

# **Comorbidity**

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**Abstract**

Comorbidity

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This thesis document analyses and contextualizes my solo thesis exhibition, *Comorbidity*, through providing photo documentation of the work, a reflection on personal experiences, social phenomena, contemporary art, and critical theory. Throughout this last year I have developed a body of sculptural, video, and performance work that deals with the psychological and physical implications of sexual and gendered oppression. With an invested interest in the ways that pop culture has shaped conceptions of gender and sexuality in American social dynamics, I look at physical and mental health, the feminization of domestic labor and the “self-care” industry, the relationship between human and non-human animals, and the transformation and reclamation of derogatory language, imagery, and aesthetics. Utilizing concepts from queer and affect theory, I consider the methods and subject matter in my work as well as the works of other queer and feminist artists. By externalizing what is internal (mental and physical illness) and internalizing what is external (systemic oppression predominately based on gender and ability) in my life, work, and writing, I posit that trauma, grief, and illness are inextricably tied to social conditioning and various forms of overlapping oppression.

## Comorbidity

*A comorbidity is any coexisting health condition. The prefix “co” means together and the word “morbidity” is the medical term for a health condition. It can also be described as co-occurring or coexisting conditions. [...]*

*Comorbidities sometimes interact with each other, but they can also exist entirely separately. Some conditions may raise your risk of developing others, or may commonly occur together. [...] Comorbidities are often chronic conditions and can include physical or mental health.*

-Healthline.com

I can't remember exactly where I first encountered this term but it must have been in one of many frantic online searches of various health conditions when I was in the thick of trying to make sense of my crumbling physical and mental health in my first year of grad school amid a relentless global pandemic. The term struck me as I consider myself to be a fairly morbid person and am aware of the stigma that surrounds the term “morbid” and illness in general. I've since discovered that I have several comorbidities, both physical and mental, and this is likely true of several members of my immediate family. Learning about the genetic inheritance of illness has caused me to look over my life, identity, upbringing, and intimate relationships in a whole new light. Where does blame go when factors beyond your or any one else's control are at work? As I've learned about my body and mind, I've developed much more patience and empathy for myself, my family, and others, and recognized the ways that external factors contribute to my health.

In my work I often depict what it looks like for bodies to hold devastating emotional and psychological weight and, vice versa, the interpersonal and intrapersonal ways that our bodies and appearances contribute to mental turmoil. These are experiences I've carried my whole life outside of a clinical understanding of what this all meant. As complicated as understanding health is in a country that denies basic access to healthcare, I wonder how the complexity of physical and mental health is compounded by external and engrained social oppressions and trauma.

In my thesis exhibition, I understand the term *comorbidity*, in addition to its medical definition, as a metaphor for the co-occurring, simultaneous ways that humans oppress each other based on conservative and heteronormative social-conditioning and double standards that encode our interactions. By externalizing what is internal (mental and physical illness) and internalizing what is external (systemic oppression predominately based on gender and ability), I show how these conditions overlap and exacerbate one other.

## Deep Soak

This performance and durational installation begins with a gelatin life cast taken from my body lying in a cast iron bathtub, a robe hung on the wall with a set of slippers on the floor next to a coiled green garden hose. In a parody of suburban, white, heteronormative femininity, I enter the gallery and put on the white bath robe with the word “Bride” embroidered onto the back and a pair of white house slippers with the words “Dog” on the right slipper and “Mom” on the other, I take the hose and a glass of white wine to the tub and begin filling it with water, submerging the gelatin cast of myself other than its knees that protrude above the water’s surface.

An emersion water heater heats the water. The gelatin gradually melts and disintegrates in the heated water. The heat slowly works on the figure, first destroying the features and details of the skin surface, then progressively disintegrating and ultimately destroying the gelatin replica of myself. Once the gelatin cast fully melts and becomes integrated into the water, the impurities rise to the surface and this mixture starts to re-gelatinize into a still and putrid gelatin pool. This erasure and transformation of my form and likeness can be seen as a metaphor for loss and grief following death as well as the loss of identity that can happen when we slip in and out of constricting socially constructed gender roles.

