

Ambivalent Attachments:  
Love, Sex and Family in Works by Catherine Opie, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan

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A Thesis in the Department of Art History

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## ABSTRACT

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As the mainstream gay, lesbian and bisexual rights movement began to prioritize marriage equality and other forms of legal relationship recognition in the 1990s, some queer people were concerned about the repercussions of such campaigns. This thesis research examines two bodies of work by artists who self-identify as lesbian or queer women: the first two photographs in Catherine Opie's Self-Portrait series, *Cutting* (1993) and *Pervert* (1994), as well as Shawna Dempsey and Lori Millan's *Object/Subject of Desire* (1993). These works by Opie, Dempsey and Millan appear to manifest ambivalence about these contentious debates, which I seek to better understand. I engage with texts by a number of queer theorists, including Michael Warner, Lisa Duggan, Jack Halberstam, Lauren Berlant and Heather Love. Ultimately, the objective is not to argue that these works align with either side of the subcultural divide, but to show that identity and desire are more complex than binary thinking may suggest.

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## Introduction

Marriage equality and other forms of legal relationship recognition became a contentious issue for sexually-diverse people in the U.S. and Canada in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Those advocating for the cause emphasized that excluding non-heterosexual people from the institution marriage is a form of discrimination, and in doing so the government was “depriving them of critical assistance, security, and obligations in virtually every area of life.”<sup>2</sup> However, some queer people interpreted these campaigns as indications of an internalization of heteronormative relationship constructs,<sup>3</sup> and worried about the ways in which the movement could further alienate queers who did not subscribe to these constructs, arguing that it would be better to challenge the financial and legal privileges that marriages and civil unions offer instead.<sup>4</sup> This thesis research examines two bodies of work that exemplify this tension, casting light on the concerns of their particular social and artistic moment, while also bringing insights gained from queer theory, a field that was in its infancy when they were created, into the conversation. These works are the first two photographs in Catherine Opie’s *Self-Portrait* series, *Cutting* (1993) and *Pervert* (1994), as well as Shawna Dempsey and Lori Millan’s video *Object/Subject of Desire* (1993).

The ambivalence of the LGBTQ+ community with regard to issues like relationship rights and sexual expression is captured in these works. Both bodies of work declare the longing for a domestic partnership that would provide access to the privileges that many other white, cisgender, middle-class citizens of the U.S. or Canada enjoyed in legally recognized heterosexual

<sup>1</sup> Evan Wolfson, *Why Marriage Matters: America, Equality, and Gay People’s Right to Marry* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 29, 32-33; Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Shame* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Michelle K. Owen, “Family as a Site of Contestation: Queering the Normal or Normalizing the Queer,” in *In a Queer Country: Gay and Lesbian Studies in the Canadian Context* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pump Press, 2001), 91; Tom Warner, *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 224-225.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfson, *Why Gay Marriage Matters*, 13-15.

<sup>3</sup> Warner, *Never Going Back*, 218.

<sup>4</sup> Warner, *Never Going Back*, 220.



relationships by the end of the century. They portray the desire for a “normal” relationship involving long-term monogamy, child rearing, material wealth and property ownership, but they do so with a degree of discomfort or even repulsion. They simultaneously declare with confidence a seemingly contradictory desire to maintain their freaky sexual lifestyles involving controversial acts like fisting and edge play. Though the issues these art works speak to were polarizing, queerness urges us to resist binary thinking. These works illustrate the conflicts within and between members of the communities that the artists were a part of. They show that neither communities nor individuals are cohesive units, for there are plenty of internal divisions.

I consider how the structure of these bodies of work facilitate the representation of this multidimensionality through shared technical and conceptual mechanisms. The artists convey their ideas using formal methods that express fragmentation and multiplicity; Opie's self-portraits belong to a series of three photographs spanning a decade, while Dempsey and Millan's video performance is divided into four distinct parts. These works also represent the artists' bodies as they play with the visual language associated with idealized femininity, queering its performance through body adornment. Words and images are either projected onto or inscribed into the artist's skin, simulating how language shapes bodies and the desire they experience.

Each of the artists whose work I discuss self-identify as queer or lesbian,<sup>5</sup> though they make art from different regions in North America and the slightly dissimilar political contexts shape their work. Catherine Opie's art practice is based in LA. She spent her childhood in Sandusky, Ohio before her family relocated to suburban Rancho Bernardo, California when she was thirteen years old.<sup>6</sup> As an adult, she studied photography at the San Francisco Art Institute and

<sup>5</sup> Orna Guralnik, “Being and Having an Identity: Catherine Opie,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 14 (2013): 241; Myrna Kostash, “Beyond Identity Politics: Transgressions,” in *The Next Canada: In Search of Our Future Nation* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2000), 137.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Opie, “The Drive to Describe,” interview by Maura Reilly, *Art Journal* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 89.

later graduated with an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts. Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan met when they were both residing in Toronto and working theatre technician jobs. Millan dropped out of high school, where she had been bullied, recalling later that it was “very little about education and mainly about forming a citizen or non-citizen.”<sup>7</sup> Dempsey studied fine arts at York University. The pair moved to Winnipeg in 1989, where the cheaper cost of living made it possible for them to focus on making art together full-time.<sup>8</sup> At the time they were lovers, but they ended their relationship in 1992, continuing to live and work together in Winnipeg.<sup>9</sup>

Many texts have acknowledged how work by Opie and by Dempsey and Millan, respectively, subverts heteronormativity<sup>10</sup> but they often do not focus on the contradictions I discuss here. In bringing these bodies of work together, my thesis also contextualizes them in terms of the relevant intracommunity conflicts,<sup>11</sup> offering further insight into the meaning of the

<sup>7</sup> Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, “Public Warning! Sexing Public Spheres,” interview by Lynne Bell and Janice Williamson, *Tessera* 25 (1998/1999): 76.

<sup>8</sup> Dempsey and Millan, “Public Warning,” 57.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Batalion, “Cracking the Domestic: Collaborations Among Women Artists,” *N. paradoxa* 13 (January 2004): 11.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Blessing, “Catherine Opie: American Photographer,” in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* (New York City: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2009); Guralnik, “Being and Having an Identity;” Lynda Hall, “Bodies in Sight: Shawna Dempsey (Re)Configures Desire,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 92 (1997); Myrna Kostash, “Beyond Identity Politics: Transgressions;” Jayne Wark, “Queering Abjection: A Lesbian, Feminist, and Canadian Perspective,” in *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada*, ed. Heather Davis (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017); Bennett, Susan. “Radical (Self-)Direction and the Body: Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan’s Performance Art.” *Canadian Theatre Review* 76 (1993).

<sup>11</sup> Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Linda Dittmar, “The Straight Goods: Lesbian Chic and Identity Capital on a Not-So-Queer Planet,” in *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, ed. Deborah Bright (New York City: Routledge, 1998); Nan D. Hunter and Lisa Duggan, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York City: Routledge, 1995); Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (New York City: Anchor Books, 1995); Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Shame* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Tom Warner, *Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Robin Bauer, *Queer BDSM Intimacies: Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries* (Basingstroke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Margot D. Weiss, “Gay Shame and BDSM Pride: Neoliberalism, Privacy, and Sexual Politics,” *Radical History Review* 100 (2008); Lynda Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Monika Kin Gagnon, *Other Conundrums: Race, Culture, and Canadian Art* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2000); Evan Wolfson, *Why Marriage Matters: America, Equality, and Gay People’s Right to Marry* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004);

ambivalence they manifest; while at the same time, my analysis of this ambivalence offers further insight into the intracommunity conflicts they relate to. This dialogue between the works of art and their political contexts contributes to the pre-existing literature on both subjects.

Since this thesis covers a range of issues, my research is interdisciplinary, drawing from writers of queer theory, feminist theory, affect theory, critical race theory, literary theory and philosophy. In order to situate these works in their sociohistorical contexts, I studied secondary sources on LGBTQ+ history as well as texts by queer activists who were a part of the political movements that concern this thesis, including Urvashi Vaid and Tom Warner. I have integrated their specific insights into my discussion of the artworks as they are relevant. More generally, during this historical reading, the tension I have noted crystallized for me. Michael Warner's persuasive *The Trouble with Normal* and his critical analysis of the marriage equality movement in the U.S. played a major part in shaping my ideas for this thesis. And yet Evan Wolfson's *Why Marriage Matters: America, Equality, and Gay People's right to Marry* also helped me to understand why marriage equality is an important issue for so many gay, lesbian and bisexual people. The works that I analyze here are vivid demonstrations that these same tensions underpinned key works by lesbians from the 1990s.

In what follows, I explore this dynamic by performing two main tasks. The first two sections of the thesis focus on the work – Opie's *Self-Portraits* from the early 1990s and Dempsey and Millan's *Object/Subject of Desire*, respectively – in order to identify, describe, and fully explore the ways in which this tension manifested itself, most notably through strategies of ambivalence and the muddling of constructed binaries. Then, to better understand the works and

Michelle K. Owen, "Family as a Site of Contestation: Queering the Normal or Normalizing the Queer," in *In a Queer Country: Gay and Lesbian Studies in the Canadian Context* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pump Press, 2001).

their apparent contradictions, I turn to pertinent texts by queer and affect theorists who write about the themes that these works explore. These include attachment, desire, loss, and failure. I take Lauren Berlant's theory of cruel optimism to provide a framework for understanding the "violence of normativity"<sup>12</sup> that these complicated images manifest, Heather Love's examination of the relationship between queer love and loss to explain the tension between the subjects' "stubborn attachments to lost objects" and "celebrations of perversion,"<sup>13</sup> and Jack Halberstam's exploration of failure to demonstrate how unintelligibility can be a form of resistance.

I introduce the specific concepts drawn from the work of each of these queer scholars through the vehicle of the art I have chosen. More generally, however, queer theory has a special pertinence to the broad dynamic of ambivalence that is my central concern in these pages, for queer theory fundamentally encourages us to rethink the binary pairings (male/female, heterosexual/homosexual) that we have been socially conditioned to accept. In the words of Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, who I draw from in my discussion on shame, queerness can be defined as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically."<sup>14</sup> Because ambivalence presupposes a duality, queer theory is the most appropriate methodology to employ in this discussion. It is a framework that allows for fluidity and complexity with respect to identity and desire. Ultimately, my objective is not to argue that these works align with either side of the subcultural divide, but to honour the complicatedness that queer theory, too, embraces.

<sup>12</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC : Duke University Press), 28.

<sup>13</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 7.

<sup>14</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 7.

Central to queer theory is of course the concept of “normativity”, and this is a concept that I mobilize in two directions: the *heteronormative*, and the *homonormative*. Heteronormativity is the “pervasive and often invisible”<sup>15</sup> cultural belief that positions heterosexuality (and its constructs) as the norm from which all other sexualities deviate, while homonormativity generally refers to the ways in which LGBTQ+ communities have come to internalize heteronormative standards. The cultural theorist Lisa Duggan is widely recognized as having popularized the term homonormativity, which she defines as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, an example of homonormativity would be the disproportionate allocation of community resources towards the marriage equality cause, which she refers to as “a strategy for privatizing gay politics and culture for the new neoliberal world order.”<sup>17</sup> While many texts cited in this thesis affirm Duggan’s notion of homonormativity, other scholars have taken issue with it.<sup>18</sup> Most critical for this thesis has been the critique of geographer Natalie Oswin, who draws attention to how the notion presumes a binary between “non-complicit and complicit queers” and implies “a corresponding distinction between authentic and non-authentic queers.”<sup>19</sup> As it is highly unlikely that any queer person living in Canada or the U.S. is able to forsake

<sup>15</sup> Michael Warner, “Introduction: Fear of a Queer Planet,” *Social Text*, no. 29 (1991): 3.

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 179.

<sup>17</sup> Duggan, “The New Homonormativity,” 188.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Stryker, “Transgender History, Homonormativity and Disciplinarity,” *Radical History Review* 100 (Winter 2008); Gavin Brown, “Homonormativity: A Metropolitan Concept that Denigrates ‘Ordinary’ Gay Lives,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 59 (2012); Gavin Brown, “Thinking Beyond Homonormativity: Performative Explorations of Diverse Gay Economies,” *Environment and Planning A* 41, no. 6 (2009).

<sup>19</sup> Natalie Oswin, “Towards Radical Geographies of Complicit Queer Futures,” *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 3, no. 2 (2004): 84.

capitalism altogether, Oswin notes that we are all complicit to some degree.<sup>20</sup> “Instead of thinking complicit space as total and negative,” Oswin proposes “we might reconceptualize it as *ambivalent* and porous, as an undetermined set of processes that simultaneously enables both resistance and capitulation... If both resistance and capitulation are enabled in and through complicity then a complicit queerness can still present a threat” (emphasis added).<sup>21</sup> When I use the term homonormativity in this thesis, I am referring to a process in which queer people feel pressure to assimilate to heteronormative ways of living and relating. Lisa Duggan’s argument greatly influenced my approach to this research topic, but Oswin’s counterargument factors into my analysis as well since I agree that the complicit/non-complicit binary that Duggan’s theory suggests must be challenged.

