PERFORMING THE GIRL SWARM:
AN IRL INVESTIGATION OF PERFORMING POSTINTERNET FEMALE IDENTITY

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to explore an amorphous group of female-identifying internet users who are active on social media platforms such as Tumblr and Instagram known as the girl swarm. The girl swarm use hyperfeminine and abject performativity that is often antagonistic to patriarchal norms. The content and aesthetics they create are pursued by capital in the form of commodity feminism whilst simultaneously the swarm are often deemed narcissistic and are frequently censored.

In this thesis I investigate the girl swarm in order to understand strategies of postinternet identity subversion. I examine how the internet went from a space that was heralded as having a post-identity utopic potential for freedom to the platforms of social media run by corporate giants that profit from people's identities. I investigate selfie culture and how it is viewed in a late capitalist and patriarchal system and I explore why the swarm's version of selfie culture is so popular with other young women online and frequently deleted as inappropriate, or abject on social media platforms.

This thesis forms part of my practice-based research and stands alongside a performance that was made for a traditional theatre space and merges choreographic and live art practices. While there have been excellent performances and academic studies that focus on the pressures and anxieties that social media and selfie culture place on young girls this research seeks to address online performativity and identity constructs that subvert limiting and patriarchal notions of young women. I unpack methods I used to embody the digital aesthetics and online actions of the swarm within a traditional theatre space. By embodying the swarm through theatrical practice I was able to understand some societal prejudices towards young women and find strategies to question these prejudices in order to forward a feminist agenda. This research project exposes the need and desire that young women are able to take up space in order to subvert limiting notions of what young women should look and act like in the twenty-first century.

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Introduction

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 1. Soda, M. (2016) *Bricks*

In 2013 my little sister was fifteen years old. At the time she had aspirations to be a beauty vlogger and would post selfies and videos of her pouting lips and charcoaled eyes online. My parents still didn't fully understand what YouTube, Facebook and Instagram were beyond a concept of them as teenage playthings, so in many ways it was up to me as a (then) twenty-four-year-old to keep watch on my sibling's activities online. I was left wondering why her behaviour made me feel so uncomfortable. I was concerned for her safety; was her online exposure a type of objectification? Or was my discomfort partially related to the patriarchal conditioning surrounding young women and their behaviour? I wanted to know more about young female online performativity and as I started to investigate female blog-culture I discovered the girl swarm.

The ‘girl swarm’ is a term I first heard being used in an interview between a group of artists, when Rosemary Kirton and Jesse Darling interviewed Molly Soda (shown above) in 2013. The swarm is not a self-identifying collective, but an amorphous group of users that I have been tracing over the years. Girl swarm is a useful and provocative description of a group of predominantly White, Western European and North American young women who are active on social media platforms, particularly Tumblr and Instagram. These young women have created a rich online culture and vast community. Their online content is often defined by the Teen-Tumblr aesthetic (Eler and Durbin, 2014). They take a lot of selfies and make images, gifs, memes and blog posts that I would define as youthful and hyper-feminine. Baby pinks mix with 1990’s grunge and teen pop cultural references from the 1990’s and 2000’s. They often explore early internet and computer culture. Their online activities articulately describe what it is like to grow up young and female in a late capital, postfeminist and postinternet age. These posts are wildly popular and also widely hated. There has been a moral panic that social media is breeding an army of young narcissists and this type of social media activity, including selfie culture, is usually equated with young women. Jesse Darling asked artist and internet personality Molly Soda ‘[a]re we living in a condition of pics or YOU didn’t happen?’ (Darling and Kirton, 2013). Much discourse and performance practices surrounding social media focus almost solely on the negative impacts that social media has on young people. However, there are ways in which groups of people are using social media to forward ideas of equality. In many ways the swarm are reinforcing tropes of White, young feminine aesthetics but they also post pictures and selfies that are purposefully antagonistic to gender norms, beauty constructs and traditional moral codes of female good behaviour. Their posts talk openly about the censorship of women’s bodies; they expose period blood and pubic hair and celebrate it. I approached this research project with the question: how are this group of young women using social media to expand, subvert or reiterate ideas and aesthetics of femaleness?

This research has taken the girl swarm’s online form of community, their aesthetics and self-mediations and investigated them through a performance practice. In the practice-based investigation I attempted to use a theatre and rehearsal studio as a space to play with the complex politics of the swarm. I have asked whether theatre practice can be used to investigate, reinforce or disrupt understanding of these new aesthetics and online forms of

self-expression. This is important because for many people of different generations and communities what young women are experiencing and creating online is a mystery - just like for my parents and younger sibling. A theatrical practice can provide an understanding of the frustrations and pleasures of being a young woman in a digital world because it enables these realities to be embodied by performers. This research also asked how theatre can help understand the swarm, and how what is learnt about the swarm can help develop feminist live theatre, so that theatre practice remains progressive and relevant as our technologically fuelled world changes and develops. In order to understand the swarm in the context of internet practices I will now briefly describe some history of the internet and self-mediation practices that have developed with it.

Counterculture in the Code

In 1968 Doug Engelbart gave 'The Mother of All Demos' at Stanford Research Institute. It was the first public demonstration of the potential of modern computing. He unveiled a computer controlled by a mouse and keyboard. This computer was fundamental in developing a modern user-interface, information management and networking; this was revolutionary. Engelbart was head of the department of the Augmented Research Centre (ARC) at the SRI. It would take the rest of Silicon Valley a couple of decades to catch up with the full vision of the networked information age that Engelbart was proposing. The U.S defence department had given Engelbart the budget to develop his ideas with the ARC. This was curious as his team developed a computer that was not designed to coerce and repress or provide military dominance of any kind but for the first time would develop an individual person's capacity to work, have access to information and share that information with others. This was the very start of the information age as we know it and the beginning of technological ideas that would develop into the internet.

Storr muses that Engelbart may not be as well-known as computer technologists like Steve Jobs or Bill Gates even though his contributions were astronomical to the field of progressive computing because Engelbart was an outsider (2017). The majority of technicians around SRI in the 1960s were a part of a military-industrial complex and dressed in crisp white shirts and ties to go to their labs. The ARC was part of the countercultural revolution sweeping across America during the decade. Engelbart's workforce wore their

hair and beards long and if you entered their labs you'd be greeted '…by hippie décor and the fragrance of marijuana and candles… and yes there were drugs and naked people in the rooms where some of the code that now drives your e-mail around the globe was first set down' (Lanier, 2005). While an LSD trip might seem unthinkable as a workplace bonding exercise in 2020 it is important to note the culture behind how this technology was developed as this affects the legacy of the technology. Engelbart's vision was to develop open systems for collaboration and sharing of information. Countercultures by nature are often anti-establishment, their emphasis is on personal freedom, liberation and unlocking a human potential, free from conservative societal restraints. Members of the ARC workforce were wary of 'the man' behind their funding and the funders were confounded with the bunch of hippies they had working for them (Markoff, 2005).

Two ideologies developed around computer development during this period. One was a call for open-source community driven computing and the other for a proprietary model. (Markoff, 2005; Lanier, 2005). Both models wanted freedom from the constraints and control of government, but an open-source method put its trust in a community, the idea of raising people up with free access to information. A proprietary model was connected to a neoliberal agenda where people were free to do as they please with minimal government interference, to use the computers (and later the internet) as an entrepreneurial tool for individual success and personal profit (Storr, 2017). Both ideologies centre an expansion of the self, enabled by technology; either in *connection* with other people or in *competition* with them. For a long time, computing systems have been connected with self-expression, potential and actualisation.

Some early interpretations of the internet revolved around similar ideas to Engelbart's open-source system (Hansen, 2004; Poster, 1995). For cyberfeminists in the 80s and 90s the internet held the potential to increase equality and expand or subvert notions of gender (Haraway, 1985;) but there was a sense that explorers of this open space were on borrowed time; 'before the "dot-com'' venture capitalist takeover of the field in the second half of the 1990s progressive computing was primarily seen as a tool for collaboration among people' (Lovink, 2015, p.164). Hackers, coders, net artists were forming communities and taking advantage of this new and fairly empty digital space that had been created by 'free thinkers'

such as Engelbart. Wark posits that it took capitalists time to understand how they could commodify the internet (2020).

As with so many changes that have occurred in human history, artists have been at the forefront of thinking, imaging and interpreting what effects and affects new technology has on our lives. Arts writer Karen Archey coined the term 'postinternet aesthetics'. The idea that we are living in a postinternet age signifies the point at which the internet is no longer niche. '[T]he postinternet would be a phenomenon that occurs in contradistinction to pre-digital society and Luddite ideals' (Archey, 2010). Archey uses postinternet aesthetics to describe work from a group of artists who are using their art to indicate what it is to live in the reality of the internet. Hito Steyerl uses the vantage point of the art world to unpack power structures and the struggles of a postinternet reality that often trades in images (2009; 2017). Steyerl stresses that there has been an erosion of an open-source informational commons; the majority of the internet is now a walled-garden of private ownership (2017). The internet developed from being a niche technology used by those with specific coding knowledge to the launch of web 2.0 and it being used by the masses. The internet has changed how we view ourselves, how we communicate and our economy.

In the early 2000s Tiziana Terranova was theorising the reconfiguration of politics, commodity and power of internet open spaces. On the internet information is a primary asset, our private information is sold to companies and our attention becomes a commodity to view the vast information that is available for online consumption. In *Network Culture* (2004) she argues that information is used to reproduce closed systems that are more predictable and stable than open spaces. Terranova puts forward the metaphor that the spreading of information through a network is perceived as the transmission of either noise or signal. This opens up questions of what types of information are deemed to be valuable and what are posited as noise. The exclusion of certain information produces constraints and closed systems online.

> …what Terranova calls 'a cultural politics of information' must entail not merely a battle over the meaning of what currently informs us within late capitalism: It involves the opening up of the virtuality of the world by positing not simply different,

> but radically other codes and channels for expressing and giving expression to an undetermined potential for change. (Wright, 2005)

Terranova is calling for the subversion of online power structures through collective action. Although power structures are trying to use information on online networks to create predictable spaces for capital to operate, there are still ways in which peoples' online actions can create difference and resistance to the dominant forces of late capital.

Teenage Chatrooms

As this political and ideological tug of war played out and the rejigging of capital control of the internet was underway, in the 2000s there were masses of young girls and queer youth sitting at their keyboards. They were using online spaces such as chatrooms and blogs to figure out who they were, and in some cases trying on other identities. Legacy Russell says of her online childhood alter-ego: 'LuvPunk12 as a chatroom handle was a nascent performance, an exploration of future self' (2020, p.4). She describes online chatrooms of the early 00s as a chance to escape the realities of her black, female, queer body and also explore these identities away from the lived realities and prejudices faced residing in her body offline. Many like Russell were seizing the opportunity to self-mediate. Tavi Gevinson created a fashion blog in 2008 when she was eleven years old. The blog went viral, she became a celebrity, causing a storm in the fashion world and went on to edit an online feminist girl's magazine until it folded in 2018. In a recent article Gevinson spoke about the outrage her presence sparked amongst journalists and fashion writers at the time, with some not believing that she was writing the blog herself. 'Ten years ago, just the idea of a child sharing parts of her life online to an anonymous audience was a novelty' (Gevinson, 2019). Although this may have been a novelty for adults, it was a lived reality for a multitude of youths. Langlois sees the internet as a different potential from the technologies that have preceded it: '[W]hat social media does which is radically different from other media, is that they offer a set of tools and practices to make content meaningful to us, to our likes, to our lives' (Langlois, 2013 p.51). Gevinson started the e-magazine *Rookie* as there were a lack of physical magazines for teen girls that went beyond the 'how to get a boyfriend' model that dominated the market in 2011 (Gevinson, 2019). She wanted to share and curate content

for an online community that spoke of the realities of growing up young and female in the twenty-first century.

Social media platforms have advanced. Internet and race scholar Lisa Nakumara states that the cyberpunk disembodiment and digital gender bending that Russell was exploring has in many ways been eradicated: 'We live more, not less in relation to our body parts… informational technologies have turned the body into property' (Nakumara, 2007, p.96). Young women are the most prolific users of social media sites. They populate these spaces with their content creation and generate traffic to the sites. They are effectively performing unpaid labour for social media platforms. With the rise of platforms like Instagram dominating female online spaces and how these spaces are monetised, Gevinson's *Rookie* was no longer financially sustainable. *Rookie* was a platform created by a young girl for young girls, it represents the democratisation of media and a challenge to old standards of femininity. Its failure marks the narrowing of female-led digital spaces in favour of big platforms and the limits that then brings to female communities who have to operate within the logic and guidelines of corporate social media giants. Social media platforms' staff and algorithms are now defining what kinds of female online performativity and imagery is noise and what is signal, what should be censored and what is allowed to remain. Geert Lovink calls for a pragmatic approach to social media. Often the focus of social media is on the user interface and how social media affects the people who use it. Lovink argues that one should not lose sight of the back end of social media: the politics and agenda of the owners of these platforms and how they are profiting from the masses by selling their personal data (2011).

In many ways the girl swarm is an extension of the community surrounding websites like *Rookie*. The swarm is composed of young women in their teens to their early thirties. I have centred my investigation around artists and online personalities such as Molly Soda, Arvida Byström, Grace Miceli and their friends and followers. I have been exploring this community from 2012 until 2020. They create art and online content in order to explore their sense of self, the postinternet world that they inhabit now and the one they grew up in. Their posts and blogs have inadvertently documented the changes in attitudes towards life online, from chatrooms with made-up names to the rise of highly charged late capital spaces like

Instagram. Swarm aesthetics are hyper-femininity meaning that they express excessive, youthful femininity. They play with tropes of teenage girl aesthetics like millennial pink, rainbows and cutesie imagery and merge them with abject aesthetics of period blood, body hair, vaginal fluid and cellulite. They are performing their gender to an excess.

This thesis draws on media studies, digital cultural studies and critical theory in order to understand the swarm, the histories of commodification of female bodies and creative culture and how this plays out on online spaces. I discuss the power relations and identity politics online communities like the swarm are experiencing. I unpack how the swarm finds resistance and agency online by examining their practices through the concepts of biopower, abjection, spatial theory and pleasure. I also trouble ideas of agency and subversion by exploring how women are exploited and the expectations that late capital places on young women when they are online.

Key Terms

I deploy the following terms in my conceptualisation and theorisation of the swarm: biopower, cyborg theatre, abjection, performativity, representational space, affective labour, theory of the Young-Girl, postfeminist subject, and late capitalism. In chapter one I use Foucault's concept of biopower (1980) as a means of sovereign control by producing systems of population control. I look at internet systems as a form of biopower that enforces dominant power in a late capitalist system. I deploy Parker-Starbuck's concept of 'cyborg theatre' (2011), in which theories of technology combine with bodies in a theatre to create a staging ground to reconfigure bodies, offering an expansion in subjectivity and diverse identity formations. Parker-Starbuck's theories have formed the frame-work for my theatrical research.

The girl swarm purposefully make abject imagery and performances online, creating posts that centre around bodily fluids and pubic hair. Kristeva states that abjection turns subjects into objects (1980). I examine how abjection can be used as a tool in performance in order to subvert patriarchal objection of the girl swarm. I also draw on Butler's theory of performativity (1993), which proposes that in order for gender and sexuality to be legible

(and accepted) by society they have to be constantly enacted through linguistic utterances or performativity.

In chapter two I further unpack theories on abjection, examining how it spatialises and reorients bodies, hierarchising them in space as above and below (Ahmed, 2014). I deploy Ahmed's notions of abjection in my examination of embodying the girl swarm. I use Lefbevre's theory of representational space, meaning the lived experience of space, to understand how the swarm are using abject aesthetics (that are spatialising) to subvert gender norms in digital spaces. I also utilise representational space to understand the subversive potential of performing the girl swarm in a theatre space.

Chapter three deploys the concept of affective labour, which has been a part of feminist discourse as a term for gendered traditions of care work that are often not financially rewarded. Hardt argues that in an information age, where the computer is central to capitalism, affective labour has now become a central part of late capitalism as a form of immaterial labour. I unpack forms of intimate labour that the swarm produce online using Hardt's theories of affective labour (1999). I examine the subversive potential of Hardt's concept of a 'biopower from below' (1999), and how affective labour can create a biopower, or community of people who can force change from within a system. I deploy Butler's theories of performativity in order to understand why performer Aysha Chamberlain feels her online performances are an important way to establish her identity. I discuss how performativity- the constant repetition of gender- can be used to subvert White and heteronormative assumptions surrounding femininity.

In chapter four I examine the Young-Girl: The theory of the Young-Girl is a concept by philosophical group Tiqqun. The theory states that people who were seen as outside of capitalist production (epitomised by the youth and feminitude of the Young-Girl) would be accepted into capitalism through their capacity to be a consumer. In order to be seen as a good citizen you must make purchases that support your identity. I use this theory to understand the swarm's complicated relationship with late capitalism. I also draw on the concept of the postfeminist subject in this chapter. Feminist media scholars (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Dobson, 2015; Dobson and Harris, 2015) describe the postfeminist subject as a

woman who is strong, confident, hetero-sexy, funny and able to self-brand and self-broadcast using digital technologies. I deploy theories around postfeminist subject formation to reveal where swarm members are playing into the good postfeminist subject and where they are subverting this norm through their online practices. Throughout, I use the term 'late capitalism' to define the era of capitalism that we are currently in.

Methodology

A performance practice offers unique insights into the embodiment of the swarm. Kershaw argues that creative practice as research has the ability to *dis-locate* assumed knowledge (2011, p.122). By using performance practice based research I am actively questioning and disrupting a priori assumptions regarding girl swarm aesthetics and actions through a theatrical process of embodying the swarm. I used a traditional theatre space as a staging ground and the rehearsal room for a bodily-investigation of the swarm.

In March 2018 I started to explore girl swarm materials and how I could move and arrange these materials in space with my body. In April I collaborated with sound artist Chris Littlewood. We spent time in the rehearsal studio exploring how sound technology could combine with girl swarm materiality and the female body. I explored different interpretations and reactions to girl swarm aesthetics by delivering choreographic workshops with Bath Spa University Dance students firstly in June 2018 and then with a group of MA students in November 2018. In early 2019 I networked with youth groups such as Mentoring Plus and BANESYDC. I talked to adolescent young women about the swarm, how this related to their own experiences of online interactions and invited them to see the performance I was creating. In the spring of 2019 I received Arts Council Funding and I spent three weeks at Bath Spa University developing and rehearsing a one-hour show based on the girl swarm, which was performed in the University Theatre for an audience of twenty people on the 3rd May 2019. In my joint roles as choreographer, artistic director and researcher I collaborated with a talented collective of performers, the sound artist Chris Littlewood, dramaturg Katie Dale-Everett and AV specialist Lukus Robbins in order to make this work possible. The swarm are majority anglophile, cis and White passing. However, I did not want my investigation to lack intersectionality or diversity. When I auditioned performers to work with me on this project, I ensured that the call-out was inclusive of all

female-identifying people. It has been a pleasure to work with three women, Aysha Chamberlain, China Fish and Sophie Northmore, who have brought their own experiences and their diverse identities to this project as queer, as mother, as Black, as White, as working-class women. These lived realities and identities combined with girl swarm performativity shaped our research, the movement language we used and our findings.

This work has been an examination of bodies and affects. The performers went through a process of becoming swarm, and the project's findings have been discovered through the performers' emotional, physical journeys and stories. Through performance practice we experienced some of the powers of online communities and uncovered anxieties in performing in a way that is viewed as antagonistic to normative culture. We were then able to examine these affective findings using critical theories including Ahmed's affective theories and Lefebvre's spatial theories. The collaboration between live performers and artists who specifically work with sound and visual technology enabled this theatrical investigation to become, drawing on Jennifer Parker-Starbuck (2011), a cyborg theatre investigation, a concept I unpack in chapter one. Through a merger of the female performers' bodies, sound and video residing within a theatre space we attempted to unpack patriarchal notions of the swarm by destabilising ideas of power and knowledge.

By exploring these online actions in a live theatrical space we were able to expose prejudices that we as performers held against swarm-style, female selfie performative behaviour. Through performance we were able to highlight and emphasise behaviours that are considered annoying traits of vacuous young girls. By turning these traits into a slow moving, ritualistic performance we presented to the audience an experience of how society casts feminine behaviour as abject at the same time as exposing the swarm as subjects, with thoughts, feelings and agency over their bodies. Our theatre-based investigations allowed us to further understand the problematic patriarchal power dynamics within the theatrical institution. Through creating a messy, abject performance that investigated a group of young women's connectivity and productions of self-imagery we uncovered deeply held prejudices towards certain young female performative behaviours. We also discovered the swarm's capacity to destabilise prejudices and patriarchal power and found the immense strength to be found when girls find a way to swarm. Parker-Starbuck and Mock argue that

‘In retransmitting any form of research practice, shared experience can become a method for deeper interrogation, for an exchange of ideas or expression’ (2011, p.232). Through the act of performance as retransmission this practice-based investigation of the swarm enables a wider audience to engage with their actions and question the prejudices surrounding young female online performative behaviour.

Chapter Overview

In chapter one, ‘Herstories of the Net’, I discuss some of the histories of the internet and digital culture through a feminist lens, alongside feminist performance practices that intersect with those of the swarm. This is not an expansive overview, but it is important for this investigation to understand that people in the early 1990’s thought that the internet was the ultimate tool in creating a utopian society that did not discriminate because of race, gender or sexuality and operated outside of a capitalist system (Hansen, 2004; Poster, 1995). Yet this is not the internet that we have ended up with where the body and its signifiers are essential to many online spaces. I explore what this means in relation to young women and the role that young women play in being creative content producers online. I examine internet practices connected to self-expression, including selfies and how these are seen by some as a morally corrupting practice or evidence of a rise in young female narcissism. I then compare twenty-first century selfie culture to female self-expression in the twentieth century by exploring female performance artists who used photography to resist and subvert patriarchal readings of their bodies.

Turning to the swarm, I foreground bodies as the focus of my research, and unpack my approaches to affect theory, abjection and space which inform the following chapters, and to Jennifer Parker-Starbuck’s concept of ‘cyborg theatre’ (2011) which structured my theatrical interventions. I draw on Jennifer Parker-Starbuck’s argument that technology combined with live bodies and performance can help to subvert limiting notions of identity by showcasing new ways of living in the world (2011). Her theory of a ‘cyborg theatre’ therefore provided me with a theatrical framework for performing the girl swarm. Parker-Starbuck extends Haraway’s (1985) notions that cyborgs can offer a mode of being that confuses old ideas regarding gender and promotes a multiplicity of identities. A cyborg theatre can provide an arena to test out new couplings of technology and identities, in order

to highlight ways of promoting diversity and equality. I take this concept and apply it to a staging of the girl swarm including performances of selfies and ASMR.

Chapters two, three and four take my theatrical investigation as my starting point to explore key themes raised by the swarm. Chapter two, 'Soft Grunge and Messy Girls', explores the girl swarm's messy self-mediation of their female bodies using theories of abjection (Ahmed, 2014; Kristeva, 1980). As a performance collective in *Girl Swarm* we examined abjection by using messy materials and methodologies combined with female performers. In chapter one I explored Ahmed's idea that abjection can be spatialising, that certain body parts and emotions are put in a hierarchy of *aboveness* and *belowness*; certain aspects of female bodies are seen as lower than their male counterparts. When a body is labelled abject it turns into an object, the borders of that object transform into a site of disgust. In chapter two I deepen this analysis by proposing that the swarm by purposefully performing abject behaviours are able to subvert power relations that objectify them, reclaiming agency.