This work ends with another performance in which I re-enter the gallery wearing robe and slippers holding an empty wine glass. I then de-robe and enter the bathtub, pushing my bare feet through the thickened gelatin and laying atop the gelatin’s surface. I bathe myself in this gelatin concoction, disrupt its still surface, scooping the slimy substance into the wine glass, drinking the melted and reformed clone and pouring it over my body. This is my auto-cannibalistic communion, my putrid baptism—a vulgar rejection of any purity myth associated with outdated notions of femininity.



Fig. 1: *Deep Soak* intro performance



Fig. 2: *Deep Soak* pre-melt

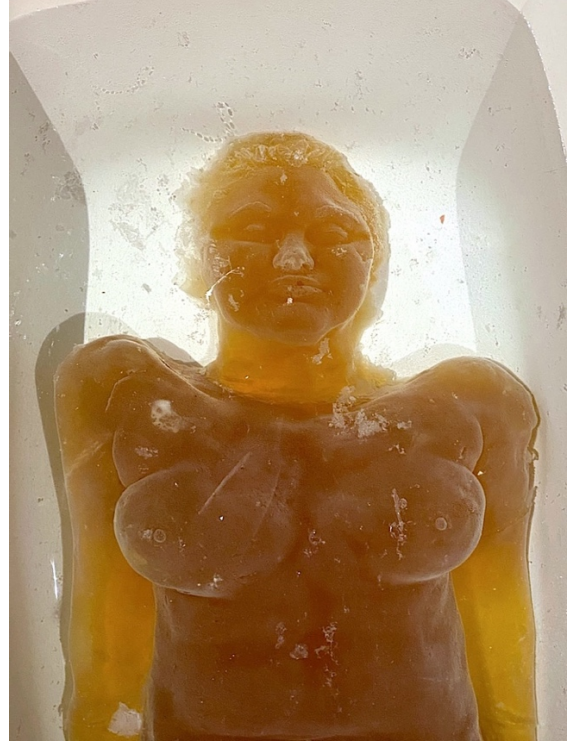


Fig. 3: *Deep Soak* pre-melt detail



Fig. 4: *Deep Soak* pre melt



Fig. 5: *Deep Soak* pre melt



Fig. 6 *Deep Soak* melting detail



Fig. 7: *Deep Soak* melting process



Fig. 8: *Deep Soak* post-melt



Fig. 9: *Deep Soak* ending performance detail



Fig. 10: *Deep Soak* ending performance



Fig. 11: *Deep Soak* performance residual

### Self-Care and Gender Failure

In American culture, baths and the notion of “self-care” (bubble baths, bath bombs, Epsom salts, face masks, anti-aging creams, spa treatments, etc.) are relegated to femininity. Perhaps this fixation on wellness and cleanliness is due to the prevalence of toxic narratives around beauty and purity in relation to female subjects and their bodies. Gelatin also has a prominent association to 60’s housewives with copper gelatin molds and a casserole in the oven. These tropes conjure the image of a woman who labors around the house and runs errands tirelessly all day, who, after the children are sound asleep, gets a single hour to herself to decompress in the bathtub with a glass of wine.

Why is talking about the “60’s housewife” trope still relevant today? In a time when queers are represented more visibly than ever before and shortly after the first woman is elected as vice president, we are faced with recessive and horrifying laws that endanger AFAB people and queer children, teachers, and parents. The major abortion ban in Texas, misleadingly called the “heartbeat act,” prevents any abortion services after six weeks of pregnancy, endangering and denying basic bodily autonomy for those with the ability to become pregnant and putting medical providers in

precarious positions. This act allows third party witnesses to sue those seeking abortion services and anyone involved in the process (medical professionals, drivers, etc.). This new act has devastatingly undone generations of work against sexism and gender discrimination and has prompted other conservative states to follow suit, threatening the status of access to safe abortion throughout the country. Similarly, the “parental rights in education bill” aka the “don’t say gay” bill in Florida that heavily restricts conversations around queerness in school settings has bolstered homophobic and transphobic legislation across the country. American family values remain largely conservative and heteronormative despite myths of progress. The white, hetero suburban family unit is still the status quo while discussions around queerness, gender equity, and racism are being erased from school curricula.

As we look towards a frighteningly unstable future, the present is haunted by the past. The two seem to collapse into one other, undoing generations of social labor. Progress has an unstable trajectory. A squiggly line; a knot. We are simultaneously moving forwards and backwards constantly and it is beyond difficult to come to terms with this. I situate my work within this space of dissonance. In *Deep Soak*, the position of the figure troubles the domestic façade that the bathtub and props imply. On the one hand, there's an uncertainty if the body is drowning or just momentarily submerged. On the other hand, the gradual erasure of the figure works against the notion of a static identity—specifically one that is gender and place-based. As a self-portrait, this violence of erasure addresses my dissociation with these stereotypes around heteronormative femininity or (I cringe to even type this) “womanhood.”

