Popular Performance

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Performing the Burlesque Body: The Explicit Female Body as Palimpsest

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Setting the *mise-en-scène* at a prototypical American burlesque show

It is past 10.00 pm in the darkened room. Friends cluster around cabaret tables chatting and drinking, eagerly anticipating the start of the show. A few patrons stand to the side of the tables near the velvet-curtained windows that span two floors; others sit in the back of the intimate room in the 'playpen', a slightly raised platform area with bar-stool height seating. On the second floor, an ornate wrought iron fence surrounds the balcony allowing spectators to see the action from above. On the weekend, the venue will fill to standing-room-only capacity as some spectators arrive hours before the advertised start time of the show to ensure a good seat. Tonight, a comfortable fifty or so patrons litter the room for the Wiggle Room, one of several weekly burlesque shows at The Slipper Room, a burlesque and variety arts venue on the Lower East Side of New York City. The Slipper Room has a decadent, Victorian feel, with flowered wallpaper, dark wood trim, and curtains and paint in burgundy and gold. At the apex of the proscenium stage, a red spotlight illuminates a woman's face as surreal video montages are projected on the red velvet curtains. The curtains, now shut tight, will open and close between each act, giving a theatrical flair to the evening's performance.

A drum roll sound cue dramatizes the commencement of the show. The audience, intoxicated from the alcohol and the delayed start time, hoot and holler in response. The curtains part slightly as Sir Richard Castle, the host of the show, slips through the opening and steps onto the small go go platform – a nod to the Minsky Brother's introduction of the runway to American burlesque audiences in the 1920s – that extends from the front of the stage. Castle is clad in a tuxedo, his jet black hair slicked back with a sharp part and a painted-on white stripe. Castle is played by talented actor, writer and sketch comic Bradford Scobie whose many other characters include 'Dr. Donut', a mutant evil superhero who espouses the virtues of preservatives while donning a very large, removable éclair in front of his genitals, and 'Moisty the Snowman', a whiney-voiced, sexually ambivalent snowman fabricated from the dirt- and garbage-filled snow of New York City streets. Sir Richard Castle is a slightly delusional, dandy-esque British bloke played, as with all of Bradford Scobie's characters, with cartoon-like exaggeration.

'Welcome to the Wiggle Room. I am Sir Richard Castle', he announces in a fake British accent, bowing deep at the waist. He flashes a large painted on gap between his front teeth to the audience in an exaggerated greeting. He then stands upright, his arms outstretched inviting applause. The crowd obliges in the first of many opportunities throughout the night to show their enthusiasm – and participate in the performance – through applause and verbal response. Noticing the curtains are still slightly parted behind him, Castle breaks character and screams backstage: 'Close it, close it, close it!' The stage curtains, operated by one of the less than a handful of performers in the show, close behind him.

'Fuck me. What a shit show', he jokes. 'Welcome to the Slipper Room', he booms, rolling his tongue and prolonging the 'sl' of Slipper. 'A fine-oiled show business machine. Showing you we can be wildly entertaining without the dull drudgery of rehearsal.' Opening a show by acknowledging 'mistakes' is a refreshing way to draw the audience in as part of the fun at a burlesque show is expecting the unexpected.

Through sarcasm and humour, the host highlights burlesque's unique approach to performance which celebrates an 'anything goes' spirit. Neo-burlesque utilizes some of the conventions of traditional theatre, including the use of a proscenium stage, lights and music to enhance the performance, choreographed movement and other traditional theatrical conventions. Yet counter to a traditional performance model (prevalent in much theatre, dance and music) where rehearsals lead, hopefully, to a seamless performance, burlesque prefers to capitalize on the surprise of live performance as one of its defining characteristics. Burlesque subverts the canon of the traditional proscenium stage through its whimsical and exaggerated presentation and style. The traditions of theatre, so revered in other contexts, become the butt of a joke in burlesque, one which pokes fun at institutions as a whole. This becomes evident in Castle's hosting as he draws the audience into the show while subverting the audience's expectations of a theatrical performance.

