Gorge: The Legacy of Grotesque Feminist Performance Art in 'Park and Scarf' *Mukbang* Content on TikTok

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A Thesis

In the Department

of

Communication Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

Master of Arts (Media Studies) at

Concordia University

Montréal, Québec, Canada

September 2025

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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Entitled: Gorge: The Legacy of Grotesque Feminist Performance Art in 'Park and Scarf' *Mukbang* Content on TikTok

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Media Studies)

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Abstract

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Phylida Tuff-West

The Western adaptation of *mukbang* – a Korean media form defined by the excessive consumption of food on camera – has produced a TikTok sub-genre of content referred to, in this project, as 'park and scarf.' These videos feature young women eating fast or packaged foods in parked cars and place a sensory emphasis on the process of consumption. This project situates 'park and scarf' content within feminist discourses on the female grotesque and Kristevian abjection, arguing that these performances foreground the unruly body by staging appetite as both excessive and pleasurable, destabilizing cultural prescriptions of feminine restraint.

The methodology combines feminist performance studies with textual analysis, using a comparative framework that pairs individual works of performance art with 'park and scarf' TikToks. This structure emphasizes how eating, whether staged in an artistic context or disseminated through social media, mobilizes excess and sensory immediacy and can be used as a vehicle to interrogate gendered embodiment. By analyzing savoury and sweet consumption across both artistic and digital performances, the project demonstrates how abjection coupled with conventional beauty functions as an aesthetic and affective strategy. Excessive female consumption emerges as a subversive mode that reclaims appetite as a site used to interrogate and question hegemonic aesthetics of suppression.

Acknowledgments

This thesis could not have been completed without the guidance, support, and encouragement of many people.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Liz Miller, for her valuable mentorship, insight, and patience throughout this project. Her critical feedback and encouragement continually pushed me to refine my thinking and develop my work.

I am also deeply grateful to Kim Sawchuk and Lindsay Rodgers for their thoughtful engagement with my research and challenging me to approach questions from different perspectives.

I would like to acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for providing the support that made this project possible.

Thank you to Nicola Martyshuk for gifting me the book that inspired and injected life to this project. Finally, I am forever grateful to my family and friends for their patience, support, and willingness to sit through many dinners listening to me talk about people chewing with their mouths open. Their belief in me sustained me through many challenges of this process.

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Introduction: Eating for an Audience

Gorge: *Eat a large amount greedily; fill oneself with food.*
Gorge: *In slang, "gorge" or "gorg" (shortened form) means "gorgeous" or "beautiful". It's a way to express admiration for someone or something's appearance.*

A woman poses smiling in the driver's seat of a parked car in San Diego. She embodies what the internet has labelled the “clean girl aesthetic,” which consists of a slick back bun, glowing skin, glossed lips, with minimalist clothing and jewelry to match. She grins in a freeze frame with her pink french tipped nude acrylic nails clutched around a bulging beige burrito before unlocking her jaw to clamp her perfect white teeth around its circumference (Figure 1.). She savours the first bite for just enough time to showcase the smudges of the white creamy substance deposited on her lips, cheeks and chin, and then goes in for the next bite. Repeating this process, she lets rogue pieces of rice and grilled meat fall from her mouth and out of the wrap and onto her lap. She chews and slurps in a way that renders the gummy texture of the masticated tortilla audible as it is saturated by the supplementary spicy sauce she adds between bites. Two thirds of the way through, she holds what is left of the burrito out to the camera to show us her progress and then reclaims her meal with another ambitious bite. Mid intake, she is unable to sever the contents inside her mouth from the remainder of the burrito, and after tugging at the piece of stubborn tortilla, surrenders it to her next mouthful. She eats what is left in a two-part bite with the last few grains of rice escaping the seal of her now matte lips. Smiling and nodding, she purses her lips and puffs her cheeks as she chews and swallows the final bite. She culminates the video with a few large sips of a brown soda gulped through a straw.

Figure 1. Keila. [@keilapacheco]. "CHIPOTLE BURRITO!." TikTok, 3 March 2025.

What I have described is a TikTok video that has almost 38 million views. It is tagged with the hashtag *#mukbang,* and belongs to a genre that has graduated from a trend to a phenomenon on the popular social media app. *Mukbang* videos originated in Korea in the 2010s, have since permeated into East and Southeast Asia, and have now cemented a place in Western culture (Stein 957). The term *mukbang* translates to "eating broadcast" and is attributed to videos that feature an individual or a group of people continuously eating excessive amounts of food in front of a camera; often chatting about the taste of the food or sharing mundane personal stories while they eat. "The generic aesthetics of mukbang in a vernacular form are encapsulated as the intentional exploration and exploitation of vulgarity, multi-sensuality, and excess" (Kim 112). These themes are punctuated by calorie-dense delicacies like the fried meat, greasy sauces, and decadent desserts that characterize the genre and add to the audio-visual impact of the highly sensory videos. Through their popularity as a form of mediated intimacy, *mukbangs* have shaped a trend of "social eating" in Korea that exists amongst virtual communities (Cha).

This dynamic of sharing the individual eating experience on social media platforms has been translated into the Western context and in 2021, *mukbang* was one of the 26 Korean words added to the Oxford English Dictionary. Because the OED is "descriptive" rather than "prescriptive," this addition cemented the prevalence and newfound relevance of *mukbangs* in North America (Khedun-Burgoine & Jieun 65). Despite this linguistic acknowledgement of the Korean Wave in English speaking Western culture, there is a lack of academic literature that addresses the fact that, while recognizing the same general principles, *mukbangs* have taken on a life of their own in the Western media landscape (Stein & Yeo 963). The type of *mukbang* content I outline and explore throughout this thesis addresses an aspect of the transcultural nuance of the social media phenomenon. While male *mukbangers* are most frequently the subjects of study in the Korean

context, I highlight a sub-genre of *mukbang* dominated by women and specific to Western lifestyle (Kim 112). What I have termed and will refer to as 'park and scarf' content features beautiful young women consuming packaged and fast foods in parked cars – cameras close to highlight the oozing sauces that coat the creator's hands and face, and the microphone quality high to capture the crunch of every zealous bite. The affective capacity of these videos is facilitated by a psychological phenomenon discovered by internet users labelled Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR). ASMR is a sensory response triggered by various auditory and visual stimuli that produce what are colloquially known as "tingles" in the head and spine of those susceptible to these sensory impressions (Barrat and Davis). While decidedly gluttonous, these female content creators engage with a measured excess that highlights a pleasure in food that is contrasted by the masochistic excess that has sent many Korean *mukbangers* to the hospital with stomach cramps (Kim 112).

Within the Western context, *mukbangs* are often researched in relation to the disordered eating habits of their viewers. Samantha Gillespie in her thesis,"Watching Women Eat: A Critique of Magical Eating and Mukbang Videos" found that internet discourse highlights a tendency among *mukbang* viewers to use the content as a means of vicarious consumption in the proliferation of eating disorders (Gillespie 103). With this finding comes the implied conclusion that access to seeing some women eat a lot of food enables other women to not eat any at all, along with the subsequent implication that deplatforming displays of excessive female consumption could serve as a solution to this problem of visible "rebellious eating" feeding into private disordered eating (Gillespie 5-6). However, I do not believe this is the only, or even the primary dynamic 'park and scarf' has to offer in a more holistic academic understanding of consuming performances and their effects on women. Here, I feel it important to remember that, "Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images… will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable" (Rich 199). These public displays of gluttony with millions of views sit in stark contrast to the notion that women tend to consume less the more people are watching (Turner 281). What I explore in this thesis is the subversive feminist potential of the blatant inversion of this tendency enacted both in 'park and scarf' videos and feminist performance art. Sarah Ahmed begins her book *Living a Feminist Life* with an acknowledgement of the major role sensation plays in feminism:

> I accept that feminism begins with sensation: with a sense of things. I want to explore how feminism is sensible because of the world we are in; feminism is a sensible reaction to the injustices of the world, which we might register at first through our own experiences. We might work over, mull over, these experiences; we might keep coming back to them because they do not make sense. In other words we have to make sense of what does not make sense. There is agency and life in this making (1).

What I argue throughout the following chapters is that 'park and scarf' *mukbangs* are the sensational, rather sensory, beginnings of feminist thought. They represent a "sensible reaction" (i.e. a reaction based in sensation) to the cultural understanding that feminine identity is premised

on omission rather than consumption, while superfluously indulgent and plotless, 'park and scarf' videos simultaneously exist as examples of nonsensical female experience (Turner 286). The problem is, that despite their reactionary and experiential potential, the type of engagement *mukbangs* elicit does not promote the feminist interrogation to which Ahmed attributes the creation of "agency and life." The primary motivators, for engaging with *mukbangs* are boredom reduction as well as the fact that they require minimal mental effort to watch (Stein & Yeo 965). This is where the consideration of 'park and scarf' content in relation to feminist performance art becomes valuable. If these mukbangs serve as the beginnings of sensational feminist thought, then performance art is a fully formed iteration of that thought.

Performance art as a method of inquiry provides an effective framework for "making sense of what does not make sense" regarding the female experience. Through artistic interrogation, performance artists articulate food's capacity to explore the body's limits and desires in relation to gender on an affective level. However, during my preliminary research into the intersection of art, food and feminism, I found that while there are many examples of women using food as an artistic medium, to find artistic depictions of women actually eating is very difficult. This is echoed by Mary Epstein in her gastronomic analysis of women's experimental theater, where she outlines her reaction to Hillary Ramsden's performance of *Kentucky Fried*:

> Rarely before had I seen a woman actually eat onstage. Tea in parlor plays, water for thirsty monologists, perhaps; certainly, I'd witnessed and performed illusory meal scenes, miming ingestion. If I had seen women performers actually eat onstage, I had somehow erased it from my memory. And had it not been couched in comedy, with self-deprecating gests and familiar props like burger buns, Ramsden's performance might have struck an even more dissonant chord... In that halting moment, however, my critical impulse to "clarify" the piece was overwhelmed by a countercritical melée of astonishment, relief, and envy. (21).

This "countercritical melée" of sensorily triggered reaction is something 'park and scarf' content prompts often more effectively and viscerally than performance art. This point has been punctuated for me on a personal level by the amount of times I have had to stop and find something to eat during the writing and research process for this thesis. Watching and rewatching 'park and scarf' videos made me *feel* hungry, whereas directing the same level of attention towards performance art pieces in which the performers eat with a similar degree of commitment, did not precipitate the same cravings. Having said that, watching the performance art made me *think* about the sequence of movements being performed with a level of contemplation that the *mukbangs* did not command. It is in these contrasting dimensions of thought and feeling that the apposition of performance and performance art becomes reciprocally beneficial. Placing 'park and scarf' content alongside consuming performances cements the value of women making the private eating experience public, while also encouraging attentive critical engagement with the process of consumption and the consuming body itself.