Now that both Canada and the United States have updated their laws to a gender-neutral definition of marriage, lesbians have access to this idealized institution that contributed to the marginalization of women and queer people for centuries. Yet, many members of the lesbian community, particularly trans women of colour, continue to face violence and poverty. Growing up in the 1990s and early 2000s, I supported marriage equality because it seemed important. The laws in place then denied many legal rights to non-heterosexual couples, so I understood that marriage was a way for two people in love to access certain privileges pertaining to property and personal finances. But I now wonder to what extent the movement’s success has harmed our communities by upholding narrowly defined ideas about relationships. Attentive consideration of these artworks, I contend, can help us to fully consider this issue.

<sup>20</sup> Oswin, “Towards Radical Geographies,” 86.

<sup>21</sup> Oswin, “Towards Radical Geographies,” 84.

### **“Optimistic,” “Very Angry” Pieces: Opie’s Early Self-Portraits**

To date, Catherine Opie’s *Self-Portrait* series consists of three photographs, but my thesis research focuses on the two images that were created in the early 1990s. Taking the political struggles that sexually-diverse communities were engaging in at the end of the twentieth century into account, I argue that these works illustrate, but also complicate, the divergent views on how relationship recognition was beginning to take precedence over other causes in the LGBTQ+ rights movement, such as the censorship and criminalization of unconventional sexual practices. Opie’s first two self-portraits, respectively, seem to be at odds with one another, and together they affirm Oswin’s conclusion that we should reconceptualize supposed complicity in homonormative structures as ambivalence. After I briefly introduce both works and provide some historical context, I will examine how ambivalence manifests in the series through the coexistence of the following binary concepts: normal and perverse; aesthetic beauty and bodily pain; shame and pride.

The first photograph in the series, *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993) [fig. 1], conveys the desire to attain a cohabitational amorous partnership with another woman. It portrays the artist standing in front of an ornate green backdrop with her shirtless back facing the camera. Opie’s short haircut and silver gauged hoop earrings signify her dyke identity. The caramel highlights in her hair have a painterly quality that echoes the fresh blood dripping down her back, from an image that had been etched into her flesh moments before the photograph was taken. If we overlook the visible blood and irritation, the picture itself seems joyful. The cutting represents a lesbian couple smiling while holding hands, beside a single-detached dwelling, under a partly cloudy sky. This image is reminiscent of a child’s drawing as a result of its amateur quality and the particular objects that it depicts: a simple house, stick figures, a schematic sun. The appearance of Opie’s lacerated skin

contrasts and complicates the otherwise pleasant mood that the cutting portrays. Although the artist herself has used the terms “idealistic” and “optimistic” to describe this work,<sup>22</sup> bloody crepuscular rays add nuance.

Taking the next self-portrait into consideration, it becomes all the more clear that Opie’s desire for coupledness does not necessarily mean that she believes spousal rights should come at the expense of radical sexual liberation. The second photograph in the series, *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994) [fig. 2], portrays Opie seated in the center of the frame with both hands clasped, resting gently on her lap. She wears only a pair of leather pants and fetish mask that covers her entire face and neck. The word “pervert” has been carved into the artist’s bare chest in decorative script, above her exposed breasts that bear a pierced left nipple. Twenty-three evenly spaced needles pierce through each arm, forming a long symmetrical pattern from the bottom of her shoulders to the top of her wrists. In this work, Opie reclaims “pervert,” a derogatory term that is not only used by heterosexuals to demean gays and lesbians but also used by some gays and lesbians to demean queers whose lifestyles they disapprove of, like those who engage in casual sex, polyamory or kink.

Some historical context pertaining to self-portraiture and photography reveals how the qualities associated with this particular genre and medium bear upon the conflicts that energize these images. Catherine Opie has worked extensively with portraiture, a genre traditionally accessible only to the rich and powerful, denoting the sitter’s superior status in society. The artist has acknowledged that her portraits are inspired by the work of the Northern Renaissance painter,

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Opie, “Lesbian Domesticity: Catherine Opie,” interview by Rachel Allen, *LA Forum Newsletter* (Spring 1998): 2; Catherine Opie, “Creating a New Iconicity: An Interview with Catherine Opie,” interview by Juliette Méliá, *Transatlantica* 1 (2013): 8.



Hans Holbein the Younger,<sup>23</sup> and this influence is especially apparent in her use of colour and composition. The history of self-portraiture can be traced back to sixteenth century Europe, a time when there was an “increasing self-consciousness about identity” and “significant changes in the status of the artist.”<sup>24</sup> It is a genre that has allowed artists to experiment with technique or composition on their own terms, without the pressure of having to conform to the expectations of a sitter who historically would have commissioned their work. The self is a subject that facilitates the “exploration of psychological change” and “expression of varying moods,”<sup>25</sup> because with self-portraiture, artists are able to work with the same subject, repeatedly, for the duration of their career. Bearing in mind this historical context, self-portraiture is an ideal genre for artists to explore their own ambivalent desires. Because self-portraiture developed through the medium of oil painting, contemporary photographers who work with this genre remain in dialogue with painting conventions.<sup>26</sup> However, there are some significant differences between a portrait in oil and a portrait photograph, and these affect how a work is commonly read by the wider public. Since photography captures something that is seemingly “real” – and it is true that Opie never digitally manipulates her photographs<sup>27</sup> – it provokes a stronger reaction from people who think that obscene art should be censored, especially when it portrays something that undermines the conservative myth of a unified national value system.<sup>28</sup> Nudity in photography is especially controversial because of the medium’s role in making pornography more accessible to the general population. According to Wendy Steiner, “the intrusion of proscribed or shocking realities into acceptable

<sup>23</sup> Catherine Opie, “Catherine Opie in Conversation with Douglas Crimp,” interview by Douglas Crimp, in *The Aesthetics of Risk*, ed. John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2008), 301.

<sup>24</sup> Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2004), 164.

<sup>25</sup> West, *Portraiture*, 164.

<sup>26</sup> Graham Clark, *The Photograph* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), 103.

<sup>27</sup> Catherine Opie, “I Have Represented This Country: An Interview with Catherine Opie,” interview by Russell Ferguson, in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* (New York City: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2009), 260.

<sup>28</sup> Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure*, 40.

reality is one of the oldest tricks of photography, which might be defined as an art of conflicted response. Painting, in contrast, is an art in which nudity can exist relatively unremarked.”<sup>29</sup> Opie’s *Self-Portraits* not only elicit a conflicted response in some viewers, but as we shall see they also portray the artist’s seemingly conflicted desires.

### *Normal/Perverse*

*Cutting* expresses the inescapability of heteronormative gender coding and, to some extent, an inadvertent acceptance of the nuclear family model’s supremacy in American culture. In an interview for *LA Forum Newsletter*, the artist confirmed that one of the stick-figures represents herself.<sup>30</sup> Although she seldom wears a skirt in daily life, Opie felt obligated to add one on both figures because it seemed to be, in her own words, “the only way to make it lesbian.”<sup>31</sup> This triangle bears so much symbolic weight in America that viewers would likely mistake the couple as heterosexual if Opie were to instead depict a butch/femme dynamic. As a result, the artist needed to misrepresent her gender expression (and perhaps also the gender expression of her imagined lover) in order for her sexuality to be read appropriately by the viewing public. In this, *Cutting* recognizes and at least partially conforms to the assumptions so many people commonly make when interpreting other bodies through codes that are grounded in a rather limited and inflexible understanding of the intersections between gender and sexuality.

Opie decided to cut this drawing into her back after she noticed that she was compulsively doodling the same image for a year following a breakup. Since doodling is a repetitive and absent-minded activity, it relates structurally to Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity - the

<sup>29</sup> Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure*, 41.

<sup>30</sup> Opie, “Lesbian Domesticity,” 2.

<sup>31</sup> Opie, “Lesbian Domesticity,” 2.

tendency for people to repeatedly perform prevalent gender and sexual scripts, without necessarily thinking about it, giving the illusion that cisgender and heterosexual identities are more natural than those that deviate from these constructed norms.<sup>32</sup> Butler's ideas encouraged people to not take the norms regulating gender and sexuality for granted, and they were particularly influential around the time that Opie created these works. Some queer people were concerned that the pursuit of spousal rights reinforced, rather than questioned, the superior status of relationship structures premised on the needs and desires of heterosexual people, and that it would further marginalize other queer people who are single or those in relationships that fall outside the norm.<sup>33</sup> Michael Warner explains further: "Squeezing gay couples into the legal sorting machine would only confirm the relevance of spousal status and would leave unmarried queers looking more deviant before a legal system that could claim broader legitimacy."<sup>34</sup> With this context in mind, it becomes clear that Opie lost more than a partner in this breakup; she lost her proximity to *normal*. At the same time, Opie was vocally frustrated with the censorship of queer arts<sup>35</sup> and politics of respectability,<sup>36</sup> prevalent in the early 1990s, and she explores this frustration in *Pervert*.

Although Opie acknowledges that she personally has "never been censored,"<sup>37</sup> *Pervert* declares solidarity with other artists caught in censorship scandals at that time. In the late 1980s, art institutions in the U.S. were plunged into in a hostile culture war when word spread that funds from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) had been directed towards projects involving two controversial photographers: Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe. In 1987, the

<sup>32</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York City: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>33</sup> Michelle K. Owen, "Family as a Site of Contestation: Queering the Normal or Normalizing the Queer," in *In a Queer Country: Gay and Lesbian Studies in the Canadian Context* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pump Press, 2001), 91; Nathaniel Frank, *Awakening: How Gays and Lesbians Brought Marriage Equality to America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 54-55.

<sup>34</sup> Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 121.

<sup>35</sup> Blessing, "Catherine Opie," 16.

<sup>36</sup> Opie, "Opie in Conversation with Crimp," 301.

<sup>37</sup> Catherine Opie, "Opie in Conversation with Crimp," 304.

Southeastern Centre for Contemporary Art (SECCA) awarded an NEA-funded subgrant to Serrano, who was accused of blasphemy for *Piss Christ*, an artwork depicting the crucifixion of Jesus submerged in urine. That same year, the NEA provided the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) with a grant to produce *The Perfect Moment*, a travelling Mapplethorpe retrospective featuring explicit homoerotic and sadomasochistic photographs.<sup>38</sup> Punitive legislation then passed requiring the NEA to give thirty days warning before they awarded any additional funds to the Philadelphia ICA and SECCA for the period of one year, and to allow the NEA final approval over and power to veto sub-grants. Furthermore, the federal government cut the NEA's budget and ordered that it could no longer support so-called "obscene art." Shortly after *The Perfect Moment* opened at the Contemporary Arts Centre (CAC) in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1990, the CAC and its director, Dennis Barrie, were accused of pandering obscenity and displaying photographs of nude minors, but were ultimately acquitted later that year. Nevertheless, it was the first time an art gallery was involved in an obscenity trial in U.S. history. Then, under pressure, the NEA pulled funding from four performance artists whose projects were already approved by a peer review panel. Three of these artists, Holly Hughes, John Fleck and Tim Miller, were known for work drawing from their lesbian or gay experiences. The "NEA 4" eventually won back their funding in 1993.<sup>39</sup> Opie has stated that *Pervert* was created in response to these censorship scandals and for that reason, she considers it to be a "very angry piece."<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> Nan D. Hunter, "Contextualizing the Sexuality Debates: A Chronology," in *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York City: Routledge, 1995), 27.

<sup>40</sup> Jennifer Blessing, "Catherine Opie: American Photographer," in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* (New York City: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2009), 16.

Furthermore, according to an interview with art historian and AIDS activist Douglas Crimp, politics of respectability that caused tension within LGBTQ+ communities in the 1990s bothered Opie and inspired her to create *Pervert*:

I made it at a time when I was really angry with the direction of gay and lesbian politics in America, and my anger was exactly about the questions of normal and abnormal. At the march on Washington for lesbian and gay rights in 1993, we were suddenly all supposed to appear normal. “Don’t include the leather community because they’re abnormal.” It created a huge division in the gay community. *Pervert* was my response.<sup>41</sup>

Opie’s anecdotal recollection aligns with Michael Warner’s analysis of the marriage equality movement in *The Trouble with Normal*. According to Warner, considerably more gay, lesbian and bisexual Americans began to rally behind the cause following the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation.<sup>42</sup> He explains that this new priority exacerbated a longstanding hierarchy of respectability in LGBTQ+ communities,<sup>43</sup> drawing from Gayle Rubin’s influential essay, “Thinking Sex,” in which she identifies a sexual value system that distinguishes between “good and bad sex.” “Most homosexuality is still on the bad side of the line,” she wrote in 1984. “But if it is coupled and monogamous, the society is beginning to recognize that it includes the full range of human interaction.”<sup>44</sup> *Cutting* shows Opie’s desire for monogamous coupledness, but since sadomasochism was on the “bad” side of the line, when paired with *Pervert*, this series inhabits the ambivalent space between capitulation and resistance that Oswin refers to in her critique of homonormativity.

The public visibility of sex was a focal point for this debate, which had its roots in the sex wars of the previous decade. According to lesbian historian Lillian Faderman, throughout the

<sup>41</sup> Opie, “Opie in Conversation with Crimp,” 301.

<sup>42</sup> Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 84.

<sup>43</sup> Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 49.

<sup>44</sup> Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 151-154.

