

## Ten Things Fat Girls Don't Want You To Know!

A video list and essay on selfhood, embodiment and affect.

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MALS 70000: Inventing the Self  
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**1**

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

...

**20**

*Who goes there? hankering, gross, mystical, nude;  
How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat?*

*What is a man anyhow? what am I? what are you?*

Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

Who am I? A mind? A body? How does my body determine my sense of self? In 2015, in New York City, the specter of an audience for these questions is ever-present. We spend so much time in front of screens looking at ourselves and documenting ourselves, creating an interaction with an audience we cannot see and who cannot see us. Instead of asking, "Who am I?" the question has become, "Who am I *when I am alone*?" As I began searching for my self and creating a visual record of my self in the first week of this semester, I realized that video is the perfect medium for an exploration of contemporary selfhood and presence. Video is the perfect medium in which to ask: What is the effect of others on my sense of self? What affects shape my sense of self? What is my true self, and where can I find it?

These questions seem insurmountable. To invent the self is to create an identity, yet there are no singular identities. Which identity do I identify with the most? Perhaps woman, perhaps New Yorker, perhaps partner, perhaps a fat girl. My attempt to answer these questions led to a ten-item video list that explores and documents my body, sexuality, space and belonging, nature and the mind. In my video list, I locate my selfhood in my body and my relationship with others. My video contains graphic imagery, including nudity and blood. I am keenly aware of how

‘private’<sup>1</sup> this material is – indeed, this work may be said to overshare – but my display of such intimacy is a performative assertion of my power and right to take up space. The video is intended to feel cohesive but not decisively answer any questions. Rather, the video attempts to display my understanding of the fractured selfhood I embody, and invites the viewer to grapple with their own identity narrative. I do not discuss each item on the video list in this essay, but I have chosen a few to explicate in order to go deeper into the theories and contexts from which my video list emerged.

My video list is a pastiche of Matias Viegner’s *2500 Random Things About Me Too*, a book-length compilation of 100 lists of 25 ‘random’ things about Viegner. Initially I was repulsed by Viegner’s self-obsession, but then I saw it in myself, so I thought it would be good to use his structure to explore the contradiction of those feelings. Working off his format of seemingly unrelated, non-linear, non-narrative items is a reflection of my own compartmentalization, and a representation of the multifarious factors that comprise my self.

Much of the video involves my naked fat body. Fat women are often told to calm down, be less bossy, be quiet, not be too emotional, and take up less space.<sup>2</sup> Most popular images of women and womanhood do not represent my body or my internal workings. I became excited to create something that shows who I am and that takes up space, which is something women and fat people are told not to do. Piggybacking off the idea that displays of stretch marks, cellulite, pubic hair, blood, tears and sexuality fall into the category of “too much information,” I saturate the viewer with images of me and my lived experience in an attempt to normalize my body and emotions – my core self.

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<sup>1</sup> My intentional use of single quotation marks, or “scare quotes,” here and in other points throughout this essay signifies to the reader that the term singled out is loaded or contestable.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this topic, see Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader* (2009), and Rowe, *The Unruly Woman* (1995).

I begin the video list with an inversion of my body: the inside comes out. Titled “A Physical Womanifestation of Pain,” item #1 challenges the idea that menstrual blood falls into the TMI category and simultaneously announces that bodies are never “too much.” I wonder why I feel obligated to produce a physical representation of my pain. What do people think when I say I cannot participate in something because of menstrual cramps, and why do I care? This urge to prove is related to how society often does not believe women.

Performativity – an action defined and made real by the verbalization of that action – is complicated with the addition of the notion that bodies define selves. Elizabeth Grosz, professor of women’s studies at Duke and expert on French philosophy, reports that there is a somewhat pre-determinist effect of bodies on the trajectory of and affect experienced in life: “It is through the body that the subject can express his or her interiority,” she claims (Grosz 9). This would seem to both deny and affirm the reality of the transgender experience of being in a body that does not align with one’s gender. The lived and performed gender conflicts with the sex assigned based on the sex organs seen at birth. How alienating is it to gender non-conforming people that I have used the portmanteau “womanifestation” and thus linked menses with “woman”?

The concept of performativity is a thread running throughout the video list, both as an idea in the mind of the viewer and as a repetition of the footage that accompanies my voice-off introduction of performativity in item #2, which, being seen, invites the viewer to recall the idea of performativity throughout the video.<sup>3</sup> Renowned feminist philosopher Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* propelled me through the editing of my video and provided a theoretical foundation upon which to stake a claim. I explain performativity in #2, speaking over images of my sister mimicking my dog’s movements and my own naked body rolling around in wet grass:

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<sup>3</sup> This self-referencing is in itself performative.

Performativity, as defined by Judith Butler: A reiterative practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names. . . . Another way to describe performativity is that it is language or gestures that make something happen. For example, saying “I am beautiful” is a performative statement. Saying “I love you” can be a performative statement. Or saying, “I want a divorce.”