In considering my refusal or inability to fit into the heteronormative pre-packaged notions of “femininity,” I turn to Jack Halberstam who writes against negative associations of “failure” to point to the liberating potential that failing can offer in the face of harmful social constructs in his book, *The Queer Art of Failure*:

From the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures. [...] [I]f womanhood depends upon a heterosexual framework, then lesbians are not “women,” and if lesbians are not “women,” then they fall outside of patriarchal norms and can re-create some of the meaning of their genders.<sup>1</sup>

Thinking along these lines, gender failure can give agency to unruly self-creation on one’s own terms with no credence to institutionalized gender roles and family-building centered lifestyles since one is deemed irrelevant to these systems if seen as a failure to begin with. Cleanliness and maintenance of

one's physical appearance and home are all tied to outdated notions of femininity, but I could never comprehend these fixations on appearances. I was a messy, dirty, disheveled kid who climbed trees shirtless and always had scraped up knees. When this didn't change much in adolescence I was constantly lectured and ridiculed by my mother who is still disgusted that I don't shave my armpits.

Growing up, I was horrified by my grandmother's obsession with cleaning and my mother's germaphobia. My mother would wince at a kiss on the cheek for fear of contamination and my grandmother would sometimes stay up until 3AM or wake up at the crack of dawn to deep clean her entire apartment on a regular basis. She spent hours of her life dedicated to cleaning her abode and also spent hours a day on personal hygiene and anti-aging routines with the aid of various products claiming to work wonders on the face and body.

I still struggle with personal hygiene and maintaining a clean home and I worry that living with me must be similar to living with a teenage boy. My partner, who is male but also nonbinary (in many ways more feminine than I), does most of the chores and often cooks me dinner while I work late in the filthy sculpture studios and come home to a cold beer with grease on my hands. Embracing queerness and gender role reversal with my partner has been liberating and exhilarating after spending several defeating years trying to fit into a cleaner and more "presentable" feminine image in professional work settings, which I inevitably failed to maintain. As Halberstam says, "[f]ailing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well."<sup>2</sup> (2, Halberstam)

## **Water, Mourning, and Pain**

A sip of clean water can hydrate, but a flood can be deadly. Water is both a purifying, life-giving substance and a violent force that can destroy and kill. It has been used in religious rituals, like baptisms, and funerary rituals, like setting the deceased to sea. Submerging oneself in water can soothe the nerves, it's a medium that oozes self-care, but there is also an undeniable association between baths and suicide, accidental deaths, murder.

I have taken many baths to calm myself in the wake of death, full of grief and confusion. Between my last year of high school and my last year of graduate school, I have experienced the loss of ten young friends and peers. My first year of undergrad was met with the slow and painful death of my grandmother, a second mother to me, and this last year of graduate school leaves me with the sudden and unexpected loss of my professor, Doug Jeck. I knew a girl who died in a tub from an

overdose. It now seems so distant. She haunts the waters across time and space. But I don't often think of her when my hands turn to prunes. In a bath, I don't think of the 16 people I know who have died, most of them only in the second decade of their lives. In a bath, I feel nothing. Which is sometimes the most welcome feeling.

The comfort of laying in a warm tub of water is the closest feeling I can imagine to being in utero, that distant and elusive state before the harshness of life and humanity is thrust upon our unassuming undeveloped bodies and minds. I often feel more comfortable in water, where gravity's pull and the weight we carry is less imposing. I was born in water, emerging like a fish according to my grandmother. I grew up near the ocean and other bodies of water. Taking baths, when I've been lucky enough to live in a place with a tub, has been a refuge from the overwhelmingness of life. If I don't have a bathtub I will sometimes sit on the shower floor in a ball and let hot water pelt my bare back. These watery sensations allow me to be present in my body, they shut off my viscous mind. As I navigate chronic pain, neurodivergence, and disability over the last few years, I've discovered that water and heat have been more effective for managing pain and mental exhaustion than most of the many medications I've been prescribed.