1980s, “lesbian cultural feminists” and “lesbian sexual radicals” were in strong disagreement over the impact of pornography, BDSM and public sex on the social status of women, establishing a notable divide between women who were a part of these marginalized sexual cultures and those who considered these practices to be unequivocally harmful.<sup>45</sup> Lesbian cultural feminists argued that these practices reinforce patriarchy by encouraging the objectification of and violence against women. Meanwhile, lesbian sexual radicals denounced the pressure to have “politically correct” sex and in seeking a similar degree of erotic freedom often enjoyed by homosexual men, they appropriated popular codes (leather to signify BDSM) and sexual practices (fisting) from gay subcultures. Faderman claims that cultural feminists outnumbered sexual radicals in the 1980s and most American lesbians held conservative sexual politics by the end of the decade. Serial monogamy was considered to be the favoured relationship pattern amongst the majority of women dating other women.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, the censorship of “nascent lesbian porn” that was “produced by and for lesbians” intensified,<sup>47</sup> particularly those that depicted sadomasochistic lesbian sex.

Censorship of queer media and the politics of respectability contributed to the marginalization of sadomasochistic lesbians in the US, and although anti-porn feminists commonly framed consensual BDSM as a form of violence against women,<sup>48</sup> paradoxically, these attitudes did nothing to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the women they claimed to support. According to a 1994 survey of 539 lesbian and bisexual women who practiced BDSM, twenty-five percent reported incidents of physical assault by members of the lesbian-feminist community

<sup>45</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1991), 249.

<sup>46</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 256.

<sup>47</sup> Gayle Rubin, “Misguided, Dangerous, and Wrong: An Analysis of Antipornography Politics,” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 257.

<sup>48</sup> Hunter, “Contextualizing the Sexuality Debates,” 23-24.

who opposed their lifestyle.<sup>49</sup> The institution of psychiatry validated this discrimination. While the American Psychiatric Association (APA) entirely removed homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1987,<sup>50</sup> consensual sadomasochism was considered a medical disorder until its fifth edition in 2013.<sup>51</sup> According to Robin Bauer in *Queer BDSM Intimacies*, “If one considers BDSM to be a pathology (mental, moral or social), anything that BDSM practitioners will say or that research will reveal about their practices will be interpreted within this frame of reference.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, one’s intersecting identities affected the extent to which somebody was discriminated against for their BDSM lifestyle. More leniency was given to those who were heterosexual, monogamous and/or married,<sup>53</sup> and sadomasochist lesbians of colour experienced higher levels of violence than did members of the same community who were white.<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, prejudice against sadomasochists, upheld by anti-porn feminists and the institution of psychiatry, has caused more harm to those who consensually negotiate power dynamics in sexual contexts, and this harm has disproportionately affected those who have generally had the least amount of power in society. In light of this, the desire for a long-term romantic partnership that Opie represents in *Cutting* should not be reduced to or judged as a desire for needless conformity, for we must consider the varied reasons why queer people may seek access to the institution of marriage, including a sense of safety and security.

<sup>49</sup> Female Trouble, “Violence Against S/M Women Within the Lesbian Community: A Nation-wide Survey,” March 1994, Philadelphia PA. Female Trouble vertical file, Leather Archives and Museum, as cited in Female Trouble, “Violence Against S/M Women Within the Lesbian Community: A Nation-Wide Survey,” National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, accessed June 30, 2020, <https://ncsfreedom.org/2007/06/18/violence-against-s-m-women-within-the-lesbian-community-a-nation-wide-survey/>.

<sup>50</sup> Although it is often said that the APA removed homosexuality from the DSM in 1973, they replaced it with Sexual Orientation Disturbance (SOD) in the DSM-II and later replaced SOD with Ego Dystonic Homosexuality (EDH) in the DSM-III. Then, with the revision of DSM-III-R in 1987, they removed EDH. Jack Drescher, “Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality,” *Behavioral Sciences* 5 (2015): 571.

<sup>51</sup> Susan Wright, “De-Pathologization of Consensual BDSM,” *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 15 (May 2018): 622.

<sup>52</sup> Bauer, *Queer BDSM Intimacies*, 41.

<sup>53</sup> Bauer, *Queer BDSM Intimacies*, 39; Weiss, “Gay Shame and BDSM Pride, 88.

<sup>54</sup> Bauer, *Queer BDSM Intimacies*, 39

Counterdiscourses on BDSM help us to better understand why it was so common for mainstream lesbian feminists to strongly oppose these forms of consensual sexual activity. In her ground-breaking book, *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism*, Lynda Hart argues that it is the destabilization of “self” that troubles feminists who protest masochism, as well as the way that the practice complicates the lesbian identity they constructed during the era of second-wave feminism. According to Hart, BDSM involves the abandonment of one's accustomed subject position: “the concept of ‘losing one(self)’ is not about trading it in for another one; rather, it is about profound alteration of consciousness... Nevertheless, it is a leap into a corporeality that can facilitate a process of coming to realize that the ‘self’ is not only a construct, a prosthetic device, but often a burdensome one.”<sup>55</sup> Second-wave feminism encouraged women to recognize and honour their own sense of selfhood, which had been depreciated in both public and private spheres. The idea of abandoning oneself goes against these fundamental principles, so mainstream feminist outrage towards consensual BDSM is to be expected, especially if it were through a practice that was largely perceived to be a form of gender-based violence. Furthermore, in the 1970s, lesbianism and radical feminism were virtually synonymous concepts since to be a lesbian was also widely considered a political choice in the fight against patriarchy. Many second-wave feminists, like Adrienne Rich, argued that the definition of “lesbian” should be broadened to include platonic friendships amongst women.<sup>56</sup> In doing so, lesbianism became “a sign of purity”<sup>57</sup> for many feminists who considered sadomasochistic sex to be inexcusably incompatible with this constructed ideal. Gayle Rubin explains further:

Given prevailing ideas of appropriate feminist sexual behavior, S/M appears to be the mirror opposite. It is dark and polarized, extreme and ritualized, and above all, it celebrates difference and power. If S/M is understood as the dark opposite of happy and healthy

<sup>55</sup> Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh*, 61.

<sup>56</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs* 5, no.4 (Summer 1980): 650.

<sup>57</sup> Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh*, 52.



lesbianism, accepting that happy and healthy lesbians also do S/M would threaten the logic of the belief system from which this opposition was generated.<sup>58</sup>

However, Hart makes an interesting observation about the ways that some feminist ideals, such as “permanence, commitment, [and] endurance,” are also at the heart of consensual domme/sub relationships.<sup>59</sup> Expanding on this idea, she notes:

S/m acts out of the word as bond - it effectuates the “performativity” of language. It is the acting out of a commitment, a willingness to be transformed through the recognition of the other. In this sense it seems to differ little from the traditional values of romantic love, which “vanilla” lesbians purportedly endorse.<sup>60</sup>

With this view in mind, *Cutting* and *Pervert* are not as oppositional as they first seem. Together, they challenge the constructed binary between “happy and healthy lesbianism” and “extreme and ritualized” sadomasochism. As the subject of both photographs, Opie insists that these desires are not necessarily incompatible, offering insight into their complexities.

### *Aesthetic Pleasure/Bodily Pain*

Although the symbolic content of *Cutting's* image connotes Opie's longing for a stable cohabitational relationship where the sun is always shining, the blood that drips from it suggests that the artist senses a disturbing flaw in this picture. Based on comments that she has made in interviews, there are two troubling matters hindering Opie's ability to access this fantasy: unforeseen heartbreak and systemic oppression. As she created this work in response to her “first real breakup of a domestic partnership,”<sup>61</sup> notions of personal failure and loss manifest as a reminder of the painful aspects of romantic love, regardless of one's sexuality. Considering this

<sup>58</sup> Gayle Rubin, “The Leather Menace”: Comments on Politics and S/M,” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 126.

<sup>59</sup> Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh*, 79.

<sup>60</sup> Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh*, 80.

<sup>61</sup> Opie, “Opie in Conversation with Crimp,” 300.

context, Opie's irritated skin is symbolic. To suffer from a broken heart is often a traumatic experience that takes a physical toll on the body. At a more structural level, the image also relates to the impact that homophobia has had on the artist's life. Opie explains: "It's a very innocent image, even though it's cut into my back. What isn't innocent is the attitude in American culture, especially right now, that seeks to deny me permission to have a family. To me, more perverse than the cutting on my back are the limitations placed on people because of homosexuality and so-called perversity."<sup>62</sup> Despite having more resources than their Canadian counterparts,<sup>63</sup> activists fighting for legal relationship recognition in the U.S. faced more barriers, including a complex constitutional framework, the strong influence of religious conservatives in mainstream media and national politics, and intense social anxiety over a perceived moral decline.<sup>64</sup> Throughout the 1980s, Ronald Reagan promised to protect "family values" in his presidential campaigns and, in the words of Catherine Lord, developed "an agenda that used the idea of 'family' as a means of social control."<sup>65</sup> Christian organizations, politicians and mainstream media amplified these concerns amongst the general public, taking advantage of prevalent prejudice to rationalize state repression. At the heart of this moral panic was the determination to maintain traditional gender roles as well as the misguided belief that homosexual adults manipulate or harm innocent children.<sup>66</sup> When Bill Clinton was elected in 1992, a year before Opie made *Cutting*, gays and lesbians were hopeful that his "presidency might signal a period of inclusion."<sup>67</sup> Then, according to attorney and gay rights advocate Evan Wolfson, the *Baehr v. Lewin* case involving three couples

<sup>62</sup> Opie, "Opie in Conversation with Crimp," 300.

<sup>63</sup> David Rayside, *Queer Inclusions, Continental Divisions: Public Recognition of Sexual Diversity in Canada and the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 92.

<sup>64</sup> Rayside, *Queer Inclusions*, 160-161.

<sup>65</sup> Catherine Lord, "Inside the Body Politic: 1980-Present," in *Art & Queer Culture* (London, UK: Phaidon Press, 2013), 31.

<sup>66</sup> David Rayside, *Queer Inclusions, Continental Divisions: Public Recognition of Sexual Diversity in Canada and the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 46-47.

<sup>67</sup> Frank, *Awakening*, 112

seeking the right to marry in Hawaii “was the first glimpse at an equality most of them had never imagined was possible,”<sup>68</sup> even though the case was eventually dismissed. But by 1996, the enactment of the Defence of Marriage Act (DOMA) that legally defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman “made progress at the federal level seem distant”<sup>69</sup> (and indeed, the U.S. did not attain marriage equality until 2015). Consequently, as Opie has made clear, her relationship challenges were not only interpersonal but also cultural.

Given that this work was created in the midst of the HIV/AIDS crisis, it is fair to assume that Opie’s undressed, seeping wound triggered fear in some viewers. A number of queer artists have worked with blood because it is a highly politicized material. In particular, Opie was inspired by the work Ron Athey, an HIV-positive performance artist whom she befriended in the late 1980s.<sup>70</sup> Reflecting on her outlook in the 1990s, the photographer shared in a recent interview with Maggie Nelson that the experience of losing so many close friends to HIV/AIDS convinced her that she was also destined to die young.<sup>71</sup> This recollection speaks to the collective trauma that sexually-diverse people endured in the 1980s and 1990s. Effective treatments for the disease did not yet exist, while misinformation incited alarm and intolerance amongst the general public. The government’s failure to adequately address the situation in the U.S. awakened many people to the importance of grassroots political activism, motivating them to create groups like ACT UP that organized direct-action protests in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Others strongly opposed this strategy and felt that lobbying was more effective.<sup>72</sup> According to activist Urvashi Vaid, the epidemic “reinforced old attitudes” like “homosexuality as illness, gay men and lesbians as

<sup>68</sup> Evan Wolfson, *Why Marriage Matters: America, Equality, and Gay People’s Right to Marry* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 32.

<sup>69</sup> Frank, *Awakening*, 112.

<sup>70</sup> Opie, “The Drive to Describe,” 84.

<sup>71</sup> Catherine Opie, “Burning Down the House,” interview by Maggie Nelson, *Aperture* 229 (Winter 2017): 109.

<sup>72</sup> Vaid, *Virtual Equality*, 102.

uncontrollable sex fiends, gay sexual acts as inherently unhealthy and deadly, and being gay as an immoral condition.”<sup>73</sup> These views added fuel to the respectability politics fire, and they were used to “criticize those who are not involved in monogamous and respectable sex.”<sup>74</sup>

Aesthetically, both photographs captivate with their vibrant colour and balanced composition, but human blood is a material with the capacity to make people feel uneasy; that is to say, a viewer may experience a sense of attraction and repulsion simultaneously. Elizabeth Grosz argues that it is the viscous, formless, unpredictable nature of fresh blood that makes it so repulsive.<sup>75</sup> Drawing from Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, she observes that a bleeding wound exposes “the permeability of the body” and threatens established order, for it refuses to conform by resisting self-containment, and in doing so it defies fixed notions of subjectivity, interiority and embodiment. It also provokes deep-rooted cultural anxieties towards matter considered to be out of its proper place or in a “borderline state.” Grosz expands this idea to hypothesize that “women’s corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage” (vaginal fluids, saggy breasts, etc.) and a “formlessness that engulfs all form.”<sup>76</sup> If blood can be read as a symbol of resistance, then *Cutting* is not necessarily about capitulation to homonormativity, thereby conveying ambivalence.

If an incision calls attention to the body’s permeability, after it heals, the resulting scar demonstrates its malleability. Performance artist Petra Kupperts explains, “Like skin, a scar mediates between the outside and the inside, but it also materially produces, changes, and overwrites its site.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, the scar testifies to the transformative potential of the culturally-inscribed body and its theoretical capacity to revise cultural scripts that constrain it.

<sup>73</sup> Vaid, *Virtual Equality*, 84.