Burlesque celebrates and is rooted in the present, and it is this 'in the moment' liveness that makes burlesque exciting for the audience and performers alike. The actor playing Castle speaks to the audience directly, and the audience is invited – and encouraged – to respond. At this moment, a strict division between spectator and performer dissolves, as does the proverbial fourth wall of traditional theatre. In fact, interaction between the audience and the performer is highly celebrated in burlesque through call and response, audience participation and direct address. This direct address to the audience occurs often in response to what may be deemed 'mistakes' – stuck costume pieces, misremembered choreography, props that go awry. Rather than 'covering up' those unplanned moments, the (seasoned) burlesque performer acknowledges and exaggerates those mishaps for comedic effect through physical or verbal commentary. The bodily and facial physical responses represent what Dodds (2011: 124) characterizes as performers' 'choreography of facial commentary': 'they wink suggestively, flick their eyes to heaven, pull coy faces, fabricate mock shock, and offer smiles of pleasure and collusion as a self-reflexive performance

strategy.' The choreography of facial commentary allows for performer and spectator to acknowledge what's happening in the live, lived experience of popular performance. Perfection, as in hitting all one's 'marks' in a highly choreographed dance or playing all the notes in a classical composition, may come second to another set of performance criteria in burlesque: remaining 'in the moment', staying connected to the audience, and 'going for it'. By acknowledging mistakes and mishaps, burlesque celebrates the (often) nonsensical whimsy of popular performance, so clear to the audience yet which in traditional theatrical and performance mediums may go unacknowledged.

This essay's notion of burlesque as popular performance is indebted to Dodds's (2011: 47, 64) defining and contextualizing of popular dance as 'an approach' rather than a fixed site. The 'popular' has been categorically dismissed as 'mere entertainment' that caters to the 'lowest common denominator' (4), a dismissal that misses its productive qualities. As the popular is rarely subsidized, it's often produced at low cost by the same entities who create the work (63). Creators of popular dance are often both artists and producers, a duality evident in much neo-burlesque, which contributes to the creation of close-knit communities and creative autonomy. As Dodds (2011: 119) points out, 'the neo-burlesque scene propagates a popular dancing body valued for its creative autonomy, corporeal diversity, and strategies for audience access and inclusion'. Reading burlesque as an approach that 'takes place under a range of conditions' (5) helps illuminate some of the productive qualities of burlesque as a popular performance.

In this essay, the 'range of conditions' of popular performance oscillates around four major categories. First, popular performance is rooted firmly in the present and its in the moment liveness which, in burlesque, is marked by the celebration of the unexpected. Second, the strict division between spectator and performer has been eradicated and replaced with active participation from the audience on numerous levels; going beyond simple audience applause or response, the spectator-performer interaction is central to understanding burlesque as what I term 'a participatory sport'. Third, novelty is celebrated, and

that which is read as nonsensical or frivolous in other contexts is highly regarded as emblematic of the creativity and artistic commentary celebrated in much neo-burlesque performance. Fourth, the performer and the character are interlaced in such a way that the characters created and performed – often with separate identities, histories and performance modes than the actors – become synonymous with the performer. This last characteristic, in particular, opens up the potential for burlesque performers to transgress social norms, an argument that will be examined in more detail in a close reading of one particular neo-burlesque act performed by MsTickle. The opening scene of this article, then, sets the stage for unpacking burlesque as popular performance through readings grounded in performance practices and theories around those practices to better understand the way the explicit female body on the neo-burlesque stage is written and in turn writes counter-narratives of gender representation and desire. I offer the idea of the explicit female body as palimpsest, one that's able to rewrite these narratives, yet which is always marked by the textual renderings of patriarchal culture.

Burlesque undone: Histories, contexts, theories

This article's opening with a description of the mise-en-scène at one particular venue is being replayed at venues across the country and, increasingly, around the world as the neo-burlesque movement has gained in popularity. The new or neo-burlesque movement emerged in the mid-1990s as an underground, anti-status-quo performance art movement that references the historical antecedent of the 'bump n' grind era' of burlesque (1940s–1960s) (Shteir 2005) while recontextualizing it with modern themes (Baldwin 2004). New burlesque is a live performance art medium comprised of short, vignette-style narrative acts that stage and play with notions of sexuality, gender and social expectations through the employment of multifarious strategies that may include self-authorship, humour, over-the-top presentation of self, transformation, storytelling, cultural parody and camp to poke fun

at and potentially destabilize cultural norms. Nally (2009: 635) aligns burlesque performance 'with camp, with a heavy criticism of hetero-normative genders, and ultimately with the queering of identities'. Central to this 'camping' includes an over-theatrical presentation of femininity which allows the burlesque performer to 'disrupt norms of femininity by parodying them in her excess' (Roach 2008: 87).