This chapter further examines spatial power structures by using Lefebvre's theories of representation space (1991). I examine ways in which the swarm are using social media platforms to create an imagined space of freedom and equality using their abject behaviour and hyper-feminine aesthetics. In order for us to play with these power subversions on stage we explored liminality and ritual performance. These types of performance subvert the hierarchy that places young female bodies in a state of 'belowness' (Ahmed, 2014). Through the practice we experienced the risks of performing subversive and abject femininity in a traditional theatre space, and I look at institutional bias towards female abjection through the feminist and diversity works of Sarah Franklin (2015) and Ahmed (2017).

Chapter three, 'Anxiety and Affective Labour', examines the feelings of anxiety that the performers experienced when initially attempting to perform girl swarm actions, and deploys this examination to unpack larger themes of anxiety and affective labour related to the swarm. Through improvisational performance practices the performers experienced an amplified anxiety of residing in bodies that are often dismissed, objectified or considered

abject on the basis of gender. Girls take up huge amounts of space online because the image of the young female body is a valuable commodity, however when young women start to subvert their images through online performative behaviours their actions become antagonistic to a capitalist system that is often sexist and patriarchal. Through performance we were able to articulate how young women are dismissed and oppressed, how digital platforms have enabled meaningful explorations of self, and have provided vast communities and connectivity. Our practice-based investigations made us realise the importance of occupying and taking up online space as an empowering act for young women online. We discovered how anxiety can reconfigure, turning into pleasure. I use Ahmed's theories on anxiety and queer pleasure (2014) to explore how pleasure can be used as tool for marginalised groups to take up space. Taking up space can mean different things, including an increase in visibility which comes with a certain amount of risk. A non-normative body is exposed and could be subject to violence. It can also mean spreading out, finding a collective and feeling comfortable amongst a group of peers - taking up space by transforming the political alliances of that space.

This chapter further investigates notions of swarm's labour, its value and how their work can be used to change and subvert oppressive social systems by exploring their work through Michael Hardt's concept of affective labour (1999). Hardt argues that immaterial labour practices and unpaid care work (often carried out by women) are combining through our technologically progressing societies and forming a type of biopower that can be resistant to traditional power structures. I argue that the swarm are forming a biopower, which allows them to make their own spectacles that subvert patriarchal views of what young women should look and act like.

Chapter Four, 'Commodity Bodies and Girl Swarm Economies', complicates the idea of swarm agency by exploring the swarm's connection to capital and commodity even further. Selfie culture is often written off as narcissistic, morally hollow and vulgar (Bard, 2017; Darling and Kirton, 2013). Blogger Sara Gram (2013) asks that people look at why these prejudices towards young women exist. She proposes that narcissism is actually a trait often demanded of young women who live in a late capitalist system. In order to understand this proposal, I explore the radical socialist philosophical group Tiqqun and their theory of the

'Young-Girl' (2012). For Tiqqun a capitalist system demands that its citizens assert their identities through their bodies, this is achieved through buying products and the result is that the citizen achieves social status and is read by others as an acceptable member of society. Tiqqun argue that the performative behaviour of the Young-Girl allowed people that were once seen as useless to capital (epitomised by the Young-Girl) to become useful through their purchasing power; according to Tiqqun, this type of existence breeds anxiety and misery. Tiqqun's theory of the Young-Girl was written in French during the mass media era of the late twentieth century, and resonated strongly with many female bloggers when it was translated into English in 2012. For these bloggers the Young-Girl encapsulated the idea that the image of a young girl is a far greater asset than her thoughts and ideas (Darling and Kirton, 2013). Selfies and self-image construction are pivotal to the swarm's online activities; Tiqqun's theory gives a framework to see where the swarm's behaviours stem from oppression or freedom within a late capitalist system.

This chapter also explores how feminist identities have become commodities that can be sold and marketed. Feminist media scholars propose that young women like the swarm are encouraged by society to self-brand themselves, to use social media as a tool to present themselves as a postfeminist, confident, independent, fun-loving, successful woman (McRobbie, 2009; Banet-Weiser, 2012). I examine how the swarm are participating in the act of self-branding and where they are failing to perform the normative, postfeminist, neoliberal young woman who uses the internet as a tool to signal her personal success. I explore where they sometimes fail in this subversion and how swarm posts and aesthetics can be co-opted under the guise of commodity-feminism and activism. In *Girl Swarm,* rather than framing selfie culture as an individual choice made by young women to participate in, we were able to uncover and understand the societal pressures the swarm are under. Through practice-based research as a performance collective we were able to connect the swarm to a late capital institution, grounding swarm behaviour into a social reality.

This investigation is vital in analysing strategies that young women are currently using in order to feel empowered in their bodies in the postinternet world they inhabit. The girl swarm antagonise patriarchal beauty norms and in return many of their online posts are being deleted. The framing of this project as practice-based research has allowed me to

analyse the ways that a theatre space can be used as a platform for displaying strategies of empowerment deployed by the swarm through exploring the embodiment of the swarm's online performative behaviours. My research project highlights the potential for the swarm's online activities to subvert limiting notions of young women in the twenty-first century and also interrogates the locus of agency for these women within a capitalist framework.

Chapter One: Herstories of the net

The body is central to my investigation of the girl swarm, as the relationship between bodies and technologies is central in any understanding of the swarm. This research has been conducted through bodies and by thinking about bodies. How do thousands of bodies interact with each other across digital platforms? How do bodies articulate and express their gender and experiences online? Through choreographic exercises, my performers took on understandings of the swarm through their bodies, through which we made discoveries about girl swarm performativity, its powers and complexities.

By centring the body in my investigation I am also centring affect, feelings and emotions that are experienced in both mind and body. Hardt points out that a focus on affect enables us to not only see how one body is affected but also another in the viewing of that body. We can start to think about causality: '[Affects] illuminate, in other words, both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers' (Hardt, 2007, p. X). The relationship between bodies and technologies is central in any understanding of the swarm. Patricia Clough brought forward the idea of the affective turn in order to understand the potentials for affect theories and technology that then moves beyond organic-physiological restraints:

> The technoscientific experimentation with affect not only traverses the opposition of the organic and the non-organic; it also inserts the technical into felt vitality, the felt aliveness given in the preindividual bodily capacities to act, engage, and connect—to affect and be affected. The affective turn, therefore, expresses a new configuration of bodies, technology, and matter… (Clough, 2007, p. 2)

My analysis deploys a materialist feminist lens in its focus on the roles of capitalism and patriarchy in the formation and subversion of gender roles (Hennessy and Ingraham, 1997). Materialist feminist theorists understand subversions of gendered roles as having a complex

relationship with lived experience and corporeal practice (Alaimo and Hekman, 2007). When looking at the girl swarm, their complex interactions with structures of patriarchy and capitalism allow them to form communities where they question their lived experiences of young girlhood by using the internet. I turn this lens on the digital spaces and subject formations of the swarm, drawing on affect theory (Ahmed,2014; Clough,2007), theories of affective labour (Hardt, 1999; Hardt, 2007), of representational spaces (Lefebvre, 1991) in order to interrogate questions of subversion and agency within the girl swarm. In this chapter I unpack these concepts in relationship both to the swarm and to the histories of women's bodies and technologies on the internet.

This chapter examines twentieth-century notions of a utopic, identity free internet and how this did not come to pass. I explore female unpaid labour in a postinternet age, looking at how the internet has enabled the rise of a new type of affective labour (Hardt, 1999) and how the swarm can utilise affective labour to destabilise patriarchal power structures. I examine views of selfie taking as a morally vacuous activity linked to young femininity. I explore contemporary performance artists using selfies as a type of digital performance practice that explores female commodification and narcissism. I then discuss twentieth century feminist performance artists who deployed radical narcissism in their artistic practices as a weapon against patriarchal readings of their work. This chapter explores theories of abjection and ways abject aesthetics and actions can be used subversively, and considers the role of spatial theory in my research, particularly Henri Lebebvre's theory of representational space. I then turn to Jennifer Parker-Starbuck's concept of 'cyborg theatre' (2011), which I drew on for the framing of my theatrical work. I examine the ways in which the creative team and I used intersecting technologies, bodies and materialities - framed by Parker-Starbuck as the cyborg abject within cyborg theatre (2011) - and the role of abjection when employed with cyborg theatre practices to explore a subversive performance of the swarm.

In order to understand the complexities of the girl swarms' actions and images online, the intersections of their bodies with technologies and the role of affect in these intersections, it is necessary to first summarise a brief history of the internet and digital cultures. From dreams of the internet being an identity free utopia where people could interact without

their pesky bodies getting in the way with all their cultural, racial and gendered baggage, to the twenty-first century reality of corporate social networks, the body with its affects and identities are key to the functioning of digital spaces. In the following sections I examine twentieth-century ideas on online equality, look at theories on technology colliding with bodies through cyborg subversions, and discuss twenty-first century online practices such as selfie culture and how these practices are viewed culturally. I explore histories of feminist performance practice that pre-dates selfies and set out the strategies I used for performing the girl swarm on stage.

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Figure 1. Steiner, P. (1993) *On the internet…*

Bodyless Utopia

In 1993 the famously reproduced cartoon (Figure 1.) by Peter Steiner made its first appearance in the New Yorker, marking the rise in mass interest of the internet's possibilities. The cartoon presented the idea of a level playing field, a digital utopia through anonymous correspondence to the public. If no one knows you're a dog, they won't know that you are on any societal periphery unless you choose to state the fact. Artists and academics argued this new technology could provide a space free from race and gender of physical bodies. Writers from the 1990s, such as J. P Barlow (1996) 'envisioned users 'electronic bodies' as a directly oppositional practice to states or other socio-political institutions that might define users in oppressive ways' (Nakamura, 2014, p.1). Many media

scholars (Hansen, 2004; Poster, 1995) were determined to show the internet as a post-identity utopia: 'online identity play creates the possibility for a 'zero degree' of racial identification/ a potential universality rooted in the precariousness of any identity as a fixation of embodied individuation' (Gonzales, 2009, p.44). In the 1990s the internet was mainly a playground for a highly skilled set of individuals who had the coding knowledge to interact online. Groups of young artists who had learnt how to add images to the internet were connected via organic communities, known as surf clubs, such as 'Nasty Nets'.

However, this unnamed utopia seems a far cry from the twenty-first century reality of Facebook, Grindr, Tumblr, LinkedIn and many other apps that require our identity to be completely transparent, our online activities well monitored. A 2013 PEW study showed that 91% of teenagers studied posted pictures of themselves online and 92% used their real names on social media. By the late 2000s the internet was no longer an elite technology, or an empty cyber-space and blank canvas used by pro-surfers. As Darling states '…the great digital dream of libertarian net-autonomy [was] replaced by a monopoly of mall-like social-media platforms, where the kids all hang out in their outlandish avatars…' (2012). The internet becoming just as much a part of everyday reality as the Starbucks on the corner caused Gene McHugh to lament '…any hope for the internet…to reduce the anxiety of my existence, was simply over- it failed-and it was just another thing to deal with' (2011, p. 5).

As capital dominates online spaces, the boundaries between work and pleasure have become increasingly diminished. George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson put forward the dominance and resurgence of 'prosumption' in digital late capitalism (2010). A prosumer is the middle ground between a producer and consumer, the person booking their holiday online or using the self-check-out. Or, if we look at social media, it is the user whose data is mined from activities online which is then delivered to businesses free of charge, doing the work of market research for companies without us knowing we are filling out the survey. Ritzer and Jurgenson claim that the prosumer is on the whole an enjoyable role, that is different to the exploited factory worker: '…it is likely that most prosumers enjoy all, or at least most, of what they do. They would be hard-pressed to think of themselves as exploited when they order products on Amazon.com' (2010, p.20). However, Terranova (2004) and Lovink (2011) argue that the socialisation of labour and the free labour that exists online is

exploitative. Lovink maintains that free labour is disguised as a tool for socialising. This contested role of prosumer points to the complexities and shifting natures of internet identities, making it difficult to understand and define the locus of agency for the internet user. The question of agency of the girl swarm is a key concern to this thesis, and requires an unpacking of how affective labour and biopower intersect with themes of agency.

Affective Labour and Online Female Biopower

So how did we go from dreams of no bodies to our social networked, profiled, internet banking reality? And what does that mean for those residing in female bodies in the age of the social network? Lisa Nakamura states, 'for women on social networking sites there is a constant negotiation between the desire to connect and the need to self-regulate. Our identities are inextricably attached to the cultural contingencies of our gendered bodies' (2014, p.2). Nakamura highlights that rather than the bodyless internet of Barlow's imagining where we cannot be surveilled by the state or by others (1996) the development of web 2.0 and subsequently social media makes women's bodies more susceptible to surveillance by companies and states than ever before. Poor women and minorities have always been surveilled and consequently controlled by state actions from workhouses to lock hospitals (Smith, 2015; Tyler, 2013; Currah and Moore, 2015). But digital technologies take this surveillance to another level. Women use image based social media like Instagram, Pinterest and Tumblr more than men and they generate more content on those sites by posting pictures and generating unique fan fictions (Duggan & Brennan. 2013). Social networking sites are for profit and the profit is generated from the activities of the users. The content that women on social media produce can be viewed as free labour (Nakumara, 2014). It is often not explicit that networks operate in this way, and 'this subjects [women] to new and invisible forms of surveillance and enclosure as every click, every post, and every log-on is measured and often sold to advertisers' (Nakumara, 2014). What does this mean when trying to define the locus of agency of the girl swarm?

Female participation on social networking sites is essential for generating user traffic, content and profits (Nakumara, 2014). As problematic as the surveillance and control social media have over women and minorities is, it also provides an unprecedented opportunity for these same groups to become media content creators (Dobson, 2015). However, there

has been a growing agitation over young female content creators, with their selfies and vlogs seen as exceptionally annoying (Dvorak, 2013), hyper-sexualised (Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas, 2011) or morally corrupt (Bard, 2017). For Dobson this is interesting as the notion of young women as cultural producers is framed as 'cringe-worthy' or 'dangerous' and causes anxiety because they are often judged for using social media in 'the wrong way' (2015). Young women being cultural producers 'has meant that we need to seriously reconsider research approaches and agendas that position girls as cultural dupes, or victims of negative media influence… in straight forward ways' (Dobson, 2015, p.4).

With young girls providing profits from this content creation, produced as free labour, there are complicated questions to untangle as to the power and agency that young girls both wield and are subjected to online. In chapter three I investigate the affective labour (Hardt, 1999) produced by social network users like the swarm. The swarm are posting pictures of their bodies, describing their thoughts and feelings to strangers in ways that often defy normative ways of thinking about public and private lives. This intimate work that the girl swarm produces can be thought of as part of Hardt's theories on affective labour. Hardt's theory draws together notions from American twentieth-century feminists (Hochschild, 1983; Tronto, 1993) that labelled certain kinds of work as gendered and that this work is devalued, dismissed and un/underpaid with Italian thinkers (Lazzarato, 1996) exploring immaterial labour produced from technology's centrality within our lives. 'This labour is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion-even a sense of connectedness or community' (Hardt, 1999, p.96). Hardt in his 1999 article was not claiming that affective labour was new, rather he was examining the fact that because of the centrality of the computer capital was now reliant upon these types of immaterial and affective labour practices. Affective labour produces biopower, and that inclusion or co-option of affective labour into a capitalist framework provides those generating the labour opportunities to subvert, manipulate and sabotage the dominant power structures of capitalism (Hardt, 1999).

Foucault (1980) wrote about biopower as a form of population control, including for instance the creation of welfare states, hospitals and penal systems in order to control

society. Hardt suggests that the Foucauldian notion of biopower looks at a sovereign power's control over its subjects; the power of life and death as seen and manipulated from powers above. However, with affective labour's ability to produce social connections and networks, Hardt argues that those undertaking affective labour have the ability to form a biopower from below that can combat and engage with the traditional biopower from above (1999).

I propose that in certain ways, collectives like the girl swarm have the capacity to form biopowers that manipulate and subvert capitalist systems that are trying to limit their behaviour. But this subversion is not clear cut; as Rosza Farkas warns, the apparent freedom social networks present may be a false one:

> Just because I can choose my own profile picture (wherever) and customise the html of my Tumblr, it doesn't mean that our "expressions" of self via social media are not within a uniform structure that reinforces the biopowers it is a product of (Farkas, 2012).

The swarm find themselves at the heart of a capitalist system where their free and affective labour produces income for others. This work takes place on social networks that are owned by large corporations, but on these platforms the swarm have the opportunity to build their own networks, their own biopower, and they can start to subvert capitalist normative notions of 'good' female behaviour and labour. One site for this is the performance practice of the selfie. In the following section I discuss selfie culture in more depth, investigate selfie practices through feminist self-portrait and trace the evolution of selfies through body artists of the twentieth century.

Selfish Selfies

Three performers are standing on plinths. They're holding poses that emulate 50s pin ups and 20th century advertising. Women as the eternal marketing tool. The compliant female put on a literal, physical pedestal. The performers are frozen still, stuck, until three palms turn toward each of the static faces.

This description is of the opening scene of *Girl Swarm* (2019). Even with the absence of phones the scene now reads as three young women taking selfies. The relationship between viewer and viewed, subject and object and the pleasure that exists in this relationship of viewing and exposure starts to shift. Why do some people view young girls taking selfies so negatively? Where does this moral judgment come from? Are selfies a form of liberation, a youthful exploration of sexuality or twenty-first-century objectification of women's bodies? The girl swarm are a group of people who collectively take vast quantities of selfies. When we consider the selfies the swarm are taking, do those types of selfies defy social norms or somehow adhere to expectations of how young women should look or act within our culture?

One of the frozen performers starts to laugh hysterically, uncontrollably, her body convulsing with movements; she steps off the pedestal.

Is the girl swarm rejecting the idea of online regulation altogether, and if so at what cost? The moral panic surrounding selfie culture has been well documented. In Alexander Bard's words 'it is now an underclass phenomenon to take a selfie, you're a vulgar person if you do' (Bard, 2017). Older generations viewing young selfie takers as narcissistic and socially inappropriate is revealed in such articles as 'Is selfie culture making our kids selfish?' (New York Times, 2015) or 'Moral Maze: Selfie Culture' (BBC Radio 4, 2015).

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Figure 2. LCKY So LCKY (2019) *Molly Soda*

The girl swarm are key contributors to the production of anxiety amongst those with a conservative attitude to selfies. Sara Gram says of the older generations' condemnation in her article 'The Young-Girl and the Selfie': 'When we talk about selfies . . . it is disgust for bodies that run in emulation, whose primary labour is dedicated to looking a particular way rather than making a particular thing' (Gram, 2013). However, I propose that by exploring the work of artists that engage with some of the key themes and strategies of the girl swarm we can start to uncover the intricacies and subversions of their online production of self-images.

Through online platforms the girl swarm is producing creative material (see figure 2.). The swarm is sharing stories, telling their deepest secrets. The artist Amalia Ulman has also used selfies to investigate the conditions of being a young girl and digital native. Ulman is credited with creating the first Instagram performance art piece (or at least the first one acknowledged by the art establishment). Her 2014 work *Excellences and Perfections* was a durational performance played out on Instagram and Facebook through the medium of selfies that are often framed by physical mirrors. The work followed the arrival of a young bright eyed Ulman in Los Angeles, her corruption into sex, drugs and plastic surgery, and

finally her redemption through therapy and wellness. 'The point was to impersonate an idealised version of what women are expected to perform in order to excel in consumer societies' (Smith, 2017). Smith notes that Ulman follows a long line of artists who take self-portraits using mirrors and that she is not the first 'contemporary female artist to have been accused of being hopelessly narcissistic for it' (Smith, 2017). Gram wrote in her 2013 blog *Textual Relations* that '[n]arcissism, as a personality trait, may not only be what capital expects but also demands from young girls, in order that they be legible as young girls at all.' This view certainly resonates with the digital performances of Ulman and many of the swarm. Gram warns that selfie culture is often reduced to individual feminist choice, that people either believe that women can do what they want with their bodies and this is ultimately feminist or that 'nothing women do that relates to making bodies interesting or beautiful is feminist because, like, dudes run the advertising agencies or something. Both of these positions are boring at best, and politically useless at worst' (2013). Instead she proposes an examination of what selfies actually represent and how they function under a capitalist system.

In order to understand how selfies function it is important to first note the historical links of photography with capitalism. Amelia Jones argues that many photographic practices have been co-opted by capitalism: '…the photographic functions centrally in the construction of bourgeois identities, determining norms of Western subjectivity that subordinate people along the lines of gender, class, sexual and racial difference' (2003, p.315). Jones also stresses that '…photography has developed a special relationship to both the commodity and the feminine since its inception around 1840' (2003, p.315). The photographed female body has been connected to a consumerist fetishization for over a hundred years. With this long history of the photographed female body linked to subjectivation and capitalist commodity, Gram's assumption that the way women view selfies is more complicated than individual feminist choice seems to have clear grounds.

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Figure 3. Wilke (1982) *S.O.S Starification Object Series*

Gram is clear that there is no way to avoid the label of narcissist, and Jones has shown the links that photography has had with the domination of women's bodies under capital. Radicalised narcissism became a tool for twentieth-century feminist artists to deploy against this reality. Hannah Wilke is often categorised as both flirt and feminist. Her work throughout the 1970's focused on a series of self-portraits (see figure 3.). *S.O.S Starification Object Series* (1974-82) was a series of 35 images where Wilke poses in various positions taken from classical compositions or advertising, but her body is covered in 'scars' sculpted from chewing gum. Critics at the time accused her of being reductively feminine (Lippard cited in Aron, 2017) and others such as Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis were confused by her intentions: 'Wilke seems to be teasing us as to her motives. She is both the stripper and the stripped bare. She does not make her own position clear; is her artwork enticing critique or titillating excitement?' (Cited in Jones, 2010). It is precisely in this confusion that Wilke's work achieves its full power. The confusion interrupts viewing the female body as sheer object, a thing to be consumed, and firmly places Wilke as the subject

who has initiated the confusion. Amelia Jones explains the importance of feminist body artists like Wilke in her book *Body Art: Performing the Subject*:

> By surfacing the effects of the body as an integral component (a material enactment) of the self, the body artist strategically unveils the dynamic through which the artistic body is occluded (to ensure phallic privilege) in conventional art history and criticism. By exaggeratedly performing the sexual, gender…particularities of this body/self, the feminist or otherwise nonnormative body artist even more aggressively explodes the myths of disinterestedness and universality that authorise these conventional modes of evaluation. (Jones, 1998, p.5)

Through a hyper-performance of a gendered body that is firmly the artist as well as the model or muse, body artists including Wilke found a way to firmly place themselves as subjects and not decorative objects. Jones stresses that the performance artists like Wilke, Schneeman and Kusama who use their body as art stress *intersubjectivity* and act as a refusal of traditional art critiques that are patriarchal and racist. Jones writes of body artist Carolee Schneeman: 'In its radical narcissism, where the distances between artist and artwork, artist and spectator are definitively collapsed, such body art practices profoundly challenge the reigning ideology of disinterested criticism' (Jones, 1998, p.8).