My interest in this topic stems from personal experiences as someone who has never been demure when it comes to eating and was also diagnosed with type 1 diabetes at the age of six. As a by-product of my diagnosis, I have developed a hyper awareness surrounding the nutritional value of foods and my patterns of consumption, but I have also found that having diabetes makes other people feel entitled to confront my eating habits with a similar level of criticality. The question “should you really be eating that?” posed frequently when someone sees me bite into something with a high sugar content presumes my condition is a by-product of unhealthy lifestyle choices, rather than a genetic auto-immune disorder, and disregards the fact that I have an insulin pump that essentially allows me to eat like someone who does not have diabetes. I have always approached food with a level of appreciation and enthusiasm that borders on flagrancy. As a child, I would eat the cartilage off chicken wings and reach for my sister's plate to clear what was left of hers. Though my father and uncles ate the table’s leftovers of a family meal with a similar ferocity, when questioned, the phrase, "I'm a growing boy” would be their defense. Based on a bit from the TV show *Friends*, when I ate in a way that sat adjacent to the consumption practices of the men in my family, my catch phrase became, “I’m Phylida, and I’m disgusting.” This statement was always said less as a defense and more as a declaration, and I feel the declarative sentiment is echoed in ‘park and scarf’ content. The TikToks exist as a kind of a visual manifestation of the phrase, with the element of disgust acting as a performative and confrontational reminder that women do in fact eat in ways that are not dedicated by outside opinion and appetites do exist despite their frequent social suppression.

Chapter two works to differentiate performance and performance art through intention and effect while reinforcing the value of a comparison that places both in Mary Russo’s subversive carnival space outlined in her book *The Female Grotesque*. Though decidedly more than practical action, ‘park and scarf’ content fails, largely at the level of intention, to achieve the institutionally reinforced status of art. Using the history of analogue film as an artistic feminist media tool, I identify the ways in which ‘park and scarf’ videos exist within the legacy of this medium but deviate from its feminist affordances in both their alignment with capitalism and their general neglect of parody and satire. While both types of performance use personal experience as a formal element of their composition, ‘park and scarf’ makes the personal public where performance art makes the personal political. In this context, the political and the public bleed into one another in a way that makes it possible for both art and content to contribute to a socially relevant conversation surrounding the policed boundaries of female consumption.

Chapters three and four are framed by Lauren Elkin’s ability, in her book *Art Monsters*, to breathe productive and sensual life into the Kristevian concept of abjection. Through an exploration of first savoury, then sweet eating performances, these chapters reveal how confrontational consumption rooted in artistic practice and extended into content creation appropriates and mobilizes the disgust traditionally associated with the female body through the liberatory potential of excess. Positioning the mouth as a site of analysis, each chapter focuses on both a piece of performance art and a TikTok that exemplify a sensuous alignment of femininity

and abjection through their selective disavowal of symbolic order (Epstein 29). The artistic works of Marina Abramović and Tanya Mars are compared and contrasted to the content creation of @sanaaeats/Sanaa (the creators' last name is not provided on her profile) and @mariavehera257/Maria Vehera to explore how the core and moral facets of disgust are embraced, manipulated, and subverted when characterizing performances that "touch" in both a bodily and affective sense (Elkin 38). The abject, in its Kristevian characterization triggers a repulsion laced unease, and while feminist art in many ways, was and is meant to agitate, its objective is not to fix that sense of unease to the female form. Elkin writes that, "In order to claim authority as artists, [women] believed they needed to make work that would be difficult to look at, excessive, somehow wrong" (35). I argue that these performance-based eating acts encourage a progressive alignment with the abject and the maternal authority it is tied to, as their use of food and its cultural associations melds with a cultural understanding of femininity situated in the sensory register of touch, taste, and smell, in order to produce work that complicates this historical mission statement. The performances discussed in the following chapters capture the viewer's attention through their use of beauty and excess that directs our gaze towards social conception of what we consider "wrong" when it comes to the confines of feminine corporeality. Centralizing the unruly female body, rather than referencing it indexically through its associations with the abject, renders the performances not so much difficult to look at, but rather, difficult to look away from.

Chapter 2: Performance and Performance Art

The following chapters examine two kinds of produced displays of excessive female consumption with the qualifier "art" as the major distinguishing factor between them. While all artistic performances are performances, not all performances are artistic (Davies 5). Performance art has highly disputed boundaries and conditions, but to extend its limits to include *mukbangs* is decidedly beyond the discipline's limber flexibility. What I aim to do in this chapter is outline the conditions that qualify 'park and scarf' content and staged eating as performance and performance art respectively. Through acknowledging the difference between culturally consumed and critically acclaimed eating acts, this chapter aims to reveal the constructive nature of making both types of content part of the same conversation.

Action vs Performance

In *Philosophy of the Performing Arts,* David Davies develops a schematic theoretical framework for the distinction between action, performance, and performance art. Within this inverted triangle, performance is cemented as a sub-category of action because unlike the latter, the former is open to public scrutiny. For example, eating a Big Mac Meal in your car is an action, but when you turn on a camera with the intention of posting a video that documents the private eating act, it becomes a performance. Tied to this propensity for criticism is the implication of an evaluative standard (5). While both 'park and scarf' and consuming performances are subject to public evaluation, in the context of 'park and scarf' videos that are more integrated into everyday life, these standards are in reference to deportment (e.g.chewing, table manners, and healthy eating practices) whereas in the context of consuming performances, these standards are in reference to artistic conventions (e.g. staging, composition, use of colour, and movement). While it could be argued that *mukbangs* have their own set of generic conventions, these standardized practices are not tied to an artistic institution as with consuming performances.

Another factor that distinguishes performance from action is the consideration of an audience. To perform is to act a certain way for the attention of viewers that are, or may be, watching (6). For content creators, whose audience can be measured numerically through views, likes, and comments, their actions are incentivised by engagement that often results in personal economic gain. They eat from fast food chains requested by viewers and engage with the most popular ASMR triggers in attempts to satisfy and expand their fan base. Performance artists, on the other hand, direct their intention towards the work itself and are guided by the understanding that it will be viewed and appreciated by an audience that has invested time (and often money) to be part of a select group with access to the performance. While platformed by TikTok, the content creator is all at once subject, author, and publisher of their work. The artist's work however, often displayed in a gallery setting, is featured for an in person audience rather than fighting for a mediated audience's attention on a social media platform saturated with millions of

similar videos. While it would be inaccurate to claim that revenue does not factor into the creation of a performative artistic work, the value or creation of the performance art does not have the same direct correlative contingency on measurable viewership.

Performance vs Performance Art

Moving to the apex of this theoretical triangle, performance art exists as a narrowed sub-category of performance. To make this distinction, Davies draws on George Dickie's Institutional Theory of Art in which Dickie asserts that for something to be an artwork, it has to acquire status in the "art world" (Davies 7). The "art world" is a social institution that has established practices and behavioural norms for both performers and their audiences that differ depending on the art form. This condition is fortified by the stipulation that the artwork – through the performer– becomes a candidate for appreciation (8). Through platform affordances and generic conventions, these two qualifiers of institutionally established dynamics and appreciative candidature seem to resonate in the realm of content creation and social media usage. However, because of the *mukbanger's* failure to act on behalf of the "art world" in addition to the fact that appreciation in the context of art means something more than, or other than, liking or disliking a work (something TikTok users can express with the physical gesture of tapping a heart on their screen), 'park and scarf" content is ultimately excluded from the realm of performance art. Not only do the artists used as case studies in the following chapters draw on elements of popular culture and theatrical performance, but they are also inspired by movements like Dada, that while ironically anti-institutional, grant them a conferred place within the canon of art history. In an interview for the FADO Performance Art Centre with Paul Couillard, Tanya Mars explains how her comical approach to performance that channels elements of Dadaism was her reaction to a contemporary wave of what she perceived as a "a very dour, humourless kind of durational, physical performance art." This kind of reactionary reciprocity with other artists is contrasted by 'park and scarf' content creators that do not contextualize themselves within history or the genealogy of artistic movements that it produces.

The other aspect that problematizes the classification of 'park and scarf' videos as performance art is the concept of appreciation. According to Davies, aesthetic appreciation is characterized by the interrogative way that the viewer attends to a piece. With performance art, the viewer is particularly attentive to the nuance of movement, as well as the "point" of those movements as a sequence (10). I argue that with *mukbang* content, only the first condition is met. ASMR is used in these videos to tune the user into movement through the audio-visual amplification of an everyday process. The heightened sounds of unwrapping, biting, slurping, and chewing keep the user attuned and fixated on the largely disconcerting nuance of the embodied practice of eating through the performative magnification of a *universal experience*. However, while neither *mukbangs* nor performance art has a practical point (i.e. nourishment), *mukbangs* do not touch on *universal symbols* or "mobilize affective dimensions of thought" (Sawchuk, *Performance (Art)* 12). It is possible to read 'park and scarf' videos as a commentary on overconsumption and the

cultural suppression of women's appetites, but that is not, by nature or through intention, what they are. As Uku Tooming explains, depictions of food that can be classified as both disgusting and titillating "[seem] to function as a supernormal stimulus which holds viewers captive but does not engage their critical capacities and does not require any discriminating sensibility for the appreciation to be possible." (129). To magnify a movement or process beyond the practical (in this case eating), and to then fail to point something out in this augmentation, is more than action but less than art.

Movies vs Films

While this thesis deals with neither movies nor films, the distinction Susan Sontag draws between the two in her 1964 essay "Against Interpretation" serves as an effective metaphor for the cultural line drawn between *mukbangs* and the mediated performance art pieces I examine throughout the following chapters. At the time the essay was written, one of the reasons that films often evaded becoming objects of interpretation was that they, "for such a long time [,] were just movies." (102). Understood as part of mass culture rather than high culture, movies were, as Sontag says, "left alone by most people with minds" (ibid). The same can generally (with some exceptions) be said of *mukbangs* from both a productive and receptive standpoint. However, if 'park and scarf' videos are the mass culture iteration of high culture video based feminist performance art, then I am attending to *mukbangs* as a film critic rather than a movie-goer. This is not to claim that 'park and scarf' videos exist as an iteration of feminist film work and that one day they will be elevated through a shift in cultural perception. Rather, I want to acknowledge that like movies and film, *mukbangs* and video based feminist performance art are in many ways the same medium associated with different sets of culturally contingent interpretive practices.

The digital videography techniques used in 'park and scarf' content are tied to the legacy of the analogue camera that coincided with the beginnings of performance art as a manifestation of 1970's feminist consciousness. Analogue film was an opportunity for women to document and distribute their work through a medium that was not regulated by mainstream media outlets (Wark 109). The relative accessibility of camcorders allowed for self-direction and framing, giving women the role of both subject and artist, as well as the opportunity to subvert the male gaze by asserting control over the representation of their own bodies (Sayre 90). Though not as widespread as digital media, the introduction of analogue can be read as a prototype for the dynamics and distribution methods evidenced in *mukbang* content. The 'park and scarf' *mukbangers* use a democratized method of filming to document themselves on their own terms, embracing DIY aesthetics and challenging expectations surrounding gendered food consumption and decorum. This food-related defiance communicated through video calls on Martha Rosler's 1975 recording of *Semiotics of the Kitchen.* In this single channel black and white composition, Rosler stands in the kitchen and "parodies the role of the perfect TV housewife and cook. Running through an alphabet of kitchen utensils, she demonstrates each for the camera."

(Smithsonian). Through her gestures tinged with violence and punctuated with the sounds of smashing and slashing, Rosler uses the "amateur" medium of videography to enter into a critical discourse surrounding women's oppression in the domestic space. While 'park and scarf' content confronts the viewer with an echo of this unexpected aggression communicated through exaggerated movement and sensory excess, what *mukbangs* are lacking is Rosler's element of parody which reveals a critical distance "between what she [is] doing and what she [is] critiquing." (Elkin 190).