### **Bath Tubs and Consumption**

Janine Antoni has activated water, bathing, consumption, and ideas surrounding gender and domesticity in various ways, from her work *Touch* in which she tightropes across the horizon line of the ocean (like a female Christ), to *Lick and Lather*, a piece where she has life cast many busts of herself in chocolate and soap, distorting them and erasing the facial features by licking the chocolate busts and washing herself in a tub with the soap busts.<sup>34</sup>



Fig. 12: *Lick and Lather*, Janine Antoni



Fig. 13: *Lick and Lather*, Janine Antoni



Fig. 14 *Lick and Lather*, Janine Antoni



Fig. 15: *Touch*, Janine Antoni

In her sculptural installation, *Eureka*, Antoni presents residual objects and props from a performance where she submerged herself in a Victorian bathtub filled with lard. The mass of her body caused the lard to rise above the edge of the tub, and with this excess lard, she created a cube of soap by adding lye and water to the lard which she used to clean herself over the course of several bathings.<sup>5</sup> Displayed as sculptures are the tub with the imprint of Antony's body as a void in the hardened lard (visually reminiscent of Ana Mendieta's *Earth-Body* and *Siluetas Series*) and beside it, the rounded cube of soap. The implied form of the artist's body also constitutes an emptiness and erasure, similar to the disappearing gelatin body in my piece. Lard itself, an interesting and bodily choice of material that Antoni has used on several occasions, bears a similarity to the fleshiness of gelatin, both being made from residual animal products and commonly used in cooking.



Fig. 16: *Eureka*, Janine Antoni

Other than the sweet, bright colored, jiggly dessert, gelatin is used for a variety of cooking processes and other purposes. It is made from collagen of livestock animals, often extracted from pig skin, cow bones, hides, and tissues and less commonly chicken and fish parts. It is used as a thickening and gelling agent for different foods and beauty products. Ballistic gelatin, due to its similarity to porcine tissue, is used for measuring the terminal performance of firearm ammunition. Because of its easily malleable, castable, and fleshy appearance, it's also used as a silicone alternative for SFX film production. My gelatin cast is made of beef and pork-based gelatin, two animals that humans have particularly parasitic relationships to.

Another work in which Janine Antony more directly engages with animal and human relationships is *2038*, a performance where Antony lies in a bathtub that serves as a drinking basin for cows on a dairy farm.<sup>6</sup> The title refers to a tag in the ear of the cow that appears in the photograph documenting this performance, highlighting the objectification and use-value that has been imposed on this cow as both a tool and product. In the photograph, the cow drinks water from the tub, reaching its head over Antony's body in such a way that it appears to be nursing from the artist's breast in a reverse, trans-species mother/child-like moment. It is "normal" for humans to drink cow milk but the thought of a cow nursing from a human or drinking human milk at all is somehow jarring and taboo, "unnatural."



Fig. 17: 2038, Janine Antony

### Reclaiming the Cow

The second half of *Comorbidity* is an installation called *Reclaiming the Cow*. Projected onto the far gallery wall is a video grid of multiple simultaneous clips of men eating beef taken from found footage of YouTube steak eating challenges along with sound from the original footage. In front of the projection is a bench that looks like a giant slab of raw beef that viewers can sit on to watch the video. On the opposite side of the gallery, a human/cow hybrid sculpture floats in the corner just above the ground. The human/cow form is taken from the same mold as the gelatin cast, another self-portrait lifted out of the reclined bathtub position and flipped upright. Though its form is human, the skin surface is made up of black and white cow splotches. The cow-ness is superimposed onto my body in a surface level fusion between me and cow, flattening the hybrid into a kind of reverent caricature. The figure is suspended in an awkwardly stiff position with its eyes closed, appearing to be withdrawn from the rest of the scene. The surprisingly calm expression and subtle smile juxtaposes the tense body language, as if the figure has transcended its physical body and turned inward to some other realm of fantasy or dissociation.

The rigid, naked figure is at odds with the whimsical steak bench and humorously hyperbolic video collage tonally. I exploit this tension to amplify the dissonance in the relationship between

cows and femininity vs cows and masculinity. In the installation, multiple forms of consumption are presented—the literal eating of flesh and capitalistic consumption as well as the consumption of hetero-patriarchal constructs of femininity and sexuality. The recorded performances of many manly men consuming excessive quantities of beef (cooked and raw) as quickly as possible becomes an externalized spectacle while the association between cows and femininity is anatomical, physical, visually imposed, and internalized.