<sup>74</sup> Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Sexuality in Canada* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1987), 222.

<sup>75</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 193-195.

<sup>76</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 203.

<sup>77</sup> Petra Kupperts, *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1.

There is an important temporal distinction to be drawn between the two images cut into the artist's skin: *Cutting* was purposefully ephemeral whereas *Pervert* was intentionally permanent. Opie chose Judie Bamber, an artist who was not involved in BDSM community, to cut the domestic scene, and she chose Raelyn Galina, a body artist experienced in scarification, to cut the decorative text. As a result, the image on her back faded entirely with time, but the script on her chest became a scar. Considering Kuppers' analysis of scarring, it is clear that Opie is not simply adopting the slur but reclaiming and transforming it for her own pleasure.

Opie's intention is not to shock viewers; rather, she uses beauty strategically, to attract their sustained attention so they may consider the commonly overlooked complexities in controversial images.<sup>78</sup> When the curator of *The Perfect Moment*, Janet Karden, was called as a witness in the Cincinnati obscenity trial, she used the aesthetics of Mapplethorpe's work to prove its artistic value, in claiming that a photograph "was almost classical in its composition."<sup>79</sup> A similar tension between pleasant aesthetic qualities and difficult subject matter is present in Opie's self-portraits. Behind the artist's body, in both self-portraits, are opulent fabric backdrops that are pleasing to the eye. The fabric she uses in *Cutting* is a rich emerald green with a motif of tasselled cloth and bundled fruit. The way in which Opie positioned the backdrop behind her body and framed the image causes the pattern to appear mostly symmetrical, with a cluster of fruit resting directly above her head. Fruit has commonly symbolized fertility in the visual arts,<sup>80</sup> and so, juxtaposing this imagery with the domestic scene cut into her back reinforces the message that Opie dreams to build a nuclear family. But it has also often represented a woman's assumed sexual availability,

<sup>78</sup> Catherine Opie, "Opie in Conversation with Crimp," 307.

<sup>79</sup> Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure*, 9.

<sup>80</sup> Jan Baptist Bedaux, "Fruit and Fertility: Fruit Symbolism in Netherlandish Portraiture of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 17, no. 2/3 (1987): 150.

such as in the work of Paul Cézanne,<sup>81</sup> in addition to it signifying sinful pleasure in the biblical narrative, the Garden of Eden, and these connotations bridge the thematic gap between *Cutting* and *Pervert*. Opie has stated that this fruit is “another way of queering the image, the use of a background that has a little bit of humour in it”<sup>82</sup> Like the term “pervert,” “fruit” is a slur commonly directed towards people who are perceived to be homosexual - effeminate men in particular. This fabric contains a varied assortment of fruits gathered together that can be read as a metaphor for queer community. *Pervert* contains a black and gold flocked damask fabric backdrop. The mirrored wave effect caused by it not hanging flat insinuates depth or movement, while also framing the artist’s body like an aura. A closer look reveals that the scars on Opie’s body and the luxurious fabric’s design share some common elements. Not only does the decorative foliage pattern compliment the leaflike embellishment on Opie’s chest, but the pattern’s leafy curls also echo the scarified spiral visible on Opie’s right arm.

The cuttings in the two photographs were rendered in drastically different styles: there is an innocence to the one shown in *Cutting* but a maturity to that in *Pervert*. Acknowledging this inconsistency, Opie states: “Well I’m a big old pervert... So I like it that the word is so elegantly scripted into my chest... The other one is sweet. It’s a child’s drawing. It’s about idealism in a certain way.”<sup>83</sup> The simple way in which the image in *Cutting* was drawn on paper then replicated in flesh implies naivety, while the calligraphy in *Pervert* suggests sophistication - but, like embroidered profanity, there is a sense of humour or irony to it.

<sup>81</sup> Linda Nochlin, “Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art,” in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988): 141.

<sup>82</sup> Opie, “Creating a New Iconicity,” 9.

<sup>83</sup> Opie, “An interview with Catherine Opie,” 106.

## *Shame/Pride*

Discussing the inspiration for the bloody image captured in *Cutting*, Opie acknowledged in an interview that she was thinking about “what a child might make in school.”<sup>84</sup> Indeed, drawing is a medium through which young children are often encouraged to express their imagination and make sense of the world around them, while family is a common subject in children’s drawings because it is the most influential social institution in their life at that age. And yet, the classroom is often a space where children learn conservative sexual values and gender roles. People raised as girls in the sociohistorical conditions that Opie grew up with were socialized at a young age to aspire to marry - a lovesick fantasy which, at that time, presupposed heterosexuality. How does a young girl, laden with these deeply rooted expectations, navigate the awakening of her unconventional romantic desires? Michael Warner argues that heteronormativity “produces a profound and nameless estrangement [in most queer children], a sense of inner secrets and hidden shame. No amount of adult ‘acceptance’ or progress in civil rights is likely to eliminate this experience of queerness for many children and adolescents.”<sup>85</sup> If a young Opie had sketched this image in red crayon as a student of a Midwestern kindergarten class in the late 1960s, there is reason enough to believe that her teacher would have been surprised, and likely displeased, by the romantic orientation it portrays.

Like Warner, Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick has also written about the impact that shame has had on LGBTQ+ communities. According to her, shame constructs (queer) identity more than any other affect. Shame and interest are interrelated affects; one feels shame after being interested in something considered socially perverse. At the same time, shame is relational and builds community; while shame alienates some of us from heteronormative culture, it also connects us to

<sup>84</sup> Opie, “Creating a New Iconicity,” 8.

<sup>85</sup> Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 8.

other queers. She explains, “That’s the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality.”<sup>86</sup> When shame attaches to something, it intensifies it and changes its meaning. Accordingly, shame is transformative, and it is through shame that we create meaning in queer cultures. Warner offers further insight into how shame has come to shape queer identities, arguing that unresolved shame was at the root of the respectability politics that were dividing queer communities in the late twentieth century. He argues that mainstream gay, lesbian and bisexual rights movements have done more to address stigma than shame, as stigma pertains to identity but shame concerns behaviour. Therefore, it would be okay to identify as a homosexual, as long as you don’t engage in shameful acts of sexual deviance, such as BDSM. Warner explains that it is the institution of medicine that first established these distinctions, which gay rights activists later used to support their fight for equality:

The concept of perversion, as distinct from perverse acts, led to the concept of sexual identity... The doctors inadvertently made it possible for their former patients to claim that being gay is not necessarily about sex. Homosexuals could argue that any judgement about their worth as persons, irrespective of their actions, was irrational prejudice. In so doing, they could challenge the stigma of identity, without in the least challenging the shame of sexual acts.<sup>87</sup>

He argues that it became common for gays and lesbians to direct this unresolved shame towards other queer people, compromising their sexual autonomy, based on the assumption that their perverse behaviours are what upholds the stigma.

The extent to which shame shapes the communities that Opie is a part of is relevant to the artist’s decision to hide her face in both photographs. This is a peculiar choice, given that a sitter’s face is historically understood as the “marker of identity” in portraiture.<sup>88</sup> Opie challenges this

<sup>86</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy and Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 37.

<sup>87</sup> Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 29.

<sup>88</sup> West, *Portraiture*, 213.



convention through these self-portraits by presenting her body modification – tattoos, scars, piercings - as the indicator of her identity. Obviously, she needed to turn away from the camera for *Cutting* in order to show the bleeding image on her back. Having used the skin on her back as a canvas, the artist would not have been able to view the drawing before developing the photograph, unless there were a reflective surface nearby. This idea, that she could not easily see the thing that was causing her pain, is of metaphorical significance for it suggests that the scene is a figment of her imagination – a fantasy – that had not (yet) materialized and might fade away. Heartbreak entails failure and loss, and it is an experience that often produces shame. Upon being asked why she donned a leather hood in *Pervert*, Opie provided two simple reasons: “Because everything that needed to be said was written on my chest. And also because of the politics of this country now. I didn’t think people needed to know what my face looked like.”<sup>89</sup> The second point suggests that the artist covered her face for safety reasons, which is an understandable justification considering the oftentimes violent discrimination that sadomasochist lesbians faced in the 1990s. More commonly, however, Opie positions her subjects staring directly back at the camera, a form of presentation that she consciously adopts in order to “present people with extreme amount of dignity.”<sup>90</sup> The departure here raises the possibility that the hood is indicative of shame. But at the same time, openly self-identifying as a “pervert” subverts the constructed distinction between pride and shame. It is worth noting that for many people, BDSM is a way to explore their shame through performance. While shame is an affect that is commonly understood in opposition to pride, *Pervert* complicates this alleged binary.

<sup>89</sup> Catherine Opie, “An interview with Catherine Opie,” interview by Russell Ferguson, in *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* (New York City: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2009), 106.

<sup>90</sup> Opie, “An interview with Catherine Opie,” 105.

## **Normal, Because We Own Things: Object/Subject of Desire**

Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan's *Object/Subject of Desire* (1993) also demonstrates ambivalence with respect to heteronormative family structures and disruptive queer desire. Dempsey and Millan are two of the most celebrated performance artists in Canada, though they have acknowledged that people are most familiar with their video work,<sup>91</sup> a medium that they began exploring in 1992.<sup>92</sup> The history of performance art and video art are interrelated. While live performance has been a common form of creative expression in many cultures throughout history, including avant-garde art movements in the early twentieth century like Dadaism and Futurism, it became a recognized fine art medium in the 1960s. Video art developed around this time as well, after portable video cameras were put on the market in the mid-1960s, though for decades it was rarely seen outside of alternative venues.<sup>93</sup> At first, artists seeking to challenge the high-art establishment were drawn to live performance for its ephemerality because it had the potential to resist commodification. Over time, however, it became common practice for performance artists to document their works using photography and video. As Amelia Jones has argued, the documentation process also "recontained" performances as objects that could ultimately be bought, sold, and displayed in mainstream art institutions.<sup>94</sup> Video art, too, was eventually commercialized in the 1990s. But video was more than just a way to memorialize and/or commodify performances. Artist Catherine Elwes likens video art to painting or sculpture because it enables the "slow materialization of an idea."<sup>95</sup> The ability to edit or record over footage gave artists more flexibility with video than live performance.

<sup>91</sup> Dempsey and Millan, "Public Warning," 70.

<sup>92</sup> Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, "Sex and Pleasure, Art and Politics, and Trying to Get Some Rest," interview by Susan Heald, *Atlantis* 23.1 (Fall/Winter 1998): 87.

<sup>93</sup> Catherine Elwes, *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 1.

<sup>94</sup> Amelia Jones, "The Now and the Has Been: Paradoxes of Live Art in Art History," in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2012), 20.

<sup>95</sup> Elwes, *Video Art*, 17.

Dempsey and Millan usually work together on a piece for a number of years, workshopping in various venues, and *Object/Subject of Desire* was no exception. The artists' official website specifies that they first performed *Object/Subject of Desire* at Red Deer College, Alberta, in December 1988, but they had performed variations of it elsewhere before this date, including one on roller skates in 1987 at the Canadian Women and Art Conference in Toronto.<sup>96</sup> My thesis examines a rendition they recorded on ¾ inch video tape in 1993, which is available to stream online for free on the artists' Vimeo page.<sup>97</sup> Though it can be said that Dempsey and Millan's process of workshopping a particular performance work over the period of several years also provides a "slow materialization of an idea," video made it easier for the artists to experiment with visual effects that would reinforce the conceptual content of their work.

*Object/Subject of Desire* is nuanced and complex, but on the surface it depicts Dempsey standing in front of a backdrop that displays various moving images as she delivers a monologue [fig. 3]. She wears a stiff, floor-length, sleeveless white dress with a sweetheart neckline, much like a bridal gown. The artists emphasize the outline of her figure with a thick black line, suggesting a disconnect between the subject and her surroundings. Although she masquerades as an archetype of heterosexual femininity, her short hairstyle and explicit speech contradict the first impressions; the cognitive dissonance thus produced "performatively queers the 'feminine' and challenges dominant culture's reliance on dress and looks as the chief signifier of heterosexual difference."<sup>98</sup> The video performance is divided into four parts, each one prefaced by a different statement clearly defining an interpersonal dynamic that she desires: "I want you to want me," is followed by "I want to improve my intimacy skills," "I want love," and finally "I want to fuck

<sup>96</sup> Hall, "Bodies in Sight," 17.

<sup>97</sup> Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, "Object/Subject of Desire," filmed 1993, Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/131476697>.

<sup>98</sup> Hall, "Bodies in Sight," 13.

you.” She speaks in contradictions, desperately declaring her desire to be desired, exclusively and devotedly, by somebody she does not desire in return. She longs for carefree, painless intimacy, as well as the privileges or superficial perks that come with being in a couple. She expresses sexual fantasies in explicit detail. Some quotations provide a flavour of the work: “I want you to need me, to cry for me, to suffer for me... As long as it doesn’t take too much of my time;” “I want to hyphenate our names, buy a puppy, invite you to my parents for supper;” “I want to run my hands you’re your sides, squeezing your nipples between my fingers as I bite your neck.” Across these expressions of desire, ambivalence manifests itself in different ways. Script and visual symbolism alike seem to both embrace and reject homonormative structures, and the prominent use of satire and irony throughout the video allows for the simultaneous and intentional mobilization of apparently conflicting claims. From our vantagepoint as contemporary viewers, it is also possible to see ways in which the artists’ ambivalence signals their own inscription inside and outside normative social positions in ways that they may or may not have consciously intended.