With 'park and scarf' videos, this absence of critique is compounded by the fact they also lack the anti-commercial ethos of feminist art enabled by the authentic nature of analogue as a low resolution, high circulation medium. With portable cameras no longer grainy and takes no longer singular and unedited, 'park and scarf' videos offer vivid sensory encouragement not only to *go eat*, but also to *go buy* food. *Mukbangs*, in North America specifically, seemingly operate with the adage "sex sells" in mind, and with brand sponsorships and fast food, they often read more as advertisement than art. These performances are perceived not as "the avant-garde of perverse sexuality" but rather as "American buffoonery" (Elkin 45). Rosler's demystification of the role of women through subversion is what allows S*emiotics of the Kitchen* to be appreciated as a film rather than simply viewed as a movie. 'Park and scarf' videos, despite the fact that their filming techniques descend from this legacy, carry the propensity for feminist fuelled subversion, but fail to follow through at the level of intention. These content creators do not quite rise to the realm of the political, however, the viewership statistics of 'park and scarf' videos (the hashtag *ASMRfood* on TikTok has 40 billion views) place them firmly in the realm of the public. Translating Sontag's distinction into the context of contemporary culture: if performance art is a *Sundance* film, then *mukbangs* are blockbuster movies, and while the latter may not make the critical contribution of the former, there is still value in attending to something achieving great success in the proverbial box office.

Public vs Political

Whether or not artists have the responsibility to make their art political has been a debate since the 1970s (Wark 5). While Mars and Abramović do not have a conclusive, or rather, unanimous response to this question, the fact that they feel obligated as artists to think on it and speak on it, differentiates them from content creators. The performance work explored in the following chapters embodies the feminist tenet that the personal is political, and in turn, everything is political (ibid). The *mukbangers* on the other hand, make the personal public, and in turn, everything becomes public (even the intimate bodily process of chewing). While decidedly not compositionally intentional in the same way that performance art is, the content creators, simply through visibility, challenge the construction of the modern Western personality. Susan Bordo states in her book *Unbearable Weight*, that "many of us may find our lives vacillating between a daytime rigidly ruled by the 'performance principle' while our nights and weekends capitulate to an unconscious 'letting go' (food, shopping, liquor and other addictive

drugs).” (70). All four women studied throughout the next two chapters perform this process of ‘letting go’ publicly (if not politically), therefore inverting the hegemonic way of being. Traditionally, these feminine coded grotesque binges take place in sites of domestic refuge; like a corner of the kitchen or behind a closed door in the bathroom (173 Davidaukis). Using the car as a setting for their *mukbangs*, the content creators signal this liminal private space while exporting it from the domestic context and bringing self-indulgent consumption out of the closet. The ‘park and scarf’ genre moves away from post-feminist notions of women’s relationship to pleasure and food. Rooted in the ethos that women can “have it all,” Joanne Hollows writes in her chapter, “Feeling Like a Domestic Goddess,” that cooking, from a post-feminist perspective “attempts to negotiate the demands of both pleasing the self and pleasing and caring for others" (186). Sanaa’s and Vehera’s videos on the other hand, focus solely on pleasing the self, and because this pleasure comes from purchased food, they completely negate the kitchen space (and in turn the domestic role of women) where the act of cooking takes place. Any gratification they offer viewers is not through giving or caring but rather allowing their viewers to witness a form of self-pleasure that dominant Western culture dictates should be conducted privately and weighed down with retroactive – if not simultaneous– feelings of shame. It is important to note that eating in the ‘park and scarf’ genre is not framed as “letting go”– these women do not lose a battle with will power or slip up and spill sauce on their chins; they get ready, drive to purchase this food, set up their camera, film themselves unrestrictedly eating (and enjoying) the food, and posts the feast like it is something they are proud to do in the light of day (not something they are guilty of doing in the light of the refrigerator). The transgression therefore lies not in the act of eating, but rather in the confrontational visibility inherent in this type of eating. In her memoir, *Walk Through Walls*, Abramović makes space for, and validates the contribution of content that relies more on being public than being inherently political. She writes, “If art is just political, it becomes like a newspaper. It can be used once, and the next day, it’s yesterday’s news.” (79-80). For work to hold continuing value beyond its situated context, “the personal experience must turn into the public, if not political, domain.” (Mecacci 109). While the same cannot be said for all creators making ‘park and scarf’ content, it seems to me that some creators are aware of the political implications of making their eating public and integrate this awareness into their creative practice.

Venturing into something that resembles Mars’ domain of performance that is satirical and humorous, one of Sanaa’s posts from the Summer of 2024 makes it explicitly clear that she understands the productive defiance inherent in her videos. Like many of her fellow TikTok creators, in August she shared a video contributing to the ‘demure’ trend. The trend began when influencer Jools Lebron (@joolieannie) posted the viral TikTok, “How to be demure at work.” As someone who identifies as a plus-sized trans woman, Lebron describes how to be understated, “mindful,” and tasteful when making aesthetic choices for how she presents herself in her workplace. This was followed up by a series of other satirical videos where she explains how to “stay demure” while flying on planes, staying at hotels, or ordering food (amongst other

activities). Other creators, with their various interpretations of the series, then riffed off Lebron's TikToks by showing the ways they exhibit 'demure' behavior in their daily lives. As much as these performances are jokes told through the trend-based language of social media, they are effective in showcasing the ways women make themselves more palatable, approachable, and ultimately conforming in the context of capitalist patriarchy. Sanaa creates eating content; therefore, she took this opportunity to reply to a comment left on one of her 'park and scarf' videos. With the comment "All u do is eat fried foods ur gonna be dead by 30 eat something healthy damn" pinned to the top left of the video, she sits up straight at a table and spears her fork into a Caesar salad. With perfect posture, she gingerly takes bites of the salad while echoing Lebron's viral mantra. She states, "It's very demure, very cutesy, very girly. I'm not shoving my face with greasy fried chicken… Today. I'm being very mindful of my body…" The smirk and slight chuckle after she says "today" along with the large bite of dressing drenched salad she shoves in her mouth to culminate the video demonstrate that 'demure' (enacted in the Lebron sense of the term) is doing what is expected of you (or in this case, requested of you) in a way that highlights the oppressive and controlling nature of the expectation (or request). This video demonstrates Sanaa's ability to critically engage with a public trend in a way that echoes the feminist performance art of Mars in a piece like *In Pursuit of Happiness* which equally addresses the social dynamics of excess and consumption as they intersect with gender. Performed from noon until midnight in 2007, *In Pursuit of Happiness*:

> constructs a modern day social satire looking at the human condition from both utopic and dystopic perspectives. Two women in lavish dress hold court at a table set for an opulent party complete with cake so decadent as to incite debauchery. A picture-perfect representation of the haves and the have nots. Inspired by the medieval fresco of Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Allegory of the Effects of Good and Bad Government on the City Life, Federico Fellini's Satyricon, Ingmar Bergman's The Seventh Seal, Hieronymus Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights and medieval Miracle plays, Mars presents a single spectacular tableau vivant (a "living image") characterized as visually rich layers of spectacular, satirical feminist imagery (LIVE Biennale).

While Sanaa is able to channel some echo of satirical feminist imagery, it lacks the historical resonance and canonical satire of Mars' thoughtful visual references to medieval artistic allegory. However, with this comparison, while maintaining that what Sanaa produces is not art, I do not mean to suggest that if a woman does "not 'theorise' her work by explicitly situating her experience within social structures, she is lost in the personal, mired in her problems to the exclusion of anyone else's" (Elkin 186). Just because Sanaa makes content alone in her car, this state of isolation does not bar her from contributing to a larger discussion that centers around the same topics explored by Mars and her community of creative collaborators. In fact, many of the researched motivations for people's engagement with *mukbangs* are reflected in *In Pursuit of Happiness* as well as Mars' larger body of work; narrowing the gap between content and art. In the article "Eating as a Transgression", Yeran Kim states that these "aesthetics of excess

deviance" appeal to a population of millennials experiencing increasing loneliness and isolation, or, as she puts it, "emotional famine" (115). The polarized neo-liberal economy that produces this individualistic society is cited as another factor causing users to seek out performances of abnormal excess, as the dissolution of the middle-class has made them increasingly frustrated and depressed about their own futures (Chung 15). Driven by the impulse to conform to beauty standards that valorize the thin female form, vicarious consumption is another way people derive satisfaction from watching *mukbang* content (Kim 115). Mars' piece functions similarly as a meditation on the human condition, using a decked-out banquet table as a symbol of decadence to explore the commodification of happiness as it is tied to feminine ideals and domestic labour. Through their content, 'park and scarf' creators contribute to these concepts of excess, consumption, gendered behavioural norms, and economic disparity, but because their work goes untheorized, is generally made meaningful through viewership rather than creation, and is missing the iconographic connection to the artistic institution, it lacks the layered richness of Mars' – and her fellow performance artist's –durational work.

Conclusion

In *Ironic to Iconic*, a book that provides a characterizing overview of Mars' body of work, the first chapter is titled "Performance (Art): A Method of Inquiry." In this chapter, Kim Sawchuk discusses how the engaging and self-reflexive nature of Mars' performances situate her as a kind of artistic researcher. I have taken the opportunity provided by the placement of parentheses around the term "art" to bring the value of non-artistic performance into this conversation around creative social inquiry. If the performance art works I examine are considered *methods* of inquiry, then the *mukbangs* I delineate are *points* of inquiry, and if we focus on *attention* rather than *intention*, then these two forms of performance lead to a similar theoretical space. 'Park and scarf' videos, like performance art, are moments that exist in Mary Russo's carnival realm. "Carnival in the feudal order of things was a temporal space in which it became possible to indulge the appetites and at the same time parody the practices of officialdom." (McWilliam 220). The carnival does not exist as an alternative to orthodoxy with the eventual possibility of being extended into political emancipation (Russo 11). Rather, within a larger hegemonic social structure, the carnival space functions as a series of resistive blips that are composed of "unrestrained sensuousness" (Strati 109). Whether it is 12 hours or two minutes, contained in a gallery exhibition or a social media application, in both a temporal and spatial sense, consuming performance art and 'park and scarf' *mukbangs* exist as examples of these pockets of perverse pleasure. According to Russo, these open, eating, grotesque female bodies function as the carnivalesque themselves, containing both parody and excess in their performance of gender. With this, the following chapters will examine how "disorderly women" operate in and as this carnival space to undermine and reinforce power hierarchies and social order (McWilliam 219).

Chapter 3: Saucy

Savoury: (of food) belonging to the category that is salty or spicy rather than sweet.
Savoury: morally wholesome or acceptable.