According to Susan Sontag (2002: 63) in her often-cited 'Notes on Camp', one of the primary vehicles for the delivery of camp sensibility is comedy: 'Camp proposes a comic vision of the world.' While an extended discussion of burlesque's indebtedness to campy humour is outside the scope of this article, I want to briefly tease out burlesque's use of camp humour to disrupt notions of femininity and gender. New York based boylesque performer Tigger (2015) identifies humour as one of the three defining characteristics of burlesque in his 'burlesque equation': 'burlesque = sex + humor + self-expression'. Alluding to the difficulties in definitively codifying a fluid and constantly charging art form, Tigger (2015) jokes 'If it has those three elements – sex + humor + self-expression – it's probably burlesque.' The simultaneous application of humour and tease to a wide range of cultural references contributes to burlesque's unique ability to make social commentary. As Dodds (2013: 80) puts it, 'Humor acts as a means to parody, satirize, or ridicule traditions of female representation, while tease enables a self-reflexive mode of performance.'

Through this knowing wit, what some scholars (Allen 1991; Buszek 2006; Nally 2009; Sally 2009) have identified as performers 'aware of their own awarishness', burlesque has an uncanny power to upend – and even dismantle – striptease from its historical and performative connotations. In neo-burlesque, the striptease has become a performance and political strategy of social transgression; put another way, burlesque uses the tease to subvert (some of) the social meanings of the strip. The primary performance mode of neo-burlesque, the striptease, then, 'offers performers a multitude of creative possibilities through which to present' their original ideas (Dodds 2011: 113). This multitude of creative possibilities is clearly represented in the diversity of topics,

narratives and performance styles at a typical burlesque show and, in turn, contributes to burlesque performers' strong sense of agency. On the surface, this may seem like an unnerving paradox that striptease, traditionally understood as a symbol of women's oppression, can be used to transgress social expectations and even oppression.

Recently, scholars (Buszek 2006; Liepe-Levinson 2001; Nally 2009; Roach 2007; Ross 2009; Sally 2009; Willson 2008) have begun to unpack this seeming contradiction that burlesque striptease can be liberating. In her study of commercial striptease culture inspired by her friend's decision to drop out of graduate school to become a stripper, Roach (2007) embarks on a journey to better understand her subject – from the dancers' motivation to the operations of strip clubs – as well as the larger trend towards 'raunch culture' (Levy 2006) and 'striptease culture' (McNair 2001). The burlesque version of sexuality on stage seems to poke fun at rather than simply reinscribe raunch culture. Though parody – the *burla* of burlesque – and striptease as performance strategies, burlesque puts forth a positive portrayal of women's sexuality on stage. As Roach observes, 'Sex-positive feminism, as exemplified in the neo-burlesque movement, is a parody of patriarchal norms' (Roach 2008: 112). In a Brechtian presentational (not representational) way, burlesque performers present hyper-stylized and hyper-sexualized images of women as a form of social commentary.

To understand how striptease can be used as a form of social commentary that parodies patriarchal culture invites us to shift our gaze to live performance practices. As Robert Allen (1991) suggests in his quintessential study of nineteenth-century burlesque, *Horrible Prettiness*, studying burlesque as popular culture requires a case history rather than an exhaustive historical approach. As culture is difficult to quantify and define, the case history 'attempts to make a problem intelligible without requiring that historical comprehensiveness or conclusive proof' (Allen 1991: 41). The knowledge produced from such an approach is always tentative and open for revision (ibid.). As a living, popular art form, studies of burlesque must be open to this type of continual revision as the art itself

constantly morphs and changes, making even the seemingly simple tasks of defining and describing it difficult. The remainder of this article, then, will focus on a case study, namely a close reading and analysis of MsTickle's Super Star/Blowup Doll Act, to flesh out the meanings of this act as a cultural artifact on its own, in the context of neo-burlesque, and, even more broadly, as it fits into a larger narrative of the display of female bodies in popular performance. Here I argue that the explicit female body serves as a palimpsest whereby traces of historic renderings of the body remain, but the burlesque performer is able to 'rewrite' her own image on top of those remnants, a reinscription that has the potential to scream volumes in its transgression of social norms.

Reading to read: Layers as/of 'uncovering' in MsTickle's performance

MsTickle is a New York-based performer and designer who began performing in the 1990s in New York City's underground nightclub scene as a solo performer, go go dancer and a member of the 'Bombshell Girls,' a troupe she formed with former burlesque performer and producer Lady Ace. Through the years, MsTickle has gained a reputation as one of the most respected and innovative neo-burlesque performers, known for her stunning costuming and props (which she designs and fabricates herself) and cutting-edge, conceptual acts. The description of her performance that serves as the basis of my unpacking of burlesque popular performance is based on a video recording of a performance at the 2011 Burlesque Hall of Fame (BHOF) competition for the title of 'Reigning Queen of Burlesque', though I witnessed this act dozens of times live in large and small venues alike.

