl in a patriarchal society. Gealy, forced into the role of a staree, aimed to inflict internal understanding within her starers, that she is a real person and is deserving of typical interaction, thus re-entering normative society. In contrast, I do the opposite; my makeup reminds my starers that I am capable of removing myself from normative society, and aims to inflict discomfort and to destabilize their perception of the world. Further, in painting myself into a person who is visibly different to the public, as well as potentially queer and likely troubled, I become an impenetrable object to be looked at, but which can look back—it is an attempt to become the feminine gaze, holding others responsible for their staring. For those who naively look, like children, I am an opportunity to see the potential breadth of personhood, creativity, and femininity. For those who glare in distaste, often men, I am an opportunity to hold them hostage in their discomfort, and create an awareness or shame in their feelings of anger. When I am presenting a purposefully intense concept of femininity, the stares that once consumed me and turned me into an edible thing now feel far more controllable when I know I am affecting the staree back.

This shame imposed on others is something I find reflected in the work of the iconic Leigh Bowery, a performance artist legend. Bowery is known to have considered “shame the least explored of the human emotions, and confessed that the urge to experience and cause shame in others was compulsive [as]...shame is the effect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation” (Elias, 185). Because Bowery was raised a wealthy middle-class child—something he despised being—he worked tirelessly to distance himself from this archetype. His desire to make himself into something of a spectacle was rooted in his desire for control over himself and

particularly over the way he was to be perceived; “He wanted to tell the joke, he didn’t want to be the joke” (Elias, 186). This was evident in his practice of the obscene, queering his gender in ways that included, but expanded past, makeup or drag and which predominantly focused on eliciting a response from the audience through controversial means.

A perfect example is his repeated performance, *Birth Scenes*, Bowery’s performance of giving birth to his own wife. While Bowery lay flat on a table and kicked his legs into the air, Nicola Bateman-Bowery would emerge through a fake vaginal seam stitched between his legs, painted red and completely nude, after clinging to Bowery’s abdomen under his dress throughout the entirety of the performance. Bowery then would bite an umbilical cord made of sausages connecting him to his “baby” and, in some cases, would pretend to feed her with “vomit,” or a cup of vegetable soup. The aim of this work began as a love letter to the performer Divine, but grew into an intentional attempt to disgust or inflict discomfort upon his audience. This performance mixes concepts of sex, gender, violence, and family, and both Bowery and his wife became new identities within it. This forced his audience to reckon with these confluences of normative social expectations, which Bowery was actively working to unpick. He was an artist who hated the comfortable, the expected, and the traditionally beautiful. He shapeshifted into new people, genders, and forms, and in doing so he partook in the act of dissolving the self, an action he described as fundamental in the process of self-realization. All of his work in becoming a new persona which lived off of the reaction of his voyeurs, was the same work that attempted to fully understand himself at the core—he took himself out of his body and dissected himself externally.

It is easier to understand the self by stepping into an adjacent identity, just as it is easier to see an entire painting when one steps back, thus destroying the old one. Through constant

commotion, Bowery successfully directed audiences' attention away from his internal self, and existed only within his presentations, only displayed once they were finished, exactly as I do in *Stare*. By doing this, an artist keeps control over their own story and public perception, separating themselves from what is uncontrollable, like Bowery's childhood and my grief. In preemptively claiming himself to be explosive and effervescent, Bowery removed others' ability to label him demeaningly. I mirror this when I make myself a feminine spectacle, and by consenting to be within public view, I cannot have my consent stolen. To claim the self in a radical way is to control the narrative.

This is evident in my largest piece, *If I Consent...*, which attempts to present, and thus reclaim, the core of myself through video clips and layered audio projected onto a trio of three-foot heads suspended from a post. The size of this projection and the intimacy of the audio and video clips—taken from childhood videos and personal messages interspersed with more recent images—is an exploration into the purposeful exposure of vulnerability in an attempt to preemptively consent to being seen, as well as an attempt to understand the self. These clips are pieces of my past, a past that has died as I've stepped into the present, and therefore I can excavate these videos in retrospect—in doing so regaining control of my history. This practice is the opposite of Bowery's intent to distract from his past, as I intend to move on through the exposure of my vulnerability. These layers of clips display the depth of my humanity to viewers, both within innate and imbued, and picks at the layers of grief which triggered this initial exploration. While viewers are forced to surveil me through pieces like *Stare*, they are also forced to consider me a person before a girl, and I ask the question: if I consent to being seen, is my vulnerability consumable?

Comparable to this level of exposure, and Bowery's performances of identities through costume, Sophie Jung explores ideas of femininity through clothing and nudity, famously quoting that, for women, "nudity becomes a costume, but one you can't take off" (Gosling). Jung interacts with the ways that masculinity is viewed to be neutral, whereas femininity is to perform. Jung creates performances in which she becomes different characters, often wearing a suit that resembles an adorned but naked body. As she performs, the nipples of the suit slip to reveal her real nipples underneath, creating a tension between performance through a worn object and performance through inescapable skin. This is reminiscent of my sister serieses, *Collages* and *Imprints*. Similarly to when my makeup cracks and reveals true flesh underneath, or when *Imprints* slips to reveal *Collages*, Jung revokes the idea of bare skin equating to vulnerability, replacing it with the reality that all of life is performance, particularly for those who present in feminine ways. In a patriarchal system, it is generally true that hetero-masculinity often requires little performance and intention within presentation, whereas to be feminine is to be constantly vigilant. In this sense, Jung is correct: nudity, and to bare flesh, remains a performance—it is simply one of the last layers of the exterior. In my performance of *Stare*, my makeup is a second skin that protects me from vulnerability. However, Jung raises the question: if my bare face and feminine presentation are still a performance, then am I ever at risk of vulnerability? If my overly feminine facade is a way of presenting femininity in a way that evokes confusion within those adhering to the patriarchy, shame upon those who stare, and general control over those who view me, then the difference between this and my performance as a typical feminine person is that the latter is digestible. When my presentation adheres to heteronormalcy, my exhibition of femininity is comprehensible, which does not stand out, and which is constructed in a way to submit to the male gaze. Comparatively, my facade of

femininity using extreme makeup is unappealing to others because it lies outside of heterosexual typicality. In a heteronormative presentation, I find myself picked apart by the people around me despite any attempt to become invisible. In my makeup, I am impossible to pick apart as I am simply not myself.

Although my work is not exactly a form of losing myself into a character, but instead is a form of becoming a new version of myself, it is not dissimilar to the idea of a costume or persona. The artist Sin Wai Kin performs new identities seamlessly, becoming fresh personalities for each show, movie, or performance they create, and is dedicated to the relationship between all aspects of the world and these characters through a queer lens. Their work is also inspired intensely by drag, and Sin Wai Kin has become a seasoned drag queen themselves—something which aided them deeply in their interaction with gender: “Through the act of drag—which is a really purposeful putting on and taking off—I came to the realization that I wasn't a woman. Over time, the line between life and performance has also blurred. The taking off has become part of the performance...the imagined line between authenticity and performance,” (The White Review). They describe the importance of one iconic collection of pieces, imprints of each drag makeup onto wet wipes, which record each performance and character onto physical objects. They consider them to be death masks, as parts of their own body are mixed into the fabric along with the removed makeup.

My work with makeup imprints began before I discovered the work of Sin Wai Kin, but I feel a strong connection within our similarities. My performance of intense femininity is one that skews my gender, as I transform into a caricature of apparent gender, thus making my own illegible. A piece of this presentation is within the removal of the makeup itself, because it shows my ability to revert back to social norms and become someone new, revealing my ability to

re-enter spaces with a bare face and zero consequences for the previous day. I can re-enter the modern panopticon without problem, thus proving that I was capable of leaving it. Although the makeup can be removed, my imprints act as proof of my transformation, and the way I became a new identity for a few hours. My imprints are displayed in tandem with collages, some of my more vulnerable work. They include books, poems, and photographs that are reminiscent of my time in 2020, feelings of fear and depression, and the desire to either conform perfectly or to disappear altogether. *Imprints* are proof that I removed myself by embodying a new identity through the makeup, and purposefully juxtapose *Collages* to describe the reasons behind the decision to shift identity. The collages are my life before queered gender and intentional performance, and the imprints are remnants of my entrance into and exit out of escapism through physical transformation.

Re-exploring my initial examination of the world around me is difficult, but fundamental to the practice of presenting the self. Once one has become aware of the importance of presentation, and further the panopticon within modern culture, it is impossible to ignore it. Each person is watched constantly, and escape is possible, but often only through dangerous and challenging methods. Although I thoroughly enjoy dissolving my original self into the idea of a feminine person, it places me outside of predictable social order—by no longer playing my part, thus intensely standing out, I place myself within the grasp of those who also reject the panopticon, the eccentrics and the unpredictable. Despite this, the idea of safety within the panopticon is an oxymoron—to be watched by anyone, as I have found, is to be consumed. Instead, through the tools of makeup and visibility, I am capable of leaving the troubles of internal vulnerability and worldly capriciousness. Instead, I can predict the actions of those around me, control the way I am seen, and can consume the world back.

Citations

Aperturewp. "Nan Goldin Reflects on Art, Addiction, and Activism." *Aperture*, 21 Nov. 2023, aperture.org/editorial/nan-goldin-reflects-on-art-addiction-and-activism/.

Barkley, Caroline. "Panoptic Patriarchy and the Gap between Queer Lives by Caroline Barkley." *The Onyx Review*, onyxreview.agnesscott.org/panoptic-patriarchy-and-the-gap-between-queer-lives-by-caroline-barkley/. Accessed 31 Mar. 2024.

Buck, Louisa. "Block Universe Launches with Reflective Performance by Sophie Jung." *The Art Newspaper - International Art News and Events*, The Art Newspaper - International art news and events, 28 Sept. 2021, www.theartnewspaper.com/2019/05/21/block-universe-launches-with-reflective-performance-by-sophie-jung.

Elias, Ann, et al. "Camouflage/Fashion/Performance: A Case Study of Leigh Bowery." *Bloomsbury Collections*, Sydney University Press, www.bloomsburycollections.com/book/fashion-performance-and-performativity-the-complex-spaces-of-fashion/ch1-leigh-bowery-and-judith-butler. Accessed 31 Mar. 2024.

Galvin, Kristen. "Anatomy's a drag: Queer fashion and camp performance in Leigh Bowery's Birth Scenes." *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1 Sept. 2017, pp. 185+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A501832668/AONE?u=mlln_w_mounthc&sid=googleScholar&xid=037c44df. Accessed 9 Apr. 2024.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Starers and Starees." pp. 79–94.

Gosling, Emily. "The Art of Dressing for Performance Art." *ELEPHANT*, 15 Apr. 2020, elephant.art/art-dressing-performance-art/.

"Interview with Sin Wai Kin." *The White Review*, 14 Sept. 2021, www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-sin-wai-kin/.

"Nan Goldin. Nan and Brian in Bed, New York City. 1983 | Moma." *Museum of Modern Art*, www.moma.org/collection/works/101659. Accessed 8 Apr. 2024.

Stockton, Katheryn Bond. "INTRODUCTION Growing Sideways, or Why Children Appear to Get Queerer in the Twentieth Century." pp. 1–57.