Despite the fact that, according to its definition, the word savoury marks something morally wholesome, the act of a woman gorging on food characterized by its lack of sweetness has been historically cemented as *unsavoury* behaviour. While any expression of appetite did little for the moral character of a woman, in the Victorian era, a taste for "spices and condiments" referenced an equally spicy disposition with negative moral connotations (Andrievskikh 142). To this day, a sweet woman is often considered more palatable than a salty or spicy one. Within the Western context, savoury foods are especially effective at eliciting a disgust response in people on both physical and moral levels (Rozin). The artist and content creator analysed in this chapter work within the culturally produced contradiction inherent in the term savoury in order to create work that enfleshes the disgust that "appears to mystically attach itself to the female body at birth… and then proceeds to pursue that body right through each stage of its being" (McBride 2). While neither performer nor creator claim to make explicitly feminist work, this chapter will use Marina Abramović's 1995 performance, *The Onion,* and what I will refer to as Sanaa's 2024 *Flying Dutchman* (a hamburger patty sandwiched between two grilled onions rather than bread buns) TikTok to explore how the core and moral facets of disgust are captured, challenged, and harnessed by savoury eating performances that bear the markings of monstrous feminist art.

In his paper that addresses holes–both material and systemic–in modern psychology, Paul Rozin states that despite its relatively new, but nevertheless well-deserved standing as a significant topic of scholarly interest, disgust is often studied for the wrong reasons. While regularly researched for its relevance in relation to disorders and phobias, Rozin finds disgust particularly interesting due to its migration "from a 'get this out of my mouth' to a 'get this out of my soul' emotion." (760). His statement speaks to the duality of disgust as having both core and moral facets. Core disgust is a response to certain foods and body products, while moral disgust is a response to the violation of virtuous and ethical behavioural norms within a given culture (ibid). Many foods go through a process of what Rozin calls 'moralization,' where morally neutral foods become imbued with social significance. These binary conceptions of disgust, and their ability to bleed into one another is the concern of this chapter. I will explore how Lauren Elkin's theorization of artist Eve Hesse's term 'ucky' speaks to a kind of disgust endowed with a feminine tactility that renders it capable of touching in both a bodily and an affective sense (38).

Smear

'Ucky' is neither ugly nor yucky. Elkin uses the term to describe monstered art, or, in other words, art that exists at the boundaries of beauty and disgust. 'Ucky' art is "another language of flesh, beyond abjection and embrace" that does not reject, but rather dances with the

kind of disgust that Eimer Mcbride affirms is fastened to women from birth (Elkin 49). Referenced indexically in this chapter by the smear of lipstick or foundation, sauce or saliva, the 'ucky' captures the stomach curling leaky decay of Julia Kristeva's abject, and melds it with a sense of excessive femininity fortified by – and here, Elkin borrows Carolee Schneeman's words used in her 1975 piece *Interior Scroll* – a "hand-touch sensibility" and "diaristic indulgence" (38).

The abject, like the 'ucky,' concerns itself with borders. However, where the 'ucky' embraces slashes, smears and sensitivity, abjection is instead focused on policing borders to maintain the safety and construction of the self (Kristeva 3). Cementing "food loathing" as the most archaic form of abjection, Kristeva states that:

> abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it– on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also, because abjection itself is a composition of judgement and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. (10)

There are three places on the body where we allow our borders to be transgressed: the anus, genitals, and mouth, and the performances examined in this chapter are concerned with the mouth. The mouth is, as Rozin states, a bodily hole with low intrusion sensitivity, but high contamination sensitivity (759). This means that while the orifice is accustomed to frequent entry, what enters it is of great importance to us. Both *The Onion* as a performance art piece, and *The Flying Dutchman* as social media content trigger our sense of contamination sensitivity to varying degrees.

The Onion is a 20-minute recorded performance of Marina Abramović eating a whole yellow onion. As she looks up to the sky and eats, a repeating soliloquy of complaints about the artist's personal problems – both mundane and existential– is layered with the sounds of her biting into the vegetable, skin on, like it is a crisp apple. The paradoxically defeated ferocity of her bites increases as the juice from the macerated flesh coaxes tears from her eyes. She chokes on the onion as she fights to swallow it, the foam that froths around her mouth smudges and dims the bright red of her once perfectly applied lipstick, and she eventually weeps tears that speak to something deeper than a chemical reaction to the allium. *The Onion* was created during what Andrea Mecacci refers to as Abramović's "Balkan Cycle": a decade in the artist's career during which, through various mediums and pieces, she "[composed] the most incisive portrait of the Balkan crisis" (107). For this reason, *The Onion* has been rightfully analyzed for its symbolic and explicit connections to the Yugoslav Wars and Abramović's personal relationship with her Serbian identity. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I will be looking as this particular piece not only for the ways it speaks to the larger themes of "pain, disgust and physical unease" that characterize Abramović's controversial body of work, but also for the ways that *The Onion*, as a 20 year old video performance, relates to the mainstream contemporary use of these themes when placed in apposition with Sanaa's TikTok (Demaria 296).

There are two versions of *The Flying Dutchman* posted on Sanaa's feed. Unlike Abramović, who layers the sounds of consumption with the vocalization of complaint, Sanaa posted both a "chatty" and non-speaking version of essentially the same video. Over the course of both short videos, she eats a meal from the American fast-food chain In-N-Out Burger. The meal consists of one Double-Double hamburger (two patties and two slices of cheese), one Flying Dutchman, a large order of Animal Fries (french fries topped with melted American cheese, grilled onions and a tangy Thousand Island-style sauce), and a Dr Pepper. Wearing natural make-up, she eats the fast food in the front seat of a parked car and keeps eye contact with the camera set up on the dash. Sanaa squeezes sauce from a packet onto each bite and is less concerned with where that sauce ends up on her face and hands, and more concerned with maximizing the impact of the sound created by each food's texture as she chews. While both versions have the generic markers of a 'park and scarf' *mukbang*, in the chatty video, she verbalizes the thoughts her expressions capture in the speechless version (e.x. her eyes roll back with indulgent pleasure when she tastes the fries for the first time) and casually reviews the food in addition to eating it. Sanaa uses the grammar developed by Abramović to create an eating performance that shocks while maintaining the attention of the viewer through captivating sensory consumption.

Abramović herself speaks to the continuing value of her work in her memoir, writing, "Only layers of meaning can give long life to art – that way, society takes what it needs from the work over time" (79-80). I take this statement as an invitation to peel *The Onion* to the point where it "makes possible a kind of touching, even though we keep our hands to ourselves" (Elkin 49). The majority of people, having almost certainly consumed raw onion at some point in their life, can relate to this piece on an empathetic rather than simply sympathetic level. While Abramović's melodramatic monologue may be out of *touch* on its own, the onion is able to physicalize the sting of her lament and compensate for the ineffability of pain through a form of collective sensory recognition. Sanaa's video operates with a similar form of hands-free affect. These performances however, while sensorily recognizable, are not wholly relatable. In the same way that someone who has experienced raw onion has not necessarily consumed a whole raw onion, someone who has had a Flying Dutchman from In-N-Out Burger has not necessarily had the burger in combination with multiple other burgers and a large, loaded animal fry. The grotesque exists in this uncanny disconnect (Russo 8). Both art and content transform the familiar into strange through a kind of masochistic excess that is much more benign in Sanaa's case, as small spicy peppers (Figure 2.) and an over order of fast food act as a faint echo of the volatile sulfuric compound of the (almost) insurmountable onion that Abramović faces (Figure 3.).

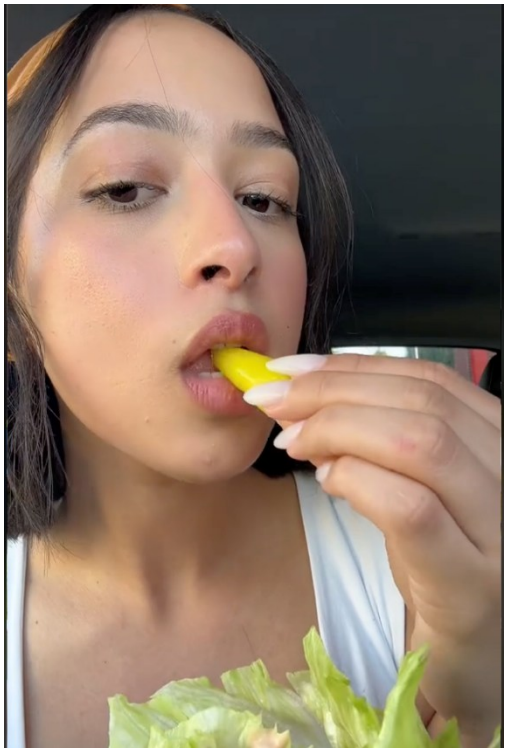

Figure 2. Sanaa [@sanaaeats] "in n out asmr 😁 " TikTok, 8 March 2024.

Figure 3. *Marina Abramović —The Onion UTA Dallas, 1995*, 2023.

This variance in potency demonstrates that while Abramović's performance calls on abjection, Sanaa's performance taps into disgust; with the key difference being the level of fear attributed to both states of recoil. Rina Arya affirms in her interrogation of the Kristevian concept, that while some scholars distinguish abjection and disgust by the latter's inability to instigate fear, it is more accurately a question of degree rather than total inability. She writes that "Abjection involves greater levels of disgust, and therefore fear, and fear encroaches on the boundaries of the self." (57). As previously stated, the mouth represents the physical manifestation of these boundaries, therefore, for Abramović and Sanaa, their respective positions on this spectrum of recoil-related-fear are illustrated largely by what happens in and around their

mouths. In Abramović's case, the abject impact of her piece increases when a clear foaming juice starts to seep and bubble from the corners of her lips (Figure 4.). Hovering at the border of the self is an ambiguous liquid, and the uncertainty surrounding whether it is going down or coming up mirrors its indistinguishability as a substance (it could be onion juice or saliva). Abjection as an amplification of disgust is marked by our inability to separate from the abjected substance – as Kristeva states "It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object" (4). Abramović's salvia, despite her expulsion of it, is inextricably and biologically linked to her being, and is therefore disturbing not just in its proximity, but simply in its existence once it has "separated from [its] natural location" and crossed over to the "other side of the boundary" (Arya 57).

Figure 4. *Marina Abramović —The Onion UTA Dallas, 1995*, 2023.

Where Abramović's video features juice/saliva, Sanaa's features the In-N-Out sauce. She adds an extra dollop to each bite, and the corners of her mouth become coated with the pinky beige condiment (Figure 5). The viscous substance that belongs to Mary Douglas' being in-between category, gives rise to a sense of disgust through its particular textural ability to problematize boundaries (48). It is neither solid nor liquid. However, despite its liminality between states of matter, the sauce that ends up on Sanaa's mouth is initially sealed in plastic and is anchored, through packaging and preparation, to a place within the social norm where meaning is still intact; the same cannot be said for Abramović's raw unpeeled onion (Kristeva 2). Food highlights a uniquely human compulsion to elevate physiological needs into aestheticized and politicised systems and relationships. As Rozin states, "Disgust is in the service of a cultural value of distinguishing humans from animals and leads humans to withdraw from reminders of their animal nature." (760). Both of these performances, but particularly Abramović's, with the inclusion of an immersive sensory experience and the absence of silverware and table etiquette, do not permit their viewers to keep a critical distance from their own animal nature. This content, with its proximity to animality in turn serves as a reminder of human mortality (ibid).