### *Homonormative / homoerotic desires*

The contradictions that *Object/Subject of Desire* conveys mirror the intracommunity conflicts resulting from differences in opinion about which political issues to prioritize at the end of the twentieth century. Many lesbian, gay and bisexual activists in Canada began to shift their focus from individual rights to relationship rights in the mid-1980s,<sup>99</sup> though it was not until the early 1990s that the movement gained some traction. The Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Ontario (CLGRO) was the first Canadian organization to “develop a comprehensive, consensus-based position on relationships recognition, with a focus on lobbying for legislative change,” from

<sup>99</sup> Rayside, *Queer Inclusions*, 94; Warner, *Never Going Back*, 219.

1989 to 1994.<sup>100</sup> According to Tom Warner, a founding member of CLGRO, activists who sought sexual liberation and radical change on a societal level in the 1970s and 1980s were “despaired at the new direction.”<sup>101</sup> But the HIV/AIDS crisis revealed a need to gain legal recognition for queer relationships, in order to share employee benefits such as health insurance, ensure hospital visitation rights and allow life partners to make appropriate post-mortem decisions.<sup>102</sup> The struggles to acquire relationship rights also involved parenting rights, such as adoption, a considerably controversial issue amongst the general population.<sup>103</sup>

Nevertheless, the struggle for relationship recognition was a controversial cause amongst queer people because it primarily “benefitted those who had partners and those who had jobs. These are more likely to be middle-class lesbians and gay men.” Furthermore, since “men [were] more likely than women to have jobs that offer benefits... gay men [would] benefit disproportionately from spousal benefit claims.”<sup>104</sup> Disabled queers living with a romantic partner could also lose their disability benefits if their relationship were to be legally recognized.<sup>105</sup> So aside from relationship status, class, gender and disability were factors that determined the main beneficiaries of these campaigns. Consequently, opponents of the relationship rights movement argued instead “for a redefinition of the way in which benefits are provided by the state, such as universally to individuals or on the basis of economic need or dependency.”<sup>106</sup>

The 1993 federal election was a promising time for Canadian activists seeking equal recognition of “same-sex” relationships under the law, after the Cabinet of Jean Chrétien publicly

<sup>100</sup> Warner, *Never Going Back*, 218; Miriam Smith, *Lesbian and Gay Rights in Canada: Social Movements and Equality-Seeking: 1971-1995* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 122-126.

<sup>101</sup> Warner, *Never Going Back*, 218

<sup>102</sup> Rayside, *Queer Inclusions*, 95; Wolfson, *Why Marriage Matters*, 28.

<sup>103</sup> Rayside, *Queer Inclusions*, 100; Owen, “Family as a Site of Contestation,” 87.

<sup>104</sup> Smith, *Lesbians and Gay Rights in Canada*, 102.

<sup>105</sup> Warner, *Never Going Back*, 219.

<sup>106</sup> Warner, *Never Going Back*, 220.

supported ongoing plans to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act (CHRA) and officially prohibit discrimination based on “sexual orientation.”<sup>107</sup> But when the House of Commons finally voted in 1996 in support of Bill C-33 to amend the CHRA, it included a preamble to clarify that the government “recognizes and affirms the importance of family as the foundation of Canadian society and that nothing in this Act alters its fundamental role in society.”<sup>108</sup> Although the “family values movement” was by and large more influential to American political matters than it was to those in Canada, the fact that the federal government prefaced an amending Act that would prohibit the discrimination of queer people with a line upholding the significance of family demonstrates that these cultural anxieties prevailed on both sides of the border. This preamble also reveals the issue that many queers took with equality activism: simply obtaining equal rights under the law ultimately upholds the heteronormative values that sexually-diverse people with more radical politics sought to decenter.

At the time when Dempsey and Millan made *Object/Subject of Desire* (1993), equality activists throughout Canada had not yet succeeded in acquiring spousal rights for non-heterosexual people. In 1995, the NDP government in British Columbia became the first province to amend a law to include lesbian, gay and bisexual people, updating the Adoption Act to allow “same-sex” couples to adopt.<sup>109</sup> Thereafter, other provinces began to amend their laws incrementally.<sup>110</sup> Then in 2000, the federal government adopted Bill C-23, the Modernization of Benefits and Obligations Act, “[extending] benefits and obligations to *all* couples who have been

<sup>107</sup> Warner, *Never Going Back*, 244.

<sup>108</sup> An Act to Amend the Canadian Human Rights Act, Bill C-33, As Passed June 20, 1996 (Canada, 35<sup>th</sup> Parl., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess.), <http://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/35-2/bill/C-33/royal-assent/page-16>.

<sup>109</sup> Warner, *Never Going Back*, 236.

<sup>110</sup> Owen, *Family as a Site of Contestation*, 100.

cohabiting in a conjugal relationship for at least one year, in order to reflect values of tolerance, respect and equality, consistent with the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.”<sup>111</sup>

*Object/Subject of Desire* demonstrates both capitulation and resistance to homonormativity. Dempsey masquerades as a bride, an archetype of heterosexual femininity, though her desire to be the breadwinner of her imaginary lesbian family, subverts traditional gender roles to some extent. But it is obvious that this definition of love encompasses much more than the emotional state itself; her description presumes that “love” brings conveniences like cheaper rent and car ownership. When she remarks that this partnership will be “normal, because we own things,” Dempsey seems to mock how notions of normativity are shaped by capitalism. The choking gesture that she makes moments later suggests that the artists consider these standards to be suffocating. This visual metaphor signifies a stifling pressure to conform.

The manner in which representations of lesbians in the media was evolving intensified this pressure to conform. While mainstream media in the 1990s was more willing than in previous decades to depict homosexuals in a positive light, for the most part representation was given only to those considered most tolerable by heterosexuals – a trend that the artists have denounced. Part three of *Object/Subject of Desire* speaks to this shift. The commodification of lesbian culture is epitomized in the aesthetic deemed “lesbian chic,” popularized for a relatively brief time in 1993, when lesbian arts and fashion became marketable to a wider consumer audience. Featured in *New York Magazine*, *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*, [fig. 4] “lesbian chic” was criticized for targeting straight wealthy white women<sup>112</sup> and depoliticizing lesbianism.<sup>113</sup> Dykes who “refuse[d] to be assimilated into middle-class respectability” remained unfashionable and were neither the face nor

<sup>111</sup>*Modernization of Benefits and Obligations Act*, Bill C-23 (Canada, 36<sup>th</sup> Parl., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess.), <https://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/36-2/bill/C-23/third-reading/page-11>.

<sup>112</sup> Dittmar, “The Straight Goods,” 323.

<sup>113</sup> Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2011), 242.

target market of this fleeting fad.<sup>114</sup> While straight media was appropriating a certain lesbian aesthetic to sell goods, lesbian media was regularly seized at the border by Canada Customs officials.<sup>115</sup> Commenting on the place that lesbians held within popular media in the 1990s, Millan has stated:

The mainstream right now is full of lesbians. I mean every sitcom seems to have a lesbian on it, every drama has a beautiful skinny couple who kiss, and that's it. And I think it goes back to an earlier point, that it's very digestible, this idea of seeing lesbians, because it makes all the little liberals within feel real good about thinking that's fine. But as soon as any kind of politics or real sexual practice enters the picture... Well, it doesn't. The point is, it *doesn't* enter the picture, it's just not acceptable.<sup>116</sup>

Like fat women, trans and/or racialized lesbians are also dismally underrepresented, and though Dempsey and Millan do not drive such intersectionality to the fore, their video clearly pushes back against the depoliticization and desexualisation of lesbianism by ensuring that politics and sex *do* enter the picture.

*Object/Subject of Desire* is explicitly provocative. Given that sex is often defined in heteropatriarchal society as penetration by penis, her fantasy to fuck you “with my face, my fists, my hands, my feet, again and again” is particularly rebellious. Furthermore, the idea that somebody could get pleasure by pleasuring another person, without themselves receiving genital stimulation really destabilizes what heterosexuals have come to define as “sex.” The moving pattern resembling rainfall that is layered over the performing body suggests vaginal fluids produced by pleasure or orgasm. In contrast to the other three parts, this pattern is not bound by the perimeter of the figure, but it spills over the entire frame, accompanied by a distorted image of a pair of hands fondling the screen. At times, these graphic elements effectively obscure the figure and conceal her facial expressions [fig. 5]. These messy, disorderly visuals have metaphorical

<sup>114</sup> Dittmar, “The Straight Goods,” 321.

<sup>115</sup> Warner, *Never Going Back*, 269-270.

<sup>116</sup> Dempsey and Millan, “Sex and Pleasure,” 86.



significance; resisting confinement, they illustrate the subject's deviant sexual desires. The language that the artists use in part four is strikingly sexual, but *Object/Subject of Desire* does not contain any overtly erotic imagery. According to Millan, they "avoid gratuitous representation," which means that they "wouldn't throw sex in just to have sex... Every single thing, in the end, in the work that we present, has to somehow support the basic ideas of that particular piece."<sup>117</sup> Concluding their four-part performance with an explicit expression of sapphic desire while wearing a costume that traditionally symbolizes virginity, was a deliberate, audacious and impactful choice that complimented other dualisms and purposeful contradictions in the video. It was also wickedly funny.

#### *Satire, irony and the embrace of duplicity*

Humour is a key part of the ambivalence that characterizes *Object/Subject of Desire*, as well as a way for the artists to entice viewers into contemplating ideas they may otherwise dismiss. Simply put, the video is really funny, but it uses material that is otherwise generally unfunny, like neoliberal narratives of romance and family. Similar to Opie's use of formal beauty, Dempsey and Millan use humour to strategically seduce viewers: "Humour," they declare "is the only way to force people to hear what they don't want to hear."<sup>118</sup> As literary theorist Linda Hutcheon pointed out in 1995, feminist and queer artists commonly use ironic humour "as a powerful tool or even weapon in the fight against a dominant authority."<sup>119</sup> Dempsey and Millan use recognizable imagery to draw viewers into their performances that are embedded with contradictions and unexpected twists, to get people thinking. Tanya Mars, a performance and video artist based in

<sup>117</sup> Dempsey and Millan, "Sex and Pleasure," 86.

<sup>118</sup> Dempsey and Millan, "Public Warning," 62.

<sup>119</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: the Theory and Politics of Irony* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 26

Toronto, has observed that it is particularly subversive for women performance artists to use humour in their work since feminists are so often portrayed in popular culture as “not being able to take a joke.”<sup>120</sup> Satire and irony are genres in which humour is often included to call attention to serious matters,<sup>121</sup> but in many cases laughter could be read easily as a complicit response, regardless of subversive intent. This is partly why, on the surface, Dempsey and Millan’s performance appears to indicate ambivalence towards the political issues it addresses, for irony is an inherently ambivalent form, facing two ways in every utterance it makes.

Using “humour to show the absurdity of the rules we live by,”<sup>122</sup> Dempsey and Millan not only satirize heteronormative relationship clichés, but also common patterns in queer dating. At one point, Dempsey professes her longing for a mutual agreement that “won’t be a relationship, but rather an intimate friendship involving sex where applicable.” She recites a list of actions that may occur when two busy people attempt to plan a date, a phenomenon that is also known as phone tag. At first, Dempsey recommends that they choose an activity that “doesn’t require too much interaction.” She then mentions the desire to discuss heavy subjects like “childhood trauma and failed relationships” with an apparently inappropriate level of enthusiasm, as if to mock the tendency for lesbians to overshare on the first date, which is something of a joke within the community. It is absurd to frame the practice of optimal “intimacy skills” as a date that quickly shifts emotional detachment and intensely vulnerable conversation. *Object/Subject of Desire* makes fun of ways that some people treat dating like gameplay, and how in an effort to have fun and avoid hurt, meaningful connections are hindered.

<sup>120</sup> Tanya Mars, “Not Just for Laughs: Women, Performance, and Humour,” in *Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian Women*, ed. Tanya Mars and Johanna Householder (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2004), 22.

<sup>121</sup> Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 25.

<sup>122</sup> Hall, “Bodies in Sight,” 10.

So then, what are the risks of using satire and irony, genres that, to some extent, imply ambivalence towards serious political matters, and how might those risks be mitigated? Linda Hutcheon notes that irony is risky because “even if an ironist intends an irony to be interpreted in an oppositional framework, there is no guarantee that this subversive intent will be realized.”<sup>123</sup> She argues that the realization of subversive intent depends on the pre-existing “discursive communities” that both the ironist and interpreter are a part of, as well as the context in which the performance takes place.<sup>124</sup> Jayne Wark has observed that there are more queer performance artists using humour in Canada than in the US, and she argues that the respective political contexts are to explain for this distinction: “The comparatively open atmosphere in Canada... accounts for why artists like Dempsey and Millan, unlike their American counterparts... were able to use humour as a queer strategy for resisting and sublimating abjection.”<sup>125</sup> While the majority of people in both the U.S. and Canada strongly opposed homosexuality in the 1980s, in general Canadians grew increasingly more accepting of sexual diversity throughout the 1990s.<sup>126</sup> Dempsey and Millan perform in many types of venues, including public spaces that are not conventionally used to display art, and *Object/Subject of Desire* is freely available through Vimeo to anyone with a device connected to the Internet. Given the possibility that a person who is not familiar with their work or queer politics may encounter their performance art unexpectedly, there is more risk that subversive intent would go unnoticed, so Dempsey and Millan use certain clues to indicate irony.