MsTickle enters the stage wearing an extravagant red velvet cape, her left arm extending in front of her, fingers reaching for the light. As she walks slowly across the stage, a long red fabric unfolds behind her, her own runway carpet attached to her body, literally (and figuratively) creating the space for her own celebrity. A strobe light flickers on and off, mimicking light bulb flashes of the paparazzi. A woeful moan can be heard over the electric, bass-heavy music. Right before the lyrics begin, MsTickle removes her red cloak and red carpet runway and presents herself as an iconic Hollywood starlet – replete with a blond Marilyn Monroe-esque wig and a plastered smile – as she struts around the stage waving and blowing kisses to her hypothetical fans. She wears a gold, sequined 'wiggle' gown – a form-fitting design with fishtail curved bottom that exaggerates a woman's curves – opera-length red satin gloves and a red bolero jacket. The back of the dress features a large bow covered with rhinestones that glitter in the stage lights.

MsTickle's movement gains meaning when juxtaposed against the song's longing lyrics. MsTickle removes one glove slowly and then her bejewelled necklace as the lyrics lament mortality and what it takes to achieve celebrity: 'If I could live forever/I wouldn't ask what price: fame' (Kinzie 2004). MsTickle struts for a few beats and then removes her other glove to the chorus: 'I want to be a superstar/I want to have a house on Sunset/you'll only see me afar.' She wraps the gloves around her wrists and lifts her arms in pseudo-bondage, wiggling her body in mock seduction as she faces the audience, front and centre. Her face is expressionless, fixed on a one-note smile that hints at the superficiality of celebrity culture.

At an instrumental break in the song, MsTickle leans forward and lets the red bolero jacket fall off of her body. While stooped over at the waist, she unzips her gold gown, steps out of it, removes her blond wig and peels off the mask featuring the fixed-smile painted face. MsTickle stands upright again, pausing in mid-pose, her arms bent at her sides, hands reaching towards the audience. Here the audience sees that underneath the Hollywood starlet mask is another mask and another iconic figure: that of a blow-up doll. Wearing a full body plastic blow-up doll suit with exaggerated lips sculpted into a permanent phallus-receptive 'O', MsTickle's movement changes from the beautiful, fluid gestures of the Hollywood starlet greeting her fans to the mechanical, stilted and explicit gestures of the blow-up doll come to life. The lyrics contribute

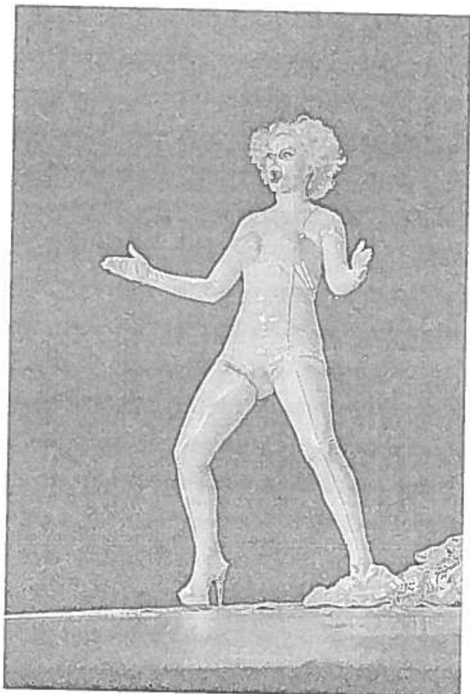

Figure 7.1 MsTickle performing at the Burlesque Hall of Fame, Las Vegas, NV in 2011 (photo © Ed Barnas)

to her message: 'I'm public property sacrifice me/let there be no mystery you have made me/I am the main attraction kept in a gilded cage' (Kinzie 2004). MsTickle teeters around the stage with unstable physicality, pausing numerous times to execute several obscene gestures, including fellatio, fisting and exaggerated, mechanical masturbation.

Next MsTickle literally peels herself out of the blow-up-doll suit and mask to reveal thigh-high boots, a tiny thong and pasties fabricated from baby bottle nipples giving her real breasts a cartoonish feature. She celebrates her liberation from the confining artifice by rubbing her hands seductively on her skin, flipping her (natural) hair and luxuriating in her own body. She digs into her tiny g-string, removes a lipstick which she uses to touch up her makeup before turning it onto her own body to writes on her exposed midriff: 'For Sale'. She waves

to the audience and blows kisses, returning to the physicality of the Hollywood starlet image from which she began the act.