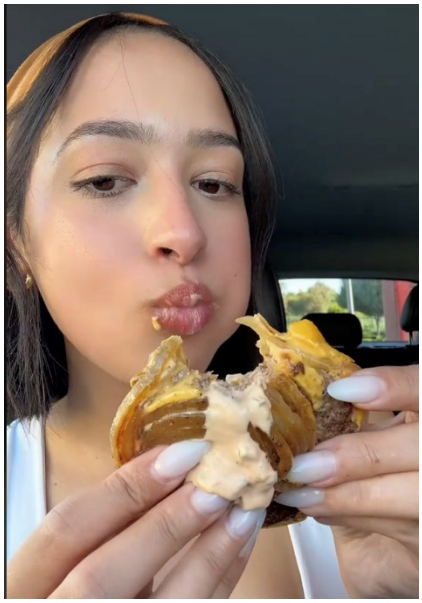

Figure 5. Sanaa [@sanaaeats] "in n out asmr 😜 " TikTok, 8 March 2024.

As evidenced by many disgust laced comments left, not only on Sanaa's videos, but also many other videos tagged *#mukbang*, a lack of decorum combined with the quantity and quality of food featured in these videos tug at this chain that latches us to our animalness and speak to cultural anxiety surrounding unhealthy eating habits. 'Park and scarf' performances wrench us towards mortality by initiating a subconscious thought process that juxtaposes the beautiful woman in the video with a mental projection of where she will end up if she continues to consume these foods in this way. Abramović choking on the onion, on the other hand, is a more literal and immediate encounter with the inevitability of death. The corpse is, according to Kristeva, the "utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life." and that is the ultimate fear, with disgust as its smoke signal, that *The Onion* conjures more vividly than the *Flying Dutchman* (4).

These disgust displays that reference death can serve as a reminder, through the language of the body, that aspects of life (in this case the patriarchal maintenance of feminine purity) are potentially in need of infection. While the users that leave comments on 'park and scarf' videos– echoing political campaigns that moralize the concept of weight loss – are seemingly concerned for the creator's health, most likely the real issue users find with their content is not so much the excessive consumption or even the choice of food that they consume, but rather that they consume without acknowledging it as exceptional or shameful. As Kristeva writes, "It is thus not a lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order." (Kristeva 4). A private binge is positioned as an inevitable conclusion to the expectation of public restriction and denial of hunger that is central to the construction of femininity (Davidaukis 171). In making the binge a public act, it is a visceral denial of contemporary behavioural norms and social order, and working within the realm of disgust further implicates the viewer in this challenging content; or rather, content that challenges.

Integral to the phenomenology of disgust are three stages that Kristeva outlines in her encounter with the abject (Kristeva 2-3). The first is confrontation or approach– Arya points out that this interaction could be abstract or material and still qualify as part of a disgust response. The second stage is marked by physical symptoms: i.e. facial expressions, nausea, or gagging. Finally, the third stage requires the disgusted individual to purify themselves of the object. This last phase is often characterized by spitting out the substance or removing all physical traces of its existence (Arya 55-56). Through an insistence on swallowing the food and a refusal to remove traces of its sloppy entrance past their bodies' borders, both performers deny their viewers the resolution of a disgust experience with Kristeva's third step as its conclusion. As Abramović takes her first bites of the onion, a piece of the skin (the part of the onion that is generally considered inedible for humans) escapes the scope of her teeth and she uses her tongue to coax it into her mouth. This relatively tame example, enacted at the outset of the performance foreshadows the way she will battle her body's disgust response with increasing intensity as the piece goes on. Abramović does not even raise her hand to wipe the evidence of the fight from her face, allowing the onion's juices to meld with her make-up and pollute the image once composed of strong lines and blocked colours (Figure 6).

Figure 6. *Marina Abramović —The Onion UTA Dallas, 1995*, 2023.

Sanaa eats her meal with similar excess when it comes to amount, and equal lack when it comes to proprietary. While enjoyment replaces the element of torture present in Abramović's eating performance, Sanaa relishes in a relish filled sauce as it taints her seamlessly applied skin tint. Because of our animal roots "We feel a simultaneous sense of attraction and repulsion" to these disgusting displays (Arya 55). Through a refusal to purify themselves, artist and creator equally prohibit the viewer that continues to watch, from engaging with the cleansing ritual – fixing them somewhere in-between these states of attraction and repulsion. Abramović capitalizes on the understanding that "Horror that has been generated from disgust results in an inability to move, a passivity, that means the only option is to face it." (58). Finding her niche in durational performance art, she specializes in prolonged confrontations with disgust (Lācis 6). The 'park and scarf' genre uses this freezing effect in a similar way to capture the attention of a scroller on TikTok. These performances, like the food objects they feature, demand to be

consumed in their entirety. They in turn create work that does not allow you to "sit in its prettiness" but rather fidget in the 'uckiness' of it all – while nevertheless remaining seated (Elkin 34).

While the expectation is that a woman would find the amount or type of food featured in these videos insurmountable, in their metamorphosis into the grotesque, Sanaa and Abramović become an echo of a snake as they seemingly unlock their jaws to eat what is in front of them. I suspect that a key element of the subtle horror inherent in the 'park and scarf' genre is that, like the snake in the garden of Eden, Sanaa and her fellow creators may encourage other women to eat the proverbial forbidden fruit with a similar ferocity. There is inherent risk in images of the female grotesque. However, this is not a risk that should be avoided but rather viewed as an opportunity for change that operates in pockets of dissonance (Russo 11). With this, Mary Russo suggests that the grotesque, positioned as feminism's "odd sister," can co-exist with femininity constructively rather than tautologically (13). 'Ucky' therefore challenges "disgust as an affect produced by an encounter with the abject as the female body." (Elkin 47).

Just as Russo labels the grotesque as feminism's "odd sister", the 'ucky' is the touchy-feely cousin of the abject (38). While related, unlike the abject that "just leaves us alone in a room with our own vomit," 'ucky' pieces incorporate a feminized texture and a "diaristic indulgence" that socializes close up truths of the female body (Elkin 56). While I have highlighted the more abject elements of the 'ucky' with the smear of sauces and juices, its complementary tactility "that restores touch to the aesthetic" is captured in these performances by the smudge of makeup and the (verbal) spilling of guts (38).

Smudge

Plato urges us "not to confuse the mask of beauty with the entity." (Beck 76). I would argue that 'ucky' art encourages us to do just that. In describing the cover art used for her book – a 2020 piece called *Blue Eyeliner* by Genieve Figgis (Figure 7) – Elkin states that, "there is beauty here, but it is the ucky beauty of entropy, of unmaking, of the smear, the scratch, the slash" (39). The painting is an abstract portrait of a woman whose face melts along with her makeup as she runs her hand down what is a material representation of the feminine masquerade. Russo affirms that there is critical and hopeful power in a woman's ability to put on *and* take off a mask of femininity (70). Her claim sits in argumentative conversation with the psychoanalytic theorization that, rather than a stable feminine identity, what exists under this mask is lack (ibid). Elkin's 'ucky' lives somewhere beyond this debate; what lies under the mask of make-up is not nothing, but neither is it a fully formed face. Rather, it is a mask fused with face, melded together by the friction of lived experience. Exemplified by *The Onion,* 'ucky' art follows what Russo labels Luce Irigaray's "provisional strategy" for the productive use of the masquerade:

> To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself simply to be reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself-inasmuch as she is on the side of "perceptible," of "matter"- to "ideas," in

particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by masculine logic, but so as to make "visible;' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible… (Irigaray 68).

Figure 7.Genieve Figgis, *Blue Eyeliner*, 2020.

Abramović's piece cements her as both the sign and sign producer, working within the realm of "ideas" and challenging them through visibility and physicality (Russo 66). She plays into the psychoanalytic characterization of women as narcissistic (covert in Abramović's case) and masochistic, expressing varying levels of these qualities in her words and actions respectively (Russo 70). However, she equally extends beyond the melodrama of her soliloquy to create something disarming, tender, and unbearable (Lācis 119). In her performance, she never reaches the bulb of the onion – Mecacci analyzes this as the discovery of Abramović's own nothingness, neatly revealed "layer by layer" (112). However, this act of peeling implies what Irigaray refers to as a 'masculine logic' and a systematic approach to the onion that does not exist. She instead gouges at the vegetable, eating it without concern for its constitutive layering. Rather than represent the Lacanian idea that "femininity is a mask that masks non identity," as implied by Meccacci's reading, the entropy of the onion and the smudging of her makeup enfleshes the path of Abramović's distinguished life as an artist and woman (Russo 69). She challenges you to make her the object of your gaze, as the red lipstick, once crisp, applied in a thick even layer, smudges out into a blotchy stain. While still perceptible, the literal manifestation of the female masquerade (the makeup that signals the made-up) melds into a face that is still expressive even after the onion is revealed to be coreless.

Similarly, Sanaa flaunts the feminine as a "take-it-*and*-leave-it *possibility*" (Russo 70). Her masquerade is achieved through a publicized and selective enactment of the female grotesque, as a woman with a full face of natural makeup and perfect nails pointedly "[reveals] what the cosmetic surface works to conceal]" through her sloppy devouring of greasy, beige, processed meat sandwiched between onions of the same description (Betterton 131). As her foundation melds with mayonnaise, the cosmetic surface does not dissolve to reveal a gaping

hole, nor does it reveal an unvarnished truth. While the material feminine mask may decrease in opacity as the video goes on, it mixes with the abject to create something “too female” (Elkin 38). The ‘park and scarf’ genre exists alongside the cultural understanding that the “female body [has] come, not exclusively but predominantly, to represent the shudder aroused by liquidity and decay.” (Mulvey 148). The apposition (and eventual melding) of Sanaa and a liquid sauce not only calls on, but also makes literal this metaphorical relationship. The viscous sauce and painted face combine to offer a sensibility to the “spectacular category of the female grotesque” within contemporary culture (Russo 6). This textured display combines the depth and surface models of Russo's grotesque. It signals the misogynistic revulsion to a fluidity culturally cemented as feminine, as well as the ornamental use of grotesque art in classical aesthetics. A readily scrutinized ornamental surface detail that exists in the periphery of “real art” is, as Russo affirms, yet another metaphorized connection between the grotesque and the female body. Sanaa’s video brings tactility to the collision of these metaphors that constitute the female grotesque, as her ornamental masquerade ventures into the cave of abjection.

While the “hand-touch sensibility” speaks to performance at the discursive level of the body, the “diaristic indulgence” that Elkin references as equally characteristic of the ‘ucky’ is expressed in these pieces through verbal language. The “diaristic” part of this phrase references the auto-biographic quality of their monologues and the “indulgence” defines the biography as an embrace of the touchy-feely emotive nature traditionally associated with femininity. Nature and reason as attributed to women and men respectively can be traced through history and points to the 17th Century notion that women, bound to their bodies, are ultimately ruled by passion (Vitzthum 4). Where Abramović’s speech functions as an overview of her life; each line a new entry, Sanaa’s soliloquy is one from a series of videos labeled “chatty mukbangs” and is more representative of the daily function of a dairy. As she looks up to the heavens Abramović laments, "I am tired of always falling in love with the wrong man/I am tired of being ashamed of my nose being too big, of my ass being too large…I want to go away, somewhere so far that nothing matters anymore/I want to understand and see clearly what is behind all of this/I want not to want anymore.” She complains and wishes in a melodramatic stream of consciousness style that exists somewhere at the intersection of nihilism and a middle-aged rendition of, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. Sanaa on the other hand, in the chatty version of *The Flying Dutchman* video, provides viewers with a life update and food review, reminding them she will be visiting In-N-Out several times on her trip to LA. Embracing the idea that any day to day experience can be used as material for performance in which the artist/creator is their own object, the daily practice of eating is used by these women as a creative medium. Playing with the notion of passion and self-control, the indulgence of their internal monologues while they simultaneously indulge their physical impulses amplifies the potent threat of their excess as words spill from their mouths and liquids seep down their cheeks. Regardless of the words they speak, it is their expression of feelings and experiences that makes their work approachable, not despite, but in addition to its grotesque elements.