Subversive Abjection and Powerful Spaces

Tumblr and other social networking sites allow an avenue for the girl swarm to explore the objectification of their own bodies and the female bodies that have preceded them that are in many ways as 'aggressively explosive' as the twentieth-century artists Jones is referring to. The closeness between spectator and artist, or content creator on social media is acute, with people able to interact, comment and reshare material. I propose that with this collapse of traditional viewing space another space is created for subversive freedom. As I have discussed previously, spatial theories are key to the investigations of the swarm. I have turned to Henri Lefebvre's theories on spatial production to understand the power relations that exist online between the swarm and the networks they operate within. In chapter two I argue that Lefebvre's notions of 'representational space' when combined with theories on liminality can trace ways that the swarm are trying to carve out networked spaces of

constantly evolving difference; when investigated through theatre practice the process of imagining and performing a representational space takes us in to the liminal. I explore where performance ritual starts to disrupt the flow of power that snubs young girls and their online output as wrong, cringey or morally vacuous.

A key development throughout this practice-based research was an evolving understanding of space and the power relations involved in spatial production. In this work I am straddling theoretical conceptions of the digital space the swarm resides in and the physical space of the theatre. Steyerl positions digital space as an unstable, ungrounded free fall (2011). Detached power gazes and acts from above, with subjects spiralling with no firm ground beneath them. Within a constantly shifting digital landscape preconceptions of class, race and gender are able to reconfigure and shift (Steyerl, 2011). Such shifts could be seen to provide the swarm with the ability to subvert and play with gender norms and expectations. In chapter two I unpack theories on abjection and how it moves and reorients bodies, hierarchising them in space as above and below. In order to understand the swarms' resistance to this hierarchy I explore their use of Instagram as a representational space (Lefebvre, 1991) and how they reimagine a digital network through elaborate signifiers and objects. In chapter three I investigate the concept of taking up space through queer strategies of pleasure that helps bodies extend into spaces that were not designed for them (Ahmed, 2014).

I draw on the theories of Lefebvre for much of this work. My investigations have straddled both the digital platforms the swarm utilise and the very physical spaces of the theatre and rehearsal room. In order to understand the subversions taking place online and how we investigate, experience and represent those subversions and their limits through a performance practice it has been useful to engage in discussions of power and how power can be reimagined and suspended by using Lefebvre's theories and Turner's theories on liminal space and ritual (1966).

The performers I worked with during my practical investigation went on a journey into girl swarm performativity. They developed individual characters and started to perform those characters both in the rehearsal studio and on Instagram. In chapter three I discuss the

performers' emotional journeys from anxiety to pleasure. Their pleasure was centred around the idea that it was important for girl swarm style performance to be able to take up space. I propose that taking up space means something different online and in physical space. The girl swarm very successfully take up space online, their digital output is able to be copied, shared and commented on. Because the swarm antagonise patriarchal norms their posts are often under threat of deletion and removal from digital space. Their activities are often dismissed online; they are accused of taking up space with young girl nonsense (Gram, 2013). Offline these images and activities cannot be erased or dismissed so easily. In chapter three I consider how swarm members have already started taking their work offline and into IRL spaces, curating their own art shows and publishing books that collate deleted images. The reason these artists and swarm members created these physical outputs is expressed as a desire to 'take up space and carry the weight' (Byström and Soda, 2016 p.16). If the swarm can be displayed in a gallery and in a book, it can be performed within a theatre. In chapter four I connect the swarm firmly to late capitalism. Terranova claims that the internet and information technology is a battleground for contemporary spatial politics (2004, 2012). She argues:

> Information is neither simply a physical domain nor a social construction, nor the content of a communication act, nor an immaterial entity set to take over the real, but a specific orientation of forms of power *and* modes of resistance. (2004, p.71)

I explore the types of exploitative and rewarding labour practices that digital spaces incite. I unpack the power structures surrounding commodity feminism and activism and how these mechanisms of capital co-option play out amongst the swarm complicating them in society's desire for young women to operate online as postfeminist neoliberal subjects.

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Figure 4. Statterwhite (2014), *Reifying desire*

An artist who successfully combines dominant mediums of art making with a subversive practice that embraces and centres the pleasure in diverse identities is postinternet artist Jacolby Satterwhite (see figure. 4). Through creating 3D videos and performances, Satterwhite's practice intends to create atopias (places that foster difference) in which notions of gender are subverted. He does this very successfully by using his background in Western classical style painting. By using the same compositional structures as great masters of the past when creating his animations, he hopes to bring the immense cultural weight of art history to his videos of difference. This would equate to a practice that can subvert the institution, a practice that can gain a dominant society's validation for queer acts.

Satterwhite uses a classical artistic medium to lend power and cultural weight to his subversive creations that aim to validate queer bodies and queer aesthetics. In this thesis I explore the possibilities that the theatre and university as dominant cultural institutions can raise up swarm-like aesthetics and performance just like Satterwhite's use of classical

paintings. I also explore the risks involved in placing subversive acts within dominant institutions. In order to establish a methodology that enabled my performance practice to investigate potential subversions of the girl swarm within the institution of the theatre I turned to Parker-Starbuck's theories of abjection and cyborg theatre (2011).

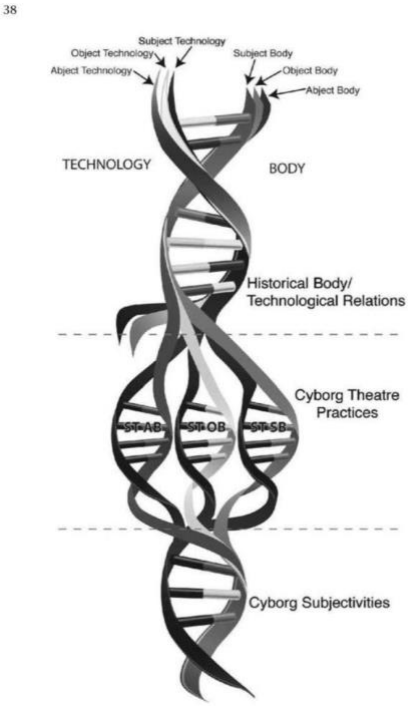

Figure 5. Parker-Starbuck (2011) *p.38, fig.1*

Cyborg Theatre

Jennifer Parker-Starbuck has put forward the idea of 'Cyborg Theatre' (2011), a type of performance that '…emerges at a historical moment of negotiation, with technologies on stage as subjects' (2011, p.50). Parker-Starbuck recognises that the human and technology have existed throughout history but at certain moments in time the lines of human and technology intersect, and it is this intersection that creates the possibilities for multiple notions of cyborg bodies to occur (see figure 5).

For many feminists, technological advancements offered the opportunity to upset binary notions of gender and traditional gender roles. Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto (1985) is

one of the most influential feminist writings on technology-driven bodies. The cyborg is a construct born of capitalism. When most are asked to think about a cyborg, they go to the movie industry for inspiration, a figure from fictional governments' war cabinets. Haraway argued that capital's mythological enfant terrible could be turned on its master, just as it had been in so many science-fiction films. This time it's turning would shift societal prescriptions enforced by a capitalist-based society. For Haraway, the figure of the cyborg held the potential to break what she saw as limited, binary notions of people. She argues that the co-option of the cyborg into society could create a community of tolerance, a populace that was 'not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints' (1985, p.15). Haraway uses the cyborg as a means of pushing forward an inclusive feminist society. The idea of the female body as natural child bearer, as mother and nothing more is disrupted through technological enhancement, '[t]he cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics' (Haraway, 1985, p.7). Haraway produces the cyborg as an entity capable of 'recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control' (1985, p.56). The cyborg attempts to recode space to forward a more inclusive society.

Shields notes the increased importance of the body as site for the cyborg since the manifesto was first proposed by Haraway in the mid 1980s (2006, p.217). This observation can be furthered by Shaw's statement that there is a '…sense in which… cyborg simulation can be understood as *performative*' (2015, p.15). Judith Butler proposed that in order for gender and sexuality to be legible (and accepted) by society they had to be constantly enacted through linguistic utterances or performativity (1997). Although Butler's original work was in the linguistic field, Shaw is keen to note the relevance of performativity not only as speech but as a bodily enacted process (2015). There is an emphasis on the vitalness of repetition: 'the performative is enacted repetitively and necessarily in varying contexts. It is this repetition…which renders the conditions which it seeks to instantiate unstable' (Shaw, 2015, p.15). The precarity of set notions of identity such as gender and sexuality are highlighted by the need for repetitive enactments in order for those identities to be read by power. For Butler social existence is a forced choice, and this socio-symbolic network is only sustained through repeated performative gestures: 'bodies only appear,

only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas' (1993, xi).

Parker-Starbuck extends the figure of the cyborg into staged performance practice (2011), exploring how various theatre productions (when using technology) can promote an expansion of subjectivity. Parker-Starbuck's interest lies in turning points: where bodies considered abject/ object/ subject intersect with technology and where technology or cyborg then projects as abject/ object/ subject (2011, p. 4). The double helix-like structure she has adapted to illustrate this (see figure 5) explores the idea that subjectivity has been fragmented and hybridized and these reconfigurations change throughout time and are constantly evolving. Parker-Starbuck proposes that the theatre is 'a staging ground, a rehearsal for existing and inevitable merging between bodies and technologies, [. . .] a space for trying things out, for introducing old ideas anew, for developing what hasn't been able to be articulated in other forms' (Parker-Starbuck, 2011, p.8). Cyborg theatre, or theatre's use of technological practice, has the ability to change bodies and how we view them, interrogating modes of being and becoming. It has the ability to view bodies through a process of 'becoming cyborg' rather than a fixed subject, enabling us to think about these cyborgian bodies through frames of ability and identity (Parker-Starbuck, 2016). The performance of a cyborg theatre can be used to destabilise fixed notions of people in terms of gender, race or disability; the cyborgian body can be a feminist tool.

> My argument for an expanded cyborgian theatrical techno-subjectivity is enhanced by feminist techno-theorists such as Donna Haraway… and others seeking to propose challenges to persistent hegemonic notions of subjectivity in a shifting technological world... This ongoing project of expansion continues and what was 'the subject' continues to fracture and include a wider range of 'subjects'… (Parker-Starbuck, p.150)

For Parker-Starbuck the theatre is uniquely adept for exploring the connections between humans and technology over other media because it 'focuses on the metaphoric qualities of the cyborg, rather than overtly straightforward combinations' (Parker-Starbuck, 2011, p.37). Parker-Starbuck is interested in the fluid becoming of bodies as cyborg rather than the fixed,

male cyborgs that appeared within cinema such as the Terminator or Robocop (2016). A cyborg theatre:

> … refigures multiple conceptions of bodies – abject, object, or subject – through its material affiliations with technologies in performance. The body is neither merely a discourse nor a natural organic mass; its psychological and phenomenological structures always work in conjunction with the other. (2011, pp.151-152)

It is Parker-Starbuck's blend of abjection - which she identifies with materiality - and technology that I have used as a framework for my practice-based research. I worked with sound artist Chris Littlewood and together we started to explore the potential of a sonar cyborg theatre practice and how this could be combined with theories of abjection to perform the girl swarm. Our initial experiments used material connected to the girl swarm, particularly glitter; we would record the sound of glitter being poured using contact microphones and then start to mark the performance space using glitter. The distorted sounds of the glitter recording were then layered with noises pulled from social media and internet messenger programmes. The sound technology combined with the glitter starts to grow and warp. We began to create a 'staging ground' for the swarm that had technology embedded into it. The sound technology and messy materiality started to open up a performance space that was able to be representational and liminal.

Chris and I were able to use Parker-Starbuck's abject cyborg theatre as a guide for exploring the girl swarm's relationship to consumerism and feminine materiality. We used Parker-Starbucks theories of the configuration and interplay of bodies and technology as abject and how this subverts and distorts their subjectivity and agency as a basis for our performance practice. We developed an improvisation, placing girl swarm-related objects such as beauty products, gel pens, furbies, tampons and old laptops onto different types of pick up microphones creating a hyper-feminine space that was throbbing with static and sounds created from the placing of the materials. We also opened and drank from coke bottles connected to contact mics. Chris was able to layer the sounds of the objects, growing the sound into a hedonistic mess allowing us to conceptualise consumerist and gendered objects through digital sound art and technological exploration. In chapter three I discuss how placing mess onstage is not automatically subversive. We discovered with this exercise

that we not only needed to find ways of presenting hyper-feminine mess onstage, but subvert the disgust related to that mess and the bodies that create it.

A key networking site for the girl swarm is Instagram, and it seemed obvious that in order to embody and investigate the swarm we needed to explore online as well as in the theatre and studio. We used Instagram's live streaming service to develop character improvisations. Here a mobile phone becomes the staging ground transmitting and recording the improvisation. The phone also denotes the playing space as walking in and out of shot and the interaction with screens became part of the movement language of the improvisations. Through this exercise we discovered that the performers were anxious about going online. However after the exercise they experienced a sense of pleasure and enjoyment, and started to articulate the desire to take up space as part of exploring the girl swarm.

In order to show the centrality of the phone in girl swarm performativity we started to use the selfie-sticks depicted earlier in this chapter. Our improvisations became more layered using the filters on the phones to frame or coat the body. This also becomes a more traditional notion of the cyborg, a body with technological enhancement and attachment as the phone is now connected to the body via the selfie-stick. In using the selfie-stick we again started to play with ideas of abjection and anxiety. As Jess Perriam notes in her article 'Why all the selfie-stick hate?' (2020), selfie-sticks are often loathed for their association with narcissistic, self-absorbed youth. By attaching this cause of anxiety on to the body we were able to start to analyse why there is such hatred in the technology. By defiantly and actively performing pleasure in using the technology we questioned this hatred of self-expression.

We wanted to explore the pleasure the swarm generates for themselves through their online interactions and creations. I would start each rehearsal with an improvisation that was devoid of physical technology but drew from the language and imagery of Haraway's cyborg manifesto: 'you are made of sunshine…nothing but electromagnetic waves, section of spectrum' 'A creature- animal and machine who populates a world ambiguously natural and crafted' (1985, p. 66). This started to form a basis for movement language development. We explored the fine edge between pleasure and abjection of the swarm and selfie culture through the phenomenon of ASMR (Auto Sensory Meridian Response). ASMR

is a bodily response to online video posts. When viewing videos that produce soft sounds such as whispers or tapping, some people experience a physical sensation of pleasurable tingling through the body that starts in the brain and works down. Those that are not capable of experiencing this reaction find viewing these videos as odd or distasteful. By talking about selfie culture through a technological medium that produces both abjection and pleasure we wanted to tease out the complex questions of freedom, control, sexism and agency that the swarm experience in their online lives. The movements and actions for the ASMR experiments were completely defined by the technical set up; we played with a range of mics, video and speakers and combined these with bodies and materials to create a staging ground of difference.

In the next chapter I explore our use of ASMR in more depth. I investigate the messy hyper-femininity the girl swarm are performing online and analyse the cultural politics of female abjection. I use ASMR and pink sand to investigate the subversive capabilities of the girl swarm within the theatre and discover the risks of performing female mess on a theatre stage that has patriarchal and institutional bias.

As stated earlier, this project is first and foremost about the experiences of female bodies. I have been using a materialist feminist lens to examine these bodily experiences. The affects that the swarm experience and provoke are complex. This thesis looks at theories of abjection and pleasure surrounding the swarm and what these affects do to bodies that experience them. Young girls' online activities are often dismissed as culturally worthless or they create anxieties around being morally vacuous. Simultaneously a young girl's body is used by capital to sell goods and her unpaid labour generates immense wealth on social networking sites. The swarm utilise young girl aesthetics and promote actions that are often seen as societally abject. They celebrate menstrual blood and other female bodily fluids; they promote female pleasure and body hair whilst embracing a pink and plastic aesthetic. The centring of the body in this way brings the swarm into the realm of the abject. Abjection turns bodies into objects and objects into sites of disgust (Kristeva, 1980; Ahmed, 2014). In chapter two I discuss how this process of abjection can generate anxiety in individuals and in chapter three I discover queer strategies that turn abjection and anxiety into pleasure

that enables bodies to subvert dominant spaces, creating spaces they can occupy with comfort and ease (Ahmed, 2014).

 [1]

Chapter Two: Soft Grunge and Messy Girls

A performer turns slowly, caressing her hands over her body. She steadily, purposefully lowers down and tilts a bottle so that its lip is touching the stage. She moves the bottle lip away from her body. Vivid pink spills on to black. A blister, a kiss, a demarcation, a wish, a safe space, a battleground, a séance, a flap, a wink, a yawn, an eyesore, a collective, a defiance, A GREAT BIG MESS. The auditorium fills with static, electrical surges and glitches. A curved line of pink sand is carefully placed to open up possible readings and spill them on to the stage. By adding pink powder paint to the sand, the pink sand can be understood as a gendered mess.

This chapter will investigate readings of and reactions to the performance of pink sand and ASMR conducted as part of my piece *Girl Swarm* performed in the University Theatre at Bath Spa on 3rd of May 2019. To understand some of the reactions and risks of placing gendered mess on stage it is necessary to examine affective reactions to female mess. Sara Ahmed suggests that 'focusing on emotions as mediated rather than immediate reminds us that knowledge cannot be separated from the bodily world of feeling and sensation;

1 White (2019) *Girl Swarm i*

knowledge is bound up with what makes us sweat, shudder and tremble' (2014, p.171). Female mess often generates strong emotional responses of disgust. These strong responses associated with feminine mess means assumptions on female worth and experience are often made. By focusing on how and why these affects are generated we see that feminine qualities that are often seen as implicitly taboo, cringe-worthy or disgusting can be seen as part of wider social constructs that govern female experience. A key tool in exploring and informing our girly mess was the concept of soft grunge (Kirton, no date), a hyper-feminine aesthetic and type of online action that is popular with the swarm. The production and performativity of hyper-femininity is highly popular amongst Tumblr users, and simultaneously viewed as vapid and abject by others, both counter-culturally and in mainstream culture (Kirton, No Date; Dobson, 2015). Soft grunge provokes complicated affects both on and offline, and it is these affects that I will unpack in this chapter. In this analysis I pay close attention to the production of feelings of disgust and the abject in order to further understand the swarm's experiences online.

Spatialising terms can be usefully applied to the swarm. Even the term itself 'girl swarm' generates a critical mass of young women; a swarm is hard to dismiss. These young women are pushing, amplifying and expanding through their purposefully abject images. The swarm are highlighting the discrepancies between the freedoms of male and female bodies. Female nipples are banned on Instagram, thousands of images of bikini clad women are left for public viewing but an image representing female sexual pleasure is often excluded from the marketplace of images. Swarms by their nature take up large amounts of physical space and are usually connected with the negative or an animal plague. Because of their large numbers, when the girl swarm push others away through their performative abjection they are carving out a space for themselves, they are invading cyber-space. In the previous chapter I hypothesised that the swarm experience censure partly because they are occupying vast amounts of online space that could therefore not be colonised by capital, and part of this pushback is that the swarm are considered abject and not morally upright citizens. This gives them a platform to establish new modes of femaleness: 'the abject…works to threaten what is thinkable or possible in the first place' (Ahmed, 2014, p.88).

When my sound designer Chris and I started to work with three female-identifying performers, we found that the performers' relationship to space was paramount to their own understanding of the work they were doing. Through improvisations on Instagram they started to engage with the swarm as a group who were able to amplify, augment and share themselves to an interested and supportive online community. Through our practice we had started to experience this same understanding of community. We were trying to find a way to perform the importance of the digital space occupied by the swarm and how the swarm subvert notions of femaleness by utilising abjection. By performing noises, voices and movements that invoke feelings of irritation towards air-headed young women and then complicating those feelings via a layered performance practice within an IRL theatre space, we were able to question traditional prejudices towards young women. Through the utilisation of abject behaviours within our practice via soft grunge aesthetics, we were able to destabilise the performers' perceptions of those behaviours and promote notions of equality and difference for young girls, and uncover institutional bias to the performance of female mess.

This chapter draws on Ahmed's theories surrounding emotions, affect and the spatialising of abjection to unpack our use of soft grunge, particularly through our use of pink sand and ASMR (online videos that provoke a sensory, bodily response). It draws on Lefebvre's theories of spatial production to engage with the power dynamics of abjection and how abjection works on bodies in space. It examines how abjection moved through the performers' bodies, and how abjection moved their bodies on the stage.

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 1. Kirton (2014) *Follow for more Soft Grunge...*

Soft Grunge and Border Disgust Objects

The swarm is a nebulous online group of young women that I have been tracing over several years. Their aesthetics and actions have changed with time, but some strands of aesthetics and performativity have remained constant. The swarm often chooses to post material with a pink and pastel colour palette combined with some sort of mess (see figure 1). This might be a counter-culture clothing item, an excess of consumer products (particularly toys, stationery and food), bodily fluid or body hair. This messy pink aesthetic is what Rosemary Kirton labels 'soft grunge':

> 'Soft grunge,' 'pale blog'…are all labels that share aspects of blog-cultural behaviour. These labels infer something pseudo-subversively cute; a softening. In each of them, there is a distinct sense of the feminine, the vapid and the abject. It doesn't always come off as infantilised or gendered… but on the whole it does. (Kirton, no date)

Soft grunge activities are gendered, potentially subversive, dismissed by dominant power structures and vulnerable to co-option by capital. The swarm utilise soft-grunge in their hyper-feminine online posts. The concept of soft grunge helped inform aesthetic choices and actions of our practice, as we wanted to find ways to represent the 'feminine, the vapid and the abject' (Kirton, no date) aesthetics of the swarm on stage and to understand the annoyance messy hyperfeminine behaviour provokes. Early in the development process, sound artist Chris Littlewood and I began to experiment with consumer objects related to

the swarm – gel pens, furbees, teddy bears, tampons, old laptops, beauty products and a huge amount of glitter. Chris created a looping piece of music that sounded like a musical jewellery box and layered internet MSN Messenger notifications and linguistic hesitations and colloquialisms taken from swarm vlogs. We then created an improvisational score, scattering the swarm-related objects onto the studio floor which was covered in contact microphones. As electrical items were placed on contact microphones the sound score started to grow into a cacophony. These experiments created scenes that highlighted and amplified my body as young, female, irritating, messy, loud, obnoxious, consumeristic and vapid. In order to understand why these young female actions are seen as at best irritating and at worst morally abject, I turn to Sara Ahmed's description of disgust and abject objects and how these work on the body.

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 2. Byström, A. (2017) *My photo from the adidas originals campaign*

Ahmed theorises that bodies become objects of disgust (2014, p.88); disgust and abjection work on bodies directly and reorient them towards objection and subjection. 'Abjection is bound up with the insecurity of the not, it seeks to secure 'the not' through the response of being disgusted' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 86). Kristeva emphasises that the border of the self or subject turns into an object through abjection (1984, p.4). Theories on the abject, and what or whom are labelled as disgusting or abject have been framed by many scholars as a form

of power and control (Bataille, 1934; Tyler, 2013; Hennefeld and Sammond, 2020). When a body or group of bodies are labelled as disgusting and that process turns those bodies into objects it is easier to think of this group as somehow lower or less of a subject than the person or group who are experiencing the disgust. Young women's bodies are always in danger of being turned into objects of disgust if they transgress set boundaries of normative femininity. The power dynamics of disgust and revulsion towards selfie culture have been present since the selfie's evolution. The rate of hostility towards certain online female imagery is increasing as fast as the consumption of those images: Byström for instance, has received threats of rape in response to an image released in which her legs are unshaved (Figure 2); her leg hair transforms the border of her body into a disgusting object. Ahmed posits that 'borders need to be threatened in order to be maintained, or even to appear as borders' (2014, p.87). So, in order for normative culture to read a young woman as a young woman, there needs to be abject objects, such as Byström's legs to be rejected as feminine, to be labelled as disgusting. 'Border objects are hence disgusting, while disgust engenders border objects' (2014, p.87). Ahmed goes on to ask how this circular economy of disgust can be overridden (2014). In order to understand how the swarm use the disgust and abjection that turns their bodies into border-disgust objects we need to further examine relations between disgust and power and ask why certain female performativity is regarded as disgusting.