MsTickle's performance is very much a commentary on mainstream culture's obsession with celebrity culture as well as a startling reminder of the continued commodification of women's bodies in our society. MsTickle (2013) has identified the 'layers' in this act as a process of 'uncovering'. Underneath the masks and beneath the layers are more layers – shocking, unexpected, explicit – suggesting that a core essence might be unattainable. MsTickle (2013) says she added the runway effect in her act for the Burlesque Hall of Fame competition partially to 'take up more space' but also to help 'set up the narrative', a narrative that, according to her, plays with the 'icon of glamour and vanity, all the stuff we are taught to admire and aspire to'. MsTickle (2013) specifically used the 'blow-up doll as sex object' to suggest that 'underneath all that glamour begs the question: how much are we selling ourselves for?' Underneath the female body as sex object is another layer 'that is a real body but it's still stripper-esque' (MsTickle 2013), suggesting that women are unable to escape from the signifying practices of a sexualizing patriarchal culture. MsTickle consciously choose this theme of sexual display as a commentary on objectification, and ultimately identity, by asking: 'When we strip down the layers, what's underneath?' (MsTickle 2013). She answers this question, to some degree, in the final moments of the act by writing her message, literally, on her bare body: For Sale. In the context of the narrative of this act, this simple message has, like the layers removed, layers itself.

This description of MsTickle's act comes from a performance at the Burlesque Hall of Fame (BHOF) competition, a large-scale, 'high-stakes' show that occurs once a year in Las Vegas, Nevada. Although this type of radical performance art is, for many, what's compelling about and representative of neo-burlesque acts, it is unlikely that MsTickle's act would normally be accepted to compete in the 'Reigning Queen of Burlesque' category at BHOF. At BHOF, if an act diverges from classic burlesque, it tends to be in the realm of variety acts, which celebrate skill-set diversity more so than body, race, age and

performance-style diversity. MsTickle was guaranteed a highly coveted performance spot in 2011 because the prior year she had won the 'Best Newbie' category at the competition. Upon winning, MsTickle (2013) says she 'knew instantly' she wanted to do her blow-up doll act the next year: 'Especially coming from New York City where [burlesque] used to be commentary, political, cutting edge … I wanted to represent my work, and represent people doing interesting, conceptual stuff.' MsTickle says she considered it her 'duty' to represent the performance art side of burlesque, the type of burlesque that bubbles up in venues like the Slipper Room described at the beginning of this article, where the 'anything goes', in-the-moment liveness encourages performer experimentation and audience participation alike.

Dodds (2011) argues that artists in 'smaller'-scale venues 'prove far more radical' while more 'commercially' successful burlesque performers put forth a more 'conservative image'. I agree with Dodds that radical burlesque often is located in small-scale venues that provide the potential to circumvent traditional narratives of desire and sexuality. (A quick survey of fringe and underground art throughout the decades clearly suggests that art tends to lose its edge when it becomes commodified and packaged for a mainstream audience.) As Dodds sums it up: 'the less the performance disturbs, the wider the audience it attracts' (2011: 113). MsTickle's act on the BHOF stage simultaneously proves and complicates Dodds' argument. Taken out of the context of a small-scale venue and placed on the stage of the BHOF competition, MsTickle's act gains new meaning as a direct commentary on the beauty ideal embedded within the pageant structure of the competition. Dodds understandably aligns radical performance with small-scale venues, and that's likely where MsTickle's act was born. But maintaining this strict division between commercial and small-scale burlesque seems to limit rather than expand burlesque's radical potential and opportunities for gender expression. By removing the possibility of political efficacy in commercial burlesque, or by containing radical burlesque to small-stage cabaret venues, we lose some of burlesque's radical potential. We lose the playful juxtaposition of serious issues with trivial theatrics.

We lose the pleasure in the delightful absurdity of competing for the 'Reigning Queen of Burlesque' as a giant blow-up doll. And we lose burlesque's celebration of frivolity as central to its creative spirit.