This whittled-down paraphrase of Butler relies on a theoretical foundation that must be further explained. The following key ideas are the foundation of performativity as related to gender and sexuality. First, the existence of regulatory norms of sex; second, that sex is materialized through highly regulated and regulatory practices; third, that those norms act in a performative way to “constitute the materiality of bodies,” i.e. affect how bodies exist and confer power; fourth, that those norms “materialize the body’s sex,” i.e. they “materialize sexual difference,” i.e. they make sexual difference come into being; all this “in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” (Butler 2-4). It must be noted that “the heterosexual imperative” which Butler emphasizes is basically the heteronormative patriarchal family unit of late capitalism, or the ubiquitous and ubiquitously lauded picture-perfect nuclear-family domesticity.<sup>4</sup> I resist that hegemonic unit with my explicit valorization of my own difference.

“The ‘I’ comes into formation in contrast to what is expelled,” argues Krista Miranda, a doctoral student in NYU’s prestigious performance studies program (Miranda 2011). Thus, the formation of a subject is contingent upon its identification with the normative, which can only take shape alongside the concurrent development of the abject, with which it is counter-identified. In sum, the act of doing and being constitutes my self and is not done in a vacuum, but rather is shaped by the things that are *not* my self. Yes, self exists in opposition to the abject, to

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<sup>4</sup> “The consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” is the foundation upon which Jasbir K. Puar builds pinkwashing and homonationalism theories. The regulated and regulatory acts of sex serve to alienate non-normative sex(es) as anti-national and at the same time pitied. Thus the tortured prisoners of Abu Ghraib received sympathy for being forced to engage in homosexual activity while the bombed out Iraqi population, which was not homosexually humiliated, remained un-sympathizable. For more, see Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007).

that which I am not, yet part of the revolting allure of the abject is that there is some part of it that *is* of me. My self-love would not be radical were it not for the stigmatization of fat queer bodies that my love pushes against.

Tacitly inherent in the conception of performativity is the importance of public and private. What the other sees or decrees affects who I believe myself to be. Thus performative statements are powerful because simply by saying what needs to be true, it becomes true. Saying “I am beautiful” or “I am worthy of love” makes those things true. Furthermore, that I display my body and my blood in such a setting that basically requires others to view them is a performative act in itself. I use my body and the tools at my disposal to command attention and assert my right to take up space. This is a definitive act of power.

The reiteration of “bodies, minds, selves, identities,” as I say in item #4 Best Wood, is necessary because “bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled” (Butler 3). The fact of living, with attendant affect, shatters the neatness of those impelled norms. Bodies resist language and legibility. Rather than trying to fit bodies into norms, we would benefit from examining the body beside the norm. “*Beside* permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object,” posits the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, an esteemed feminist and queer theorist of the 1990s and 2000s (Sedgwick 8; emphasis in original). Sedgwick argues here that the category of “beside” allows one to take a broad, nonjudgmental stance on rigidly dualistic ideas, including, I believe, the sexualized/gendered norm to which the body should adhere. In other words, to re-perform “bodies, minds, selves, identities” while thinking of the norms that shape them as existing beside the bodies, rather than as a vise around them, may lessen bodily shame and dysphoria.

We hold experiences and realities in our bodies. For example, the out-of-body-experience takes place in the mind – but the mind cannot be out of the body. There are somatic manifestations of mind, though, including physical manifestations of emotional pain, as well as anxiety, depression, grief, and insomnia. One can take this line of reasoning further and invoke hoarding, overeating, alcoholism, sex addiction, self-harm. We call these mental illnesses, but they have very bodily consequences.

Examining performativity and embodiment side by side begs the question, Where is the self located: in the *body*, or in the *actions* that constitute being? Bodies are as vital as minds to our identity and selfhood, because bodies and minds are not distinct from one another. Despite this lack of physical distinction, Grosz reports that historically, mind has been defined as that which is not body. She adds that Cartesian dualism was set up to have the body equal Woman, so women could be justifiably excluded from the (superior) realm of the mind. She goes on to trace the history of dualism through resulting mind/body dichotomies: reason/passion, sense/sensibility, male/female. To this list I add thinking/feeling.

The sense of touch is in itself a representation of dualism and a challenge to dualism. To touch is to feel: it is active and passive at once. "...[T]he sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity; to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, ...and always also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself, if only in the making of the textured object," Sedgwick reasons (Sedgwick 14). Touching implies recognition of the existence, reality and labor of another: what is being touched had to have come into being. Touching is the most interdependent action.

Discussing the distinction between texture (an item's sensed properties that can be deduced by looking) and *texture* (the contextual and narrative qualities of an item), Sedgwick

creates an understanding of texture that transcends its haptic and visual qualities in the aural comprehension of crispy chicken skin and brushy corduroy (Sedgwick 15). I posit that texture can reflect nature, so to Sedgwick's examples I add the sensation of stepping on a crunchy leaf in autumn: The texture of the leaf is not felt through the shoe, but it is experienced aurally. In stroking the wood in #4 Best Wood, I appreciate the texture of the tree, its bark, its existence in a public park, the effects of 'nature' on nature, and the opportunity I have to interact with it. At the same time, I gesture towards another kind of touching and feeling: The eroticism in my stroking of the tree is palpable and the sexual exuberance of John Lennon's "Oh Yoko!" adds to the viewer's textual experience. Best Wood unseats viewers in their understanding of sexuality and is transgressive in a way that lesbian sexuality no longer is.