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 3. I-D (2015) *Dolls Kill*

Girl Power or Pussy Riot?

Disgust for specific bodies and objects does not appear from nowhere but is discursively brought into being: 'images and signs of disgust become habituated through repetition' (Tyler, 2013, p.24). The girl swarm with their soft grunge aesthetic are often labelled as disgusting by both mainstream and countercultures, the former for transgressing norms and the latter for their girlish performativity. Kirton comments on other countercultures, particularly gothic communities, looking down on soft grunge bloggers:

> The term 'Soft Grunge' is oddly both pejorative and self-affirming. It is also an oxymoron: Grunge is seen as subversive and abject. Softening it - making it more palatable, agreeable and subservient for consumption is gonna ruffle feathers… (no date)

As soon as mess becomes female and particularly young and female (and therefore marketable), ideas of abject behaviour become confusing. I suggest that for many countercultures female mess is simply not the 'right' kind of abject to be taken seriously. In the opening of her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2014) Ahmed explores both the

terms ‘soft’ and ‘swarm’ by examining a British National Front poster that accuses ‘swarms’ of illegal immigrants getting into ‘soft-touch’ Britain at the expense of the taxpayer. Although this example is from a fascist source and explores a different swarm, Ahmed stresses that rhetoric of a soft national identity has become common parlance for mainstream politicians and publications. The common thread between the girl swarm and migrant swarms, treated as things to be hated, is that softness is culturally understood as both feminine and emotional. In this rhetoric, softness creates nations ‘like skin; they are soft, weak, porous and easily shaped or even bruised by the proximity of others'' (Ahmed, 2014, p.2). In normative society, to be soft and feminine is to be lowly and weak; however to be female and read as feminine conforms to an established social order. Despite this, the swarm’s hyper-femininity provokes the disgust-border-object logic of normative culture that turns their bodies into abject objects.

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 4.@curatedbygirls (2019) *pussylluminati*

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 5. @curatedbygirls (2019*) Which box…*

The swarm are performing outward femininity on a huge scale. Instagram accounts like @Curatedbygirls (see figures 4 and 5) help to showcase the vast quantity of images that

express a joy in exposing and curating images of bodily parts and desires that are considered abject and position this type of abject as feminine. Online curations of images that centre on body hair, vulvas, menstruation and female pleasure with the specific aim to highlight these actions and images as desirable, powerful and that are emulated by thousands of other platform users, imbues these online interactions with subversive power. Butler's use of performativity (1988) is useful here:

> If the ground of gender identity is the stylised repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (Butler, 1988, p.520)

For Butler, gender is only legible through constant performativity. Groups like the girl swarm are using social media to amplify performative repetition that subverts readings of the weak, bleeding, passive female body.

The girl swarm explores ways to promote alternative and less restrictive versions of femaleness by embracing their messy female bodies, by finding pleasure in the portrayal of female abjection. I propose that girl swarm posts can be read as 'forms of politics that seek to contest social norms, in terms of emotion, understood as "embodied thought"' (Ahmed, p.170, 2014). Abjection works on and through girl swarm bodies, turning bodies into objects, borders of objects into sites of disgust. The subversion of the disgust-border-object through messy, emotional online posts is an embodied practice of resistance. However, the swarm's type of subversion can be disregarded by other countercultures because of the explicit young, female aesthetic being used. In chapter four I explore the theory of the Young-Girl (Tiqqun, 2012) that unpacks why young femininity is linked so explicitly to capital and why young girls like the girl swarm are often reduced to passive consumers. My experiments with Chris articulated the disgust-body-object but stopped before any subversion took place. In order to choreograph a version of the subversive swarm IRL I needed to understand the swarm's spatial relationship to power.

Disgusting Space

The abjection that the girl swarm experiences affects the space they inhabit and how they are regarded by others. Ahmed stresses that disgust works on and through bodies to reorient them:

> …The relation between disgust and power is evident when we consider the spatiality of disgust reactions, and their role in the hierarchising of spaces as well as bodies… disgust at "that which is below" functions to maintain the power relations between above and below, *through which "aboveness" and "belowness" become properties of particular bodies, objects and spaces.* (Ahmed, 2014, pp.88-89)

Ahmed describes how emotions such as disgust are experienced through bodies and through space. Disgust ranks bodies in terms of 'aboveness' and 'belowness' - female bodies, and particularly their bodily parts, are placed below male bodies in a patriarchal hierarchy. Ahmed suggests that a common response to experiencing something that leaves a bad taste, or that is considered disgusting, is the desire to first look at the other or object that is generating the disgust and then pull away and create distance from that other/ object:

> That distancing requires proximity is crucial to the inter-corporeality of the disgust encounter. The double movement (towards, away) is forgotten, however, as the body pulls back: it is as if the object moved towards the body, rather than the body having got close enough to the object. Hence the proximity of the 'disgusting object' may feel like an offence to bodily space, as if the object's invasion of that space was a necessary consequence of what seems disgusting about the object itself. (Ahmed, 2014, p.86)

The experience of disgust may feel as if an object is invading a subject's space. In the case of the swarm they are creating images that centre their feminine bodies and experiences. By using social media, they are taking up large amounts of digital space. One reaction to this perceived invasion of abject young women online is the deletion of their images by those

that govern social media platforms, I discuss this phenomenon in more depth in chapter four.

It is useful to turn to Henri Lefebvre's theories on spatial production in relation to the swarm in order to understand the performers' conceptions of the space they occupied when performing the girl swarm, including how we could use the stage as a space to represent the swarm without a multitude of young girl bloggers. Lefebvre proposes three interrelated principles of space: spatial practice, representations of space and representational space (1991, p.33). *Spatial practice* refers to how we perceive space physically through the body and how the body performs in a space according to established social convention. The swarm could be understood as simultaneously performing how a patriarchal society expects girls to perform, and also entering realms of exhibitionism, overexposure and abjection that antagonise these norms. *Representations of space* are associated with planning, bureaucracy and maps; they are connected with the power structures that produce these signs of order and control. If social media platforms are viewed as a site, a cyberspace, their programmers can be seen as the planners and bureaucrats. The likes, followers and hashtags laid out as signs to represent the order and how both the performers and the swarm interact with the community guidelines drawn out by Instagram (and they're failure to comply with these guidelines) shows the control over the social media platform as space. *Representational space* is the lived experience of space. 'This is the dominated - and hence passively experienced - space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects' (Lefebvre, 1991, p.39). Online spaces like Instagram are complicated because they induce anxiety about how women's bodies are viewed, and they are increasingly set up to censor women's actions. At the same time these sites are easily accessible virtual platforms where like-minded people can connect. Selfies, videos and interaction produce a reimagining of the internet as a representational space that is feminist and equal. Social media platforms used by the swarm can be understood as a representational space in which desired freedoms are enacted.

Lefebvre's concepts of representational space provide a framework to view social media as digital spaces that can be appropriated and subverted by the girl swarm. For our practice-based research to truly understand the swarm's potential, we needed to find ways to play

with representational space and subversion theatrically. We aimed to create a performance that turned the stage into a messy, overtly female occupied space that would help activate the performers as subversive subjects - to play with a representational stage-space. In order to connect the digital swarm to theatrical representational space we turned to the concept of cyborg theatre (Parker-Starbuck, 2011). In chapter one I discussed Jennifer Parker-Starbuck's concept of cyborg theatre as 'a staging ground…for…merging between bodies and technologies…' (2011, p.8). As my investigations brought me to different understandings of the power structures of liveness in art through the recorded (Auslander, 2008), it became clear that in order to truly investigate the postinternet reality of the swarm and for that work to have a subversive value, some interaction with technology on stage needed to occur. By making my performance practice a cyborg theatre practice I could effectively harness theatre's power to be a representational stage space that investigates the agency of the swarm through their bodily actions. By utilising cyborg theatre, this stage space could also be constructed as a feminist space in which we could critique the abjection experienced and utilised by the swarm. A cyborg theatre has the ability to present an audience with a technologically abject body; as these cyborg bodies are presented as visions of the future, as subjects with thoughts, feelings and agency, cyborg theatre then 'forces the slightly uneasy question of what the future "subject'' actually will be' (Parker-Starbuck, 2011, p.54).

Cyborg theatre needs bodies in order to function as a subversive method of presenting different notions of subjects. For Parker-Starbuck readings of abjection (and the cyborg abject) are also distinctly embodied. 'The abject…returns us to bodies…to moments of instability, of crises of identity..., of cultural anxiety, but always through corporeal affect' (2011, p.57). The confrontation of prejudice and societal anxiety could only be created when digital technology collided with the female body. By combining technology and abject bodies on stage, traditional notions on subjectivity and objection become destabilised, allowing performers to overcome labels of being social abject when performing in ways that are usually connected to young female online practices. The sound artist Chris and I worked with the performers and experimented with recording the opening and fizzing of coke bottles and pouring glitter on to surfaces with contact mics taped to them; the glitter then became an electrical buzz. We layered internet noises from the early 2000s with girlish voice

recordings. We combined physical pouring of glitter with its electronic rendering to mark an outline of the performance space. The performers chose a set of poses that mixed swarm selfies with poses from the advertising of products like Coca-Cola from the 1950s and 1960s. We were starting to layer some of the complicated symbols of the swarms' digital space into our physical stage space, trying to highlight the representational aspect of the space. We felt that by making an outline of a space that could be ambiguously bedroom and ritual safe space using a material frequently used by the swarm, and then turning the outline into digital sound, we were creating the optimum cyborg-theatre space for a staging of the swarm. By using symbols that read as female and performing a ritual with them, we could create a representational space on stage that reimagines and reconfigures the dominant social order. These symbols included pink sand and, later, ASMR performance.

Pink Sand: Female Ritual and Liminal Space

Our primary symbol in early experiments was the glitter we used in the sound experiments. Glitter has a strong association with femininity, commodity and campness. However, during the creation process I turned the material from glitter to pink coloured sand. I chose sand partly for ecological reasons concerning the plastic materiality of glitter, but mainly because of its use by many people and cultures, for example: Buddhist zen gardens, Hindu, Buddhist and Jainist sand mandalas, Wicca magic circles and non-secular wedding ceremonies. Sand is a material that has been associated with ritual and demarcation of sacred spaces. It is a material that represents protection, meditation and transformation. I combined this signifier of ritual with the swarm's trademark pink colouring. The sand can also be read as a physical representation of the girl swarm, as a line of sand is built up of a multitude of individual grains, like the mass of girls online. A line of sand will shift and drift just like the swarm as an amorphous multitude, not a fixed mark or collective but a group that is constantly shifting and adapting. Sand also has negative connotations and stories attached to it: the house built on sand returns us to notions of people that are soft, weak and lazy, whose lives and homes can be easily washed away. Sand is a material that is loaded with signifiers that enact a change in our social understanding of a physical space. I used the pink sand performance to state the effort and potential power of the swarm in creating a representational space of difference.

This representational space of difference needed to be activated; the performers' bodies needed movements that helped question readings of them as abject, overturning symbols in a ritualistic performance of girl swarm-style femininity. I wanted to use sand, digital sounds and performance to embark on a ritual, drawing on Turner's ideas of what ritual does to space, in order to open up possibilities of multiple representations of young women. Turner argues that rituals and rites of passage generate a liminal space, which is a space 'betwixt and between' where the ritual participant is neither one thing or another, is neither here nor there (1966). All of the social structures and cultural conditions that usually encase bodies and how they operate in the world fall away from ritual participants. The participant is ambiguous 'their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all customary categories' (Turner, 1966, p.236). The liminal space the ritual participant occupies becomes an opening of possibilities. When the swarm occupy liminal space the power and restrictions that are exerted over their bodies becomes confused. They are performing a female body that is connected to a body-object of advertising and the narcissist of social media. The soundscape filled with the plinking of msn messenger and 'OK, cools', 'uh-hums', 'mmmmms' are again associated with the vapid teen girl. But in ritual space the normative associations of bodies that are 'below' (Ahmed, 2014) start to blur; the liminal space belongs to them, and is created by them by purposefully performing difference. Turner also discusses the ritualised abject body by calling upon Mary Douglas' work on dirt (1966), noting that during many rituals of initiation or rites of passage the participant in their liminal space is considered 'polluting' to those who have not been initiated. The liminal returns us to the abject body that has huge transformative power contained within its abjection: 'the unclear is unclean' (Turner, 1966, p.236). Walker discusses the ritual and abject body in relation to performance artist Franko B (2005). The abject body is a body whose borders are threatened and so the disgust-border-object is an othered person as argued through Ahmed (2014). Walker discusses the shaman as a type of abject other that often absorbs the shame and dirt of a community:

> …the relationship between sacrifice and scapegoat observes that in Biblical terms a scapegoat is symbolically marked with blood, weighed down with the sins of the community and cast out, and that within society, scapegoating is a most convenient form of transposing blame onto an individual/group and then ostracizing them for it.

(Walker, 2005)

Through our performance practice, the girl swarm who are often ostracized and deleted from social media are now finding equality and redemption through a ritual performance. All those participating in ritual within a liminal space are regarded as equal and participants are free from social hierarchy (Turner, 1999). Of course, we were not enacting this ritual in a truly sacred space that was free from hierarchy. We were performing the girl swarm's pink sand ritual within a university institution and a normative theatre space. I will now discuss the problem that performing the girl swarm in such a space produced.

Institutional Problems

The swarm's aesthetics and actions often make other people irritated. They show too much skin, share too much information, they're too girly, too pink. This irritation was evident throughout the practice-based explorations. The implications that this annoyance can have, very nearly undermined the performance we were trying to create. As we were performing within the University Theatre at Bath Spa, I was provided with a technician who would also act as a supervisor of the theatre space on behalf of the university. We had just completed our dress rehearsal and the technician informed me that I was not allowed to use the pink sand that I had made, only the regular sand (he knew I had some left from rehearsal). His justification was that the pink was too messy and annoying to clear up. He could not understand the significance of the pink sand over the regular yellow variety. It took some pleading on my behalf and promises from several members of the company that we would be the ones to mop the floor after the performance was done in order for us to continue as planned.

Girl Swarm performer China Fish shared a story from her last show. *Queen Cunt* (2018) was a feminist sketch comedy show that explored and broke taboos surrounding the female body. At one point in the show China sprays some of her breastmilk out into the audience. Whilst touring the show a venue technician took a dislike to the mess the show created and told China she would not be able to spray the breastmilk unless he checked it for contaminants. We return to woman as disgust-border-object through the female, leaky body. Parker- Starbuck notes that 'Fluids are societally projected as that which undermine

conditions of female materiality, constructing them as an uncontrollable force, and creating a sexual divide' (2011, p.60). This made me contemplate previous performance experiments, for example my practice in 2014 involved spitting, spewing and dribbling edible glitter from my mouth. The institution where I was studying would not let me continue this studio practice on their premises, not for concerns of my safety but over concerns of the mess created in the studios, even after I demonstrated that I could leave the studio as I found it.

These are just three examples of men or institutions patrolling or trying to restrict women's work; there will be many examples of men supporting women's theatrical endeavours. It raises the question, however, of why some mess is accepted as suitable theatre practice (normal sand), but gendered mess (pink sand) is something that needs to be stopped? Why in these instances was female mess considered annoying, irrelevant and unnecessary to performance practice by the caretakers, custodians and technicians of theatres and studios? These acts of closing rank to bar female performativity highlight a dominant institution's reluctance to be a soft touch welcoming of a swarm. It also showcases patriarchy's desire to reject knowledge and experiences that are considered female. As Ahmed states, 'we learn about power by how challenges to power are dismissed' (2017).

Wench in the works

Sarah Franklin describes how her feminist stance within the academy often throws a wrench - or more specifically, a wench - in the works or working of the institution. She states that '…sexism as a means of reproduction helps us to understand the processes of selection that determine which forms of institutional life are enabled to continue, to regenerate, and to be passed on' (Franklin, 2015). This highlights the resistance that China and I have faced as systemic and symptomatic of institutions that are inherently sexist. By placing this performance in the theatre and also a theatre that is situated in a university establishment, the aim was to counter patriarchal readings of the swarm by destabilising notions of power and knowledge. We experimented with common symbols of status, career and authority and how to actively 'soften' and 'swarm' them. We settled on costumes of pink two-piece trouser suits and a roleplay that started off with the swarm as university librarians merging into alternate art-history specialists. In this role they were able to propose alternate truth

through feminist storytelling. It was also important to keep this an abject cyborg-theatre investigation, this was done by using contact mics, handheld microphones and video cameras during the ASMR investigations. The disruption of the soft female body in abject performance posed by technological intervention helped to complicate viewing the female body as soft by its nature; the fusion of technology helps a cyborg body disrupt binary notions of male and female, nature and artifice (Haraway, 1985) in order to find other more equal ways of being in the world.

Through the themes of mess, abjection and women's labour (and the rejection of it) we explored not only the use of pink sand, but the phenomenon of ASMR or autonomous sensory meridian response. ASMR is an experience that is often defined as a pleasurable tingling sensation that predominantly occurs at the crown of the head and then moves down the body and spine that promotes a profound sense of calm and an increase in attention. ASMR is usually stimulated by watching videos or hearing sounds that predominantly feature people whispering or using objects to make soft sounds. ASMR has become an internet sensation with over 13 million YouTube videos aimed at triggering ASMR. Something that started as a group chat on Facebook in 2010 (Brockelhurst and Clifford-Bell, 2019) has developed into big business with celebrity ASMrtists earning large sums from online endorsements and advertising companies are utilising ASMR to sell products.

Not everyone can experience ASMR; a study from Sheffield University (Poerio *et al*., 2018) found that half of its participants experienced a response. The intimate nature of the videos can often seem extremely odd to those who do not experience the tingling sensations. 'Whispering, role-playing, massages, creams, rubber gloves, mouth sounds and the clicking of the tongue are all popular ways of triggering that brain tingle…' (Brocklehurst and Clifford-Bell, 2019). Because of the intimacy, bodily response and corporeal enactment involved in its production ASMR has often been equated to a sexual practice, but most ASMR participants deny this: 'If you take it out of context you could make it sexual but actually ASMR itself, the tingling, the videos on YouTube, are not' (Scottish Murmurs cited in Brockelhurst, 2019). Hirsch has noted that this association with sex workers is almost unavoidable for women posting videos online. Hirsch comments on the censorship her work

struggles with, as the only naked female bodies free from internet censorship seem to be pornographic bodies (Newell-Hansen, 2015). With her 2008 performance *Scandalishous* her type of online portrayal was a rarity, '…but now that everyone is on Facebook and in YouTube videos, you have this juxtaposition of your body with the pornographic body. So it's about how that's shaping our sense of self and sexuality' (Hirsch cited in Newell-Hansen, 2015). It is interesting that ASMrtists do not seem to suffer from the same censorships as the swarm or artists like Hirsch, even though ASMR activity often involves a soft, messy, female body that is often read as overtly sexual.

I used ASMR combined with Kirton's 'soft grunge' as a means to discuss the swarm with a theatre audience. Using the language and conventions of ASMR to discuss actions and aesthetics of a group also deemed an online performative oddity seemed appropriate. The use of ASMR strategies to vocalise how young girls are viewed and treated online was an important decision. Ahmed's work on racism and sexism within institutions highlights that diversity is so often dismissed by the mechanisms of institutions:

> Just using words such as racism or sexism can mean being heard as making a complaint. If we think of the word complaint we might think of a formal statement: a complaint as something you officially lodge. But if we think of the word 'complaining' it brings up something else; it brings up somebody else. The word complaining has a negative quality. The word belongs with the killjoy in the same family of words: complaining, killjoy, whining, moaning, buzzkill, party-pooper, stick-in-the-mud. Elsewhere, I described how being heard as complaining is not being heard. You are heard as expressing yourself, as if you are complaining because that is who you are or what you are like. If you are heard as complaining then what you say is dismissible, as if you are complaining because that is your personal tendency. When you are heard as complaining you lose the about: what you are speaking about is not heard when they make it about you. (2019)

By describing the sexism that surrounds how the swarm are viewed through the linguistics of ASMR my hope was to amplify a situation that is always in danger of being dismissed or misunderstood as not important. I wanted to confuse or refuse the notion of the

complaining feminist killjoy by delivering our message through a linguistic vehicle that is designed to produce pleasure (and that when it fails produces unease and discomfort).

Figure 6. White (2019) *Girl Swarm ii*

Many feminist performance artists such as Carolee Schneeman and Kira O'Reilly have used food and mess in relation to their bodies to problematize and push against taboos surrounding female corporeality. The aim of the multisensory mess is to start to dispel female stereotypes. In the performance we experimented with different foods being eaten. We explored the soft flesh of oranges, crispy cornflakes as well as gooey substances such as slime (see figure 6). The performers were able to get messy whilst discussing selfies, young girls, self-portraiture and the patriarchy. Ahmed's complaining, feminist killjoy is complicated and subverted by using strategies of performing and enjoying mess.

In this chapter I have discussed the girl swarm as a collective of messy female bodies. I have explored this type of mess through theories of abjection and how abject bodies are spatialised. I have explored what it means for a messy body to subvert power relations, and how liminal spaces and ritual performance can open up the body to multiple readings that go beyond tight binaries of male and feminine. I have shown the potential problems that arise with performing female bodily abjection within an institution and shown ways to combat this problem. In the next chapter I discuss the anxieties the performers encountered

when performing the girl swarm and the transformation of this anxiety into a pleasure in performing subversive femininity. I examine the subversive potential of intimate and affective labour of the swarm within a late capitalist system.

Chapter Three: Anxiety and Affective Labour

Three girls are on stage. Two are actively performing laziness. They're slurring words, their bodies are draped over stage blocks, sinking into the stage floor. The third is giggling, pouting, starting conversations that meander, sparking conversations with strangers that oscillate between emotional and intimate and the mundane: 'what's your fav apple?' She is crawling languidly along the stage. Within this scene all of the characters are performing intimacy, boredom, boringness and laziness. One could say they are collectively performing timewasting. We developed this scene to increase our understanding of the complexities of online labour of swarm members such as Molly Soda and her followers. Kirton writes of Molly Soda's online production that she 'perform[s] a kind of emotional or intimate labour for which there is a demand but no societal recognition' (Darling and Kirton, 2013). Time-wasting online is often connected to a negative lack of productivity and many internet scholars see young people who spend large amounts of time online as lazy, disconnected, stupid or hopelessly self-centred (Turkle, 2013; Baurelein, 2008; Putnam, 2000). However, there is a movement amongst some users on social media to actively reject these notions. Jesella argues that 'The timewasting of the users…has a particularly feminist valance and these performances of timewasting are part of a genealogy of feminist interventions into capitalism' (2014). This chapter will discuss the intimate labour of the swarm within a capitalist system and explore the ways that the swarm's online intimacies and their lazy labour create anxiety. Through our performance practice we were able to explore societal anxiety surrounding the swarm and how that anxiety affects the performing body. I will interrogate strategies of performance making that embrace and subvert the effect of cultural anxiety that clings to female bodies.