The artists use body language, visual effects and speech tempo to demonstrate and confirm that irony is intended. Part three and four of the performance show this strategy in practice. Dempsey rotates slowly like a ballerina in a wind-up musical jewelry box, at one point revealing

<sup>123</sup> Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 15.

<sup>124</sup> Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, 17.

<sup>125</sup> Wark, “Queering Abjection,” 107.

<sup>126</sup> Rayside, *Queer Inclusions, Continental Divisions*, 46.

her undercut hairstyle in profile view [fig. 6]. It seems as though the clockwise rotation of her stiff body is being controlled by a hidden mechanical device, a detail that suggests the subject is being manipulated by an external force. As she turns, her arms raise from an outstretched position, gradually bending at the elbow, eventually crossing at the wrist, until both hands reach her neck. Dempsey's exaggeratedly earnest speech expresses a desire to have the type of relationship that is represented in Opie's *Cutting* – the idealized monogamous nuclear family model: "We'll put in a pool, buy a car, and be normal, because we own things. We will drive off into the rest of our lives, and be happy, and not lonely, and just like everyone else." But this is the moment in the video when she grasps her neck with both hands as if she is choking herself, [fig. 7]. Both voice and gesture signal that the artists intend for those lines to be interpreted as ironic. The background is an image of bright red stage curtains, implying that she is reciting a script and playing a role that may not coincide with her own opinions. "Whether it's a nostalgic or fantastical visual element," Millan explains, "we remind our audience again and again that this isn't real."<sup>127</sup>

Eventually, the artists move away from irony together. In the final part of the video, however, when the talk turns explicitly to sex, Dempsey's body language is much more relaxed. Her movement becomes less automated and is motivated instead by a passion that is also expressed through the script. Whereas parts one through three ended with a bow – a gesture that explicitly signals the enactment of a performance – the final, sexual, part of the video concludes quite differently. Dempsey extends her arms as if she were to bow again, but instead she slowly walks out of the frame while gazing assertively at the viewer [fig. 8]. This inconsistency distinguishes part four from those that came before it. It resists conformity and, unlike the other parts of the performance, there are no markers of irony. Clearly, Dempsey and Millan's uninhibited expression

<sup>127</sup> Dempsey and Millan, "Public Warning," 68.

of lesbian sexuality does not demonstrate ambivalence towards these desires in particular. But there is still another way in which the explicit sexual language of the video's concluding part does register the artists' own ambivalent positionality – not now as a formal technique that the artists' deliberately manipulate, but rather as a structural ambivalence born of their own dual position both inside and outside the boundaries of a normativity structured not only by sex but also by race.

*Exposing white femininity, dreaming of privilege*

Throughout their body of work, Dempsey and Millan draw from the popular culture of white middle-class women, mining “mass media, movies, magazines, churches,” as well as their “own histories and childhood memories” for material.<sup>128</sup> In the late 1980s and early 1990s, artists who were Black, Indigenous and/or people of colour finally started to gain some recognition from (the overwhelmingly white) Canadian art spaces and publications.<sup>129</sup> Although there was resistance, exhibitions, festivals and conferences began including artists of colour who were vocal about the systemic racism they experienced and the impact it had on their careers.<sup>130</sup> The feminist arts community was particularly called out and enmeshed within these discussions.<sup>131</sup> Consequently, some white women artists became more aware of their privileged position within the art world. Dempsey acknowledged in an interview from 1998 that their process was “not unlike what many Women of Colour are doing – recreating their history and making it relevant. Sometimes White

<sup>128</sup> Dempsey and Millan, “Public Warning,” 63.

<sup>129</sup> Monika Kin Gagnon, “Introduction: An Other Conundrum?,” in *Other Conundrums: Race, Culture, and Canadian Art*, ed. Monika Kin Gagnon (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2000), 21.

<sup>130</sup> Monika Kin Gagnon, “Building Blocks: Anti-Racist Initiative in the Arts,” in *Other Conundrums: Race, Culture, and Canadian Art*, ed. Monika Kin Gagnon (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2000), 51-72; Beatrice Bailey, “Three Women Speak,” *FUSE* (Winter 1987-1988), 32-33.

<sup>131</sup> Buseje Bailey, Leslie Corry, Adrienne Else, and Kim Fullerton, *Locations: Feminism, Art, Racism, Region: Writings and Artworks*, ed. Joyce Mason, originally published by Women’s Art Resource Centre, Toronto. Special WARC insert in *Parallelogramme* (Spring 1989).

women think, ‘Oh, well we don’t have a culture,’ but, of course, we do have this huge culture.”<sup>132</sup> This observation accords with Ruth Frankenberg’s study in the mid-1980s, in which she concluded that majority of white women consider their culture to be indescribable, unmarked and formless.<sup>133</sup> These beliefs are rooted in a colonial worldview that positions whiteness as a neutral experience and reinforces its authority. “A far-reaching danger of whiteness coded as ‘no culture’ is that it leaves in place whiteness as defining a set of normative cultural practices against which all are measured and into which all are expected to fit,” Frankenberg explains.<sup>134</sup> By referring to and playing up cultural markers of white femininity that often go unnoticed by white women, Dempsey and Millan’s work enables these markers to become visible and, by extension, strange.

In *Object/Subject of Desire*, the artists play with a familiar archetype of white heterosexual femininity: the virginal bride in a white wedding gown. Wedding dresses vary by culture and trends come and go, but the most conventional colour and style for white middle-class brides at the end of the twentieth century was a white ballgown. Then as now, finding the perfect dress was arguably the most important part of the wedding-planning process for the majority of straight women, and this experience was reflected throughout pop culture and capitalized on through a billion-dollar industry. Although it is true that many lesbian couples celebrated their love through wedding ceremonies that were not legally recognized by the state before Canada established marriage equality in 2005,<sup>135</sup> the white bridal gown has long been an emblem of white female purity and monogamous heterosexuality. Of course, black women wear white wedding gowns too, but the

<sup>132</sup> Dempsey and Millan, “Public Warning,” 63.

<sup>133</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, “Questions of Culture and Belonging,” in *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 196-241.

<sup>134</sup> Frankenberg, *The Social Construction of Whiteness*, 208.

<sup>135</sup> Ontario introduced marriage equality in 2003, but it was not until 2005 that it became law for every province and territory in Canada: “TIMELINE: Same-Sex rights in Canada, CBC,” accessed August 18, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/timeline-same-sex-rights-in-canada-1.1147516>.

specific correlation of the colour, expense, and symbolism that Dempsey and Millan's video highlights and pokes fun at is distinctively white.

White became the traditional colour for bridal attire in the nineteenth century and it is associated with Victorian morality. After Queen Victoria wore a white gown to her wedding in 1840, an unconventional choice for royals at the time, it became trendy amongst white middle-class brides in Western Europe and the British colonies who dreamt of having a fairy-tale wedding of their own.<sup>136</sup> In *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*, Cele C. Otnes and Elizabeth H. Pleck explain the correlation between white wedding gowns and privilege and sexual purity:

...white was the color girls were supposed to wear at court. It was also hard to keep clean, and cleanliness was becoming more valued as a sign of privilege (and later became associated with good hygiene and fighting germs). More important, the queen herself, and the era she lived in, valued the ideal of female sexual purity and associated this trait with the color white. In Western culture, there were only two kinds of women, good ones (mothers or virgins) and evil ones (whores). The Victorians had their own twinning of women, the pure versus the “fallen” (their term for a prostitute). At her wedding, the pure woman wore a white veil and gown to signify her virginity. She deserved to wear white because she and her family had protected her sexual virtue.<sup>137</sup>

Dempsey and Millan use references to the Virgin Mary to highlight the associations between purity and virginity that are encapsulated in the white wedding dress. Of course, this was a particularly risky choice considering the antagonistic views that many religious conservatives had of queer people at that time. Although Christian rights organizations in Canada had less political power than they did in the US,<sup>138</sup> marriage equality was a contentious issue for the large number of people who believed that marriage can only be between a man and a woman. *Object/Subject of Desire*

<sup>136</sup> Chrys Ingraham, *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (New York City: Routledge, 2008), 59-60.

<sup>137</sup> Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 31.

<sup>138</sup> Rayside, *Queer Inclusions, Continental Divisions*, 37.

challenged these convictions, but repeated references to the Mother of God do not simply function to cause controversy. The Virgin Mary symbolizes certain characteristics attributed to white femininity, such as innocence and angelic sweetness. Dempsey began each of the four parts with her arms down by the side of her body, slightly extended so that her wrists and forearms do not touch her torso, with her palms open to the camera. This stance bears a close resemblance to the one seen in *The Immaculate Conception* by Anton Raphael Mengs [fig. 9]. It is also seen in images of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven, and this correlation is especially clear considering that Dempsey appears to be floating in the sky in the first part of the performance [fig. 10]. In part three, a grayscale photograph of a garden of lilies is layered on top of the red curtains, behind the performing body [fig. 11]. White lilies commonly symbolize purity and they often appeared alongside the Virgin Mary in early Renaissance painting.<sup>139</sup>

The ideals of moral purity associated with virginity and the white wedding gown are not equally available to women of colour, however. Given the colonial context in which the white wedding gown gained popularity, it is also a racialized trope symbolizing a sexual morality and female virginity that has been far more commonly associated with white women than women of colour. Black and Indigenous women, in particular, have been hypersexualized by white people for centuries. In the Americas, slave-owners subjected Black women to sexual violence and this history gave rise to the stereotypical portrayal of the hypersexualized Black woman, in contrast to the sexually pure white woman.<sup>140</sup> Thus the purity that the white dress speaks to is not only the sexual purity of virginity; it is also the racial purity that the tight control of sexuality within heterosexual marriage traditionally sought to ensure. In the North American context, marriage laws

<sup>139</sup> Riklef Kandeler and Wolfram R. Ullrich, "Symbolism of Plants: Examples from European-Mediterranean Culture Presented with Biology and History of Art," *Journal of Experimental Botany* 60, no. 7 (2009): 1895.

<sup>140</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, "The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York City: Routledge, 2000), 135-148.



were used to preserve racial purity. Sociologist Katerina Deliovsky has pointed out that "compulsory heterosexuality"<sup>141</sup> is not simply about the patriarchal obligation for women to practice heterosexuality, but it also has to do with white supremacy and racial solidarity. Her interviews with white women in interracial relationships "suggest that in order to reap the benefits of 'white' womanhood, women must conform to the rules of compulsory 'white' heterosexuality, this signalling their 'good white girl' status."<sup>142</sup> So the purity that marriage has maintained was not just sexual but also racial.

Crucially, however, the gown in Dempsey and Millan's video is not made of conventional materials such as satin, chiffon or lace, but rather of vellum paper, packing tape and Velcro.<sup>143</sup> Discussing the gown's materiality in an article for the *Canadian Theatre Review*, Lynda Hall observes: "Dempsey appears not only vulnerable, but, symbolically wrapped in paper, also appears innocently available and sexually appealing in an already culturally conditioned marked body. White paper as material suggests purity, fragility, and easy access but also disposability."<sup>144</sup> These characteristics have often been associated with (white) women and used to justify their subordination in patriarchal societies, but they have also been co-opted by white women to avoid taking responsibility for their complicity in white supremacy. In the first part of the performance, black text, typed in Times New Roman font, was superimposed onto her white dress. It appears as though the paper on which this text was typed has been slightly crumpled, denoting a discarded draft, a detail that plays up the themes of fragility and disposability that Hall refers to. Yet the

<sup>141</sup> Compulsory heterosexuality is a term used by Adrienne Rich in the early 1980s to describe the societal forces that push women towards heterosexuality. According to Rich, it is a patriarchal tool that thrives on lesbian invisibility and secures men's unrestricted access to women. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no.4 (Summer 1980): 631-660.

<sup>142</sup> Katerina Deliovsky, "Compulsory 'White' Heterosexuality: The Politics of Racial and Sexual Loyalty," in *White Femininity: Race, Gender & Power* (Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2010), 63.

<sup>143</sup> "The Dress Series," Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, accessed May 29, 2020, <http://www.shawnadempseyandlorrimillan.net/#/19-photographs/>.

<sup>144</sup> Hall, "Bodies in Sight," 15.

process of layering images onto the performer's body, to some extent stains the otherwise blank piece of paper, compromising its alleged purity.

Of course, the most significant way in which Dempsey and Millan disrupt the narrative of purity is by explicitly claiming their sexuality, but as much as this is disruptive it is also a strategy that is available to them *because of* their security as white women; in view of the hypersexualization of women of colour, such a strategy would not have signified in the same way in the hands of artists who were not white. The very transgressiveness of *Object/Subject of Desire* is thus also a marker of white femininity, and the ambivalence to social normativity expressed through these works speaks to the artists' relative privilege as white cisgender people. In short, it is easier to reject the norm if we are securely positioned within it. White lesbians in the early nineties were marginalized because of their gender and sexual identities, but they were also privileged. The politics of respectability observed in LGBTQ+ communities at the turn of the millennium were based on white, middle-class morality. "Whiteness generally colonises the stereotypical definition of all social categories other than those of race," Richard Dyer explains, "To be normal, even to be normally deviant (queer, crippled), is to be white."<sup>145</sup> Dempsey and Millan are speaking from a position of difference but are comfortably entrenched in and protected by their racial identity. The notions of "normal" that *Object/Subject of Desire* critiques were constructed according to the values of white people and upheld by white supremacy, compulsory heterosexuality, marriage and capitalism.