"The fact of having different truths in similar situations can really fracture relationships. I think it's related to the fact that we can never see or experience the whole of any situation," I claim in item #6 Fracture. This idea springs from the experience of intersubjectivity. Just as my self is influenced by and reflected in things outside of me, others see parts of themselves in me. With limited access to others' subjectivity, we base our understanding of who someone is on the small bits of them we can see. These bits of their being – or, non-being – are almost all we can know of another person, and from those small bits, we create the whole of who they are. We fill in the whole with what we know of the parts.

Similarly, we create an assemblage of our own multiple selves from our experiences and memories. I chose to set item #7 Woolf, Grief, Being and Non-Being to an explicitly emotive song in order to underscore the universality of grief. The Indigo Girls's "Virginia Woolf" addresses suicide, temporality, isolation, belonging, and of course Woolf, and has a foreboding, dramatic melody. Reading Woolf's *Moments of Being* while making the video list reminded me

of all the experiences that have become moments of non-being in my life – “A great part of every day is not lived consciously,” Woolf declares (Woolf 70) – because at the time I was not aware of the preciousness of those moments.

I felt empowered to use this song because it clearly went with the sense of loss I have about the end-of-life suicide of a woman whom I have recently deemed “my second mother.” I have no objective distance from this situation; her illness began two-and-a-half years ago and her death was in late April. The easily accessible affect in “Virginia Woolf” helps me understand my relationship with this woman and also assure me that I will keep going without her, that “it’s alright; someone gets your soul,” that “each life has its place.” In selecting this music for #7, I found validation in Ann Liv Young’s successful use of pop songs as a “cheap, emotional undercurrent” to both spark and mimic real-life affect (Kourlas).

Avant-garde provocateur Young creates masterful, deceptively complex dance-theatre that betrays the fragility and fantasy of boundaries between self and other. In her review of Young’s “The Bagwell in Me,” Miranda asserts (Miranda 239),

Literal and figurative “in-your-face” work like Young’s, which perpetrates “a coming face to face with [what is abjected,] an unnamable otherness,”<sup>13</sup> is a threat to our own subjectivities as audience members, for such conceptualizations of the autonomous self are predicated on polite and fabricated categorizations of performer/spectator, life/art, art/pornography, etc.

In the same vein as Young, I destabilize the boundaries between those categories, and in doing so, I threaten the viewer with dissolution of categorical distinctions. My Self, abject and Other to the viewer’s neat and contained self, inches closer to the viewer, simultaneously reifying the viewer’s sense of selfhood as separate from me and also jeopardizing that separateness.

Grosz draws on Descartes in saying the body is part of and governed by nature, whereas the mind is governed by the individual. (This line of reasoning quickly becomes a Möbius strip of its own: what is the individual if not the self – and is the self not the mind, not the body?) The

body is subject to ‘outside’ forces, laws of nature, and is out of one’s control. The mind, on the other hand, is not of nature at all, I comment in item #8 Grosz, Volatile Bodies. Nothing external to the mind can control it. Yet, life – emotion, affect, embodiment, abjection – can be overwhelming to the mind, stifling and unbearable to the self. In item #9 ANXIETY depression, still photographs of me in emotional torment float across the screen. The moving images reference how we describe ourselves as “moved” if we are emotionally affected by something. Much of my video list shows how I feel vis-à-vis my encounters with the world. My self – my body, my mind – is in concert with the world around me, and is not separate from it.

Whitman manages to capture the ineffable way bodies – if not selves – find Peace (item #10), connection, saturation.

**27**

*To be in any form, what is that?*

*(Round and round we go, all of us, and ever come back thither,)*

*If nothing lay more develop’d the quahaug in its callous shell were enough.*

*Mine is no callous shell,*

*I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,*

*They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.*

*I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy,*

*To touch my person to some one else’s is about as much as I can stand.*

## Works Cited

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## Addendum

Video list item titles and music.

- #1 A Physical Womanifestation of Pain. "Blood of the Lamb," Billy Bragg & Wilco.
- #2 Performativity.
- #3 Belly Laugh.
- #4 Best Wood. "Oh Yoko," John Lennon.
- #5 Enraged.
- #6 Fracture. "Somebody to Love," Queen.
- #7 Woolf, Grief, Being and Non-Being. "Virginia Woolf," Indigo Girls.
- #8 Grosz, Volatile Bodies.
- #9 ANXIETY depression. "Morning, Morning," Richie Havens.
- #10 Peace. "In the Privacy of Our Love," Hot Chip.