Intimate/ Affective Labour

In November 2015, Molly Soda had her first solo art exhibition outside of her native U.S.A at Annka Kultys' Gallery in Hackney, London. Annka Kultys described her show *From My Bedroom to Yours* as being:

….about girls and for girls in their bedrooms, and takes the private behaviours inherent to those spaces and makes them public, reflecting how that process changes the way in which those behaviours are seen and contextualised. As a result, her images are raw, rejecting conventional beauty norms, whilst still maintaining a tween-Tumblr aesthetic and employing kitsch elements and lowbrow internet culture. (2015)

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 1. Soda, M. (2016) *From My Bedroom to Yours*

Soda's work explores online young female intimacies through video performances. The gallery walls are painted millennial pink, with glitter, teddy bears and unicorns (see figure 1). Her work consists of videos where she laughs, sings, chats and dances whilst looking directly into the camera. Char Jansen describes the experience of viewing the works: '… as if you're standing in the artist's bedroom with a laptop that has been left open with multiple tabs playing' (2015). Soda shares her feelings with the viewer, whether that be loneliness, boredom or flirtatiousness. Soda's whole oeuvre is freely accessible online; when going to the gallery, a viewer can deepen one's experience of her work by accessing all the videos across various online platforms and the comments that her online following have left on them.

Soda's public performances of intimacy can be read as a feminist critique of the perception of girls and girls' online behaviour. Her work is excessive, an assault on the senses and extremely feminine. Ahmed argues that femininity is equated with the overly emotional: 'being emotional comes to be seen as a characteristic of some bodies and not others' (Ahmed, 2014, p.4). However, Jesella proposes that for Tumblr communities like Soda's and the swarm there is power in the excessiveness of their posts: 'These posts are excessive in their content and proliferation and the way they waste the users and the way they waste the viewer's time. In all of these excesses they gesture towards the excesses that constitute femininity itself' (2014). For Jesella there is power in production and performance of femininity as excess. She argues that through the luxuriation and pleasure of producing femininity the body can move beyond biological necessity and declares online excess a feminist utopic position (2014). These types of emotional performances that take private acts and make them public is a type of intimate labour that is antagonistic to normative codes of behaviour and work. Girl swarm intimate labour with the messy, emotional excess that Soda exemplifies contains great power. To explain this power, I need to define what intimate labour is comprised of; I propose that it is a part of what Michael Hardt identifies as 'affective labour' (1999).

Historically affective labour holds its beginnings in feminist discourse as the labour of the body within classically gendered traditions of care work. Affective labour has been incorporated into what Hardt calls 'immaterial labour', or the informatisation of capital. Informatisation is the switch to a service economy that relies on the gathering, exchange and distribution of information and knowledge via communication and computer technologies. As there is no tangible product produced from this work, it is labelled as immaterial. Affective labour in the context of an information age means 'labour of human contact and interaction' (Hardt, 1999, p.95). Hardt writes that this labour includes a variety of services from health care to entertainment: 'What affective labour produces are social networks, forms of community, biopower' (1999, p.96). In chapter one I highlighted Hardt's argument that biopower can be hierarchised. Biopower was a concept put forward by Foucault to describe dominant high-powered forces creating systems that control population from above (1980). Through the information age affective labour networks or

collectives of non- dominant people are created, which Hardt equates to a biopower from below (1999).

Intimate labour, like traditional modes of female affective labour, predominantly exists outside of the realms of capitalist exchange. For example, artists like Maja Malou Lyse (Figure 2), Rosemary Kirton and Molly Soda distribute a huge amount of their artistic practice online through Tumblr, Instagram and Twitter. The freedom with which material can move from one blog to another means that authorship and ownership of creative material cannot exist in the same manner as it does within normal corporate boundaries. These artists and other members of the girl swarm are not receiving monetary compensation for great portions of their work. The girl swarm's unique societal capital is reliant upon an attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997). The attention economy has occurred because of the realities of an information age. With the vast amounts of information accessible, online sites now have to compete to gain notice. Our attention has become the most precious commodity in late capitalism. The amount of attention the swarm generates for itself charges it with enormous potential to upset capitalist frameworks by taking up vast amounts of digital space and attention with their non-normative femininity.

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 2. Lyse, M. (2015) *Type name here*

The power of the girl swarm comes from its mass. Kirton highlights this strength, writing the 'idea of "collective strategies of empowerment" that emerges from a mobilised online

narcissism' (Darling and Kirton, 2013). The paradox of many individuals cultivating a collective uniqueness, the weight of thousands of virtual bodies coming together in exploration of difference, has great clout. Matthew Caussey and Fintan Walsh write, 'we are at a stage where neoliberal culture has virtually absorbed any agency that politicised identities were once presumed to have' (2013, p.2). The swarm in its multitude have started to move beyond old identity politics that are marred by capitalism. Their collective actions online are forming the type of biopower from below that Hardt ascribes to affective labour.

If the online intimate labour of Soda and the swarm is examined through the lens of affective labour, it can be seen to be operating within capitalist frameworks. However Hardt also identifies that the elevation of what was once deemed 'women's work' into the heart of patriarchal, capitalist construct offers a chance for those performing affective labour to subvert and sabotage from within the very system from which they were once excluded (1999). Online the swarm has some control of the production and mediation of its own spectacle and they are forwarding notions of the messy, emotional, feminine body. They are embracing laziness and are incredibly busy being unproductive. The many hours spent re-blogging, sharing and commenting on others posts online can be seen as '[a] timewasting practice that embraces a feminist politics in which the feminist self is constructed through others and is not the individual or individualised liberal subject' (Jesella, 2014). With the girl swarm's intimate labour online they have created a community; with this community they have created a biopower that they are in control of; with this control the swarm may be able to resist neo-capital population control. They are able to effectively defy normative, Western beauty standards and generate adoration and fandoms for aesthetics that they have created within a community of endless borrowing, editing and resharing. This might suggest that it is this threatening of the capitalist system that causes people to feel uneasy about the potential of the selfie, as discussed in chapter two.

Anxious Improvisation

The swarm creates a biopower that is antagonistic to capitalism. When I started to work with the performers in staging the swarm, the thought of performing girl swarm behaviour created anxiety in some of the performers. I propose that this anxiety is connected into performing a community which is antagonistic to capital. During the rehearsal process the

performers went from feeling anxious in their portrayal to actively enjoying the performance and wanting this type of girlish behaviour to 'take up space'. It may be that the performers went through the swarm process when they worked to put it on stage; in some way they became a part of the biopower that is resistant and subversive. This process revealed that anxiety plays an important part of creating space that is resistant to capital. In order to show the vast nature of the swarm I decided to develop three different characters whose communities are commonly found on Instagram, and make scenes in which each character interacts with her online followers. We took some inspiration from the performers' real lives. One member of the cast, Sophie Northmore, is a trained yoga teacher, so we tapped into the huge community of female insta-yogi's and other spiritual or wellness gurus. Aysha Chamberlain is a Vogue dancer, so we found inspiration from the voguing communities (who have a large online presence), commercial dancers and festival it-girls for her character. We grounded the third character played by China Fish in the emotional, oversharing cam-girl, like Molly Soda and her followers.

As part of my initial explorations for this character development I created a series of improvisational exercises using Instagram's live stream programme. The performers were able to pause, adjust the phone they were recording from, enter and exit out of shot, play to the camera and ignore it. They were free to play with their character type in front of the camera in any way they wanted. Sophie took inspiration from movement practices including five rhythms and ecstatic dance. She started to chant and moved with exaggerated swaying and whirling across the space, her long hair tumbling free as her head rolled in imagined ecstasy at being at one with the universe. Sometimes she would pause and stare deeply into the camera as if trying to forge an energetic connection with her unknown viewers. When someone was performing the rest of the cast watched these live stream improvisations happen in real time from other electronic devices. There was a sense of genuine pleasure and enjoyment in watching another member of our company perform, the way the performance stuttered, paused and luxuriated in time. Sometimes the performers directly looked at the camera and other times they were totally in their own world. We were discovering the pleasure and freedom in being viewed and in viewing others in a network of supportive peers. I suggest that power and validation is gained when this viewing does not reduce the performer to an object, a body of signifiers. We could liken these non-normative

digital improvisations to Ahmed's idea of queer gatherings; 'queer bodies "gather" in spaces through the pleasure of opening up to other bodies' (2014, p. 165). In the gathering and opening of queer bodies to one another a type of activism occurs in reclaiming a social space (Ahmed, 2014). I suggest that the type of performance allowed the performers to open up to each other in a digital gathering, taking pleasure in non-normative performances of excessive hyper-femininity. The improvisations go beyond viewing each other in an objectifying gaze into a performance that also helps create a community. This type of online improvisation starts to generate the beginnings of an intimate labour, forming its own biopower. This is achieved through the process of pleasure orienting non-normative bodies towards each other. I have argued that there is a potential for the swarm to subvert constraining capitalist norms through their online intimate labours and the communities they form; through our practice we experienced this first-hand.

For two of the performers, China Fish and Sophie Northmore, their reflections of the exercise highlighted an initial trepidation about performing on the internet. Although they enjoyed watching others, they felt very nervous before they started their own improvisation. This anxiety of becoming swarm, and in the process becoming vulnerable and exposing the self to being read as abject is perhaps not surprising. Ahmed discusses what this vulnerability may signify:

> …vulnerability involves a particular kind of bodily relation to the world, in which openness itself is read as a site of potential danger, and as demanding evasive action. Emotions may involve readings of such openness, as spaces where bodies and worlds meet and leak into each other. Fear involves reading such openings as dangerous; the openness of the body to the world involves a sense of danger… (2014, p.69)

These improvisations required the performers to open their bodies to multiple potential readings including narcissist, slut, exhibitionist and of being 'too much' or 'too extra', exceeding defined roles and expectations of female corporeality. Ahmed (2014) proposes that the role of fear and anxiety is to establish a separation between bodies which strike fear and those considered fearful. This proposition again highlights the spatialising power

dynamics occurring in the relationship between bodies and abjections; in chapter two I discussed Ahmed's concept that abjection pulls and pushes bodies and puts them into social hierarchies (2014). However, after the improvisations took place, we found that anxiety was replaced by feelings of enjoyment, positivity and excitement amongst the performers. There were multiple comments that referenced a satisfaction in 'taking up space' or a view of the increasing importance of these activities in claiming a space that was accepting and encouraging of girlish performativity. How were the performers able to overcome their anxieties of performing hyper-feminine behaviour to the extent that they felt a key area of importance in this project was to demand *more* space for young women to engage in these types of performative behaviours? To explore this question I will be engaging with Ahmed's theories on the affects of pleasure and comfort (2014), and how the queering of pleasure can allow non-normative bodies to find joy through taking up space.

Bodies that sink in

When a body is non-normative or transgressing set social codes it opens itself to vulnerability and readings of abjection. In order to take up space and enjoy the space your body is occupying certain affective processes have to occur:

> To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and another's begins… in feelings of comfort, bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies. The sinking feeling involves a seamless space, or a space where you can't see the 'stitches' between bodies. (Ahmed, 2014, p.147)

The swarm is an amorphous, constantly evolving collective that is mainly made up of cis White women, who feel comfortable in many spaces that minority groups do not. Ahmed notes 'discomfort is not simply a choice but an effect on bodies inhabiting spaces that do not take or extend to their shape' (2014, p.152). Cis White women do not have to experience this discomfort as they frequently exist in spaces that do 'take or extend to their shape'. I have suggested that the swarm often transgress defined definitions of womanhood, and that even if that transgression is small their bodies are barred from feelings of comfort in many online spaces as long as they choose not to shave their legs or

continue to talk about periods and female pleasure in public forums. These are all positions of privilege as cis White women are able to convert to normative aesthetics and go about their daily lives with ease; the swarm are intentionally placing themselves outside of normative Western feminine aesthetics and in to positions of discomfort or attack. However it is interesting to note that the swarm have found a comfortable space to spread out and sink in online. I have argued that cyberspace is a capitalist space that complies to a neoliberal and late capitalist system, and hypothesised the ways in which the swarm are antagonising that system- so why are they so at home online? And why did this feeling of comfort extend to the performers in their live investigations of the swarm?

In order to answer these questions, we need to further examine Ahmed's theories of comfort and pleasure (2014). Ahmed's writings specifically explore queer strategies of empowerment, but they are also useful in exploring the potential of the swarm to defy normative culture. For Ahmed queer politics can offer 'hope and possibility for other ways of inhabiting bodies' (2014, p.162); one of the ways that this is possible is through the enjoyment and pleasure in non-normative life. She stresses the power here is not about converting shame to pride but 'the enjoyment of the negativity of the shame, an enjoyment of that which has been designated shameful by normative culture' (2014, p.146). Enjoyment and pleasure can be used to support non-normative ways of operating with the world. Ahmed argues that pleasure acts on the surface of bodies. Through pleasure bodies become expansive; they open up to others and 'as such, pleasure can allow bodies to take up space' (2014, p.164). This expansiveness can be understood to operate on all bodies. Sports fans pouring jubilantly out of stadiums and Trump fans spreading through towns after rallies support Ahmed's suggestion that there is a 'spatial relation between pleasure and power' (2014, p.164). However there is an opportunity through a queering of pleasure and by experiencing queer pleasure in public space for non-normative bodies to impress on the surface of some social space, altering it so that they can sink in to it (2014, p.165). The transformation of dominant space through queer pleasure can explain the performers' anxieties transforming into feelings of enjoyment when watching their peers take up digital space through social media.

When Sophie explores her character on stage, the audience is confronted with a script filled with a type of female language that many find grating. Visual artist Holly Foskett-Barnes came into rehearsal to offer an outside eye. She experienced the same affective journey of the performers, experiencing both anxiety and pleasure when watching Sophie's character. The scripts for these sections were all based on Instagram comment threads, and for Sophie's character this means a script heavily laden with cheesy-pseudo-spiritual sayings such as 'love and light to you my sisters' and peppered with celestial and heart emojis. This language was paired with a movement practice in which the two followers of Sophie's character continually move and stack staging blocks across the stage so that Sophie can walk, downward dog and ecstatic dance all over the stage. Sophie is using the stage and is being 'held up' and supported by her followers in taking up space. Holly identified with Sophie's type of performativity and laughed as she recognised a more exaggerated version of the type of comments she leaves on people's Instagram pages. She noted that it was embarrassing hearing these comments spoken out loud. The section made her feel awkward about her own online behaviour, but at the same time she felt genuine enjoyment and pleasure at watching the swarm onstage. The experience made her question why she needed to feel awkward about women supporting other women online. Holly's reaction suggests that her embarrassment is connected to the performer's anxieties discussed earlier. Anxiety stems from the vulnerability of abject readings leaking on to a body (Ahmed, 2014) as these types of online characters break confining and traditional expectations of female embodiment. But by inhabiting the stage with entitlement and ease, by performing pleasure and the pleasure being witnessed by others, we were able to use the stage space to disrupt readings of shame, embarrassment and anxiety on girlish performativity and instead find pleasure and acceptance.

Figure 3. White (2019) *Girl Swarm iii*

Not all of the performers experienced anxiety during the making of this piece. Aysha (see figure 3) was very clear that she did not think there was anything to be anxious about in the making of the performance. Her social media use is closest to that of the swarm's. She is also a member of the UK Voguing community, who use sites such as Instagram to connect with each other and share videos of performances, freestyles and looks. For Aysha this type of online improvisation is a standard activity. While the other performers were portraying characters that were different to their own personalities, Aysha's exploration was a slightly more exaggerated version of herself. Even though this was an exercise I had asked her to perform, because Aysha and her character were one and the same, there was a sense that the agency over the performance was Aysha's. With her improvisation there was a sense that she was performing into the webcam already assured of the interest of her audience, but also that this performance was a private act that the viewers were allowed into; the performance was for Aysha's pleasure and if she enjoyed it so would her audience. She looked into the camera maybe to address her viewers but maybe just to adjust her hair. She came in and out of shot as she pleased; she was on her own time scale, revelling in the pleasure of enacting herself. An artist that has explored this type of cam girl performativity is Ann Hirsch. Hirsch's ground-breaking YouTube performances *Scandalishous* (2008) and *Horny Lil Feminist* (2015) have both been at the forefront of online female performativity.

Scandalishous was a durational performance in which Hirsch created an alter ego named Caroline, a college freshman who dances to camera and chats with followers. Hirsch 'explored self-representation as feminist practice, and its limits. She adopted the genre conventions of the camgirl with a self-awareness that at times bordered on parody…' (Rhizome, 2019). Aysha's improvisation perhaps echoes Ann Hirsch's type of self-awareness.

Art and cultural theorists such as Berger (1972) have discussed the history of women's self-awareness and presence in public spaces. John Berger writes about the social conventions of a woman's presence and how she is viewed by others and herself under patriarchy in his book *Ways of Seeing* (1972). His theories are useful in exploring Aysha and Hirsch's self-aware performances on camera:

> To be born a woman has been to be born within an allotted and confined space…The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. (1972, p.34)

On the surface it may seem slightly depressing to a feminist reader that Berger's 1972 analysis of a woman's lot seems very close to Sara Gram's description of the selfie-taking young girl: '[n]arcissism may not only be what capital expects but also demands from young girls, in order that they be legible as girls at all' (2013). So many experiences of girl swarm style performativity have been voiced as the pleasure in the occupation of a larger amount of space by young women. Byström and Soda edited a physical book of deleted girl swarm photos with the express desire for these photos to 'take up space and carry the weight' (Byström and Soda, 2016, p.16). Through online selfies perhaps some women are finding ways to burst out of the confines of Western patriarchy. Berger writes that 'men act and women appear' (1972, p.35). He argues that men simply look at women, whereas women, in their necessary habits of self-surveillance 'watch themselves being looked at' (1972, p.35). For Berger this process of surveying makes women turn themselves into objects '… an object

of vision: a sight' (1972, p.35). When considered alongside selfie culture, this suggests that the majority of selfies are just a continuation of women's self-objectification.

Aysha, as a Black woman and as a part of the voguing community that was created by trans Black and Latinx womxn, understands more than Berger, or myself, ever could, what the reality of being reduced to an object to be viewed by others means. The reactions that Aysha sometimes receives from her mixed cultural heritage of White European and Black Jamaican descent can act as examples of othering. Her ethnic background is frequently not believed as she is often read as 'too White' (but still 'too Black' to be White); her straight, dark hair is read as 'too Asian' which becomes a point of othering, reduced to a sight that is not understood, or is rejected by the viewer as not one of them. The trans community that created the ball room and voguing scene historically had to survey themselves and each other (Butler, 1993). For many in the scene attending the balls, being watched and recognised in their community for their performance skills was enough. The goal for some in this community however was to pass, to be 'real':

> When they can walk out of that ballroom, into the sunlight and on to the subway, and get home and still have all their clothes and no blood running off their bodies- those are the femme realness queens. (Corey cited in Paris is Burning, 1991)

By being viewed as cis women in the eyes of men these queens could escape the violence that might be enacted on them as owners of bodies that are frequently considered abject under a system of power that is often both racist and heteronormative. Sometimes men *act* and women *disappear*. Although Aysha is not a trans woman, she is a woman of colour who is frequently subject to objection and erasure. When Aysha walks the runway her ballroom category is femme realness, Aysha's performances are a powerful reclamation of her identity as a femme womxn.

The power of vogue and the ball scene it originated from is the power of the performative to subvert societal norms by repetition. Ahmed (2014) argues that negative affects that define bodies, such as fear or disgust, are achieved through the repetition of stereotypes (the fearsome negro and the fearful White child or the disgusting faggot and the disgusted

man). But it is through those same repetitions that these stereotypes are destabilised. Butler's use of interpellated performativity, works under these same principles of destabilisation through repetition. In the ball scene there are enactments of different femininities and performances of proximations of straightness carried out by bodies that are not White, cis or straight. For Butler this type of performativity 'might be understood as hegemonic power that fails to repeat loyally' (1993, p.383). The performative repetition of queer bodies of colour gives these bodies an agency that 'is derived from the impossibility of choice' (Butler, 1993, p.383). The repetitive performance of identities that are often considered outside of societal norms, that fall into the category of bodies and desire for bodies that are 'foreclosed' by those societal norms, becomes an act of subversion. The ball scene produces acts that highlight the constant instability of heteronormative identity constructs and undermine them by offering an alternative way of being, the choice of the foreclosed identity that is supported by a community of others. I would argue that Aysha's online performances represent a similar reclaiming of agency that Butler ascribes to the ballroom and voguing queens of Jenny Livingstone's film *Paris is Burning* (1991). Aysha is acting in order to appear. When reflecting on the improvisations in *Girl Swarm*, Aysha noted the freedom she felt in embodying an exaggerated sense of herself online. The videos and selfies that she posts of herself online get a warm reaction from her peers. Aysha has found spaces that she can occupy, able to post videos that reveal different aspects of her identity and to feel supported and seen.

Conclusion

Through this chapter I have discussed the affective labour of the swarm. Rosemary Kirton's idea of collective empowerment can be seen through thousands of teen-Tumblrs coming together to form their own biopower, to make their own spectacles. I have examined the girl swarm through theatrical and choreographic practice to see what can be further understood about this online phenomenon. I have used performance to investigate the anxieties of residing in bodies that are often dismissed, objectified or considered abject on the basis of gender. I have discussed the pleasure and community experienced in online practices where those gendered bodies are offered safety and acceptance through online community. It was my intention in *Girl Swarm* that people might be able to recognise some of their own online actions within one or more of the characters or to recognise the

comfort, acceptance and community that women are able to access by this form of online performativity. One audience member commented on the performance that 'i[t] was a relatable and interesting work that makes you look at your own social media in a revealing way' (anonymous, 2019).

By exploring the swarm's relationship to space, how they occupy space and the power relations behind the space they occupy, I have highlighted how the swarm can be understood to overcome readings that limit them as narcissistic or reduce their actions to self-objectification. Through our performance practice we understood that taking up space was one way to subvert abject readings that can slide easily on to women's bodies. In order to understand why taking up space is important I turned to Ahmed's theories of queer pleasure (2014). It is only through feelings of comfort and pleasure that bodies are able to extend into spaces. For a non-normative body to feel that comfort – to extend seamlessly into the stage space or the digital space - they had to be connected to others, to form community, a biopower from below (Hardt, 1999).

In the next chapter I complicate the idea of swarm agency by turning my attention to the girl swarm's connection to commodity and late capitalism. I explore late capital identity politics through Tiqqun's Theories of the Young Girl (2012) and Terranova's idea that internet spaces accept differences in order to capitalise from them. I test the limits of the swarm's subversions of femininity and explore how subversive acts are co-opted back into late capitalism regimes through processes of commodity feminism and activism.

Chapter Four: Commodity Bodies and Girl Swarm Economies

In order to create a performance of the girl swarm I needed to buy a set and costumes. I created an onstage shrine to each of the characters, for example tarot cards and crystals for Sophie Northmore's digital spiritual thrill seeker and selfie props and fluffy pillows for Aysha. I bought costumes from fast fashion online clothing sites such as Boohoo and Missguided. My email became bombarded with flash sales; I scrolled through thousands of outfit choices. As the company spoke about selfie sticks and particular fashion aesthetics for characters during rehearsals, we started to find targeted ads for these brands flooding our social media.