Fig. 18: *Reclaiming the Cow* install shot with video



Fig. 19: *Reclaiming the Cow* self portrait as cow



Fig. 20: *Reclaiming the Cow* Steak Bench



Fig. 21: *Reclaiming the Cow* install shot

## Cows, Humans, and Non-Human Animals

Cows have taken on a load of nationalist, sexualized, and gendered symbolism in American imagery and language through anthropocentric narratives. As beef and dairy products are consumed and produced in copious quantities in the US, the black and white dairy cow, used in advertising for numerous fast food and ice cream chains, has become a sort of mascot for American consumption (especially in the South). In order to keep a steady flow of milk production for dairy farms, dairy cows are forced to give birth once a year and are re-inseminated just months after birthing each calf—if a cow is unable to produce milk sufficiently, they will be sold to slaughterhouses for beef production.<sup>7</sup> Depictions of bulls and long-horns ooze with dense, phallogentric masculinity, fixated on largeness, strength, and violence, while the large udders, production of milk, and the breeding function of female cows are their most prominent and exaggerated attributes. Bulls are gendered in violent bullfighting and rodeo displays while mechanical bulls make the idea of “riding” explicitly sexual. Cow print has become an increasingly popular fashion trend, perhaps spearheaded by sex-workers cashing in on these gendered animal tropes with cute and sexy cow costumes and captions saying “breed me” (and why not take advantage of these dehumanizing tropes?) or the hyperbolic, overtly feminized illustrations of cow/human hybrid creatures with enormous udder-breasts in hentai and fan fiction circles.

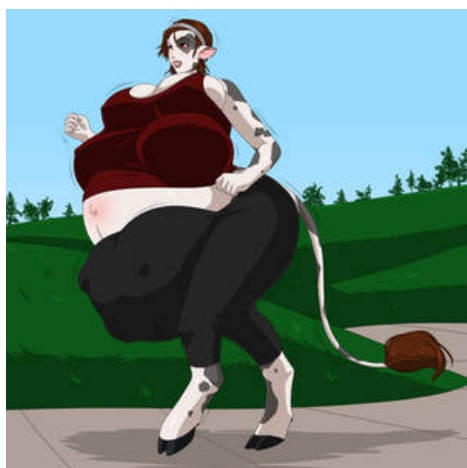


Fig. 22: Milkshake by Zdemian, from deviantart.com Fig. 23: image from *The Cow*, book by Ariana Reines

In an exhibition at Reena Spaulings Fine Art called *INTERFERTILITY INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX: SNATCH THE CALF BACK*, Juliana Huxtable has dialed in on these various cow-

centered associations in a series of self-portraits of the artist as a neon club cow, wearing iridescent body paint and hair styled as horns, depicted in various abject scenarios—like being milked and sitting in a pile of her own shit. In drawing a parallel between women and cows, she emphasizes the patriarchal fixation on breeding and transphobic rhetoric equating women with their ability to reproduce. Besides the cow-portraits, a series of “advertisements” are displayed along-side other portraits of Huxtable, who appears in the form of many other sexualized animal-human hybrids throughout the exhibit. Some of these works are installed as photographs and videos in bathroom stalls, referencing these stalls as both sites for hookups and in reference to livestock stalls.

Huxtable’s work has been very influential to how I approach In relation to livestock, capitalism, and consumption, in an interview, Huxtable poses these questions:

If you’re eating a cheeseburger, is your body not only working to digest the nutrients in the sandwich, but also the souls of the various cattle it’s ground of, and various beings these cattle once ate? What about the trauma of the insertion of the farmer’s fist into the cow’s anus to determine pregnancy? What about the trauma of the calf during the spectacle of its own sale at a state fair? And, of course, how do these traumas affect production? If the cow is unhappy, symptomatically, the milk will show its suffering. While PTSD may be the main ingredient in most of our food, we’ve certainly shown an ability in the last century to adapt and process these traumas digestively, cellularly, and emotionally, however dysfunctionally.<sup>8</sup>

Her work brings the complicated hierarchy between human and non-human animals and the ways that humans project anthropocentric and gendered characteristics onto animals into dialogue. It prompts a conversation about trans, human, and animal rights, the ethics of the meat and dairy industries, and how certain animals are often co opted for objectifying, dehumanizing, derogatory gendered and racialized language and imagery.



