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4010 Fat Studies: Fat bodies “In the Flesh” and “At Play”
Session Chair Julia McCrossin, The George Washington University

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10:00 – 11:30 AM

**PERSONAL APPEARANCE – PERFORMING SELF
ABSTRACT**

In *Personal Appearance*, a custom-built professional mascot costume allows me to travel the world making personal appearances, as myself. My manifestation as a cuddly cartoon character functions to erase social barriers, encouraging physical contact and the building of emotional bonds. While the audience’s guard is down, *Personal Appearance* engages the notion of fatness, addressing the lived reality of taboo bodies in spaces made for the socio-normative body, and encouraging discussions on the nature of size, beauty, acceptance, accommodation and accessibility.

This performance can be read as research within the Fat Studies discipline, but it also should be read as cultural production within a contemporary art context.



PERSONAL APPEARANCE – PERFORMING SELF**Cindy Baker**

My artwork is synonymous with my ongoing research; it is through my performance that I am able to study and better understand not only those people and topics that I am interested in, but myself as well. Coming to understand how I am changed by the situations I put myself in (and how I am not changed) allows me to be more sensitive in my interpretation of the results of my work.

This project can be read as research within the Fat Studies discipline, but it also should be read as cultural production within a contemporary art context. Most of the artwork in my broader practice engages themes coming from North American popular culture sources, such as fashion, consumer culture, reality television, popular language/slang and semiotics, magic/illusion, and popular architecture/structures.

My work often takes as its subject the relativity of beauty, desire, and sexuality, the performance of persona and gender roles. In my work I also address the gallery and the roles people play within it; the performance of expected viewership behaviour and the pushing of those rigid boundaries.

On one hand, coming from the 'outsider' position of a queer woman with a taboo (fat) body, I make work that is meant to challenge normative standards of the body, beauty ideals, gender and sexuality. On the other hand, from the 'insider' position of an artist who has worked for 15 years in various positions within the gallery system, I make work that is meant to encourage the viewer to question the notions of acceptable behaviour around art; to challenge traditional relationships between viewer and gallery, and to create a space for free questioning and play. Some of my earliest work out of school addressed both concerns; **Creepy sex with creeps** (1997-9) invited viewers to become the sitters in the headless portraits, inviting them to rethink their role in objectifying and judging bodies.

A lot of my performance practice can be read as a mixture of these 2 interests, but in fact - starting from a position critical of the gallery and art-production system, and with no formal training in body politics, queer or gender theory - performance itself (rather, the act of performing) is what drove me to make my work about beauty, body, and sexuality a major focus of my career.

In 2001, I built a Plexiglass Box on wheels. Trained in painting, printmaking and industrial design, I had no formal background in performance art. When I started performing, it was simply the best way to express the ideas I had. My first major performance project, **Plexiglass Box**, was, at its simplest, a way for me to let the public see a real artist at work, while giving me the opportunity to watch and study the public from within a protective environment. The performance consisted of a bottomless plexiglass box - slightly bigger than a phone booth - on wheels, which I got inside of and pushed around in public. Back then, I wrote:

I have constructed a glass box in which the artist may view the world, immersed yet safely separate from society, as artists "should" be. This glass box allows the artist to draw attention to herself yet allow her to completely ignore the world if she chooses. It gives her authority, anonymity, simultaneous exhibitionism and isolation.

In North America, our art communities may be close, lush, and vibrant, but the greater part of the rest of the population is very removed from art. Regional isolation affects us in that we are not only removed from bigger centres and other artists, but we are removed from contemporary art audiences.

The Plexiglass Box is a shark cage from which to record nature's dangerous creatures, a bank teller's cage, a germ-free zone, a portable popemobile – all implying a need to protect the person inside. It references the annoying mime in his glass box, entertaining all who will pay attention, Houdini's 'inescapable' glass waterboxes, Penn and Teller's clear magic tricks with which they shatter the illusion of the magic establishment, women's "glass ceiling" (and walls), a metaphor as relevant in the art world as it is in business, simultaneously referencing Shawna Dempsey's arborite housedress, an uncomfortable, confining, defining construction. Is the artist inside a work of art, a scientist or examiner, an alien, a magician, mime, clown or other performer? Is she perfect, pristine, a specimen, an example?

This glass box is a tool for intervention; in it, the artist visits gathering places of isolated areas, places where, was she not inside her glass box she may be in grave danger. Conversely, being in the box puts her in a very vulnerable position. She will examine the masses in an attempt to understand them and she will put herself on display in an attempt to allow them to learn more about her own species. She will not contaminate them nor allow herself to be contaminated by them, yet a mutual understanding of each others' cultures shall be aspired to. She will probe, entertain, study, expose herself to, and provide services to these people in malls, parks, and other public and private spaces. She shall be at times a scientist, an alien, a woman, a magician, a work of art.

The box itself was very heavy, and with only a few small ventilation holes, was very hot inside. Though I might only be walking a few blocks in it, there could be no doubt that the work I was undertaking was physically strenuous and exhausting. Borne out of frustration with what I saw as a disconnect between artists and the public at large, and disillusionment with the educational system, the **Plexiglass Box** allowed me to be out in the public while I made my work, engaging with people directly as much or as little as they wished to engage.

Over the course of the project, I had the opportunity to take the Plexiglas box out across Canada. More and more, because the box itself was so physical, so extravagant, so *there* and because it was so physically demanding, the box was very much about me and my body within it, much more than I could have predicted. While out in the box, I was forced to remove layers of clothing, to mop the sweat from my body, to rest often, and dress my wounds. I was on display, but not necessarily for the enjoyment or entertainment of others, as I encountered fear and puzzlement as often as I encountered awe or curiosity. For the most part, though, the people that I encountered refused to interact or even acknowledge my presence.

After countless conversations with the public, the media and the art community, and partly because of how physical the project was I realized that because of the fact that my body is so different, so socially taboo, whenever I perform the audience automatically reads into it a statement about my body, and about the fat body in general. I came to understand that no matter what the project is about, no matter how the performance is manifested, as a performance artist with a body society labels taboo (fat), my work must address my body, for it is read into the content of my work whether I intend it to be or not.

Like it or not, through performance art, artists (just as anyone else in broadcast media or performative roles) put themselves under the microscope of society's aesthetic and physical standards. In order to take an active critical role in the consumption and dissemination of my own image, I began actively addressing the fat body throughout my practice, (both performative and object-based) - my body, women's bodies, queer bodies, and taboo bodies.

- **All things to All Men (and Women)** (2004) - Inspired by an acquaintance's assertion that our small group of friends represented all things to all men (and, because some of us were queer, women), this work attempted to represent (in underwear), every possible object of desire. The goal was in fact not to complete an exhaustive catalogue of all potentially desirable people, but instead to uncover my own limitations; by creating one of everything I could imagine, what the audience could more clearly see was everything that THEY could imagine that I did NOT - thereby visually delineating the bias and limitations in the artist's own desires. This work helped me to uncover and articulate my own beliefs about the politics of desire, gender, social constructs of body image and what kinds of desire are socially acceptable.
- **Aesthetics** (2004)- Artists are in the same business as aestheticians in a way; the creation of ideals of beauty as well as beautiful objects, or at least, objects that are meant primarily for the gaze. I invited the public in to watch while I had all of my body hair removed at a professional salon. The project meant to highlight the ridiculously artificial boundary between society's categories of beauty and ugliness by taking me from too hairy to fit within conventions of beauty all the way to too hairless. At the same time, it allowed/forced me to put myself under the microscope, to put my body on display in a very intimate and awkward way that proved quite unsettling. To have all my hair removed is the first step by putting myself not only under the microscope of society's aesthetics, but into the very hands of the literal makers of beauty: the aestheticians.

The beauty standard is such an unrealistic goal, a mere sliver along the continuum of body types and potential physicality. So what if I took a running start towards that mark – that tiny speck that is the beauty ideal – and completely overshoot it?

- **Fashion Plate** (2007) - A project about beauty, body image, and the dysfunctional contemporary fashion industry. Over a month within the fashion district of Toronto, the public was invited to design and create clothing for me (but more importantly, to look at me, literally 'size me up,' and think of me as a fashionable person). With no measuring tools or patterns available, the clothes had to be designed and fit completely by guesswork, or by the 'designers' getting quite physical with me, wrapping fabric and arms around me, and comparing my body to their own. This performance furthered my broader concerns about the body by challenging the public to actively look at and think about a large woman's body, and to see that body as beautiful. At the end of the month, there was a fashion show and public launch for the new line of clothes, at which I modeled each of 34 new outfits. This project challenged people to look at a fat (taboo) body, to think about that body in relation to their own and in relation to fashion, which is, after all, a visual translation of society's rules and standards about bodies.
- **Portraits of My Naked Hands Lounging in Bed** (2008 – ongoing) - I am trying to evoke the dual sensations of attraction and repulsion inherent in our society's relationship to fat women, creating ridiculous photographic bodyscapes using only my hand. These farcical sexscapes, intended to be mistaken for other, larger bodyparts and sensual rolls of flesh, may remain, to the average viewer, alien even after they come to understand what the subject of the photographs is because our collective denial of the fat woman's body includes all of her parts, including her hands.

The natural lighting is meant to suggest a comfortable, placid environment and a day filled with self-indulgent lounging. The subject of a partner or a second body is never broached, except when the viewer imagines one amidst the creases and rolls. This atmosphere set up through the series subtly confirms our learned suppositions of fat women as self-indulgent, and resists confrontationalism by refusing to suggest the viewer's role in this taboo sexcapade, thus allowing us to let our guard down enough to explore the attraction/repulsion element of the physicality of the body, which we normally are forbidden from engaging.

Eponymously Yours

Owning a professional mascot costume of myself allows me to travel to communities across the country and around the world making personal appearances as *Cindy Baker*. This project functions similarly to the **Plexiglass Box** in that I still have the opportunity to watch the world from a safe emotional (if not physical) distance, but this time exaggerating and simplifying myself for ease of examination and scrutiny by the public. Unlike that project, in **Personal Appearance**, my persona's similarity to other cuddly and approachable characters functions to erase social barriers and encourage physical contact and play, as well as the building of emotional bonds; it therefore allows me further and more complex access to my project of studying people through allowing them to study me. While the audience's guard is down, **Personal Appearance** engages the notion of fatness, addressing the lived reality of taboo bodies in spaces made for the socio-normative body, and encouraging discussions on the nature of size, beauty, acceptance, accommodation and accessibility.

Reasonable Facsimile

This is a project about performing oneself - about being sheltered yet vulnerable, plain yet larger-than-life, on display and yet invisible, immersed yet removed. It's funny but creepy, in the same way that clowns are, but also in that no one can be certain that it's me inside. (There is usually no hint of the person in the mascot costume – in this project it might be considered very important for the viewer to know if it is me, since it changes the meaning significantly if it is not me inside – but I give them no clue.)

The idea of "performing self" is related to issues of gender construction and usually refers to expected gendered behaviour. While this project is not primarily about the performance of gender roles, it **is** about the performance of expectations based on one's persona in any given situation.

How does one perform a caricature of themselves? The answer of course is that we do it every time we go out; we may be ourselves, but we are not only ourselves; we are representatives of ourselves, hyper-people. The more socializing we do, the more developed is this persona; more refined, more false in that we smooth out the edges, remove the anomalies.

Though we may strive to fit in and we may belong to communities, in performing our personalities through physicality, we assume the mantle of genre. (Philosopher Jacques Derrida's definition of genre implies "participation without belonging – a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set.") In this way, in our public lives, EVERYONE is to some degree an impostor.

But it is not the self, ironically, that defines self anyway, since the performed self would not exist without its audience. The notion of genre implies that we are "typecast" as ourselves. Actors playing a role (or many similar roles) over an extended period of time are in danger of becoming typecast; this is less because of the loss of ability to perform other roles and more because of the audience's inability to see them as anything other than that adopted persona. It is less likely that the actor will lose the ability in this case to perform other acting roles, and MORE likely that they will in fact adopt the traits of their screen character into their real-life persona.

So this persona-building, acting out the self, informs the self and affects who the person is. How will I change after spending days surrounded by people, people I might know well, but in complete silence – a spectacle ignored?

Instead of being "just me" as I was in the *Plexiglass Box*, this is "hyper-me" while being not me at all. This is the pinnacle of performing self, because nothing about the performance is ACTUALLY me; it all merely *resembles* me.

By becoming a *caricature*, I am automatically more loveable, fun, approachable and literally larger than life.

By becoming a *caricature of Cindy Baker*, I nurture the myth of the character of that person/persona that is constantly examined and toyed with through my own practice.

By becoming *Cindy Baker*, I discover and unpack what makes me me – or, more accurately, what makes me appear to be me.



So, while I'm performing a character that is recognizably me (in what I look like, what I do, where I go, how I act), it's also recognizably a mascot that conforms to the role of a mascot (in what it looks like, the way it moves and communicates).

Since my performances always make a statement about my body, whether I intend it or not, through *this* performance, I simultaneously play into that notion (through the presence of my exaggerated and caricatured body), and refute it (by hiding my actual body for the duration of the performance.)

Hot in Here

The last few years have seen a rash of fatsuit performances on TV and in the movies. It has been suggested that fatness is the final frontier of political correctness— the one “ism” that remains largely unrecognized by the mainstream. These portrayals of falsified fatness, notably the fat Gwyneth Paltrow in *Shallow Hal* or Eddie Murphy as both the title character and his fat girlfriend in *Norbit* (or Eddie Murphy as every fat character in SEVERAL movies), prove that the very idea of fatness can still elicit a laugh. This performance allows me to be the fat girl in the fatsuit; my attempt at understanding what it must be like to be able to take off the fatsuit at the end of the day, like Tyra Banks and all the other crying daytime talkshow hosts after their ratings-grabbing forays into the world of fatness.

It's really interesting to me that in order to complete the fatsuit experience, these celebrities find it necessary to not just go out in public fat, but go out to Walmart wearing really cheap unfashionable clothes, or be seen eating banana splits in public; it's clear that they believe that being fat is not simply a physical state, but is in fact a lower class, free from good taste or aesthetic sensibility, and a result of grossly indulgent behaviour. Even the television series *Drop Dead Diva*, which would have you believe it is pro-fat and in fact stars notable pro-fat celebrities Margaret Cho and Rosie O'Donnell, portrays their lead character as an indulgent overeater with no self-control. (The main character is a shallow model reincarnated into the body of a fat lawyer; she not only discovers in her new body a wealth of knowledge and intelligence, but an uncontrollable need for pastries.)

I think it's funny that many celebrities, when asked about their experience in a fatsuit, mention hotness as the “worst part of being fat”, as though they believe that fat is very much like they have just experienced it: itchy, dead to the touch/dulling the senses, hot, and easily removed. My fatsuit, while hot and muffling, provides me with a converse experience to the average fatsuit wearer. In it, I am more approachable; people are almost universally friendly and happy to see me. When I take off MY fatsuit, I am left with the warm glow of having been the subject of adoration by the masses.

In my mascot costume, I go places Cindy Baker would go, do things Cindy Baker would do, in an attempt to gather Cindy Baker experiences and develop Cindy Baker habits, through interacting with those who know Cindy Baker best, at professional gatherings, social events, work. And I take the show on the road, continuing to do typically Cindy Baker-like things, but around those who know me only superficially or not at all.

What Not to Wear

With an assortment of clothing, Cindy Baker is like a Giantess Barbie – interchangeable personas with each new uniform. Look, it's Conference Cindy, in her thoughtfully kooky yet vaguely professional outfit. Oh, it's Weekend Cindy, in that muumuu that goes from bedroom to garden to grocery store, and then out bowling! Now it's Performance Artist Cindy in another impossible to peg ensemble that helps define her as an artist whose work addresses relevant social concerns and as a fun-loving person with a devil-may-care attitude!

Performance Art presenter FADO gave me the chance to examine how others want me to be in the performance ***Fashion Plate*** presented at the Drake Hotel in Toronto. ***Personal Appearance*** gave me the chance to determine how I want others to see me, and thereby exert influence over my persona.

(Though the persona is created, in great part, by outside influences and in relation to others, through understanding the ways to alter the “self” simply through presentation, artists and cultural movements have harnessed significant influence. For example, in *Beauty Secrets*, Wendy Chapkis wrote about the phenomenon of changing the self through adopted style within Punk, New Wave, and Yuppie movements.)

By having this costume professionally made, before the performance even started I had the opportunity to see how others characterize me – how my physical features are exaggerated in an attempt to create a caricature of me – and how I responded. This process gave me an invaluable opportunity to describe myself to professional character-builders, ask them to interpret how they see me, and negotiate with them to achieve what we both believe is a reasonable facsimile.

Dissemination

Because the mascot, my chosen mode for this performance, is typically used as a tool for promotion, this project functions doubly (and ironically) as public relations and actual performance. I walk a thin line between being as truly myself as I can, and following standard guidelines of successful and appropriate mascot behaviour. This provides the most basic puzzle that even the most casual of observers can go away with after seeing this performance – Who is this? Why, it's Cindy Baker. And who is Cindy Baker? She's a performance artist. What/where/when is she performing? This, right now; this is the performance. Who is inside? Cindy Baker, of course! OK, then who is the character she's playing? Herself; Cindy Baker - and hopefully it will keep them thinking about the project for some time after.



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