Figure 1. Parmigianino (1524) *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror*

This immersion within a consumer capitalist process points to the swarm's complicated relationship to commodity. The pressure to present aspects of one's personality through clothing purchases was revealed to me through the deluge of marketing that flooded my digital life in such a short space of time. In this chapter I will explore the girl swarm's complex relationship to commodities. In order to explore the contradictory nature of the swarm I decided to write a script for the last section of the *Girl Swarm* performance. I wrote

about the role that technological advancement has always played in connection to self-portraiture, and the performers compared Parmigianino's *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror* (see figure 1) to contemporary selfies. We asked why the old portrait was a celebrated human achievement and why selfies are disparaged as cringeworthy narcissism. The juxtaposition of old, traditionally dominant forms of culture and knowledge exchange against newer and distinctly feminine ones was key to this exploration. However, with the costume choices it could be argued that I was fulfilling Banet-Weiser's postfeminist-interactive form of 'self-branding' (2012). The performers were dressed in pink two-piece suits (bought from the fast-fashion websites). The suit is traditionally a masculine signifier that was then subverted or feminised by the pink colour. The characters dressed in their pink suits and high heels signal a type of confident, successful and self-exposing womanhood. Banet-Weiser argues that '[p]ostfeminism and interactivity create what I would call a neoliberal moral framework, where each of us has a duty to ourselves to cultivate a self-brand' (2012, p.56).

I have discussed in chapters one and two that young female bodies have been connected to consumerism since the nineteenth century (Jones, 1998). I have also highlighted the tendency to regard young female self-representation as narcissistic, pathological or inherently problematic (Gram, 2013; Dobson, 2015). The heady saturation of internet shopping options where sweatshop produced, fast fashion clothing sites promised killer prom dresses or funky festival leotards at the price of cheap labour (usually from women of colour) in many ways backs up this portrayal. In the UK during 2020 there has been major outcry that these brands have been operating in unsafe conditions, forcing their predominantly Asian female workforce to keep working during a pandemic for as little as £3 an hour (Barlow, 2020; BBC, 2020). At the same time Channel 4 have featured the entrepreneurial spirit of the all-female run fashion house Missguided (*Inside Missguided*, 2020). But as Gram argues, '[n]arcissism, as a personality trait, may not only be what capital expects but also demands from young girls, in order that they be legible as young girls at all' (2013). Feminist digital and media scholars argue that for Western young women to signal their success and self-actualization within a neoliberal, late capitalist system they are often expected to participate in public self-disclosure that showcases how they fit in to postfeminist ideals of young womanhood (Dobson, 2015; Harris, 2004).

Social networking sites expose young women to targeted consumerism but also offer a space for them to articulate their anxieties over consumer culture. The swarm sits in a complicated place within digital culture as they are constructing self-representations through digital media that are overtly feminine and could be seen to play into cliched tropes of the postfeminist young girl, yet their online actions are often antagonistic to normative culture and are frequently censored by the social media sites that they frequent. The swarm occupy platforms that generate money from their affective labour and simultaneously censor that labour when it steps out of strict parameters of normative girl self-representation. However, the swarm's activities are promoting new ways to think about economic circulation of young female artistic practices. This chapter will delve in to the problematisation of young girls as narcissistic consumers and the swarm's connection to commodity and commodity feminism. The swarm's aesthetics are being co-opted by brands and corporations and sold back to the public as a type of commodity feminism and activism. I will argue that the swarm are not just traditional consumers, but through their online networks they are destabilising traditional economic circulations of artwork and how art is consumed. The swarm's relationship to capital is complex; their aesthetics and actions are subversive but also co-opted as marketing strategies for large brands. As their aesthetics enter mainstream Western culture, does the swarm's subversive potential diminish?

Terranova proposes the relationship between information held in online networks and the topology of networks need to be analysed. As information moves through a network it has the ability to transform the space of the network (Terranova, 2004). In the beginning decade of the twenty-first century the internet became more open source. This was achieved by creating a system that was decentralised, and Terranova argues this decentralisation created localisation and autonomy which in turn encouraged divergence and difference (2004). The power structure of late capitalism tolerates difference 'and is inclusive (up to a point) but also expansionist' (Wark, 2020, p.215). For Terranova both the struggle for resistance and pursuit of capital domination is firmly affected by the infrastructural qualities of the internet:

> There is no cultural experimentation with aesthetic forms or political organisation, no building of alliances or elaboration of tactics that does not have to confront the turbulence of electronic space. The politics of network culture are thus not only about competing viewpoints, anarchistic self regulation and barriers to access, but also about the pragmatic production of viable topological formations able to persist in an open and fluid milieu. (2004, p. 68)

We could return here to Hardt's idea (discussed in chapter three) of biopower forming simultaneously from powers above exerting pressure downwards and the network spreading out from below (1999; 2007). So how do the girl swarm exist in this 'open and fluid milieu'? Where are they swept up in capital expansionism and how are they able to persist in their subversions of femininity within this digital space through the biopower formed by their intimate, affective labour? In the following section I will discuss some girl swarm members and their relationships to brands and commodities. Girl swarm artists Byström, Soda and Miceli use social networking sites like Tumblr and Instagram to share their creative practice as they feel that young women often have less opportunities to exhibit their work in the art world. Their online content creation and networking has drawn the attention of large companies who work with them on advertisement campaigns. Simultaneously their work online is being increasingly censored and deleted. This highlights that capital seems to be keen to profit from girl swarm aesthetics whilst trying to stifle their growing biopower.

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 2. Miceli and Nike (2019) *Powerful*

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 3. Miceli and Nike (2019) *The Sport of Self Love*

Grace Miceli is an illustrator who works under the moniker Art Baby Girl. Her illustrations are often explicitly about anxiety that is triggered or exacerbated by commodities and consumer lifestyles, with her series of t-shirts featuring popular household products where the slogans have been changed to things such as 'I'm just a little desperate for attention' or 'It's ok to be lonely sometimes' (2019). All of her work has the hyperfeminine quality of the swarm, with doodles of everyday young girl items that look like they've been drawn with felt-tips. Through her following on Tumblr and Instagram her illustrations and work have become popular within mainstream culture. She is now an illustrator for The New Yorker magazine and in 2019 she collaborated with sports giant Nike, her illustrations adorning their clothing. Her work with Nike loses its nihilism but forwards a seemingly feminist and inclusive message, such as the slogan 'powerful' over a Nike tick on a teen girl t-shirt (Figure 2). She also made a series of videos in collaboration with Nike. A group of young girls hang out in a working-class Brooklyn coffee shop with the title 'The Sport of Community'. A woman of colour vogues in her apartment whilst her young children play around her in 'The Sport of Grounding'. A young White woman with a mullet talks lovingly to herself in the mirror 'The Sport of Self Care' (Figure 3).

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 4. Dazed Digital (2017) Image of book: Bystrom, A. and Soda, M. (2016) *Pics or it didn't happen*

In chapter two I discussed a sports collaboration that did not go so smoothly: self portrait artist Arvida Byström's 2017 collaboration with Adidas Originals sparked violent rape threats (BBC, 2017). The campaign simply showed Byström in a conventional modelling pose with her unshaved legs 'on show'. The year before, Byström and fellow swarm member Molly Soda published a book entitled *Pics or it Didn't Happen* (2016, see figure 4). The book is a collection of Instagram picture posts taken by the artists and hundreds of other users that follow their accounts, which were subsequently removed by the app as they breached community guidelines. These censored images 'include photos of genitalia, bare butts, female nipples, period stains, liquid resembling semen or vaginal secretions, pubic hair' (2016, p.13). In chapter two I explained how many aspects of female bodies and identities have been labelled as abject under patriarchy. There still exist deep taboos and shame regarding menstruation, the female anatomy and female sexual pleasure, which is why so many of the images in *Pics or it Didn't Happen* were deleted.

In order to untangle the power dynamics between the swarm, capital and commodities it is important to further understand the role of the young girl within late capitalism. I will explore how late capitalism is intimately connected with bodily identity and image construction in order to examine how the swarm are using their selfies and online spaces to critique their young female narcissist status. Late capitalist systems require people to perform and assert their identities in order to be accepted as valuable members of society. This concept is explored and personified through the figure of the Young-Girl (Tiquun, 1999).

The Young Girl

Tiqqun, a French philosophical and activist collective that operated in the late 1990's, argues that in order to achieve totality capitalism had to offer societal recognition to those who had previously been seen as outside production. The first groups of the historically disenfranchised to be included were the young and the female. More than inclusion, these previously excluded bodies would now 'find themselves elevated to the rank of ideal regulators of the integration of the Imperial citizenry' (Tiqqun, 2012, p.3). Difference was incorporated for the first time in dominant Western societal structure through consumerism. There were Women Consumers and Young Consumers; eventually there were Black Consumers, Brown Consumers and Homosexual Consumers (Gram, 2013). For Tiqqun this inclusion of everyone outside of patriarchal norms became a concept 'abstracted and recoded in to Youthitude and Femininitude' (2012, p.16), or the theory of the Young-Girl.

Gram puts the idea of the Young-Girl across succinctly:

> The identity of the Young-Girl is about taking these previously useless bodies and making them useful. If they are not useful for making things, then they will be made useful for buying things, and this consumer identity is performed on and through her body. What characterises the Young-Girl is that her body is a commodity, one which belongs to her and is her responsibility to maintain the value of. (2013)

Tiqqun proposed their theory of the Young-Girl in 1999. For Tiqqun, this is not a gendered concept. With the evolution of men's magazines and adverts that target people's identity

types, by 1999 Tiqqun believed that *all* people were Young-Girls. Their use of the phrase Young-Girl, and it's often misogynistic tone, highlights the scathing regard that the group has for this type of capitalist system of control. For a Young-Girl to feel valued and a part of society she must maintain her body image; she must own two flannel shirts and ten pairs of shoes so that she can adequately display her identity to the rest of society (Tiqqun, 2012, p. 18). Tiqqun highlighted the prevalence of magazine articles and advertising campaigns that preyed on anxieties surrounding inclusion or that pre-constructed desire (the desire to be younger, thinner, 10 ways to spice up your love life etc). Jennifer Gonzalez writes 'eliciting affect in the form of prepackaged desires, might be one of capitalism's most successful means of self Production' (2009, p.45). To a great extent, bodily affects and identity are maintained through a person's engagement with consumerism. With the Young-Girl we can see clearly Alexander Galloway's notion that 'every economic transaction today is also an affective transaction (which is to say a transaction that will likely deal with aspects such as, but not limited to, racial identity)' (2012, p.125).

Tiqqun rely heavily on both Debord's theory of the spectacle (1967), and also the Foucauldian concept of biopower (1980) to articulate its theory of the Young-Girl. Debord's theory of the spectacle centred around the 'social relation of people mediated by images' (Debord, 1986, p.6); Tiqqun drew in particular on Debord's theories that criticised commodity capitalism. Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (2012) is written in several different magazine style fonts, with phrases hanging like strap lines on the page '…BECAUSE I'M WORTH IT' (2012, p.84). The lining of the book is covered with images from twentieth-century adverts, highlighting how magazine articles try to solicit affect in people, to make them think a certain way, buy certain items. Foucault (1980) wrote about biopower as a form of population control, for instance the creation of welfare states, hospitals and penal systems in order to control society. Adam Morris writes in his review of Tiqqun that 'Tiqqun understood their moment- the turn of the millennium- as the historical moment that biopower was in the process of fully integrating with the spectacle' (2012). By the end of the twentieth century media had become so pervasive it was starting to control the way people lived, and Tiqqun proposed their reading of the Young-Girl to highlight the damaging effects of mass media on personal freedoms.

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Figure 5. Conlon. (2014) *I Pledge Allegiance to the Young-Girl*

Preliminary Materials for the Theory of the Young-Girl was translated into English for the first time by Arriana Reines in 2012. With the English translation, the Young-Girl was put into academic circulation. Although the concept was written in regard to the mass media of the late 1990's, the Young-Girl seems to have truly come into her own by 2020, through the platform of social media and has caught the attention of young female bloggers (see figure 5). On Twitter, Instagram and Facebook people can voice and showcase their unique bodies whilst expressing the utmost conformity to biopower's regime. For example, there are 278 million Instagram posts that use the hashtag #ootd (outfit of the day) in order to showcase their clothing choices, which predominantly fit into a model of fast fashion and consumer culture. As Rosza Farkas says, 'I love how the Society of the Spectacle in the Young-Girl is the spectacle-made-social hashtag twitter' (2012). With each selfie equating to a bodily exposure and each status a confessional that also generates income for social networking sites, it is possible to liken these online actions to Tiqqun's idea that each Young-Girl needs to 'permanently self-valorize' (2012, p.18).

Tiqqun states the theory of the Young-Girl is a genderless concept; in their own words: 'a hip-hop night club player is no less a Young-Girl than a beurette tarted up like a porn star' (2012, p. 13), though many critiques call this in to question (Farkas, 2012; Power, 2013). The Young-Girl for bloggers such as Nina Powers (2013) and Jesse Darling (Darling and Kirton, 2013) remains most relevant when connected to actual young girls. I suggest the Young-Girl is a useful tool to analyse imagery and opinions surrounding contemporary young women and the girl swarm, as the Young-Girl reveals the power of a young woman's body under late capitalism, where that power is false and the anxieties this generates. The simultaneous power and oppression held in a woman's image is discussed by Darling:

> …young women are in this uniquely powerful place in which their own image holds more value than their body ever will as a subject under patriarchy. The image of the Young-Girl is worth more than her ideas, more than her labour, more than anything she will ever have to offer past her selfie-by date. (Darling and Kirton, 2013)

Dobson argues that dismissing girls' self-representations on social networking sites as oppressive is too simplistic and calls for a slow and nuanced approach to the power flow of girls' digital self-mediation (2015, p.7). Looking at the girl swarm's online activities with a nuanced reading of power and subversion is vital. In Byström and Soda's book we see a collection of internet users' self-mediation that has been banned from the online visual marketplace. With Byström's collaboration with Adidas when the same types of visual tropes and explorations of self are combined with a big brand and put on billboards there is an explosive public reaction that ultimately endangers Byström with threats of violence. I propose that what gives the swarm power is the idea that they are 'thinking about social media beyond the notion of connectivity to that of authentic recognition' (Langlois, 2013, p.58) and in doing so they are combatting the totality of Tiqqun's theory. Their online performativity is mainly centred around self-image constructions, if we return to Farkas' notion that through the twenty-first century Young-Girl the spectacle is made social (2012). How does the power shift when young women can self-mediate and produce networks that defy normative expectations of womanhood? Chapters one and three highlighted Hardt's view that biopower can be generated from above and from below. Affective labour forms networks of people which are types of biopower that can be used to destabilise and combat

systems of control (Hardt 1999; 2007). The swarm's online image constructions form a network of people that often antagonises patriarchal power, and they are doing so by collectively self-mediating. However, does this subversion through mass-authenticity remain when big brands get involved? In the following sections I examine the censorship members of the swarm are experiencing when using social media platforms, especially Instagram and the ways corporations can circumvent this censorship without aiding in women's liberation from patriarchal conventions.

Shadow Bans and Censorship

By using social media, the girl swarm are able to become their own media producers; they are able to blur boundaries of public and private behaviours and share intimacies with strangers online. They form a constantly shifting and evolving collective network. Soda's prolific online output - she posts endless videos, gifs and textual posts - highlights these shifting internet intimacies. Her work questions the conditions of being a young girl in late capital, she shares intimacies from the mundane realities of an ear infection to make up tutorials and durational videos which see her crying over the content of her inbox. Soda also draws huge enjoyment, solace and feelings of connection with those that she engages with online. (Jansen, 2015). This type of online action is certainly not unique to Soda. Jesella groups these types of posts as lazy Tumblr feminist posts and argues that:

> It is an intimacy not just in terms of content, the kind of consciousness raising that happens with the sharing of stories but of…"inappropriate intimacy". It's not just the thrill of making public what is usually private but of making contact with strangers across the virtual divide. Here we can see how time wasting can lead to unpredictable, temporary feminist socialities that engage in theory making, various kinds of boundary crossing and allow for practices of doing feminism that can help us rethink and re-embody what feminism is and does. (2014)

Because Soda has a huge online following her posts are shared on a wide scale on Tumblr with comments being added, conversations being started. She is self-mediating in connection with a collective. Within this realm of online activity of 'inappropriate intimacy' the subject/ object dichotomy that often surrounds issues of young women is confused. In

this sense the girl swarm are engaging with a political immediacy. Through online image crafting they are critiquing their Young-Girl statuses as the spectacle, the narcissist and the consumer. In doing so they are fulfilling Simon O'Sullivan's statement that 'a minor practice will precisely stammer and stutter the commodity form, disassembling those already existing forms of capital, and indeed moving beyond the latter's very logic' (2005). This means that the girl swarm are being met with derision, hostility, moral outrage and deletion. Critics try to dismiss the girl swarm as basely narcissistic, with a multitude of articles such as 'Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation' (Stein, 2013) and 'Generation Selfie' (2014).The swarm are trying to defy limiting conventions of femininity and overturn the social order of what is considered morally above and below (Ahmed, 2014). If they succeed, then they undermine a patriarchal establishment's moral codes and so they are heavily criticised and silenced.

In 2019, Instagram started to demote posts that they deem 'inappropriate' but that don't violate the platform's community guidelines. Demotion is known informally as shadow banning, when users' posts do not show up under hashtag searches so are not discoverable to a wider community. In a move that many have decried as incredibly vague, the only example of inappropriate posts given are ones that are 'sexually suggestive' that might be anything from a person in a bikini or a breastfeeding mother. The decision is seen as something that will mainly affect women and minority groups (Cook, 2019). Collectives like the girl swarm occupy huge amounts of cyberspace with their online activities. Capital cannot control how much space these women dominate, so shadow banning is being used to decrease the visibility of online content generated by women who are deemed abject under patriarchy. Another strategy used to maintain control of online spaces is capital's co-option of overtly feminist online acts. Alexis Anais Avedisian highlights that Instagram poet and artist Rupi Kaur had several of her images removed from the platform for breaching community guidelines because they featured menstrual blood; however companies such as THINX (a female sanitary product company) have taken inspiration from Kaur's aesthetics and used them in global campaigns that appear as sponsored ads on Instagram (Avedisian, 2016). 'This feminism works within capitalist and patriarchal frameworks to sell us a significantly less potent version of an ideology that is meant to challenge these very structures' (uwire, 2014). When capital cannot stifle a movement, it tries to commodify it,

bringing identities back into the Young-Girl marketplace. At the start of *Pics or it Didn't Happen* (2016) there are a series of short essays including Avedisian's THINX piece. Beautifully crafted photos or in-the-moment selfies exploring feminine intimacy and experience are erased from platforms without warning or explanation. The original idea behind Pics was to create a memorial or a graveyard for all the deleted posts, highlighting the emotional distress that comes with erasure on social media. With Byström and Soda's use of social media they are a part of a large network that they could use to gather the posts and turn them into a physical artefact. Communications Professor Sara Roberts says of the book:

> What this collection of redacted images does, ultimately and fundamentally is to link these private absences and unremarked-upon removals to much larger political questions about representation of (among other things) race, gender, sexuality, and the politics of acceptability in our contemporary moment. (2016, p.21)

Publishing the deleted posts alongside essays that question commodity feminism on Instagram and brands like THINX's use of the aesthetics and artistic and emotional labour of young women online shows that the authors are thinking about their work and the work of their peers within a political and feminist framework. All of the essays included in the book stress that the majority of the images gathered or submitted were from White, cis, able bodied and thin people (Klaus, 2016; Soda and Byström, 2016; Avedisian, 2016, Roberts, 2016; Gerges, 2016). There is a level of privilege and entitlement which occurs with posting these types of bodily explicit imagery. In preliminary workshops and rehearsals, I used *Pics…* as the basis for movement tasks, asking people to select three images in the book to embody. On page 77 is an image of a Black woman wearing a hoodie and a hijab with green neon sunglasses. Multiple participants stopped at this image, asking 'what's wrong with this one? They were reacting to the unexpected framing of the image, in which there's no nudity, no violence - just a bold, strong image of a Black woman's self-expression. Byström's collaboration with Adidas occurred a year later in 2017. I will now discuss the impact of corporate collaborations and commodity feminism on identity formations amongst twenty-first century young women.

Commodity Feminism

What happens to the subversive potential of the swarm when high profile figures in a network form a collaboration with large companies? Sara Banet-Weiser discusses the implications of brands' involvement in social activism:

> …advertisers and marketers use brands as lucrative avenues for social activism, and social movements in turn use brands as launch points for specific political issues. Commodity activism reshape and reimagines forms and practices of social (and political) activism into marketable commodities and takes specific form within brand culture. (2012, p.16)

If White, thin, able bodied women like Byström push the boundaries of normative feminine expression into a wider arena of public awareness, does this help marginalised groups find more space for non-normative expression? Or is this another example of commodity feminism in the guise of liberation for a privileged few? Dobson warns that 'representational changes that appear to offer something new and more diverse or more socially progressive do not necessarily or inevitably serve gender and social justice purposes' (2015, p.27). Representation is important, but if it is dislocated from people and policy it does not actively help in breaking down barriers. In 2019 the New York Times reported that members of the Black Trans community in the U.S 'feel more fearful than ever before', suggesting that in part because of an increase in Trans visibility through the media there has been a perceived increase in anti-trans violence (Rojas and Swales, 2019).

Feminist media scholar Angela McRobbie examines the lack of interrogation that occurred in the 1990's and early 2000's surrounding young teenagers and commodity feminism. She argues that the feminism presented by girls' magazines and toy companies was celebrated as it pushed forward a third wave feminist agenda:

> Indeed it is my claim that there is now, embedded within these forms of feminine popular culture, a tidal wave of invidious insurgent patriarchalism which is hidden beneath the celebrations of female freedom. In addition to ignore the consequences

> of commodity feminism is to abandon the terrain of understanding young women's position in the contemporary social order. (McRobbie, 2008, p.539)

For McRobbie, this lack of interrogation allowed for a period in which hyper-gendering under the guise of girl power and an emphasis on sexualisation of tween and teen girls became marketing norms throughout this period. There are many examples in popular culture of enactments of womanhood and girlhood, but for McRobbie the majority of these female performativities do not push forward a progressive or diverse feminism. For example, the popularity of characters such as Carrie Bradshaw in the television series *Sex and the City* (1998), a woman that is apparently promoting sexual liberation and independence, may seem progressive and feminist. But the ways in which the programme uses a White female body to promote product placements and connections to luxury consumerism that preferentiates the rich, White female is actually the same oppression that women have always faced under a capitalist system: '[t]he performative here has the effect of seeming to reinstate the "original"' (McRobbie, 2008, p.542). Many feminist scholars have examined the girl-power phenomenon of the 1990s and 2000's, pointing to a prevalence of media representations of the tough, strong, independent, outspoken, postfeminist individual woman (Dobson, 2015; Innes,1999; Hopkins, 2002). Byström's trainer commercial enacts the re-instating of the thin, White, cis woman. Except that the one non-normative inclusion - her body hair - started to shake the original. Byström was able to have a platform to voice the violence levelled against her and to note that people who are more marginalised than herself have a much harder time when trying to express themselves (Byström, 2017). It seems likely that Adidas would have profited from the publicity and did not do anything publicly to help women like Byström from receiving vitriol online.

> … despite the social-change rhetoric framing much commodity activism, the empowerment aimed for is most often personal and individual, not one that emerges from collective struggle or civic participation. In this context of brand culture, the individual is a flexible commodity that can be packaged, made and remade- a commodity that gains value through self-empowerment. (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.17)

Working with large companies allows people whose images are often erased to have much bigger exposure, but dislocates the image makers and their bodies from their supportive networks, opening them up to potential harm.