Fig. 24: *Interfertility Industrial Complex: Snatch the Calf Back*, install shot, Juliana Huxtable



Fig. 25: *Cow 1*, Juliana Huxtable



Fig. 26: *Cow 2*, Juliana Huxtable

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SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

Juliana Huxtable, "'BIO-GOTH'  
BODY," 2019. Printed paper, 24 x  
18 in. Reena Spaulings Fine Art,  
New York. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 27: *Interfertility Industrial Complex: Snatch the Calf Back*, "advertisements," Juliana Huxtable



Fig. 28: *Interfertility Industrial Complex: Snatch the Calf Back*, install shot, Juliana Huxtable



Fig. 29: *Interfertility Industrial Complex: Snatch the Calf Back*, install shot, Juliana Huxtable

## Animacy and Hybridity

In thinking about both my own work dealing with animal/human hybrids as well as the works of other artists working with this subject matter, I have turned to Mel Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* to consider the nuances and real socio-political ramifications that relationships and power structures between humans, non-human animals, and objects constitute. Mel Chen establishes an expansive, pluralistic approach to dealing with the

subject of animacy and affect in relation to linguistics, queer, critical race, and disability theories. They describe the idea of animacy in the context of their studies as, “an often racialized and sexualized means of conceptual and affective mediation between human and inhuman, animate and inanimate, whether in language, rhetoric, or imagery.”<sup>9</sup>

Chen locates their analysis of animacy in a mostly contemporary (though absolutely historically informed) US socio-political context as a way to navigate the various and often intersectional ways that agency and privilege are most often determined by markers of human (vs other animal/object) status, race, gender, sexuality, class, ability (vs disability), etc.. Early on, they establish a working “animacy hierarchy” informed by the writings and research of various linguists who have studied the concept of animacy in depth:

While I consider the animacy hierarchy as linguists do, as a prevalent conceptual structure and ordering that might possibly come out of understandings of lifeliness, sentience, agency, ability, and mobility in a richly textured world, I actively contextualize this hierarchy as a politically dominant one, one potentially affected and shaped by the spread of Christian cosmologies, capitalism, and the colonial orders of things.<sup>10</sup>

Chen, citing linguist Mutsumi Yamamoto, prefaces and problematizes this hierarchy as an inevitably anthropocentric one that perpetuates the very human tendency to see humans as superior and separate from other animals, neglecting evidence that many non-human animals and life forms possess traits that meet and/or surpass human abilities.<sup>11</sup> By making these linguistic notions visual and three dimensional, I collapse these hierarchies into uncomfortable hybrids.

I'm interested in the ways hybridity can hold space for contradiction and divergence, its ability to speak to both potentially oppressive and liberating impulses. When humans impose sexual and gendered connotations onto non-human animals, they can emerge as exploitative sexual fantasies that cast femininity and animality in submissive roles that can negatively and violently impact real human-human and human-animal dynamics (even when masculinity is amplified through animality, like with minotaurs and fauns, there is often a predatory sexualized sub-narrative underpinning this). At the same time, sexual fantasies, kinks, and role-playing can create an empowering safe-space to explore non heteronormative/conservative sexual expression, and various non-human animals present alternate models of sex in terms of anatomy, sexuality, reproduction, and relationships that do not perpetuate the human narrative of gendered dominance/submission hierarchies. Ultimately, I want to show the absurdity of categorizing and legitimizing different living beings and inanimate objects based on such oppressive criteria. In this way, creating a visual connection between a female body and a cow hide disturbs this often unquestioned hierarchy.

## Overidentification and Disidentification

In my work I utilize stereotypes, problematic fantasies, derogatory phrases and imagery pertaining to gender and sexuality as a strategy for critique. Just as the word "queer" emerged initially as a derogatory term, later reclaimed as an empowering agent, I hope that my monstrous human/non-human animal hybrids in reclaiming, literalizing, and making physical slurs like fat cow, bitch, pussy, etc., can confront these insulting terms, gain power and agency, while offsetting the power-dynamics that these terms originate within. I'm influenced by visual artists that approach latent violence in this direct and mimetic way like Juliana Huxtable, Catalina Ouyang, and Rona Pondick. I'm also indebted to pop musicians like Joey la Beija, Jungle Pussy, Megan thee Stallion, and Doja Cat who have done important reclamation work with terms like "pussy" and unabashedly dealing with sexuality in a critical and liberating way in their lyrics and performances.