MsTickle's act, then, becomes both a protest against and a celebration of the explicit female body, one that gains new meaning in the more 'commercial' context of the BHOF stage. MsTickle's performance specifically and neo-burlesque more broadly represents the new kind of gender expression that Jack Halberstam celebrates as 'Gaga feminism'. Gaga feminism is a 'symbol of a new kind of feminism' embodied in (but not reducible to) the pop figure Lady Gaga that has opened up a space for reinvented representations of gender. Halberstam (2013: xii) suggests that Lady Gaga is a 'loud voice for different arrangements of gender, sexuality, visibility, and desire', arrangements which similarly play themselves out on the neo-burlesque stage in challenging and provocative ways As Halberstam puts it:

> these feminists are 'becoming women' in the sense of coming to consciousness, they are unbecoming women in every sense – they undo the category rather than rounding it out, they dress it up and down, take it apart like a car engine and then rebuild it so that it is louder and faster (2013: xiii).

This metaphor of 'undoing' the category of 'women', 'dressing it up,' and 'rebuilding' it so that it is 'louder and faster' as an apt way to think about the performance of gender politics and the politics of gender performance on the neo burlesque stage.

Though it may initially seem an oxymoron, the exploitation of sexuality via the signifiers of gender normally ascribed to patriarchy can be used as a tool to unpack that same system. As Halberstam (2013: xi) puts it, Gaga feminism 'strives to wrap itself around performances of excess, crazy, unreadable appearances of wild genders; and gender experimentation'. This presentation of self manipulates pre-existing iconography, but it is through that decontextualization and reconfiguration that gendered representations become self-authored. In the case of MsTickle's multilayered performance, she uses startling

gender stereotypes to make a bold commentary about the continued oppression of women while telling a narrative of self-transformation. Femininity is heightened, exaggerated and put on display – so actively, vividly, completely – in performances that do not reduce women to one singular gender expression but rather open up the possibility that self-expression comes in many forms.

Through her 'excessive performance,' MsTickle 'dismantles the character of woman': the female body is literally 'taken apart' through layers and it is through and on her body that that narrative takes place. The layers in this performance – both literal and figurative – expose the fallacy that one is ever able to transcend what the female body signifies in our patriarchal culture. MsTickle's bare body serves as a canvas on which she writes her message of both political protest and artistic provocation: For Sale. The audience is forced to think about MsTickle's provocative message all while consuming her bare body in its power, beauty and sexual allure. Part of the productive quality in burlesque, according to Willson, comes from the performer who intentionally makes a spectacle of her desirable body: 'By looking at the spectator in the eye and smiling she is mocking, teasing, and challenging the spectator as well as pleasurably and actively affirming, "making a spectacle" out of her desiring/desirable sexual self' (Willson 2008: 113). In making a spectacle of her desiring/desirable body, MsTickle – as is true of many burlesque performers – gains delight in her body. That final liberation from her blow-up doll artifice unleashes a physical and psychic release. The performer gaining pleasure in her displayed body similarly invites spectators to consume her unveiled female form as a pleasurable delight and as a cognitive provocation.

And yet the material reality remains: MsTickle uses her body as a canvas to remind the audience that the same body she has put on display in spectacular and pleasurable way is ultimately a commodity 'for sale.' Here I would like to offer the concept of the explicit female body as a palimpsest to help think through this seeming contradiction. From the Greek 'palimpestos' which means 'scraped again', a palimpsest is a writing surface on which the original writing has been erased to make room

for new writing; despite the erasure, remnants of the original writing may bleed through and become part of the canvas of the new text. Ultimately, MsTickle's performance suggests that the remnants of patriarchy are still legible, even in self-authored contexts such as this one. By acknowledging that those traces of patriarchy are always already subtexts of public performance of gender, both staged and real, the explicit female body on stage as palimpsest offers a counter-narrative that flaunts, teases and throws those very same assumptions to the wind. This helps us understand the transgressive and liberatory potential of burlesque that, on the surface, may appear counter to feminist ideology.

Carolee Schneeman famously said 'I am both image-maker and image. The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring, but it is as well votive: marked, written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will.' Halberstam (2013: xii) similarly argues that Gaga is a 'media product and a media manipulator', that she represents 'both an erotics of the surface and an erotics of flaws and flows.' Put quite simply, the female artist can be both subject and object; the creator of the image is author and product. The explicit female body serves as a palimpsest, and when those reimagined images get 'written over in a text of stroke and gesture', as Schneeman puts it, or rebuilt like a car engine, as Halberstam puts it, we still see the marks from that which has been erased. It is impossible to remove the explicit female body from what it represents, from what it signifies. And yet if we think about the explicit female body on stage as a palimpsest, that remainder is a necessary possibility for its very being. The question of whether burlesque oppresses or liberates becomes obsolete as a new reading of the productive possibility of popular performance comes centre stage in all its subversive potential and glamorous excess.

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