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 6. Miceli (2018) *Me at all my negative*

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 7. Miceli (2019*) Just letting you all know.*

Some of the content created by the swarm focuses on relationships to products they interacted with in their teens and childhoods. This content often portrays feelings of depression and emotional distress in being a young woman under late capitalism. It seems that young women in their twenties and thirties have a lot to untangle between their relationship to aggressive marketing and the shaping of their early selves. They are using social media as spaces to interrogate their relationship to capital. Grace Miceli's work (see figures 6 and 7) shows girl swarm aesthetics tied tightly to hyper-feminine consumerism. Quite often her work expresses uneasiness with this link through the production of anxiety-ridden posts and artwork or through the outright refusal of productivity associated with capitalism, through the enactment of laziness. These themes are carried into her work with Nike, challenging the status quo of what is considered a sport and who is considered powerful by centring the stories and images of Black or working-class young women. This also opposes the notions of the postfeminist strong, independent young woman that proliferated media in the 90s and 00s. Banet-Weiser argues that 'personal empowerment is

ostensibly realised through occupying the subject position of the consumer citizen…'. Late capitalism positions consumer citizens as able to 'satisfy their individual needs through consumer behaviour, thus rendering unnecessary the collective responsibilities that have historically been expected from a citizen' (2012, p.18). What is interesting about Miceli's work with Nike is that it foregrounds connections with others and communities as an important part of achieving personal empowerment. But Nike has a notorious track record on discouraging unionised workers rights, unfair female and child labour (Bain, 2017; Spar, 2002; Salazar, 2004) in the global south. There may be extended visibility for young women in the USA through this collaboration, but not for workers abroad.

Within the Western societies the swarm inhabits it is difficult to find a platform that doesn't tangle one up in the ethics of late capitalism. For example, gallery spaces often operate to promote the status quo of dominant societal norms. Early digital spaces, by contrast, have been associated with artists who often feel excluded from the mainstream art world (Martinez, 2015). Many swarm members such as Miceli turned to online platforms like Tumblr as it was an accessible way of creating and disseminating the type of art they wanted to make, that focused on a female, postinternet lived experience. Through their online engagement they developed their practice within a community of peers until they felt ready to share their work offline. In 2015, Miceli set up an IRL gallery show in Brooklyn, NYC entitled Girls at Night on the Internet. The show brought together several members of the swarm like Byström and Soda. The exhibition focused on young female experiences within digital culture and artists that are excluded or underrepresented in traditional gallery spaces. The show became a success in New York, and as I have noted some contributors have gone on to collaborate with large corporations. The popularity of the show indicates that people are willing to engage with swarm aesthetics and actions outside of Tumblr and Instagram; this is important as it means young female postinternet experiences can be understood and engaged with by other communities.

Alternative Art Value

Molly Soda is an artist who shares her work and her life online. She is an online phenomenon, gathering many followers on social networking sites for her digital outputs. In many ways she is the ultimate prosumer (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010): her life and her work are absolutely enmeshed. Before gaining art world recognition she would make personalised gifs in exchange for pizza. Annka Kultys is the London gallery that represents Molly Soda and held her first solo show in 2015/16. All of the works shown were created with Soda's online community in mind not for traditional art viewers. Reviewers like Jansen (2015) highlight the almost default setting of cringeworthy disdain that the digital hyper-feminine aesthetics of Soda's work evokes: 'It's not hard to understand why so many people write off art of the kind 26-year-old Molly Soda makes: to date, she's best known for works such as dating a giant teddy bear, and "leaking'' her own nude selfies…' (2015). Jansen does go on to say that the show was well put together, and because of Soda's connection to an online collective the show was a powerful portrayal of 'the common concerns, fears, fun, and forms of self-expression of her generation' (2015). Annka Kultys had to reassess how to value a work that is free to be viewed on YouTube. Soda's works are priced according to the number of streams they have had: the more streams, the higher the price. The value of the work here is based on its connection and impact with others.

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 8. The Kaplan Twins. (2019) *Throw back…*

Fine Art N.Y.U graduates the Kaplan Twins are also using social media in order to circumvent artworld norms. The twins have used their large social media following to further their careers. Their artwork riffs off of celebrity culture, social media, millennial consumerism and slogans (see figure 8). The first major buyer of their work was the website Pornhub, who acquired a painting the twins had made depicting a still shot of Kim Kardashian's leaked sex tape to hang in their head office. They created a series entitled *Boys Toys* (2016) in which they sold everyday objects that they had slept with as art objects. The twins are young, female, White, tanned, beautiful and well-connected. Often their work feels like it plays second fiddle to the images of themselves on social media, which art consultant Matty Mo says is a very deliberate thing:

> Almost immediately we started to think of ideas of how we can monetize their brand in the environment which is direct-to-consumer art sales on Instagram. They made this interesting observation that they got a lot more likes on photos of themselves than they did of their artwork. And so we got to think about how we could integrate an art object into their lives and tell the stories of their involvement with the objects and sell it directly to consumers. (cited in Davis, 2017)

As there are still so many disparities within the art world's treatment of male and female artists, should the use of social media by those who are denied equal access to the arts, and quite often to equal pay, be seen as an interesting and welcome development? Despite the Kaplan's popularity (176000 Instagram followers as of 2019), their work and themselves as people are dismissed by many as annoying, provocative and exploitative (Eckardt, 2017). As arts commentator Ben Davis argues '[w]hat the Kaplan Twins offer is so clearly basic titillation that I can't imagine it not being discarded by the very appetites that it stokes, since those appetites are so superficial' (2017). When looking at the Kaplan's work through the lens of commodity feminism, the tightrope that the twins walk between cashing in on their bodies and their female subjects and subversion of art industry and patriarchal norms becomes incredibly hard to separate. The twins fit into Dobson's description of heterosexiness – a merger of traditional feminine tropes (pink, cutesy) with heterosexual pornographic ideals of female body construction and beauty (2015). Because the heterosexy body (White, thin, hairless and young) is reified only through a small number of bodies,

those that fit the descriptor of heterosexiness are fetishized and afforded a large social currency (Dobson, 2015). Although heterosexiness holds social currency, female sexuality still exists within a cultural context of abjection as discussed in previous chapters, and 'the contradictions girls and young women face to present themselves as "sexy" and not slutty' (Dobson, 2015, p.40) is a reality that Western young women have to navigate. Because of this contradiction the Kaplan's work will always be at risk of being reduced to 'basic titillation'.

The twins seem to be performing a postfeminist selfhood that has been defined by feminist media and cultural scholars as a call to be strong, confident, fun-loving and capable (Harris and Dobson, 2015). The postfeminist subject in this context is one who successfully self-brands. 'Postfeminism in practice is often individualised and constructed as personal choice rather than collective action; its ideal manifestation, in turn, is not social change but rather capacity for entrepreneurship' (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.56). In a postinternet age the postfeminist Young-Girl has merged with the interactive-subject. '…the interactive subject participates in and through interactive technology; she "finds" a self and broadcasts that self, through spaces that authorise and encourage user activity' (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.56). In this social context young women are encouraged to self-expose themselves online, express themselves 'and represent their life narratives in terms of personal and professional choice success and achievement' (Dobson, 2015, p. 40). Following this framework, we can see where the Kaplan twins work is less subversive than Soda's and her followers'. The twins are using social media to be influencers, to hold power. Their work is as pristine as their outfit choices. Theirs is a polished heterosexiness and they are performing female empowerment that raises them as individuals through their particular self-brand. Soda, by contrast, is often actively performing messiness and advertising her unsuccessfulness. This gives her a vulnerability and ultimately a genuine connection to her followers, a fascination that goes both ways and forms community. These types of online actions go against the interactive-postfeminist self-representations that stress the importance of outwardly signalling personal achievement. It also makes the pricing of her work, the outward measuring of her success, interesting as it signals that her success lies not within her own power but in the connections, dialogues and interactions that she holds with others.

With the exception of the successful artists like those discussed in this chapter, the girl swarm is not (on the whole) accruing traditional forms of capital (either economic or cultural capital) whilst online. Nicholas Ridout argues '[t]heater is a privileged place for the actual experience of a failure to evade or transcend capital' (2006, p.4). Traditional Western theatre gains both economic and social capital. By placing an investigation of the girl swarm into the theatre, a space that is fully aware of its complicity with capitalism, I wanted to see if the work could open a discussion about the unrecognised value of intimate labour created by groups like the swarm. Kershaw writes of theatre's 'tacit commitment' to power structures that ultimately 'ensure that most people stay away' (1999, p.31). Exploring this work through performance-based research offered an opportunity for a different community of theatre goers to explore the swarm's possibilities. My aim was for the theatre space to lend some of its power to the swarm, centring them as part of the same societal structure that the theatre exists in and therefore countering the Young-Girl nothingness that often surrounds the swarm. However, there was a risk that the theatrical space could dull the subversive potential of the swarm. Ridout also comments on the value of placing subversive work within theatrical space.

> In the…commodified institution that is the modern theatre you perhaps have to look much harder and with greater ingenuity for your resistance or your challenge… such hard looking and ingenuity may be rewarding, and that the disclosure of guilty secrets in the theatre is an important complement to the invention of new public truths in performance. (2006, p.4)

The purpose of the *Girl Swarm* performance was to increase understandings of freedoms and oppressions that an online collective of young women encounters. In chapter two I described how we staged this exploration using concepts of abjection, mess and pleasure to confuse heterosexy interpretations and to counter the image of the complaining feminist killjoy. The performance differed from online performances of self-branded neoliberal subjects and a male technician tried to bar us from performing using pink sand, seeing the girlish mess as not important to the piece and too much hassle to deal with. Through our practice we were challenging gender norms and encountering institutional push-back, it was

only through working as a performance collective, pressurising and reassuring the technician as a group that we overcame that challenge.

In the theatre we were performing certain types of online feminine identities and actively placing these identities within the cultural and political context of the Western late capitalist society that they are a part of. The self-branded individual strives for commodity activism and feminism through individual empowerment rather than dealing with social context (Dobson, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2012). It is the dislocation of the social that ultimately ends up foregrounding brands, profit and individual trials and success stories. The process of valorising and empowering the individual erases or obscures the political and economic factors that govern young women's interactions with the world around them. By performing within a traditional theatre space that is housed within an academic institution we were actively grounding the swarm within discourses of power, privilege and knowledge creation.

Conclusion

Feminist identities have become commodities that can be sold and marketed. At the same time young women are actively encouraged by society to self-brand themselves as the ideal postfeminist young women (McRobbie, 2009; Banet-Weiser, 2012). Many swarm members understand their relationship to late capitalism and the value of their bodies as commodities. Through their online practices they seek to claim agency over their physical bodies and emotions under this patriarchal social system. Swarm online activity is hugely popular; the sharing of it takes up vast tracts of digital space. The swarm diverge from the performance of the good postfeminist subject through their online performances which are messy and overtly emotional. The swarm's online content is always at risk of being censored and erased; the scorn the girl swarm experience highlights its connection to the hegemonic problem with the Young-Girl in the digital world. Commodity activism and feminism follow a neoliberal principle that activism and feminism are rewarded through personal empowerment rather than collective or systemic change. Through my practice-based investigation I was able to portray girl swarm thoughts and opinions within an institution that foregrounds the social reality in which the swarm resides. Through practice-based research as a performance collective we were able to understand the societal pressures the

swarm are under rather than framing selfie culture as an individual choice made by young women to participate in.

Conclusion

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues][2]

In June 2019 the popstar Miley Cyrus collaborated with fashion house Marc Jacobs to run a fundraising campaign using the image shown above, selling clothes and accessories to support Planned Parenthood, an American charity that champions abortion rights for women. This was a high-profile campaign because the state of Alabama had just passed a bill banning abortion even in the case of rape or incest (Wax-Thilbodeaux, 2019). The ad campaign came under fire for plagiarising Instagram artists and their aesthetics without proper accreditation or thanks. Becca Rea-Holloway runs an Instagram account called @thesweetfeminist and specialises in creating socialist and feminist messages written on baked goods, the image of her 2018 cake is shown below (figure. 1) and was clearly the inspiration for the Cyrus/ Jacobs collaboration.

2 Cyrus (2019) *Very special collab…*

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 1. Rea-Holloway (2018) *Louder for the misogynists in the back…*

This occurrence of plagiarism highlights why research into young female online activity is so important. Countries considered to be power houses in the West, particularly the U.S.A and the U.K, are becoming more conservative. Attacks on the freedoms and autonomies of women and their bodies are becoming more frequent, with incidents such as the Alabama case. Conservative austerity cuts have led to the closure of women's refuges (Ryan, 2017), and the highest rates of fatalities due to domestic violence in five years was reported in the UK in September 2019 (Marsh, 2019). Seen against this conservative cultural backdrop, online spaces that allow young women to openly explore their self-worth, their sexuality and to destabilise stereotypes of female body images within a community of like-minded people is vital. Platforms like Instagram and Tumblr allow young women to create images that counter patriarchal oppression and question their status within late capital and neoliberal society. The issue with Cyrus, Jacobs and Rea-Holloway also shows the impossible dilemmas young girls find themselves in. The images, community and culture that they make is regularly co-opted by capital without giving those young women a chance to profit from their own material. Simultaneously the vitriol levelled at Cyrus about the campaign by certain parties (who were not aware of the plagiarism) shows how young women are harassed, diminished and rejected when straying from aesthetics of societal normalcy.

This research project was an investigation into a loose collective of young women who have been dubbed the girl swarm (Darling and Kirton, 2013). This amorphous group is epitomised by hyper-feminine performativity that often questions gender norms. The online content that the swarm creates is a celebration of female sexuality, female body hair and menstrual cycles. Frequently the swarm's online content and usernames reflect the anxiety young women can feel as citizens of a postinternet society. The girl swarm's activities are often labelled as abject or narcissistic and their selfies are increasingly being censored from online platforms. The project sought to further understand the actions of the swarm and why they are considered by some to be offensive and by others socially progressive. I sought to place these young girls within the cultural and historical backdrop of internet subcultures and late capital society. This research explored the swarm through a performance practice: by taking the swarm into the theatre and the rehearsal studio I was able to reveal girlish online performativities on a theatrical stage. Through the practice-based research the performers and I came to understand the importance of young women being able to take up more space than has been allotted to them within a late capitalist, postinternet society. We were able to experience the anxieties and pleasures of performing the swarm and use critical theories to unpack the cultural and societal impact of experiencing these affects.

In order to place the swarm's activities into the cultural and historical context of internet practices this research has examined early ideas around the internet. For many (Hansen, 2004; Poster, 1995) the internet was a chance to create a post-identity utopia where people were free from the societal constraints of their bodies and were able to pursue leisure activities away from the pressures of life under a capitalist system. This type of utopic reality did not come to pass and the internet in the twenty-first century is a place that is highly associated with our identities. Social media and online sites have now created a blur between leisure and work to an extent that has not previously been seen (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Before Web 2.0 was released webpages were not ranked by any cultural or societal importance, and surfing the web was seen as a freedom from the mundanity and stresses of everyday life under capitalism. When internet giants such as Facebook, Google and Amazon emerged this body-less utopia ceased to be a reality; identities are now key to how we operate online, particularly on social media platforms. Companies profit from the disclosure of identity, and personal details on social media. More women use social media

than men. Women's online activities are essential to the function and profit of social media platforms (Nakumara, 2014). This puts women in a position of increased surveillance by social media companies as they mine personal data for profit. Women's use of these sights can be viewed as exploitative (Terranova, 2004). Women produce free labour for these companies through the practice of prosumption (Ritzer and Jurgeson, 2010).

The idea that women are simply exploited by social media companies is complicated because these platforms offer opportunities for self-mediation, identity expression and connection which has the potential to form communities that are subversive to normative culture or form feminist communities. Through my investigation I have shown that social media sites offer a space in order for users to 'figure out, and forge who we are in relation to others' (Langlois, 2013, p.58). I have analysed how this space for contemplation and connection has been utilised by marginalised societies. Trans, queer and female communities have used online platforms such as Tumblr to share images, texts, photos and discussions that explore their identities. Online platforms provide places for those who often feel overlooked by mainstream media to increase their visibility in ways that often counter traditional narratives of gender, race and identity.

There is a strong history of feminist writers who position technology as a key tool in the advancement of gender multiplicities. Donna Haraway proposed that the cyborg could be utilised as a figure to promote socialist-feminist principals of equality (1985). As a living creature that is part human, part machine the cyborg starts to confuse and bend the boundaries of gender roles. Gender needs to be constantly performed in order to be read by society (Butler, 1997); with the cyborg body notions of gender performativity are confused or corrupted and, in the confusion, potential spaces are opened in which differences and multiplicities of identities can be celebrated. The potential of cyborg performance has been further developed by Jennifer Parker-Starbuck (2011), whose book *Cyborg Theatre: Corporeal/Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance* (2011) investigates the cyborg within theatrical spaces. Parker-Starbuck proposes that a cyborg theatre is a staging ground where technology and the human connect in order to destabilise fixed notions of subjectivity. My investigation has sought to understand whether the diversity sought within

cyborg theatre could be utilised to investigate the gender performativity of the girl swarm in an Instagram age.

I used Parker-Starbuck's theories of an abject cyborg theatre as a methodology for staging the swarm. I was able to examine the disgust felt towards the swarm and further understand the anxieties of residing in bodies that are often dismissed, objectified or considered abject on the basis of gender. I have discussed the theory that when someone is marked as abject they are transformed from being a subject to an object and the borders of that object are transformed into a site of disgust (Ahmed, 2014; Kristeva, 1980). Ahmed argues that abjection is spatialising; it reorients bodies into hierarchies, with female bodies lower than male bodies. In order to understand the power behind abjection to move bodies in space and how this plays out with the swarm online, I turned to Lefebvre's theories on spatial production and particularly his writings on representational space (1991). Representational space is the lived experience of space and how individuals seek to change and appropriate space through symbolic objects. By using the symbols and materials of the swarm combined with performers bodies and sound technology I made a performance that harnessed the power of representational space and suspended the hierarchies of abjection through a liminal performance of ritual. By connecting the irritating aspects of the swarm to a slow, ritualised performance I was able to upset the simple categorisation of the girl swarm as abject. The divisions of abject, object and subject were complicated through performance.

By exploring online activities and aesthetics of the swarm in a theatre space I was able to investigate the power relations in the spaces the swarm occupy. A traditional theatre space resides within capitalist power structures and is associated not only with financial capital but the generation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993). Often a theatre space helps to support dominant power structures (Kershaw, 1999). However by placing figures that are often seen as subversive into the dominant space of theatre I was able to temporarily imbue the girl swarm with that cultural dominance whilst still performing difference. I also experienced institutional bias when performing female abjection on stage. I examined the resistance of institutions to embrace feminist performance through the diversity work of Sarah Franklin (2015) and Sara Ahmed (2017).

I have explored the intimate labour of the swarm. Their online actions can be viewed through Hardt's theories of affective labour (1999). Gendered work that has historically been uncompensated and unrecognized has been made central to late capitalist economies because of the importance of information technologies to our lives. This elevation of affective labour provides opportunities for resistance to capital; affective labour produces networks of people who are a form of biopower who collectively can subvert systems of control. I have explored how the swarm's online intimate and affective labour generate anxiety, using choreographic and performance practices to explore the societal anxiety surrounding the swarm and the feelings of anxiety that occur when living in bodies that can be considered abject or objectified on the basis of gender. Through improvisational practice we discovered that taking up space was one way to subvert the anxiety that exists within and upon women's bodies. Ahmed's theories of queer pleasure (2014) were key to understanding why taking up space became an important strategy for subversion. Pleasure has the power to transform anxiety and this transformation occurs on and through bodies. Pleasure and comfort enable bodies to soften and to extend into spaces. Non-normative bodies need to be connected to communities, to form subversive biopowers in order to find comfort and allow their bodies to fill the space around them whether that is digital space or stage space.

I have investigated how the swarm's selfies, videos and other online performativity are destabilising notions of young women under a patriarchal and capitalist system. I discussed how many feminist identities have become commodities that can be sold and marketed and investigated the extent that the swarm and their outputs are being co-opted into commodity feminism and activisim. Young women are encouraged to self-brand themselves as the ideal postfeminist young women (McRobbie, 2009; Banet-Weiser, 2012); this means signalling their independence, beauty and financial success online. However the swarm and other young women on social media are often labelled as narcissistic - selfie culture is thought by many to be distasteful (Bard, 2017) and online female culture is derided as morally vacuous and empty of meanings (Darling and Kirton, 2013). Blogger Sara Gram (2013) proposed that narcissism is often something that capital demands of young women in order for them to be functioning members of society. In order to understand Gram's

proposal and how this relates to the ideal postfeminist girl I turned to the philosophical group Tiqqun (1999), investigating their theory of the Young-Girl. This theory proposed that in a late capitalist age, citizens are required to buy themselves into society by purchasing items that reinforce their identity. This theory was called the Young-Girl because according to Tiqqun, this is how people that were once seen as useless to capital (epitomised by the Young-Girl) were made useful through the reinforcement of their identities through purchases. For Tiqqun this purposefully created anxiety surrounding identity formation and how a subject's image can be read by others.

This research proposed that the swarm have found strategies to defy the confines of the Young-Girl but are always at risk of being exploited or co-opted by capital. By investigating the swarm's image construction on online spaces I found that their images interrogate and critique their Young-Girl narcissist status. By placing the swarm within a late capitalist context I was able to reveal that online girl culture like the swarm is frequently attacked as shallow Young-Girl nothingness or as morally abject because it is taking up online spaces that capital wants to colonise. The arrival of the internet into an era of mass media has generated an attention economy with infinite websites, apps, blog posts and targeted ads. Because of this overwhelming amount of content, one of the most precious things in late capitalism is a person's attention. This makes the space that young girls occupy valuable to capital (Gram, 2013). I have proposed that the swarm are often dismissed by capital because it is taking up attention that could go to other things that capital would deem more valuable. The swarm do not loyally perform the good postfeminist subject; their online performances often celebrate their failures, their messy, emotional selves. Where swarm-style aesthetics are co-opted by large brands into campaigns of commodity feminism or activism, it is usually individual empowerment that is highlighted and forwarded rather than progressive systematic change. Through practice-based research we were able to understand and experience the societal pressures the swarm operate under.

Limits and Future research

Although theories of abjection were integral to this project, the practice-based research only pushed abjection in a limited way. There are many examples of feminist performance practices that use an abundance of mess and abjection to successfully critique female

experiences under patriarchy including Carolee Schneeman's *Meat Joy* (1964) and Lucy McCormick's *Post Popular* (2020). I am aware that if my practice is compared to the canon of abject work it may seem fairly tame; this was because I wanted to perform this work to youth groups. With a teenage section of the audience in mind it became difficult to know how much abjection and graphic content could be in the performance. The audience feedback showed that younger audience members were well within their comfort zone, which indicates that these elements could have been further interrogated. Future areas of research will investigate practitioners who have made work with young people such as Lauren Barri Holstein. Barri Holstein has a live arts practice that often uses mess as a method to discuss female agency, spectacle and defying victimhood. She made a performance in March 2019 with the youth theatre group of the Yard Theatre in east London, a show was about 'bodies, pop culture, and what happens when you take young people seriously…' (The Yard, 2019). Barri Holstein's work sets a precedent in using mess and abjection to discuss youth and pop culture with young people at the centre of the enquiry.