Take Doja Cat's song and music video "Mooo!" in which she dresses like a sexy cow and sexy farmer while eating a burger, drinking a strawberry milkshake, and reciting lyrics in front of various gifs and graphics of cows, an animated 8-bit burger and farm, and, my favorite, some extra large bouncing hentai breasts.<sup>12</sup> Whether or not she was intentionally critiquing or parodying the over-sexualization and feminization of cows and women or the meat and dairy industries, her lyrics and performance still have this effect. The chorus especially brings together this particular fixation on feminized animals that I've been exploring throughout my thesis work, "Bitch, I'm a cow, bitch, I'm a cow. I'm not a cat, I don't say meow." Within this repeated refrain, Doja Cat summons the triple threat of the bitch, the cow, and the pussy, the three most prevalent slurs targeting femininity. But the current status of these terms is complicated considering that "bitch" and "pussy" are almost just as often not used as insults anymore. The definitions and intentionality behind these terms is unstable, morphing over time and incredibly context-specific considering that "bitch" can double as an insult and term of endearment and "pussy" (or "bussy" aka "boy pussy") can simply be a preferred (and mostly queer) way to refer to one's genitals regardless of their gender or anatomy. I see Doja Cat's "Mooo!" working in an ironic and parodic space that could be called "overidentification" or "disidentification," which I will describe in what follows.



Fig. 30: Doja Cat in “MOOO!” music video



Fig. 31: Doja Cat in “MOOO!” music video



Fig. 32: Doja Cat in “MOOO!” music video

*Overidentification* is a term used by Slavoj Žižek in his book *NSK From Kapital to Capital: Neue Slowenische Kunst an Event of the Final Decade of Yugoslavia*. In the chapter, “Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?,” Žižek establishes the idea of dominant stigmas and “group values” (much like conservative “family values”), what he calls the superego or “obscene nightly law”<sup>13</sup> in contrast to a public law which claims to advocate for all citizens equally and fairly, seeking justice and peace. I can’t think of any nation that doesn’t claim these qualities for their governments, yet we know that this is often a façade and very few governments succeed in actualizing these claims, and on the contrary, constantly contradict and break many of their own laws, overlooking countless human rights violations. In this chapter Žižek discusses how NSK, an avant-garde, anarchist Slovenian art collective, uses different art forms to push against such bureaucratic hypocrisy. Laibach, a band that accrued acclaim for their over-the-top music videos that appropriate fascist music and imagery (such as Nazi and Soviet anthems, uniforms, and symbolism) to parody, or *over-identify* with these heinous groups. They are so diligent in their imitations of these parties that their music and videos have been reacted to with confusion and even outrage. Žižek responds to this uncertainty as follows:

This uneasy feeling is fed on the assumption that ironic distance is automatically a subversive attitude. What if, on the contrary, the dominant attitude of the contemporary “postideological” universe is precisely the cynical distance towards public values? What if this distance, far from posing any threat to the system, designates the supreme form of conformism, since the normal function of the system requires cynical distance? In this sense the strategy of Laibach appears in a new light: it “frustrates” the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but over-identification with it—by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency.<sup>14</sup>

In this way, Laibach so faithfully and convincingly emulates fascist aesthetics that they elicit uncertainty from their viewers. What does one do with uncertainty, especially when it comes to serious socio-political content where we are pressured to take strong stances for or against various events? Perhaps uncertainty causes one to pause and look much closer at the details surrounding an event and to question their own assumptions and values. *Overidentification* as a critical strategy thus effectively shuts down superficial black and white rhetoric by refusing to take a stance, instead prompting the audience to form their own opinions rather than following the masses.

José Esteban Muñoz presents a similar strategy in his concept of *disidentification*, yet his focus is on marginalized subjects rather than the oppressor, as well as the particular identity of the person

being oppressed. As a queer Cuban American theorist who dedicated his life to the study of queer of color art and thought, his book, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, inevitably focuses on queer performance. He posits his rebellious queers as:

“Bad Subjects” [who] resist and attempt to reject the images and identificatory sites offered by dominant ideology and proceed to rebel, to “counteridentify” and turn against this symbolic system. [...] Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. [...] As a practice, disidentification does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life.<sup>15</sup>

Investing an object of critique with new life is an act of reclamation and redefinition. Just as we are constantly renegotiating language and meaning as I have discussed with the terms “queer,” “bitch,” and “pussy,” imagery, aesthetics, and cultural symbols can also undergo similar transformations through various types of queer performance and action. While *overidentification* exposes the oppressive mechanisms that encode dominant ideology by focusing on the oppressors in power, *disidentification* exposes the detrimental effects of these encoded messages on oppressed subjects. Muñoz’s *disidentification* goes a few steps further by reconstructing exclusionary and universalizing ideologies to include and empower minority identities. A good example of this phenomenon is drag pageantry which creates a space and community for queers who have been excluded from cis-exclusive beauty pageants along with safe public expression in general. Though Muñoz uses this term to discuss queer BIPOC experiences, it seems that my own approach to creative production and most of the artists I’ve discussed lend themselves more to working within the framework of *disidentification* rather than *overidentification*.

## **Art of the Unresolved**

There is always so much more that I want to say in my writing, work, and conversations and resolution has never been my strong suit. As a neurodivergent artist, concision and brevity don’t come naturally for me as I am often drifting in a vat of endless thought, speculation, and brain fog in the unruly spaces of my brain. I don’t endeavor to create art that is easily digestible with a moral that one should follow or a positive message. I would feel accomplished if my work could disrupt digestion in

its tracts, like a punch in the gut, a bodily sensation that follows you for hours or days. In the spirit of Laibach, Juliana Huxtable, and Divine, I embrace the art of the unresolved—I seek to disrupt and confuse, to revel in discomfort and obliterate categorical fixation. By creating sculptures that embody the tensions between physical and psychological discomfort that exist in the same three dimensional space we inhabit, I hope to amplify the insidious contributions of social conditioning and bodily oppression to physical and mental health. In this space of unresolution is the hope for reflection, action, and transformation; an insistence on breaking through the imposed barriers that bar us from seeing reality for what it is and a future where empathy can reconstruct our lives and interactions.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jack Halberstam, “The Queer Art of Failure,” in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2011), pp. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Janine Antoni, “Janine Antoni,” Janine Antoni, accessed June 9, 2022, <http://www.janineantoni.net/#/touch/>.

<sup>4</sup> Janine Antoni, “Janine Antoni,” Janine Antoni, accessed June 9, 2022, <http://www.janineantoni.net/#/lick-and-lather/>.

<sup>5</sup> Janine Antoni, “Janine Antoni,” Janine Antoni, accessed June 9, 2022, <http://www.janineantoni.net/#/eureka/>.

<sup>6</sup> Janine Antoni, “Janine Antoni,” Janine Antoni, accessed June 9, 2022, <http://www.janineantoni.net/#/2038/>.

<sup>7</sup> “About Dairy Cows,” Compassion in World Farming (Compassion in World Farming, Inc.), accessed June 9, 2022, <https://www.ciwf.com/farmed-animals/cows/dairy-cows/#:~:text=Like%20humans%2C%20cows%20only%20produce,three%20months%20of%20giving%20birth.>

<sup>8</sup> Whitney Clafin, “Juliana Huxtable's Interfertility Industrial Complex: Snatch the Calf Back and the Pursuit of Desire,” *Juliana Huxtable's Interfertility Industrial Complex: Snatch the Calf Back and the Pursuit of Desire* | Topical Cream (Topical Cream, September 19, 2019), <https://www.topicalcream.org/features/juliana-huxtables-interfertility-industrial-comp.>

<sup>9</sup> Mel Y. Chen, “Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect,” in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 29-30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Doja Cat, “Doja Cat - ‘Mooo!’ (Official Video),” YouTube (YouTube, August 10, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXnJqYwebF8>.

<sup>13</sup> Zdenka Badovinac et al., “Why Are Laibach and NSK Not Fascists,” in *NSK from Kapital to Capital Neue Slowenische Kunst - an Event of the Final Decade of Yugoslavia ; Exhibition NSK from Kapital to Capital Neue Slowenische Kunst ... Moderna Galerija Ljubljana, 11 May-16 August 2015 ; Van Abbemuseum,*

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*Eindhoven, März - August 2015 ; Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moskau, 2016* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), pp. 202.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 203.

<sup>14</sup> Muñoz José Esteban, “Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics,” in *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), pp. 11-12.

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