Conclusion

Policing the boundaries of the self, as Kristeva affirms, is done in service of regulation. It requires us to deny instincts so that we may stay firmly within symbolic order. Monstrous art, through its alignment with abjection, exists at the periphery of palatability and therefore questions this symbolic order through engaging our repressed animality (Arya 58). Operating with an emphasis on touch, taste, and smell, despite their technological mediation, the performances explored in this chapter challenge the productive value of "the 'higher senses' of sight and sound that are closely associated with the mind, and have been historically represented as most fully developed among elite Western European men." (Culhane 58). Elkin affirms that while maybe at one point in history, abjection was enough to reinvigorate our affective relationship with art, it has been "banalised" over the past decade by the gallery setting (47). Resisting this 'high culture' sanitization of the abject, the 'ucky' is positioned by Elkin as the alternative that helps explain a turn towards embodiment in feminist art. Its ability to reach out and touch viewers renders it capable of diffusing beyond the gallery setting (in this case to TikTok). She writes:

> The art monster reclaims the body from these strictures and takes joy in the very meat of her flesh. Or if not joy, then some kind of meaning, in this too-muchness of ourselves, or this not-enoughness. The tang that emanates from the work is a sign the artist is doing something right.

Sanaa, Abramović, and their onions are marked by this tang. While Sanaa channels the joy of feeding her flesh, Abramović uses her body in an exploration of meaning; they eat in excess and find that they want more. Both women use beauty laced disgust to hold viewers captivated as they disturb Western ideas surrounding consumption, identity, and purity.

Chapter 4: Sappy

Sweet: Having the pleasant taste characteristic of sugar or honey; not salty, sour, or bitter.
Sweet: Pleasing in general; delightful.

Sugar has a history of gendered associations that have fluctuated with its value as a commodity. Prior to the 17th century, when sugar was considered luxurious and medicinal, it was aligned with masculinity (Mintz 97). When it later depreciated to the status of democratized and addictive it became a "feminine substance" (Woloson 13). Rather than the original empowerment through association Western men experienced in relation to sugar, women have been metaphorized as the sweet substance with an ambivalence that has cemented the perception that women are themselves edible. Sweetness has "been extensively connected to erotic pleasure and feminine sexuality" while simultaneously used as the lexicon representing women's long standing social function as wives and mothers (Manzanares 94). This sweeping linguistic connection between women and sweet foods (ex. honey, sugar, tart) covers many patriarchal designations of femininity and has rendered women ripe for consumption.

While mainstream media ratifies the male devouring of the female image, the artist and content creator explored in this chapter haul the concept of consumption out of the realm of the intellectual and pin it viscerally to the realm of the physical. Tanya Mars' 2008 performance*, In Dulci Jubilo* (O Sweet Joy) and Vehera's 2024 TikTok, which I will refer to as *Chocolate Lover* (an extract from the video's caption), are pieces that explore sugar's seemingly intrinsic connection to femininity, and by extension beauty, through a collision of the metaphorical connotations of sweetness with literal sweets. This collision produces performances that are so saccharine that they lose some of their palatability and veer into the realm of the 'ucky.' As Mars crawls and eats her way through a landscape of 150 cakes and 1000 plates (Figure 8), and Vehera sinks her teeth into a two kilogram pistachio cream filled chocolate bar (Figure 9), the excess sugar mixed with the methods of its consumption take on an uncanny quality characteristic of the female grotesque. These women chew up and digest sweets, absorbing their pleasing and beautiful aspects while simultaneously masticating them with abjected saliva to produce content that addresses a central problem in Elkin's book: the problem of beauty for feminism.

Figure 8. *In Dulci Jubilo*. Directed and performed by Tanya Mars

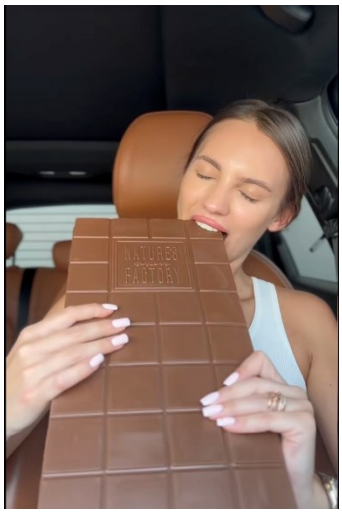

Figure 9. Maria Vehera [@mariavehera257] "OMG, THIS IS EXTRA HUGE CHOCOLATE BAR 2 KG 😍😍 " TikTok, 9 September 2024.

Though compositionally different, through gluttonous, sticky indulgence with cakes, chocolate, and creams, both performers explore a reconfiguration of desire through an alignment with abjection as it relates to maternal authority. Melding their own beauty with the beauty of sugary delicacies, they promote an 'erotics of art' as their femininity, along with the desserts, become part of the formal composition of performances that promote a proximity to an abjected presence traditionally resisted and rejected in favour of participation in a culture governed by the law of the father. The conventional beauty of Mars and Vehera mark their successful integration into symbolic order as they selectively enact a social construction of feminine sweetness, while their instinctive bodily performances that lack dialogue mark a reversion to a self that existed prior to this integration. It is important to note, particularly with 'park and scarf' content, that an adherence to a culturally sanctioned presentation of femininity is what enables these creators to engage and disengage with disgust at will, while women not considered conventionally attractive

(due to factors such as age and weight) do not necessarily have to enact disgust to be associated with it. Mars begins her performance in a formal black dress and natural makeup, poised with her hands behind her back like she is taking a turn around the garden in a period piece. As the performance progresses, and she shoves her face into the cakes she initially just surveyed and then proceeded to probe with a finger, the straps of her dress fall off her shoulders and its fabric collects icing and debris from the floor she eventually crawls and dances on. Mars' three-hour transition to something beyond sweetness happens gradually but ends up in a place further removed from normalcy than Vehera's one minute transformation into a mainstream echo of Mars' radical consumption.

Set in Dubai, Vehera's video exudes luxury and decadence; lips blushed, she wears a Miu Miu tank top, and the leather interior of her car matches the colour of the organic milk chocolate she pulls from a brown paper wrapper. She immediately begins devouring the bar of chocolate as her eyes widen to match the ambition of her stomach. While Vehera eats with a disregard for restraint that results in chocolate on her face and arms, she is careful not to stain her designer tank top. Though they embrace disorder to varying degrees, the juxtaposition of "stable" identity and abject behaviour present in both performances would traditionally be labeled as a descent or regression into something reminiscent of hysteria. However, in the context of these performances, the duality of classical beauty and visceral physicality in relation to the pleasure found in sweet foods leads to an 'ucky' space where the abject is not reserved for the horrific other and desire and femininity are not dictated by symbolic order. The sweet sticky mess melded with a feminine presence "[privileges] the space that precedes the Symbolic, the maternal space, which is at the heart of everything, and in doing so privileges a notion of singularity that multiplies and recognizes difference," while encouraging us not to place the abject in opposition to beauty, but to wrap both into the female body and its experiences (Symes 9).

Fasting and Feasting the Femme

As a kind of feminist coping mechanism, the abject has been used by female artists since the 1970s to signal a commitment to the reclamation of bodies abjected by the patriarchy (Elkin 47). Similar to the way that sugar's bonds with femininity increased when its value as a commodity decreased, art that aligned itself with prettiness and therefore femininity, within a male dominated art culture, was deemed worthless (ibid). To turn away from beauty– i.e the beauty of classical aesthetics that cements women as objects of art – was to propound your authority as an artist (35). Anorexia, as theorized by feminist cultural scholars, operates with a similar logic. As a form of protest against the unattainable patriarchal beauty standards imposed on women, anorexia nervosa, in certain cases, is characterized as a manifestation of the rejection of a woman's own sexuality as "she loses body weight and ceases to menstruate." (Betterton 145). Like the artist looking to be taken "seriously," a 'flight from femininity' in the context of the anorectic is used equally as an assertion of agency within an oppressive social system (ibid).

The problem with these patriarchal protests enacted at the expense of female form, is that they encourage people (women included) to neglect women's bodies both in trains of thoughts and lines of vision; and if they are thought of or looked at, it is generally in relation to ideas of repulsion and disintegration understood as universal rather than historically constituted (Elkin 47). The structured absence of the sensuous female form in "good" feminist art was a result of an inability for its original critics and many of its creators to reconfigure the dynamics of looking beyond those of the objectifying male gaze (Richard 25).

Figure 10. Sherman, Cindy. *Untitled #175*, 1987, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

While described by Elkin as one of the most viscerally disgusting pieces in her patchwork body of monstrous art, she considers Cindy Sherman's *Untitled #175* a 'well-behaved' work of feminist art because the grotesque bulimic purge featured in the piece makes only an indexical reference to the female body (Figure 10). Where anorexia is considered a rejection, bulimia is a coping strategy: it indulges the pleasure of consumption but maintains the disavowal of flesh through controlled vomiting (Gamman and Makinen 132). While Sherman attempts to explore the problematic site of the body that hosts this conflict of female desire and repression, she nevertheless uses abjection to eclipse the female body itself (Betterton 151). In her reflection on Sherman's works, Betterton makes a statement that echoes Elkin's argument surrounding the artistic use of abjection:

> If Sherman's photographs render explicit the horror that lurks within a film like *Death Becomes Her*, they do so at the cost of invoking a powerful tradition of disgust for the female body already implicit - and sometimes explicit - within popular culture. While her photographs are clearly transgressive of prevailing images of the feminine body, is such transgression productive for women? (136)

Mars' performance, Vehera's TikTok, and Sherman's photograph, with their depictions of food, display a kind of transgression of the body's borders through uncensored imagery of fluid materials that blur the boundary between interiority and exteriority. However, unlike *Untitled #175*, *In Dulci Jublio* and *Chocolate Lover* harness elements of the female grotesque in an effort

to offer an effective mode of viewing that obfuscates the invocation of "a powerful tradition of disgust for the female body." These videos do not engage with the conflict of anorexia or the compromise of bulimia but rather indulge in the pleasure of gluttony. As I stated in the introductory chapter, there is no shortage of art that incorporates food, but to find art that features a female body consuming food is a challenge. Through collaboration with the female body, these sweet performances mobilize confectionery to do more than just point out the misogyny of abjection's theoretical foundations.

Abjection, reformulated as 'ucky,' specifically in relation to aestheticized sweets, offers a way to reconstitute the socialization of women's desires without positioning maternal authority as something to be exiled or sacrificed so that "'I' might live (Symbolically)" (Symes 9). Kristeva suggests that when a woman fastens her desires to abjection "it is through the expedient of writing that she gets there" (55). According to her, rather than physically immersing themselves in the abject, women often explore the concept through mediated transgressive creative endeavors (such as theatre or writing). While still operating through the expedient of performance, Mars and Vehera go beyond the artistic metaphorizations of chocolate fountains and sculpted apples that can be found in other examples of feminist food art and enact their desires in a way that engages with abjection through the direct bodily experience of eating. This is highlighted in both performances through the liberated consumption of creamy fluid substances. Viscous fluids are especially effective at signaling maternal authority, as their liminality threatens the borders of the constituted self, while they simultaneously reference a time when "bodily wastes, while set apart from the body, were not seen as objects of embarrassment and shame" (Creed 51). The avid consumption of whip cream and icing in Mars' case, and pistachio cream and melting chocolate in Verhera's case, releases feminine desire from a psychoanalytic basis in 'lack' or a Kristevian basis in abstraction, and refigures it as "fluid, abundant, overflowing and diffuse." (Kopelson 1). Using the allure of sweet and artfully presented substances, their performances do not neglect the feminist utility of abjection but rather stray from the artistic feminist vocabulary that has historically positioned beauty as its antonym. Through excessive consumption, sugary, texturally fluid foods become evidence of female-centric desire rather than objects of embarrassment and shame, as these beautiful women eat beautiful treats in bizarre and unlawful (in reference to the law of the father) ways.

Like the mayonnaise in the previous chapter, chocolate is another liminal food whose ambiguity as a substance is particularly effective at disturbing our bodies' borders; however, where mayonnaise often elicits a "yuck", chocolate, in this context, adds an element of *sensuality* to the "yuck" (Douglas 48). In Vehera's TikTok, she cracks open a pistachio cream filled chocolate bar that is three times the size of her head. Not only is it symbolically excessive in terms of expense and indulgence, but as soon as she breaks into the enormous bar, the unctuous cream begins to seep out and requires fluid passing between her make-shift paddles of chocolate shell before a dollop is guided into her open mouth (Figure 11). With this, chocolate becomes, "both pleasurable and repellent in its excess" (Betterton 159). The promise of sweetness (in both

Vehera and her dessert), preserved despite the unsettling way she gobbles it up and the fact that the cream's colour and consistency are reminiscent of infant excrement, is inviting enough to make viewers, at least on some level, want to cozy up with the abject.

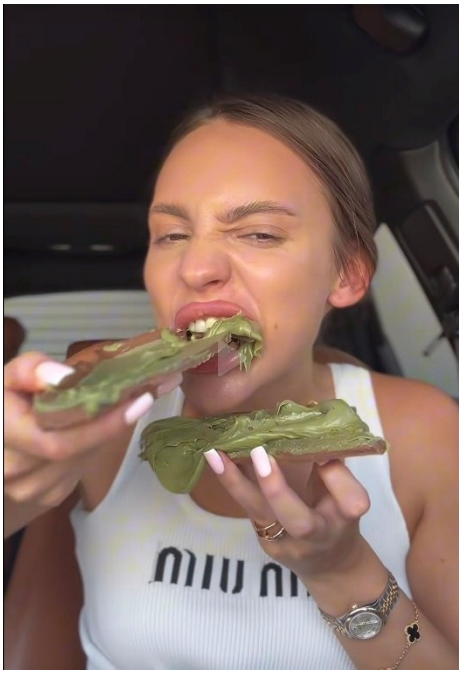

Figure 11. Maria Vehera [@mariavehera257] "OMG, THIS IS EXTRA HUGE CHOCOLATE BAR 2 KG 😍😍 " TikTok, 9 September 2024.

Mars too encourages this intimacy. In one of her "three-dimensional images" she lies on her side, face to face with a cake, and takes measured licks of its frosting (Couillard). In this single living image, she not only signals the maternal relationship, but also the reciprocity of a romantic relationship, as well as a contentment found in solitary desire. In a material manifestation of Betterton's assertion that "Food thus becomes a powerful metaphor for the conflicted relationship of sameness and difference between our mothers and ourselves," Mars suckles on white cream frosting, conjuring the milk of the mother's breast to reference a time when the border between with the self and the maternal other was still permeable (145). While her gentle slow blinks as she grazes may allude to an infant teetering on the verge of satiated sleep (Figure 12), a shift in the viewer's perspective prompted by the shift in the position of her arms, awards her slow blinks the impression instead of sleepy postcoital bliss, the mouthfuls of cream now a stand-in for soft intermittent kisses between lovers. Mars, lying in a semi-prone spooning position, stretches out an arm originally held tight to her own chest, and rests it on the chest of a lover personified by cake (Figure 13). However, as she smiles, reaches a finger into the center of the cake, brings a scoop of frosting to her mouth, and savours the taste of her transgressive indulgence, there is a third interpretive possibility offered to her audience: the comfort food itself may be enough to offer substantial pleasure, no personification necessary (Figure 14). As she references and plays with the erotic and familial associations of sugar, Mars equally performs

Betterton's speculative statement that "Body horror is converted into pleasure, but the ultimate horror (for men at least?) may be the discovery that the source of that pleasure lies not in men's bodies - but in chocolate." (160). Mars' intimate moment with a cake qualifies as body horror not because her body is horrifying or because the cake inspires fear, but rather because together they are what Mary Douglas calls 'matter out of place'. As McBride reflects in her essay that draws on Douglas' phrase, "A slice of cake on a plate is not dirt. A slice of cake on the toilet floor, is." (9). While a stage in the Lilith Performance Studio is not a bathroom floor, Mars and her confectionary companion do enact this scene firmly on the ground. In doing so, the cake becomes abject, and Mars becomes someone who delights in, and makes art from the pleasures found in abjected sugar. The mouth here, rather than the locus of disgust as seen in the previous chapter, becomes an erogenous zone.

Figure 12. *In Dulci Jubilo*. Directed and performed by Tanya Mars

Figure 13. *In Dulci Jubilo*. Directed and performed by Tanya Mars

Figure 14. *In Dulci Jubilo*. Directed and performed by Tanya Mars

An Erotics of Art

There is an aura of sexualization that surrounds the 'park and scarf' genre. When I told one of my mother's colleagues that I was researching *mukbangs* and food ASMR, he responded, "that's connected to BDSM right?" Maybe it is just the ambiguity of acronyms that leaves interpretive space for the implication of some sexual taboo, but somewhere between the young woman, her food, and the heightened sensory experience, lasciviousness becomes a fore fronted generic marker to those even vaguely familiar with the concept of female *mukbangs*. Though a valid point of inquiry, its sexualization was not what piqued my interest in this content. That being said, there is an undeniable sensuality present in these videos that I feel goes beyond what is captured by the concept of food porn. How to articulate and differentiate this sensuality from explicit sexuality was unclear to me until I read Elkin's chapter "On Sensation." She takes the final line of Susan Sontag's essay "Against Interpretation" and uses it to interrogate the artistic articulation of the experiential reality of women's bodies (Elkin 36). In this essay, Sontag calls for an 'erotics of art' to replace the 'hermeneutics of art' that has reigned for centuries as the guiding principle in the Western evaluation of creative works (104). She argues that we have never let go of the Aristotelian impulse to justify or dignify art by an interpretation of its content rather than an appreciation of its form. An 'erotics of art' is a descriptive vocabulary of form that allows for this appreciation of the work's sensuous surface without reducing the interaction between art and viewer to fetishism or iconographic analysis (103).

For Elkin, Kristeva's abject is an approach that aligns with the 'hermeneutics of art.' It essentializes and over interprets the human body, cementing it as sickening (57). Backed by Sontag's advocacy for the value of form, the radical move, Elkin urges, is to leave the body open to something beyond interpretation, and in turn leave it open to the possibilities of beauty, disgust, sadness, and pleasure. As I have argued, Vehera's and Mars' sweet performances offer an open reading of the abject by projecting and encouraging a complicated coziness that sits in

direct opposition to the comfort traditionally found in interpretive distance. Without the erasure of form compounded with an evaluation of content, what Sontag calls "real art" becomes no longer manageable (Sontag 99). I believe the intractability of 'park and scarf' agitates and interests the collective consciousness because the sensory emphasis that exists as a function of form eclipses the already negligible content.

These performances, as well as Mars' piece, through form, encourage feelings and cannot be reduced to didactic value. Both 'Park and scarf' videos and performance art often lack narrative and dialogue – there is often little to understand but much to be seen, felt, and heard, and the viewer is not necessarily left with the moral of the story, but rather the impression of an image. As Mars stated in an interview with FADO Performance Art Centre, "I'm not a good actor, but I have presence." (Couillard). Sawchuk's chapter "Performance (Art) as A Method of Inquiry," reflects on the lasting impact of the physical experimentation characteristic of Mars' work. In reference to Mars' 1996 performance *Bronco's Kiss,* Sawchuk recalls that "the image of Mars on the SUV sometimes comes to mind when I do not expect it," and she then goes on to list the quotidian moments when her present becomes linked to the past performance through a rhythmic familiarity (14). Similarly, *In Dulci Jubilo* was conjured for me recently when I walked into the kitchen at the end of a dinner party to get dessert and bring it out to the table. I was surrounded by plates stacked from the previous courses, and alone with the cake, felt an urge to stick my finger in its center and lick the frosting. Vehera's TikTok, though not art, is not exempt from this kind of parallel recall. While making chocolate covered strawberries last week, after dunking the last berry in what remained of the melted chocolate, I looked down at my hands and saw Vehera's chocolate coated palms. Though I recognize the fragments of imagery from *In Dulci Jublio* and *Chocolate Lover* in my own imprudent impulses and messy interactions with food, these performances are not entirely familiar. Their excess leaves space for monstrosity which they create through a manipulation of form.

Figure 15. *In Dulci Jubilo*. Directed and performed by Tanya Mars

In the chapter "Playing with Monsters," Sawchuk cross references interrelated feminist thought to create a "typology of monsters" (36). Both Mars and Vehera compose frames that play with proportion and enact the category of "monstruosus gigantikos," achieved when "the body is enlarged beyond the normal" (38). Mars creates a city of cakes and dishes and positions

herself as the monster on the hill. The stacked plates serve as high rise buildings that she towers above, and award Mars a grotesque realism as she crawls and dances her way through her compositional landscape (Figure 15). Sawchuk explains that exaggeration sits in contrast to the "perfection implied by the miniaturization of the female form." (ibid). This miniaturization is embodied by Vehera from the outset of her TikTok. Wide eyed and posed with the massive chocolate bar and an oversized teacup that she strains to hold simultaneously in frame, this scene is essentially the inverse of Mars' artistic set up. However, Vehera's gluttonous consumption of these oversized foods that shrink her in comparison is something monstrous in itself. Almost as evidence of a transformation from feminine ideal to female monster, in the next frame, she instead holds a miniature chocolate bar, giving the impression that, after eating and depleting the decadent confection, she is now a giant herself (Figure 16). With their attention to the effects of formal composition and the female form, both Mars and Vehera (intentional or not) enact what Susan Bordo calls an 'embodied protest' "against cultural demands that women at once contain their appetites and remain diminutively un-threatening to men" (Kopelson 1). As creators that play with proportion, their protest is enlarged along with their appetites, their bodies, and the threat they pose as "monsters." The use of their own bodies as an artistic medium promotes emotional responses in viewers, but, through an alignment with monstrosity and abjection, does not guarantee catharsis (Sawchuk 40). With work that touches in this sense, there is a critical worry that it will be found "non-transformatively emotional" that it will make us uncomfortable without offering us the concluding experience of catharsis (Elkin 58). But catharsis is something that comes from and belongs to a 'hermeneutics of art.' Sawchuk writes in reference to the installation used to exemplify the category of 'monstruosus gigantikos,' that it "caused an outpouring of heartfelt writing about [women's] own contradictory relationships with femininity and beauty" (40). The proportions of giants do not invite human intimacy, however, as expressed by Kopelson, they are equally the dimensions of excess that effectively protest the patriarchal "expectations for discursive linearity and closure." (1). In other words, being an art monster who operates in the realm of excess can be an all at once liberating and lonely experience despite notions of feminist solidarity. At their core a contradiction, these sickly-sweet performances reveal that catharsis does not have value or is not possible in many contexts of lived female reality. Instead, operating with the understanding that vision is an aggregate of sensations, these performers forefront form to capture the link between women and monstrosity, and women and beauty through what Sawchuk calls "visceral disequilibrium" (41).

Figure 16. Maria Vehera [@mariavehera257] "OMG, THIS IS EXTRA HUGE CHOCOLATE BAR 2 KG 😍😍 " TikTok, 9 September 2024.

Classical Beauty in Grotesque Aesthetics

Throughout her book Elkin uses Hannah Wilke's early work as a case study for the reclamation of beauty in feminist art. "By posing in the register of the classical rather than the grotesque, Wilke was trying to show that women could make art as well as *be* art – and that the female body had to be reclaimed from the patriarchy." (190). To this day, but especially in the 1970s, art that furthered values of prettiness was questionable and often read as narcissistic. Female narcissism is considered "dangerous" because it renders the desiring male subject superfluous, and his approval therefore disposable (Elkin 187). This reflection, read alongside Betterton's suggestion that chocolate could be a superior source of pleasure to women than men's bodies, renders a young, conventionally attractive woman filming herself finding pleasure in an abundance of chocolate particularly horrific to certain audiences. Mars, though 60 years old during this performance, and therefore not the epitome of youthful sex appeal, has an aura of timeless beauty with high cheekbones that have led many people, when I show them *In Dulci Jublio*, to comment on her resemblance to Meryl Streep. Wilke believed that people were more likely to look at beautiful women than beautiful art. Mars' assertion that the "strength of performance comes from the visual… and the body inside that image adds the power of presence" sits adjacent to Wilke's cultural assessment. With this, both Mars and Vehera make art that seduces. Somewhere between the satiation offered by sweets and the indulgence in the feminine form, the male subject becomes dispensable in an exploration of desire, and seduction becomes something other than "heterosexual bewitching" (Elkin 192).

This sits in contrast to the tactics in the savoury performances used to maintain the viewers' attention. The savoury performances rely on the shock of the stark contrast between the

beauty of the performer and the unappealing appearance of the food that they consume. As Mecacci writes in reference to Abramović's older work "the performance quickly turns this set of plain sexual appeal into its exact opposite." (109). The turn that Mars' and Vehera's performances take, into sweetened abjection, does not steer them to a place that is incompatible with seduction. While to some viewers it may seem that, through their consumption of food, they refuse the beauty initially promised by their contained bodies, what they really offer is the opportunity to confront the monstrosity of beauty. As Elkin writes:

> It invites the viewer to attend to the surfaces of the work – to scrutinize the grain of a beautiful woman's skin, and realise it is covered in ambiguous, troubling, possibly abject objects, referencing moments of pain healed over but not forgotten, and thus be invited to a visceral, material experience of art, a valorising of pleasure as an aesthetic response (192).

Pleasure as an aesthetic response is central to Mars' and Vehera's performances. While it would grant too much artistic intention to Vehera's content to claim that the smears of melted chocolate on her face and hands are physical manifestations of emotional scars, her performance nevertheless enables this attentive process that converts beauty to body horror and body horror to pleasure. Over her three hour performance, Mars is more effective at capturing the aesthetics of expressions that enable the same process with more time, space and perspective to discover the pain that burrows in a woman's skin. As evidenced by their titles, *In Dulci Jublio* and *Chocolate Lover* capture the joy and intimacy found in sweets and extend that pleasure to the ooey-gooey abject that exists beneath their sugar coating.

Conclusion

Sugar is a basic flavour. It is not benignly masochistic like spice, or an acquired taste like bitterness or sourness (Spence 107). There is a cultural understanding that an exaggerated taste for sugar is an indication of an underdeveloped palate, and despite the fact that "the liking for sweetness is hardwired in our species, irrespective of gender," it is women that are saddled with a sweet-tooth and all the cavities that come with it (Krondl 7). In the same way that sugar is a conventional flavour whose fore fronted inclusion in a recipe often cements it as comfort food rather than gastronomy, a fore fronting of conventional beauty in art often demarcates the work as amateur rather than critically acclaimed. The abject, as it is most commonly used in art, like the more complex flavors of bitterness and sourness, is not necessarily pleasant, but similarly offers distinction. The majority of people who begin consuming bitter coffee and ethanolic wine do so not because they appreciate the taste, but because they want to profit from the beverages' stimulating effects or enact a sense of maturity. Many feminist artists have embraced abjection with a similar stimulating and contrarian approach, that while increasing the reputation of their art, does not make abjection, or the female body it is fastened to, perceived as any less disgusting. It is through this metaphoric link between food, culture, and the female body that

these performances that embrace a sweet beauty as well as the bitter abject become works of valuable postmodern feminist performance. Sidney Mintz, in his historical overview of sugar, speaks to how sweetener, since the 18th century, has been used to wean people onto the bitter acquired tastes of stimulants. Through an erotics of art, abjection is framed not as poison for the patriarchy, but rather a medicinal acquired taste. Abjection serves as the simulant for a reformulation of desire that does not rely on the rejection of the mother and the blood, milk, and tears that serve as organic symbols for women's fluidity. These sugar forward performances offer spoonfuls of sweetener, through beauty, chocolate, and cakes to help the notion of abject as medicine go down more smoothly with audiences being asked to shift (or just simply confront) the way they have been urged to conceptualize the female body in relation to pleasure and disgust.

Conclusion: *Mukbangs* En Vogue

For about a year now the internet has been claiming with resounding resignation that "skinny is back." A google search that includes the declarative phrase produces a results page composed of articles from a handful of popular news sources contrasting the (relative) "body positivity" of the 2010s with the "Ozempic era" we are currently living in. This marked shift in the cultural perception of inclusivity in reference to body types is evidenced in the drastic decline in plus sized representation on the 2025 European and American fashion week runways, the trending hashtag *#SkinnyTok* that equates thinness with health, and the Kardashians trading in their "slim-thick" curves in favour of the waif silhouette. The return of 'heroin chic'– as it was called in the early 2000s– has been largely enabled by the aesthetic use of a medication designed to treat type 2 diabetes; first co-opted by the celebrity elite as a weight loss tool, Ozempic is now accessible to members of the general public with the means to purchase the prescription drug. I bring this up not simply because I want to draw attention to contemporary beauty standards, but because the current means of achieving these standards are particularly relevant to a conversation that includes *mukbangs*. Ozempic is effectively an appetite suppressant, meaning that it not only produces a synthetic sense of satiation, but it also curbs cravings of calorically dense foods. 'Park and scarf' *mukbangs*, boasting an overindulgence in fast food, therefore exist as the antithesis to the reigning status quo of "thin is in" facilitated by eating in a deficit.

Almost as a synthesis to this dialectic situated in the realm of consumption practices, in 2020 Conde Nast began producing the "Vogue Mukbang" YouTube segment, which, contextually, reads as a paradox. The series places Western pop-culture's "it girls" at a table with a napkin, fork, and knife, and presents them with an amount of food they will inevitably not finish. To call these videos *mukbangs* is a stretch. While the "Vogue Mukbangs" are technically eating broadcasts, they exhibit very few of the generic conventions associated with the *mukbangs* examined in the previous chapters. These models, actresses, and singers eat artfully presented food with varying of degrees of decorum – they cling to the napkins offered to them like a security blanket, apologize when a chew offers a glimpse of anything beyond the confines of their lipstick, and pre-emptively warn their audience when the bite they have carefully constructed on their fork suddenly feels too ambitious to fit in their mouths. The only real contribution these videos make to an understanding of *mukbangs* is their creation that cements the cultural relevance of the Korean genre in the Western context.

My goal with this thesis is to offer one of many alternative syntheses to the migration and emergence of *mukbangs* within North American culture. Co-opted by mainstream media, the transgressive potential of *mukbangs* is neutralized as the term becomes integrated into these videos that act as endorsements of hegemonic representations of the female body. Rather than elaborately produced defensive proof that the women featured in *Vogue* do in fact eat, I situate a subgenre of *mukbang* content produced on social media in relation to a feminist artistic legacy of making performance from personal experience. The superfluity they feature, not in affluence (which is the case with the "Vogue Mukbangs"), but in an 'ucky' femininity, ties them to a

history of using excess as a feminist aesthetic. In her article, "Radical Indulgence: Excess, Addiction, and Female Desire," Karen Kopelson argues that the concept of excess has become a trope of postmodern feminism on the trajectory to save feminism from itself (2). In an effort to "humanize" the feminist cause, second wave feminism made a conscious effort to align itself with normalcy and demureness. This legacy rooted in an obfuscation of spectacle, along with theories of sexual difference where the female body is characterized by "lack" – often of desire – compared to its male counterpart, has made the notion of excess a powerful subversive tool for postmodern feminists. The willingness of these content creators to make a spectacle of themselves highlights the fact that consumption is often weaponized in Western culture as a marker of instability in women. In understanding the cultural significance of the mouth as a feminist emblem, the 'park and scarf' genre manifests the intrigue and repulsion characteristic of this gastronomic form of excess. Its display of transgressive consumption, with an emphasis on liberated sensory disorder is unsettling to some viewers and captivating to others, largely because it disturbs the notion of a 'whole and proper' self constructed by Western European men.
Kylie Jenner ends her high tea "Vogue Mukbang" feast that she picks at like a finicky bird with the statement, "I could do this every day." A key aspect that qualifies *mukbangs* as performance, and in turn something adjacent to feminist performance art, is that, while potentially a response to everyday experiences, they cannot be an everyday practice. The type of excessive eating featured in 'park and scarf' content is not a viable alternative to eating in a calorie deficit, in the same way that eating an entire raw onion is not a viable response to alexithymia. This suspense of practicality is equally what places both *mukbangs* and performance art in Mary Russo's subversive Carnival realm. The events housed in this metaphorical space do not represent sustainable alternatives to hegemony but are rather experiments in resistance that make us question the current symbolic order. The radical end of the consumption spectrum enacted in these performance art pieces, and 'park and scarf' videos highlight the radical ridiculousness of the opposite end of the spectrum that has become socially neutralized through the accessibility and acceptability of appetite suppressants. These performances serve as a visceral visual reminder that the female body and its appetite is often suppressed, both metaphorically and literally, in the name of patriarchal palatability. Their subversive potential lies in 'park and scarf's' ability to offer oppositional living images readily consumed despite the fact that they are decidedly difficult to digest.

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