<sup>145</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 1997), 12.

## Heteronormativity and Queer Response

*Self-Portrait/Cutting* and part three of *Object/Subject of Desire* both present a troubling duality, in that they represent subjects who insist on pursuing committed romantic relationships modelled on heteronormative family structures despite it causing them the kind of harm so clearly symbolized by the bleeding wound and the choking gesture. It appears that the subjects in these works are on some level aware that these desires are detrimental to their wellbeing, but they pursue them regardless.

To better understand the conflicted convictions evidenced in these works by white lesbian artists from the 1990s, I turn to Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, in which she examines why certain attachments "remain powerful [even] as they work against the flourishing of particular and collective beings."<sup>146</sup> Most notably, she questions why marginalized people continue to invest in "the heterofamilial, upwardly mobile good-life fantasy" when this fantasy has become progressively and noticeably more elusive since the postwar era.<sup>147</sup> Her theory concerns the "ordinariness of suffering" and the "violence of normativity."<sup>148</sup> According to Berlant, an object of desire, which can be a person, thing, scene or event, represents a "cluster of promises"<sup>149</sup> because people often assume that proximity to that object will bring them closer to the "good life." She considers such attachments to be cruel, not only because they make people feel like it is not possible to endure the loss of these objects, but also because they inhibit alternative, more satisfying ways of living.

The artworks I have examined here contend with cruel optimism in somewhat different manners. Opie's insistence that *Cutting* is indeed an "optimistic" work of art, despite the

<sup>146</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 13.

<sup>147</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 11.

<sup>148</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 28.

<sup>149</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 23.

contradictory connotations that her bleeding back suggests, makes more sense in light of Berlant's theory. According to Berlant, people want to protect their optimistic attachments to objects that are detrimental to their wellbeing because they mistakenly believe that being close to those objects will inevitably improve their overall quality of life. The cutting's domestic imagery relates to the common belief that a long-term monogamous romantic partnership makes a prosperous and comfortable life possible. This idea is echoed in part three of Dempsey and Millan's *Object/Subject of Desire*. After Dempsey proclaims that she wants love, she reveals her desire to have a house with a pool along with other indicators of material wealth. She facetiously fantasizes about being "normal" because she and her partner "own things." Berlant encourages readers to "think about normativity as aspirational and as an evolving and incoherent cluster of hegemonic promises about the present and future experience of social belonging."<sup>150</sup> In other words, normativity is an unstable constructed ideal that people are expected to consistently strive for in order to feel included in any given society. Indeed, both bodies of work refer to self-inflicted physical injury in some way. Opie's wounds have specific subcultural connotations as they relate to her self-identification with the BDSM community. Yet, blood dripping from an image of a happy household expresses a compelling paradox. It appears that Opie's aspirations to secure a partnership that she presumes would improve her quality of life are detrimental to her overall wellbeing. Together, the shining sun and dripping blood demonstrate how deeply devastating it is for someone to lose an object of desire when that object represents a "cluster of promises" – in this case, a happy household. Meanwhile, *Object/Subject of Desire* calls attention to the ways that the attachment itself harms people. There is a discernable satirical tone to Dempsey's voice when she recites optimistic lines like "It will be good for us, it'll be fun, we won't get hurt, and we will be better people because of

<sup>150</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 167.

it” with seemingly insincere enthusiasm. The way that she articulates the words “fun” and “hurt” with a rising pitch suggests that the subject is not necessarily convinced that these statements are true, and her mention of “failed relationships” implies that she knows this from experience. Yet she wants to pursue the “intimate friendship” anyway, under the impression that it will make her a better person and, by extension, improve her overall wellbeing. Berlant explains,

Whatever the *experience* of optimism is in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world become different in just the right way. But, again, optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving.<sup>151</sup>

The point she makes at the end of this passage is key: the concept of cruel optimism shows how optimism can be an issue when it holds people back from experiencing a fulfilling life. Furthermore, it can hold communities back from imagining alternative ways of being that do not strive for normativity as a means to inclusion. Cruel optimism brings to the surface a phenomenon that resonates in the context of late capitalism and it is embedded in the contradictions that arise from these bodies of work. It helps to explain how something like *Cutting* can be seen as optimistic by Opie but, at the same time, appear hopeless from an outside point of view. Meanwhile, the way in which Dempsey and Millan use sarcasm in voicing optimistic affirmations in *Object/Subject of Desire* evokes ambivalence, but in a way that suggests these artists are more conscious of the cruel experience of their attachments.

While Berlant examines the politics of optimism more broadly, Heather Love considers how it plays out in the queer community specifically in her book, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Love is suspicious of the post-Stonewall affirmative turn that pressures folks in LGBTQ+ communities to abandon “negative” feelings, such as shame, in favour of

<sup>151</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

“positive” feelings, such as pride. She explains that the emphasis on a utopian future for gays and lesbians follows a modernist notion of “progress,” and while she recognizes why it seems important for queer people to represent themselves positively, narratives of progress are problematic for several reasons. First, they tend to leave behind those most marginalized – “the nonwhite and the nonmonogamous, the poor and the genderdeviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected, and a host of unmentionable others”<sup>152</sup> – for they are assumed to hold mainstream gays and lesbians back. Second, it ignores historical continuities by “[making] it harder to see the persistence of the past in the present.” According to Love,

Same-sex desire is marked by a long history of association with failure, impossibility, and loss. I do not mean that homosexual love is in its essence failed or impossible, any more than regular love is. The association between love’s failures and homosexuality is, however, a historical reality, one that has profound effects for contemporary queer subjects.<sup>153</sup>

In other words, while it would be inaccurate and dangerous to claim that queer love and failure are naturally linked, the extent to which homosexuality has historically been denounced as regressive and therefore detrimental to society, warranting social exclusion, has lasting impact on queer people and their interpersonal relationships. The connection between queer love and loss was further magnified in the 1980s when LGBTQ+ communities was grappling with the AIDS crisis, nicknamed the “gay plague,” that claimed countless lives in the face of government silence.

Reflecting on twentieth century literature, Love identifies “stubborn attachments to lost objects” and “celebrations of perversion” as moments when queer subjects “embraced backwardness,”<sup>154</sup> and both bodies of work that I explore in this thesis portray these matters. Opie’s *Cutting* and part one of Dempsey and Millan’s *Object/Subject of Desire* depict stubborn

<sup>152</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 10.

<sup>153</sup> Love, *Feeling Backward*, 21.

<sup>154</sup> Love, *Feeling Backward*, 7.

attachments to lost objects. Like two sides of the same coin, Opie is still so attached to her failed relationship that she etched a memento of it into her skin, while Dempsey conversely admits that desire for her unrequited lover remains woefully attached to her forever. Likewise, *Pervert* and part four of *Object/Subject of Desire* celebrate perversion, through Opie's defiant reclamation of the term itself and Dempsey's racy oration.

As institutions become more inclusive of gays and lesbians, the desire to forget the past strengthens.<sup>155</sup> Reflecting on this predicament, Love writes, "Queers face a strange choice: is it better to move on toward a brighter future or to hang back and cling to the past?"<sup>156</sup> Mainstream lesbian and gay politics consider pride to be a future-oriented affect, but this view is based on heteronormative values and a desire to achieve equality without necessarily questioning if this approach is best for queer people in general. Pride discourse relies on binary thinking as it seeks to leave shame in the past. But shame and pride can and certainly do coexist in the present, as the works discussed in my thesis express. "Such divided allegiances result in contradictory feelings: pride and shame, anticipation and regret, hope and despair."<sup>157</sup> Positioned at a crossroads, these works made by white lesbian artists in the early nineties convey a sense of ambivalence that is consistent with Love's ideas.

Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* also clarifies the ambivalence represented in these works, for it brings to light how intentional unintelligibility may be a strategy to resist heteronormativity. Bearing in mind that the binary between success and failure is a capitalist construct, wherein material wealth, marriage and reproduction are considered to be indicators of success, Halberstam argues that failure is a subversive, queer aesthetic. He explains,

<sup>155</sup> Love, *Feeling Backward*, 10.

<sup>156</sup> Love, *Feeling Backward*, 27.

<sup>157</sup> Love, *Feeling Backward*, 27.

Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity and critique.<sup>158</sup>

*Cutting, Pervert* and *Object/Subject of Desire* each negotiate with this constructed binary, and although these bodies of work seem to express an affinity with certain markers of success, they also embrace failure as an alternative political framework.

According to Halberstam, failure is most notably a butch lesbian aesthetic, since gay guys are often considered to have good taste. I would add that trans people of all genders and sexualities are more often considered to be associated with failure, particularly those who are racialized and/or from a lower class, in ways that seriously jeopardize their safety and therefore cannot be overlooked. That said, the works I have chosen here do resonate meaningfully with Halberstam's observation that "the butch lesbian is a failure not only in contemporary queer renderings of desire; she stands in for failure in consumer culture writ large because her masculinity becomes a block to heteronormative male desire."<sup>159</sup> The subjects in both bodies of work that I explore in this thesis embody failure in multiple forms: the failure to maintain or even desire a domestic relationship, the failure to uphold norms policing sexual behaviour, the failure to align with the mainstream, the failure to represent queerness in a supposedly respectable way, and the failure to express their gender in a manner that could be easily marketed or appeal to most men. They allude to some indicators of normative femininity (the triangle skirts on Opie's stick figures, the bridal gown that Dempsey wears) but short hair, leather and piercings are fashion statements that are often associated with the butch lesbian stereotype. Broadly speaking, Gayle Rubin defines butch as a "lesbian vernacular term for women who are more comfortable with masculine gender codes,

<sup>158</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Cruel Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 89.

<sup>159</sup> Halberstam, *The Cruel Art of Failure*, 95.



styles, or identities than feminine ones.”<sup>160</sup> But Rubin acknowledges that butch is a nuanced term and lesbians who identify with it vary in the way they express their gender. It is also not my place to label someone as butch who may not use this term to describe themselves. However, Halberstam’s reflection on the extent to which lesbian bodies coded as butch disrupt the visual pleasure of heterosexual men and oppose commodification is relevant to this discussion because it explains how, in these works, the refusal to perfectly embody the traits associated with normative femininity is a form of resistance that complicates the homonormative desires that they simultaneously portray.

Halberstam proposes a political framework that he refers to as “shadow feminism,” pertaining to “subjects who unravel, who refuse to cohere; subjects who refuse “being” where being has already been defined in terms of a self-activating, self-knowing, liberal subject.”<sup>161</sup> Abounding in contradictions, these works certainly enact the failure to be coherent. Furthermore, they manifest failed neoliberal subjectivity. Part two of Dempsey and Millan’s *Object/Subject of Desire* mocks discourses around self-improvement and individualism within the context of relationships. Their subject openly admits her intention to date in the interest of becoming a better person, following her therapist’s advice. She insists on splitting the bill and becoming close, but not codependent. Her intent to be “adult about things” equates self-reliance with maturity. Her approach is calculated and contractual, as revealed in her plan to “call you once a week on Tuesday” and her use of the phrase “sex where applicable,” borrowing terminology from legally binding documents.

<sup>160</sup> Gayle Rubin, “Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender, and Boundaries,” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 242.

<sup>161</sup> Halberstam, *The Cruel Art of Failure*, 126.

The female masochism embodied in *Pervert* and *Cutting* is another example of shadow feminism. Halberstam refers to the act of cutting one's skin as "a feminist aesthetic proper to the project of female unbecoming."<sup>162</sup> Opie's gender identity is a big part of why these images are so shocking, because they contradict the kind of "female empowerment" that liberal feminists want to see. These images beg the question: *why would she do that to herself?* And with the sex wars of the 1980s in mind, it is reasonable to assume that for many feminists, an adequately sensible answer to this question does not exist. According to Halberstam, "in a liberal realm where the pursuit of happiness... is both desirable and mandatory and where certain formulations of self (as active, voluntaristic, choosing, propulsive) dominate the political sphere, radical passivity may signal another kind of refusal: the refusal quite simply to be."<sup>163</sup> And yet, as Halberstam notes, "feminist theorists in general have not turned to masochism and passivity as potential alternatives to liberal formulations of womanhood."<sup>164</sup> Success is so often portrayed, and celebrated, as the desired outcome of an individual's disciplined action, while failure is considered to result from laziness and therefore condemned. Reframing this presumed laziness as refusal, Halberstam calls attention to the ways that failure can be meaningful to feminism.

The project of female unbecoming and the refusal to be coherent find an echo in the way these artists embrace multiplicity in the structure of their work, enabling the portrayal of multiple meanings at the same time. Both bodies of work consist of distinct but related parts: Opie's *Self-Portraits* constitute a series, while Dempsey and Millan's *Object/Subject of Desire* is a four-part on video. Various influential characterizations of lesbian culture have emphasized the importance of such multiplicity. Harmony Hammond celebrates "the fluid, decentred, layered identity of the

<sup>162</sup> Halberstam, *The Cruel Art of Failure*, 135.

<sup>163</sup> Halberstam, *The Cruel Art of Failure*, 140.

<sup>164</sup> Halberstam, *The Cruel Art of Failure*, 140.

lesbian [that] refuses to be framed or fixed in the art object.”<sup>165</sup> Already in the early 1990s, Cathy Griggers observed that “the Cartesian, total subject that [second-wave feminists want] to claim as a right and as the political goal of lesbian identity politics is more and more manifestly undergoing splittings and fragmentations.”<sup>166</sup> Griggers argues that reproductive technologies and the mass production of sex toys are effectively changing lesbian bodies by enabling (cis) women who do not have sex with (cis) men to bear children and appropriate the phallus. Furthermore, she points out how positionality can manifest differently in the contemporary era:

Each lesbian has a faciality touching on some aspect of a majority signifying regime of post-modernity, whether that be masculinity/femininity, motherhood, race to the nation-state, the sex industry, technologies of simulation, surgical techno-plasties, the commodification of selves and knowledges, reproductive technologies, or the military under global capitalism. Lesbians are inside and outside, minority and majority, *at the same time*.<sup>167</sup>

The works by Opie and by Dempsey and Millan embody this simultaneity, or, as I have been styling it, ambivalence. These queer and lesbian artists are also cis white women who were making art at a time when it seemed like access to institutions that were previously denied to them was more possible than ever before. *Cutting, Pervert and Object/Subject of Desire* are complicated images that demand a nuanced interpretation because they simultaneously portray capitulation and resistance to normative ways of living and loving.

<sup>165</sup> Hammond, *Lesbian Art in America*, 112.

<sup>166</sup> Cathy Griggers, “Lesbian Bodies in the Age of (Post)mechanical Reproduction,” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 184.

<sup>167</sup> Griggers, “Lesbian Bodies,” 189.

## Coda

In 2004, Opie added a third self-portrait to her series, entitled *Self-Portrait/Nursing* [fig. 12]. In this photograph, Opie is holding her infant in her arms as he feeds on her left breast and they stare into each other's eyes lovingly. As this image testifies, her desire to build a family, once expressed in *Cutting*, has been fulfilled. But a decade later, the scar from *Pervert* is still visible on her bare chest, as if to say that her identities as a lesbian, a pervert and a mother are not mutually exclusive.

The apparent contradictions that Catherine Opie, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan display in their work partake in an important and ongoing discussion amongst queer theorists and within communities. If these works replicate heteronormative relationships, they do so with a critical lens, thus complicating the intracommunity conflicts that they speak to. While the historical texts I referred to in researching this thesis often emphasized polarization, suggesting a clear divide between two parties, the art testifies to the complex ways in which queer people negotiate with the norms placed on us by the dominant culture and the potential for simultaneous capitulation and resistance. Taking texts by various queer theorists into account – Lauren Berlant, Heather Love and Jack Halberstam in particular – it becomes clear that community, identity and desire not as tidy as binary logic may suggest.

Concerning queer politics, Michael Warner observes that “one of its greatest contributions to modern life is the discovery that you can have both: intimacy and casualness; long-term commitment and sex with strangers; romantic love and perverse pleasure. To cast the conflict as one between sex and love is to deny the best insights and lived experience of queers.”<sup>168</sup> Accordingly, the intent of this thesis is not to determine which side these artists align with, but to

<sup>168</sup> Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 73.

show how multiple desires can and do coexist, as seen in *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, *Self-Portrait/Pervert* and *Object/Subject of Desire*.

## FIGURES

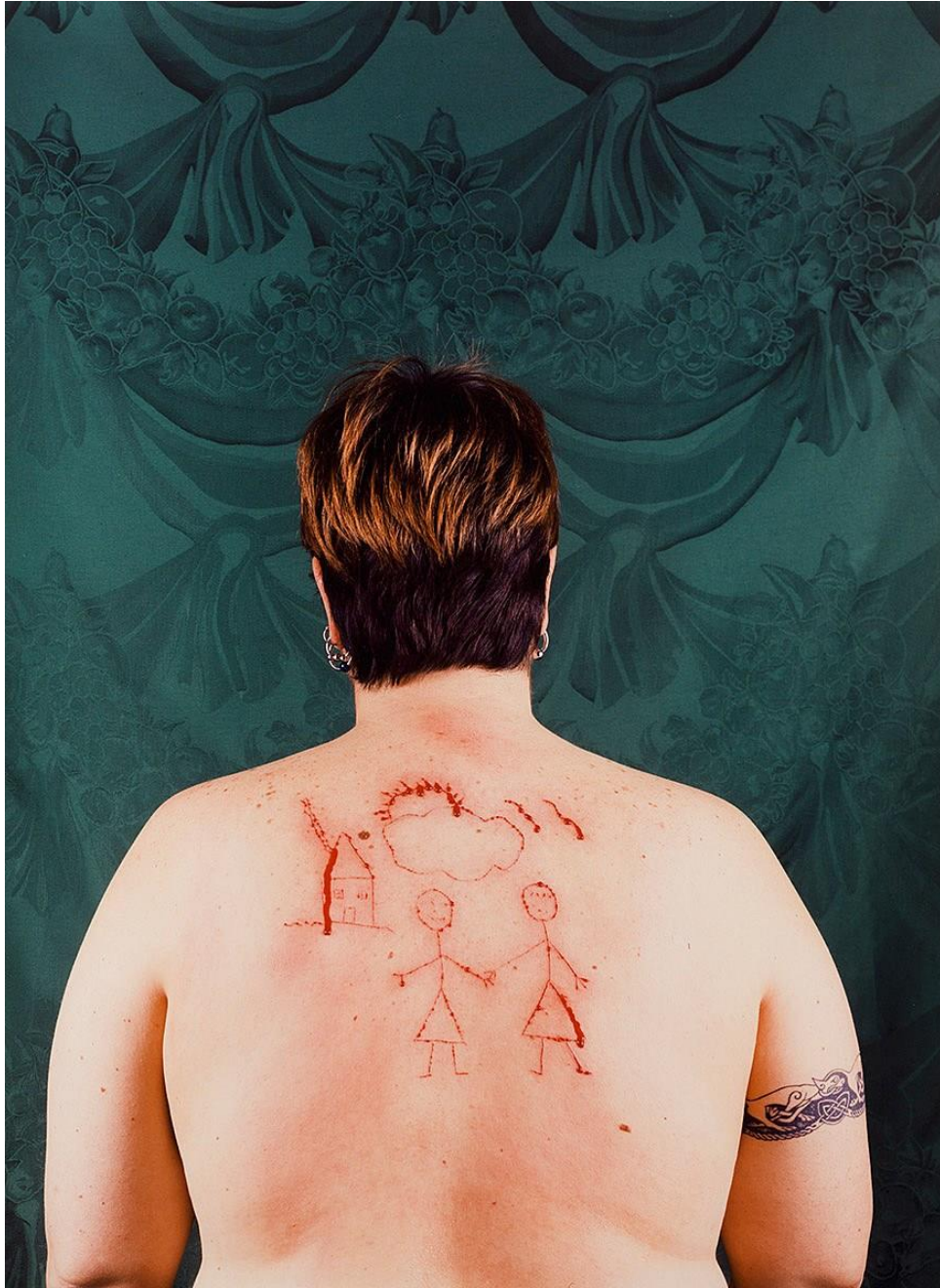


Figure 1 – Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, 1993, chromogenic print, 101.6 x 74.8 cm.  
Image source: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Accessed June 25, 2020.  
<https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/30354>.



Figure 2 – Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait*, 1994, chromogenic print, 101.6 x 75.9 cm.  
Source: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Accessed June 25, 2020.  
<https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/12201>.



Figure 3 – Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, *Object/Subject of Desire*, 1993, 3/4" video, (02:00).

Source: Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, Vimeo, screenshot. Accessed June 25, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/131476697>.



## sexual politics

### goodbye to the last taboo

Not long ago, you couldn't say the word *lesbian* on television. Now everybody's gay-girl crazy. Alexis Jetter charts the trend and asks, Is this the new visibility, or the old voyeurism?

America's newest cover girl has had a dizzying ride. She's been spotted on television, the silver screen, the music charts, and the best-seller lists—even in the Clinton administration. No one knows for sure how she did it. But suddenly, after years in the media's closet, Lavender Jane has hit the big time.

"Lesbians are the Hula-Hoop of the nineties," declares Ann Northrop, a former CBS News producer who now plots guerrilla actions for New York's Lesbian Avengers. "It's the *real* Gay Nineties, except this time it's going to be the Lesbian Nineties."

If this has somehow passed you by, here's a recap: On the *Roseanne* show last fall, once-married Nancy (Sandra Bernhard) fell for department-store makeover artist Marla (Morgan Fairchild). In quick succession, pop musicians k. d. lang, Melissa Etheridge, and Janis Ian came out. Isabella Rossellini cross-dressed for Madonna's *Sex* book, while Gus Van Sant filmed the pansexual classic *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. And *New York* magazine placed a sultry-looking lang on its cover under the headline "Lesbian Chic."

Suddenly, "housewives, high school dropouts, anybody with a Maybelline mascara wand is hearing about how sympathetic, cool, brave, and new lesbians are," says Susie Bright, author of *Susie Bright's Sexual Reality: A Virtual Sex World Reader*.

All of which raises some interesting questions: Does lesbian chic reflect a New Visibility or the Old Voyeurism? How far can it go? And, in my grandmother's lexicon, is it good for the Jews?

Andrea Bernstein, a seasoned lesbian politico who is now deputy campaign manager for New York City mayor David Dinkins, believes that the tide has turned. "It was just two years ago that *L.A. Law* refused to use the *L* word, or even the *B* word," she says, referring to an awkward morning-after-the-kiss chat between two women characters. "They had to use the *F* word—*flexible*."

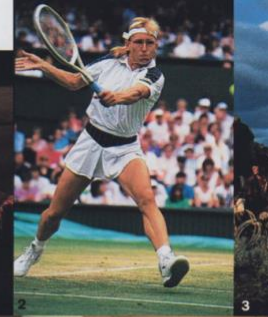
Prime time's first lesbian kiss stole viewers' breath for one endless second in 1991. But relations between bisexual C. J. (Amanda Donohoe) and confused Abby (Michele Greene) soon grew murky, and by season's end Greene had left the show.

*Roseanne* fans, by contrast, needed no advanced semiotics to understand the chemistry between Nancy the waitress and her blond poodle of a girlfriend, Marla. "This customer is *satisfied*," Bernhard cooed salaciously as she presented Fairchild to her lunch-counter chums last fall. In succeeding episodes, Nancy told a turkey-basting Dan (John Goodman) that she and Marla were planning to artificially inseminate, and the pair kissed under the mistletoe. "Well, you know what they say, Dan," Roseanne clucked to her wincing husband. "Every time lesbians kiss, another angel gets her wings."

Bernhard seems tired of talking about it now, and like Roseanne Ar-

nold, she refused requests to be interviewed. (So much for chic.) But Nancy's outing on television's number one comedy show broke more than a few taboos. Lesbian characters have historically appeared on sitcoms only long enough to tweak sensibilities and reaffirm the straight-arrow sexuality of the regular cast, says Sasha Torres, who teaches film and television studies at Dartmouth College. This was particularly true, she says, in all-girl revues like *Kate & Allie*, *The Golden Girls*, and *Designing Women*.

Take, for example, Eugenia the meteorologist, who appeared on one



1. Uma Thurman (left) with Maria de Medeiros in *Henry and June*.  
2. Martina Navratilova.  
3. Lorraine Bracco (left), Uma Thurman, and Rain Phoenix in the upcoming *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*.  
4. Mary-Louise Parker (left) and Mary Stuart Masterson in *Fried Green Tomatoes*.  
5. The founders of *Northern Exposure*'s Cicerly, Alaska.

Details, see in this issue

Figure 4 – "SEXUAL POLITICS: goodbye to the last taboo," *Vogue* (July 1993). Source: Vogue Archive. Accessed June 25, 2020. <https://archive.vogue.com/article/1993/07/01/sexual-politics-goodbye-to-the-last-taboo>.



Figure 5 – Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, *Object/Subject of Desire*, 1993, 3/4” video, (03:57).

Source: Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, Vimeo, screenshot. Accessed June 25, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/131476697>.



Figure 6 – Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, *Object/Subject of Desire*, 1993, 3/4” video, (03:08).

Source: Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, Vimeo, screenshot. Accessed June 25, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/131476697>.



Figure 7 – Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, *Object/Subject of Desire*, 1993, 3/4” video, (03:33).

Source: Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, Vimeo, screenshot. Accessed June 25, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/131476697>.



Figure 8 – Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, *Object/Subject of Desire*, 1993, 3/4” video, (04:33).

Source: Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, Vimeo, screenshot. Accessed June 25, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/13147669>



Figure 9 – Anton Raphael Mengs, *The Immaculate Conception*, 18<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas, 181 cm x 130 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

Source: Image Bank of the Museo del Prado. Accessed June 30, 2020.

<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-immaculate-conception/c3f49946-6171-465a-91a9-21f90bff01ed>.



Figure 10 – Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, *Object/Subject of Desire*, 1993, 3/4” video, (00:18).

Source: Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, Vimeo, screenshot. Accessed June 25, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/131476697>.



Figure 11 -- Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, *Object/Subject of Desire*, 1993, 3/4” video, (02:54).

Source: Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, Vimeo, screenshot. Accessed June 25, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/131476697>.



Figure 12 – Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, 2004, chromogenic print, 101.6 x 78.7 cm.  
Source: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Accessed June 25, 2020.  
<https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/14666>.

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