[Image redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Figure 2. Martorana (2019) *Really real teenz*

One of the main challenges of this practice-based work was finding ways to represent a swarm on stage with only three performers. For this investigation the collaboration with Chris Littlewood and his sound designs were key in creating an awareness of multiple voices and a performance that represented a large number of people. In order to push our sonar cyborg theatre further we want to develop a process of working with community groups,

asking them to send videos and sound clips discussing their thoughts and feelings about being a young woman on the internet; we will live-mix this audio into the sound design of the show. During the process we became aware that in order to represent the swarm we had to use video projection as well as sound and live bodies. This became a last-minute addition to the project, and the camera quickly became an essential tool in reiterating notions of narcissism and the agency of the girls' actions as they choose to look into the lens of the camera or out into the audience. There is much more to be discovered on the impact of live projections in this work. Another challenge was trying to trace a nebulous online collective over a period of several years. Although female performativity is going strong online, I am not sure if the swarm still exists in the same way as in 2014 when I started investigating it, and there has been no external reference of the girl swarm for several years. However key figures of the movement such as Molly Soda and her followers continue to generate material online that fits the pink and frothy, Tumblr aesthetic and performativity of the swarm, and so I have continued to use the name in my research.

In this research I have briefly discussed the extra barriers and abjections that are faced by trans people and women of colour, but it is important to note that the girl swarm is predominantly composed of White, cis gendered women. This means that their type of performative subversion is limited; women of colour are required to push much harder against abjections set against them. Aria Dean condemns the 'selfie-feminism' of Soda and Byström, calling their type of work 'a wet dream' for White feminists (2017). Dean argues that the internet as a technology is entangled in the power structures of colonialism and patriarchy, so it would be inadvisable for Black feminists to use selfies as a tool for empowerment:

> The Internet already flattens subjectivities into networks of branded associations and metadata…it is perhaps inadvisable for those of us whose subjectivities have not yet been recognized on a large scale to objectify ourselves further using the tools vetted by those who perpetuate our oppression to begin with — even in efforts toward documenting one's life with the hope of subverting external expectations. And anyway, on the Internet, this subversion is hardly revolutionary work. In fact, the algorithm thanks you for your contribution. (Dean,2017)

Having traced this brand of online performativity for many years, I would also note that the swarm are becoming more aware of issues surrounding race and identity. With the cultural backdrop of the summer of 2020, with the Black Lives Matter protests gaining momentum and an increased urgency both off and online, some White swarm Instagram users are beginning to understand the importance of being an intersectional ally. For example, @thescariestbugever is an Instagram meme account that often looks at anxieties of being female in a late capitalist system. The owner of this account passed the handle and its 3000 followers to two Black American women so that they could use the account to talk about racial inequality. There are times when members have been less successful in pursuing an intersectional feminist agenda; for example there are older selfies of Molly Soda in which she is wearing a bindi. What is interesting to note is that although online spaces can invite threats of violence (as in Byström's case), they are also successfully used as platforms for opening dialogues around issues such as the cultural appropriation of White women wearing bindis. Two Instagram accounts @askapoc and @askalgbtq enable White, heterosexual and cis people to ask questions to people from different racial backgrounds or sexually orientated communities in order to understand problems that these more marginalised communities face and how to be a better ally for them.

One notion regarding the role of social media in society that has changed over the last few years is the increased awareness of social media as a medium that leads to fame and fortune. The prevalence of ratings systems on social media, for example how many YouTube subscribers, how many likes a post receives and Instagram followers someone has, dominates many aspects of postinternet life now. These types of rated interactions on social media have been noted to cause damage to young people's mental wellbeing (Campbell, 2019). Molly Soda stated '[t]he more people pay attention to you, the more you have to start answering for yourself or protecting yourself' (cited in Geffen, 2018). She suggests that this is how most people communicate now, and because of the ambition to be seen and heard on platforms like twitter and Instagram and the rating system they operate under, 'We think about ourselves as a product' (Soda cited in Geffen, 2018). This opinion echoes performer Aysha's thoughts on her latest Instagram posts. She has recently been accepted into the drag House of Tea and is trying to further the ballroom community in her

hometown of Bristol. Aysha told me that she'd felt nervous posting footage of her latest runway walks on Instagram as she now had increased visibility and felt a duty to uphold standards for her house. On reflection her earlier posts and the content generated as part of the development of girl swarm did not induce this pressure, and Aysha noted a freedom in these earlier improvisations. Soda has revealed her love for watching older YouTube videos that teenagers and young girls posted in the late noughts, the playfulness in videos - especially ones that cover or recreate other media - because these posts are free from the notion of self as product. 'Amateur, spontaneous recreations are always going to be interesting because they invert the power dynamic of the original media' (Geffen, 2018). Gevinson has also pointed out that Instagram is designed to be addictive and hierarchical (2019) and talks of the platform's damage towards her own mental health. Other predominantly female communities are developing their own social media platforms so they no longer have to worry about being censored and deleted on mainstream platforms like Instagram (Pole Free, 2019).

Even though the girl swarm has shifted over the years and is harder to grasp on ratings-driven platforms, the swarm is still a useful tool for discussing online female communities and the potential for their actions to subvert patriarchal norms. Swarms by their nature are non-hierarchical; they're non-apologetic and they have the ability to demolish and transform landscapes. Girl swarm takes a plague and softens it, feminises it, lets it smile to camera. Held within the girl swarm is the potential to rethink our relationship to work, pleasure and how women connect to their bodies: one young girl may be thought of as a narcissist, but a wave this big cannot be dismissed so easily. My future aim is to build on this work with community groups, gathering voices and discussions so this practice-based work can continue to be about young women and simultaneously created by young women.

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Figure 1. Soda, M (2015) *From my Bedroom to Yours* [Online] Available at: http://moussemagazine.it/molly-soda-annka-kultys-gallery-2015/ (accessed 14 December 2020)

Figure 2. Lyse, M. (2015) 'Maja Malou Lyse' [Online] 1 December. Available at: https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/zmx8xe/sex-selfies-and-slut-shaming-with-maja-malou-lyse (Accessed: 1st October 2020)

Figure 3. White, P. (2019) *Girl Swarm iii*. [photograph] Bristol

Chapter 4

Figure 1. Parmigianino. (1524) *Portrait in a Convex Mirror.* [Oil on Convex Panel] Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Figure 2. Miceli, G. (2019) 'Girls Sportwear' [Online] Available at: https://gracemiceli.com/nike/

Figure 3. *Sport of Self Care* (2019) [Online] Grace Miceli, New York. Natalia Mantini Production. Accessed: 15 December 2020. Vimeo

Figure 4. Dazed Digital (2017) 'Image of book: Bystrom, A. and Soda, M. (2016) Pics or it didn't happen' [online] 6 March. Available at: https://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/gallery/23539/14/pics-or-it-didnt-happen (Accessed: 1st October)

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Figure 6. Micelli, G. (2018) 'me at all my negative thought patterns!' [Instagram] 16 December. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/BrdoIHCBXSK/?igshid=1o2msboihehvx (Accessed: 1st October)

Figure 7. Micelli, G. (2019) 'just letting you all know' [Instagram] 7 August. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/B031-hbBmdC/ (Accessed: 1st October)

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Conclusion

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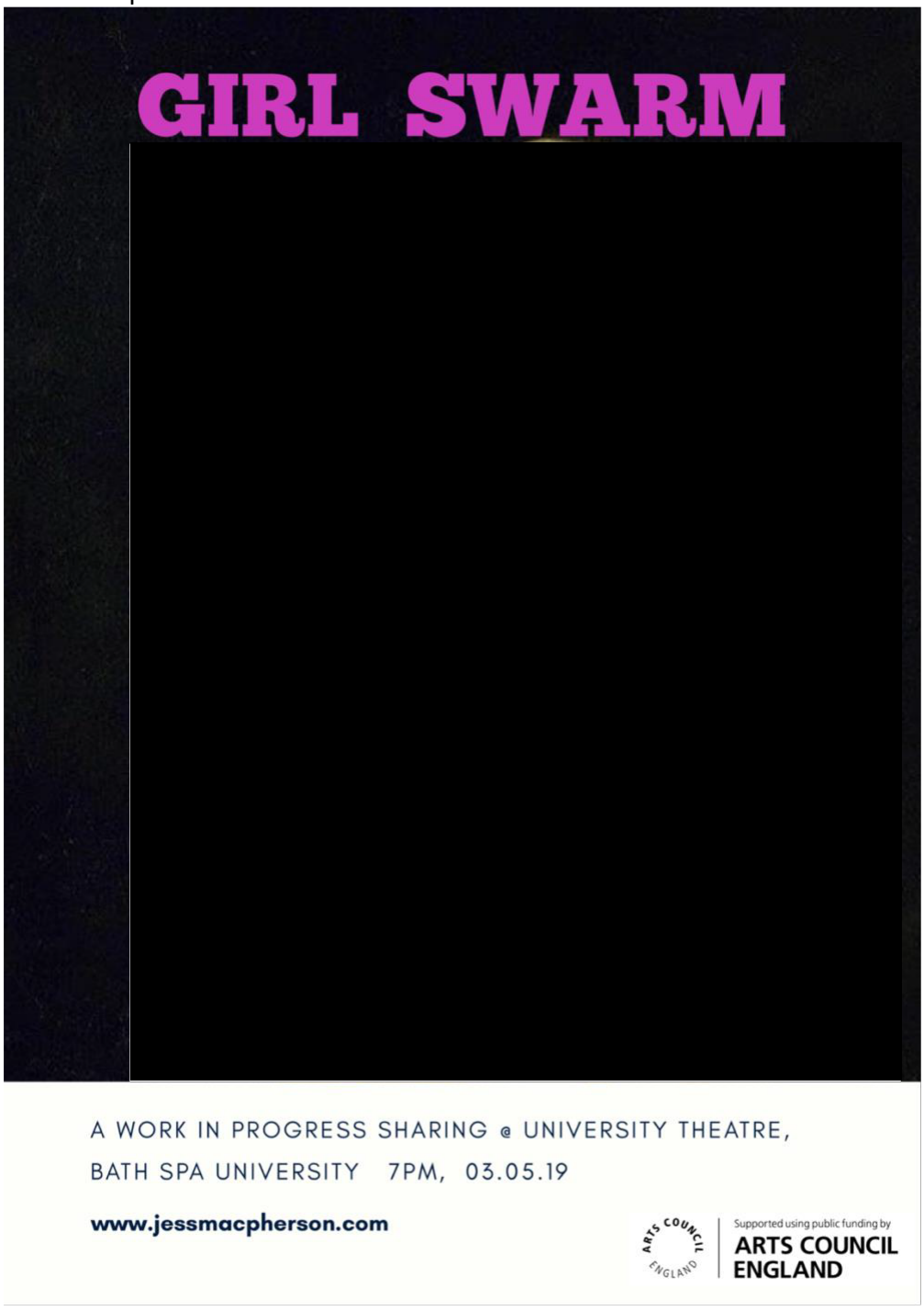
Figure 2. Martorana, M (2019) *Really Real Teenz!* [Online] Available at: https://theyardtheatre.co.uk/theatre/events/really-real-teenz/ (Accessed: 1st October)

Appendix

Poster for performance

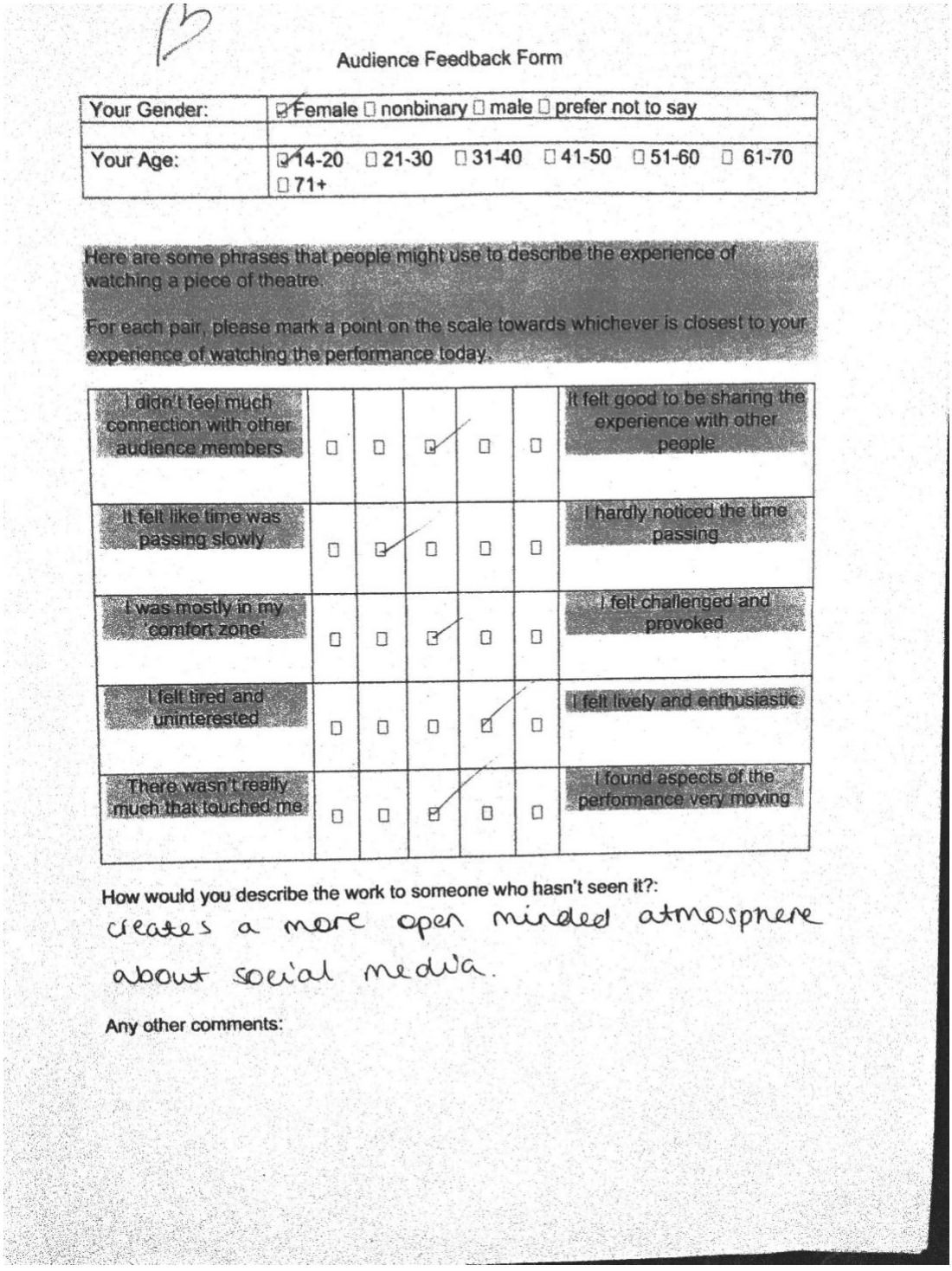


[Image partially redacted in this digitized version due to potential copyright issues]

Notes from meeting Aysha, September 2019

Notebook entry during Holly Foskett-Barnes' visit to rehearsals April 2019

Selection of audience feedback from the show on 5th May, 2019.



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Audience Feedback Form

Your Gender:	☑ Female ☐ nonbinary ☐ male ☐ prefer not to say
Your Age:	☑ 14-20 ☐ 21-30 ☐ 31-40 ☐ 41-50 ☐ 51-60 ☐ 61-70 ☐ 71+

Here are some phrases that people might use to describe the experience of watching a piece of theatre.

For each pair, please mark a point on the scale towards whichever is closest to your experience of watching the performance today.

I didn't feel much connection with other audience members	☐	☐	☑	☐	☐	It felt good to be sharing the experience with other people
It felt like time was passing slowly	☐	☑	☐	☐	☐	I hardly noticed the time passing
I was mostly in my 'comfort zone'	☐	☐	☑	☐	☐	I felt challenged and provoked
I felt tired and uninterested	☐	☐	☐	☑	☐	I felt lively and enthusiastic
There wasn't really much that touched me	☐	☐	☑	☐	☐	I found aspects of the performance very moving

How would you describe the work to someone who hasn't seen it?:

creates a more open minded atmosphere about social media.

Any other comments:

Audience Feedback Form

Your Gender:	☒ Female ☐ nonbinary ☐ male ☐ prefer not to say
Your Age:	☐ 14-20 ☐ 21-30 ☐ 31-40 ☐ 41-50 ☒ 51-60 ☐ 61-70 ☐ 71+

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It felt like time was passing slowly	☐	☐	☐	☐	☒	I hardly noticed the time passing
I was mostly in my 'comfort zone'	☐	☐	☐	☒	☐	I felt challenged and provoked
I felt tired and uninterested	☐	☐	☐	☒	☐	I felt lively and enthusiastic
There wasn't really much that touched me	☐	☐	☒	☐	☐	I found aspects of the performance very moving

How would you describe the work to someone who hasn't seen it?: interesting, I'm not very used to social media and it has got me thinking. I didn't realize women were persecuted on line.

Any other comments:
have thought that social media was a waste of time, this piece has got me thinking that maybe it does have a place.

Audience Feedback Form

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Your Age:	☐ 14-20 ☐ 21-30 ☐ 31-40 ☐ 41-50 ☑ 51-60 ☐ 61-70 ☐ 71+

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I felt tired and uninterested	☐	☐	☐	☐	☑	I felt lively and enthusiastic
There wasn't really much that touched me	☐	☐	☐	☑	☐	I found aspects of the performance very moving

How would you describe the work to someone who hasn't seen it?:

Captivating. Held my attention
Thought provoking thinking about the women present elements

Any other comments:

made me challenge my prejudices and preconceptions
Interesting to know how performers felt about their role.

Audience Feedback Form

Your Gender:	☐ Female ☐ nonbinary ☐ male ☐ prefer not to say
Your Age:	☐ 14-20 ☑ 21-30 ☐ 31-40 ☐ 41-50 ☐ 51-60 ☐ 61-70 ☐ 71+

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I felt tired and uninterested	☐	☐	☐	☒	☐	I felt lively and enthusiastic
There wasn't really much that touched me	☐	☐	☐	☒	☐	I found aspects of the performance very moving

How would you describe the work to someone who hasn't seen it?:

Clever interpretation of subjects that are very real and relevant. There is something that will create thought reaction for anyone.

Any other comments:

Audience Feedback Form

Your Gender:	☒ Female ☐ nonbinary ☐ male ☐ prefer not to say
Your Age:	☐ 14-20 ☒ 21-30 ☐ 31-40 ☐ 41-50 ☐ 51-60 ☐ 61-70 ☐ 71+

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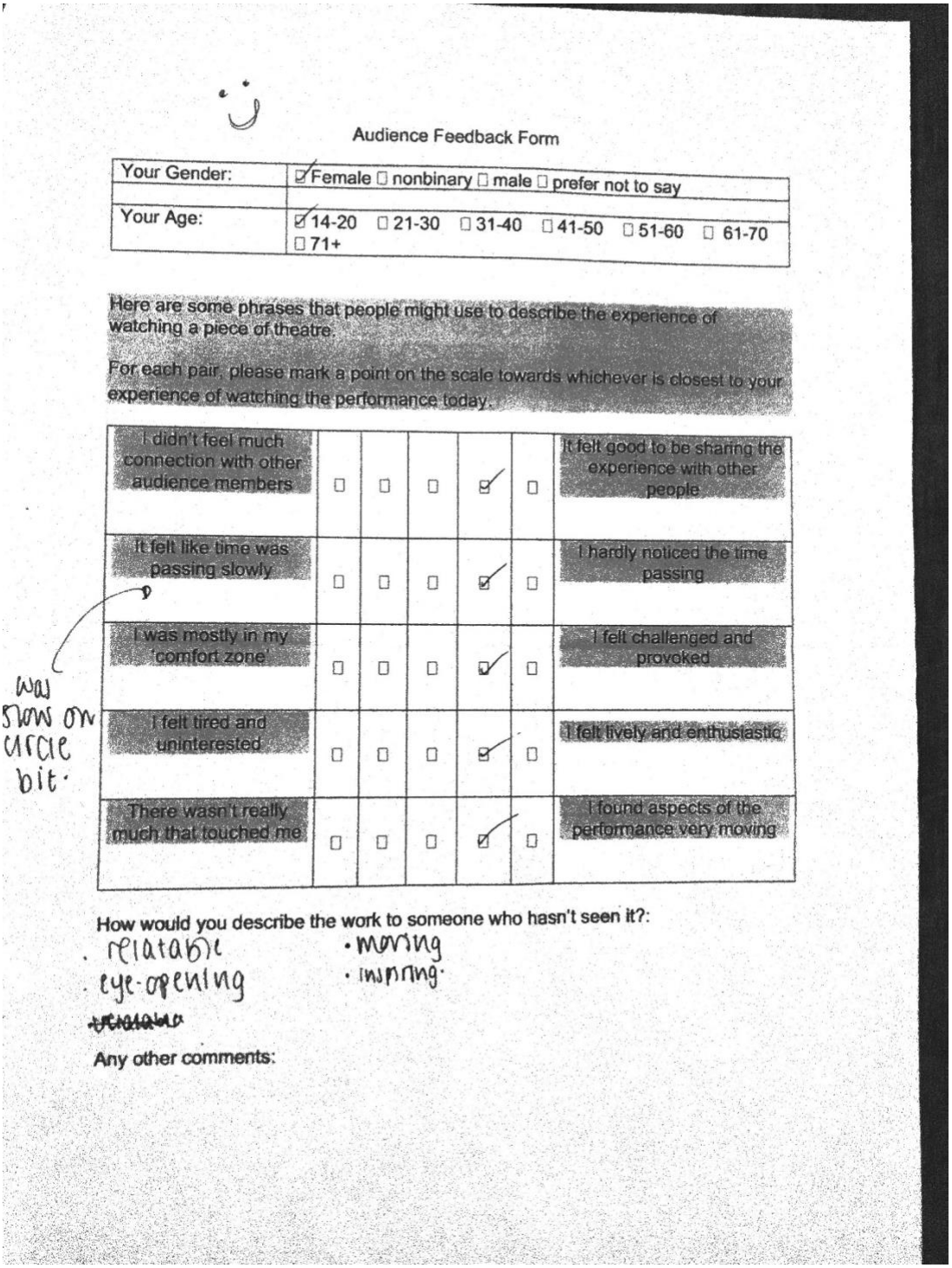
I was mostly in my 'comfort zone'	☐	☐	☐	☐	☑	I felt challenged and provoked
I felt tired and uninterested	☐	☐	☐	☐	☑	I felt lively and enthusiastic
There wasn't really much that touched me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☑	I found aspects of the performance very moving

How would you describe the work to someone who hasn't seen it?:

A journey in the thought provoking world of female body image and social media.

Any other comments:

I ~~liked~~ appreciated the use of space and sounds within the performance (while feeling reactions to the sounds and distortion ~~to~~ was purposely agitating) with imagery to match



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I felt tired and uninterested	☐	☐	☐	☑	☐	I felt lively and enthusiastic
There wasn't really much that touched me	☐	☐	☐	☑	☐	I found aspects of the performance very moving

was slow on circle bit.

How would you describe the work to someone who hasn't seen it?:

- relatable
- eye-opening
- moving
- inspiring.

Any other comments: