

Benedict Quilter (P Wits)
Form Destroyer: Confusion Is Sex
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**A thesis submitted by Benedict Quilter
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Master of Visual Arts**

Here I Give Thanks...

My practice seeks to bring into question the heteronormativity of a traditional male identity by using rock and its histories as a metaphor. I want to bring into question the ways in which these histories engage with the present. One of the key themes in my practice is distorting the construction and performance of masculinity in the tradition of rock music.

At the heart of my ongoing engagement with music and art is the idea of confusion. The title *Confusion is Sex* comes from the band Sonic Youth's E.P of the same name.

These notions of confusion and sexuality are two of the main themes of the project I embarked on that resulted in *Flesh for Fantasy*. Sonic Youth are also a band who over their career have played with similar ideas about sexuality and subversion of rock histories/aesthetics.

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I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Flesh For Fantasy

Distortion is one of the fundamental underpinnings of my practice, whether that be distorting the guitar through an abstract painterly approach or distorting the traditional historical hegemonies associated with rock music subcultures. My infatuation with distortion came about through my interest in underground music forms like punk and noise music. This interest in literal distortion which I have explored in my sound work has become a lens that has bled into all areas of my practice.

In my second year of my Visual Arts degree I participated in a studio critique called 'Talk Week'. I presented a series of unrefined collages that at the time I had not put enough thought into. They relied heavily on a heteronormative notion of glamorous images of women taken from fashion magazines and rearranged and distorted in various ways. These collages were critiqued harshly by the group and one line has stuck with me ever since: "*You have your own body and your own gender.*" The more I thought about that sentence, the more I realized that I was confused and deeply troubled by what it means to be a man in a patriarchal context. Firstly, this discomfort meant that I wasn't considering or identifying where I sat in relation to issues being presented in areas such as the male gaze and gendered objectification and secondly, I started to consider the physicality of a cis male body through the medium of rock n roll. The more I thought about it the more I realized that for so many people ignoring patriarchy is not even an option.

The writer bell hooks' definition of patriarchy in *Understanding Patriarchy* resonates with me:

Patriarchy is a political system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.¹

I started to think about how these ideas are passed down from one generation to the next and how the traditions of rock music act as a perfect analogy for the construction of patriarchal male identity. Within the rock n roll genre there is a visual and demonstrative representation of the above sentiment. The way these sentiments are upheld and perpetuated as traditions in rock music are a perfect analogy for the construction of patriarchal male identity.

There is some debate as to the specifics of what constitutes rock music. By and large when I refer to rock music, I am referring to music revolving around the combination of guitar, bass, and drums. This combination of instruments came to prominence in the 1950s with rock n roll and rockabilly music being two of the earliest movements to use them. The blues and jazz traditions of American music also played a key role in the development of the styles of playing in rock music, but for the specifics of what interests me, it starts with rock n roll.

¹ bell hooks, *The Will to Change, Understanding Patriarchy*, (USA : Washington Square Press, 2004), 18.

Rock n roll carries with it a strong visual element from show business, and a theatrical ethic and sense of duty to put on a performance. It also combines a strong sexual component in its instrumentation and dance crazes of the time, with a lot of the performers making their hips part of the stage show. Elvis Presley's publicist once described him as "the equivalent of a male striptease... with the exception that he doesn't take his clothes off."² There is a long tradition of innuendo in the lyrics of rock n roll such as Slim Harpo's *I'm a King Bee*, which The Rolling Stones famously covered on their self-titled debut album:

*Well I'm a king bee, baby
Buzzing around your hive
Yeah I can make honey baby
Let me come inside*³

The guitar is slung below the waist and becomes an extension and a coded metaphor for the phallus, the thrusting and facial contortions of the lead guitarist becoming like a parody of sex. James Miller, in his history of Rock n Roll *Almost Grown*, describes the founding of rock n roll as being about "disorder, aggression, and sex: a fantasy of human nature, running wild to a savage beat."⁴

This sits alongside a very black-and-white, antiquated view on relationships taken from the blues/folk traditions of American and English music. A reverence for the source material meant covers of songs like Bo Diddley's *Mama Keep Your Big Mouth Shut* sit in uneasy contrast to needy, cloying songs like *Let's Spend the Night Together*.

In the 60s and 70s artists like Lou Reed and Mick Jagger pushed against traditional ideas of masculinity and how men were expected to dress, intentionally making their sexuality appear ambiguous, and wearing outfits that played into the burgeoning queer culture that so inspired the arts in New York and London. In his talk *Cross-Gender/Cross Genre* Mike Kelley positions the hippie aesthetic of femininity as oppositional to the militaristic patriarchal culture of the time, and points to this being a potential influence on the "homosexual posturing that finds its apex in glam rock."⁵ A look through Hal Fischer's *Gay Semiotics* shows how much Lou Reed in particular, borrowed from the aesthetics of the gay leather/cruising scene. Then bands like The New York Dolls and the Sex Pistols pushed things out even further by borrowing from the drag scene and the bondage scene respectively. Writing about Glitter Rock, Tricia Henry notes that groups like The New York Dolls "confounded images of gender distinction through one or more of the following techniques, androgyny, transvestism and parody of sexual stereotypes."⁶

² James Miller, *Almost Grown: The Rise of Rock And Roll*, (USA : Arrow Books 1999), 134.

³ Slim Harpo, *I'm A King Bee*, recorded March 1957, Excello, 1957, CD.

⁴ James Miller, *Almost Grown: The Rise of Rock And Roll*, (USA : Arrow Books, 1999), 88.

⁵ "If America's problems were the result of being militaristic and patriarchal, the antidote would be the embrace of the prototypically feminine" Mike Kelley, "Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre" in *Foul Perfection*, ed. John C. Welchman (USA : MIT Press, 2004), 103.

⁶ Tricia Henry, *Break All Rules*, (USA : UMI Press, 1989), 31.

There is a fundamental tension in this display of “camp” and “feminine” energies and the toxic masculinity of the lyrics and surrounding cultures of rock of this era that bleeds into the contemporary moment.



Fig 1: Lou Reed Press Conference Sydney August 1974

In her essay *Notes on “Camp”* Susan Sontag observes that a “taste for the androgynous is something that seems quite different but isn’t: a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms.”⁷ Rock music, since the 60s has had an identity crisis around playing the role of the hypermasculine sex machine in a very traditional way and engaging in gender confusion as a form of “play”.

In his writing on Lou Reed the rock critic Lester Bangs refers to Reed’s transgender partner as “disgusting” and a “thing”, and while The Sex Pistols famously used an image of two cowboys pressing penises as a poster design, their song *New York* derides The New York Dolls as “faggots” and “just a pile of shit”. So while the performers were engaging in a re-coding of society’s values, the culture surrounding it was wrapped in the same conservative ideas of man/woman binaries and patriarchal ideas of masculinity.

Picking Through the Wreckage with a Stick

My interest in music and in particular rock music comes from my father who is an avid collector and listener to music of the 20th century, in particular popular music of the 60s and American

⁷ Susan Sontag, “Notes on “Camp”” in *Against Interpretation* (USA : Anchor Books, 1990) 279.

roots music. He and my mother were both teenagers in the 60s so a lot of my recollections of listening to music as a child is music from that era.

My infatuation with rock music began when I saw the music video for Prince and The New Power Generation's song *Raspberry Beret*. The psychedelic imagery and production in the song coupled with the androgynous look of the band changed something in me. From there my musical interests extended into a lot of more glamorous and theatrical groups such as Motley Crue and Guns N Roses. The hyper-sexualized "otherness" of these groups and the danger that they seemed to represent hooked me in. It wasn't really until I discovered Nirvana that I found a group that felt like they were "mine" and spoke to me personally. The outward simplicity and directness of their sound seemed more achievable and directly inspiring than the pyrotechnics and virtuosity of someone like Prince or the refined craft of The Beatles. That direct "do it yourself" approach has had a lasting impact on me and my practice across all mediums.

My friend Zak and I would try to capture this with late night free-form jams, never quite coalescing into anything in the way of songs. We loved the spectacle of bands like The New York Dolls and Nirvana and the humorous way they played into and against gender types.

Nirvana, in particular Kurt Cobain, also involved themselves heavily in questioning the patriarchal way rock music traditionally operates. I can't think of any other rock band at their level that played pro-abortion rallies and took a politically charged position in terms of opposing homophobia and sexism. They used their position to further progressive understandings of issues around sexuality and gender, like telling homophobes and sexists not to listen to their music in the liner notes to their *Incesticide* album.⁸ Through the way he chose to talk about gender and queer issues, and in his lyrics, Kurt directly opposed the patriarchal ideals of men as being cut off from empathy. It also called into question the way rock distanced itself from engaging with these issues.

Through their association with Nirvana, I became aware of the band Sonic Youth, who also engaged in gender blurring and subversion in their lyrics and in their aesthetics. They had a more hippy/beat poetry inspired approach to songwriting, and toyed with a love/hate relationship with rock aesthetics. Both Kurt Cobain and Sonic Youth were generous in terms of listing influences and giving a platform to unconventional bands. Through Sonic Youth's ongoing collaborations and name-dropping of noise music I was exposed to a whole world of more extreme sonics. I became obsessed with bands who ran against "traditional" conventions of good and bad taste. Through my interests in these bands' styles, the loud guitars and long-haired opposition to convention, I began to be exposed to influential underground magazines like *Forced Exposure* and *Bananafish*, which opened me up to yet more worlds of sound to explore. The psychedelic aesthetics of *Bananafish* had a lasting impact on me. The

⁸ "At this point I have a request for our fans. If any of you in any way hate homosexuals, people of different color, or women, please do this one favor for us - leave us the fuck alone! Don't come to our shows and don't buy our records." Kurt Cobain, Nirvana, *Incesticide*, recorded 1988 – 1991, Geffen, 1992, CD.

fusion of “high” and “low” art, with writing not just based around music but anything and everything, opened my mind to how wide the psychedelic net can be.

After a few years of being immersed in industrial/power electronics music, with the help of patient friends in my life I began to see that really the misogyny and homophobia of this world was the same as any other toxic masculinity, and that the “subversion” this culture was involved in was not really all that subversive. It reinforced the same patriarchal roles and insecurities as the conventional music it claimed to oppose, while contributing nothing in terms of a dialogue. Whilst the sonic properties of this music appealed to me, the aesthetics and lyrics were very much stuck in a notion of transgression that really doesn’t lead anywhere meaningful in terms of questioning patriarchal oppression, nor was it interested in questioning what fed into the construction of the ideas of masculinity.

While groups like Whitehouse played with notions of transgression and shock, writing songs with titles like *Prosexist* or *Rapeday*, and dedicating an album to the German serial killer Peter Kurten, their context was a 1980s England with moral crusades for censorship and a return to family values run by campaigners like Mary Whitehouse. As times have changed, and groups have stuck to these ideas of one-upping each other with shocking imagery and titles, one is left with something that plays more into underground men’s rights ideologies than it does anything cutting edge or transformative.

I lost touch at that point with the side of me that, as a younger person, had learned about and respected in Kurt Cobain. I had become so used to the harsh noise walls I’d built around myself that I had become deaf to the things that really mattered to me.

In her essay “Understanding Patriarchy” bell hooks notes that:

Boys brutalized and victimized by patriarchy more often than not become patriarchal, embodying the abusive patriarchal masculinity that they once clearly recognized as evil. Few men brutally abused as boys in the name of patriarchal maleness courageously resist the brainwashing and remain true to themselves. Most males conform to patriarchy in one way or another.⁹

In buying into the aesthetics of extreme music and the surrounding culture I had effectively lost sight of the things that attracted me to music to begin with, like the notion of “play” and the subverting of gender norms. I realized that the kind of art I needed to make was one that grappled with these issues and brought them into question, as opposed to ignoring them.

I became interested in the way that in the 60s there was a sense of community between causes like the Black Panthers and The Yippies and the way that the psychedelic aesthetic brought people together, if only for a moment. In opposition to the aesthetics of Industrial music’s¹⁰ extremity and harshness, the 60s psychedelic aesthetic, as Mike Kelley describes it, is a

⁹ bell hooks, *Understanding Patriarchy The Will to Change*, (USA: Washington Square Press, 2004), 18.

¹⁰ Industrial music aesthetics often have a militarized or “shock tactic” aesthetic as best summarized by the output of the label Industrial and the band Throbbing Gristle throughout the late 70s and 80s

“pastiche aesthetic, promotes confusion, while at the same time postulating equality - all chaotic parts are considered equal.”¹¹ This idea of confusion is something that is at the heart of my ongoing engagement with music and art. I’m attracted to the moments where I am bewildered and uncentred by a work.

My practice seeks to question the homophobic ‘boy’s club’ of the rock canon. Although I had always thought of myself as someone who questioned gender and was part of the ‘good fight’, I realized that not only was my denial of my own complicated relationship with heteronormativity causing me pain and shame, it was something I felt was important to explore as a concept. For a long time, I thought that hiding my discomfort was what was expected of me, and that to voice that was a sign of weakness. I take issue with heteronormativity as a given. I don’t believe in the idea of a binary of sexualities any more than I believe in gender being a binary.

I want to help other people see the beauty in the absurdity of rock’s iconography the same way I did as a young person, and to dismantle the baggage I accumulated over the years because of the rock histories I was taught. This notion of unlearning and questioning the reverence for rock iconography is central to my practice. In her essay, “*Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification*”, Judith Butler writes,

*When the prohibition against homosexuality is culturally pervasive, then the ‘loss’ of homosexual love is precipitated through a prohibition which is repeated and ritualized throughout the culture. What ensues is a culture of gender melancholy in which masculinity and femininity emerge as the traces of an ungrieved, ungrievable love, indeed, where masculinity and femininity within the heterosexual matrix are strengthened through the repudiations they perform.*¹²

A clear illustration of reinforcing the heterosexual matrix can be found in the denial of the homosexuality of Freddie Mercury and Euronymous in the films *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *Lords of Chaos* respectively.

Absent and Erotic Lives

In my moving image work *Flesh for Fantasy*, I began by looking at rock music videos as an art form and analyzing their recurring imagery. I wanted to see what the clichés and tropes of this form could say when they were separated from their context of a promotional tool. I became fascinated by the way gender was performed in them and how sex is used in such a strange, abstracted way. The title for the work comes from a 1983 single from Billy Idol. The reference to flesh (both figuratively and literally) in my work, alludes to a space where projected fantasies, once thought of as virile become flaccid.

In Dan Graham’s work *Rock My Religion* (1983-4) he explored performativity and gendering by highlighting physical movement in rock music, aligning this with Shaker ideas about movement,

¹¹ Mike Kelley, “Cross-Gender/Cross-Genre” in *Foul Perfection*, ed. John C. Welchman (USA : MIT Press, 2004), 104.

¹²Judith Butler, “Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification,” in *Constructing Masculinities*, eds. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson (USA: Routledge, 1995), 28.

as a religious experience. The Shakers are a religious sect whose forms of worship include song and dance. Graham draws parallels to the ritualistic, ecstatic nature of Shaker worship and Rock n Roll, and brings into focus the ways in which movement affects us and brings us together.

I am interested in the homosocial energy of these performances of masculinity and the way that, as satirized in the mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap*, the audience is predominantly young men.

Marty DiBergi: Let's talk about your music today, uh... one thing that puzzles me, ummm... is the makeup of your audience. It seems to be, uh, predominantly, young boys.

David St. Hubbins: Well, it's a sexual thing, really. Aside from the identifying that the boys do with us, there's also a reaction from the female to our music.

Nigel Tufnel: Yeah, really they're quite fearful. That's my theory. They see us on stage, with tight trousers... We've got, you know -- armadillos in our trousers. I mean, it's really quite frightening -- the size. And, and they, they run screaming.¹³

The Spinal Tap dialogue above illustrates the strange space where young men are in the thrall of the phallus via substitutes like the guitar or the microphone. Taking this idea of rock as a form of ecstatic religion, I started thinking about how it is just as strangely (perversely even) sexist and bewildering as a religious text. There is an adage that the worst kind of Catholic is a lapsed Catholic. I see myself as a lapsed rockist. In the same way as a former Catholic spends the rest of their life unpacking what they were taught in church, staying in an active relationship with what they insist they repudiate, I realized there was equally as much to unpack in the effects these rock personas had had on me and my life.

Looking back at the music I had enjoyed as a teen, the construction of masculinity, as presented through endless repetition of sexualized and virile rock stars, seems bizarre and perverse in the way it is normalized. As I re-watched more and more rock videos, I started to become fascinated by the phallogentricity of the imagery, whether explicitly or through the instrument as an extension of manhood and virility. The imagery, once removed from its narrative in a music video format, becomes more clearly masturbatory. I started thinking about how this culture affects the spectator (predominantly young people), and how these power fantasies are passed on. The central tension between an expression of male sexuality and male bonding creates an unintended queerness.

The video component came out of initial forays into incorporating the sexualized male form from pornography with aesthetically similar imagery from rock music photography.

I was interested in how the implicit sexuality in the crotch-centric imagery sat comfortably with the explicitness of the pornographic imagery. There is an interesting crossover in the aesthetics of the rock star pin ups that line teenage bedrooms as shrines, and the pinups from adult

¹³*This Is Spinal Tap*, directed by Rob Reiner (1984; USA, Studiocanal, 2013), DVD.

magazines. This tension was beautifully explored in Andy Warhol's artwork for The Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* album. Warhol took the phallogentric swagger of The Rolling Stones and applied to it a queer pinup aesthetic that accentuates the erotic potential of the title. By presenting a man's crotch and visibly erect penis on the cover, and having a zip that came down allowing you to peek inside at the crotch/underwear of the model, it sits, potentially, in a gaze outside the conventional heterosexual one in rock music culture.



Fig 2: Andy Warhol's artwork for The Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers* album (1971)

The video element of the work came as a natural extension of the collage component of my practice.

I wanted to move from the still imagery of the photograph to one of the other main modes of representation in music, the music video. I began assembling as much footage as I could to highlight the repetitive, psychosexual, absurd nature of the imagery of rock music. So much of the discussion surrounding this music follows heteronormative patterns of denial of homoeroticism or campness in the imagery. I'm interested in why there is that denial, and why there is such discomfort for so many men in it.

In his essay *Masculinity as Spectacle* Steve Neale concludes by agreeing with the film theorist Laura Mulvey's view of the spectator in mainstream film as being a male gaze. He then adds that it is this fundamentally male gaze that means the eroticization of the male form is constantly repressed and disavowed. He notes that

while mainstream cinema, in its assumption of a male norm, perspective and look, can constantly take women and the female image as its objects of investigation, it has rarely investigated men and the male image in the same kind

*of way: women are a problem, a source of anxiety, an obsessive enquiry; men are not.*¹⁴

For a long time, I felt an intense discomfort with depictions of the penis and the stereotypical cis male form, although when I look back with the benefit of hindsight at my childhood interests in archetypes like the superhero I see an idealized phallogentric male, and to me it says something revealing about how masculinity is constructed and men are expected to behave. There is a back-and-forth contradictory dialogue between idolizing a fetishized male form alongside a denial of the homoerotic gaze. This suggests to me a tension in the construction of an idea like “heteronormativity”. By highlighting/satirizing the performed pantomime-like quality of masculinity in rock music my intention is to chip away at its normalization of heteronormativity.

My publishing project *Independent Woman Records* began with an idea about challenging the traditionally hyper-masculine energies of underground music, in particular presenting things in a way that offered a counterweight to industrial and power electronics aesthetics. I was bored by the way that so much of the noise/free music scene was perfectly happy with labels having male-heavy rosters releasing carbon copies of “transgressive” music from the past. While I believe strongly in this as a cause, I now realize that it is not my place to use a label name seeming to embody womanhood. This kind of work is something that needs to be continued by women. The best thing I can do is step back and let that happen. Having named the label as a teenager as a vehicle for self-publishing zines that I felt reacted against hegemonic structures and critiqued various canons.

Through my interest in the sound genre I became more and more restless with the way that the subcultures surrounding different styles of music close themselves off to other ways of listening and seeing. Through the curation of the label there has been a constant effort to release artists across the spectrums of gender and to highlight them alongside other voices to create a conversation.

I feel it is important to be constantly changing and in a state of flux. It’s also important to acknowledge when your projects have not been as well thought-out as you intended. Although the *Independent Woman* referred to in the title has never been something I’ve sought to define, and which the multiplicities of the released material sought to expand and question, I also need to acknowledge that that kind of questioning and unpacking is not my place and is a dialogue that doesn’t really need a male voice. As such I have begun phasing out that label name and have begun a new label called *No Label*. This name much more accurately reflects the intent of the label while also not potentially minimizing the hard work of female voices who are more qualified to engage in those dialogues in music and art. In wrapping up this project I am proud to have released music by a more gender diverse line-up than most experimental labels and to have left behind an example of a label that didn’t follow a conventional genre or ego/personality based structure.

In their essay *Rock and Sexuality* Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie observe that,

¹⁴ Steve Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle,” in *Screening The Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steve Cohan & Ina Rae Hark (USA: Routledge, 1993), 19.

Rock treats the problems of puberty, it draws on and articulates the psychological and physical tensions of adolescence, it accompanies the moment when boys and girls learn their repertoire of public sexual behaviour¹⁵.

This idea of rock as the moment where adolescents learn their repertoire of sexual behaviour is a central tension that keeps me coming back, in the same way that my childhood obsessions with superheroes like Batman keep me fascinated. What does it mean for boys to grow up viewing and absorbing rock music's excesses and male power fantasies?

Much like a chord on the guitar can have distortion applied and take on a new sonic character, the imagery of rock music through the distortion of context can take on a psychosexual absurdity. During the 1960s the culture of the "lead" guitarist came to prominence with performers like Jimmy Paige, Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix pushing the guitar solo to the forefront of the song. Bands like Led Zeppelin and Cream became famous for their soloing on each respective instrument, giving each member time to prove his dominance over his instrument. The coverage of their 'genius' in publications like *Creem*, *Rolling Stone*, *Melody Maker* and *NME* turned them into icons in the early 70s, with a famous piece of graffiti in Islington, London, claiming "Clapton is God". Through this period in the late 60s through to the 70s the guitar solo came to be seen as the ultimate guitarist statement. The lead break had always played a part in songs, but during this era they became an extended, ego-filled spectacle where the player proved their mastery of technique minute after minute. It moved away from being a component of the song to being seen as the part to look forward to. Bands like Led Zeppelin would perform versions of songs that would triple the length of the studio version, stuffing in solo after solo to strut their stuff. This led to the writers Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie inventing the term "cock rock".

The cock rock image is the rampant destructive male traveller, smashing hotels and groupies alike. Musically, such rock takes off from the sexual frankness of rhythm and blues but adds a cruder male physicality (hardness, control, virtuosity). Cock rockers' musical skills become synonymous with their sexual skills (hence Jimi Hendrix's simultaneous status as stud and guitar hero). Cock rockers are not bound by the conventions of the song form but use their instruments to show 'what they've got', to give vent to their macho imagination.¹⁶

This idea of the "macho imagination" is perfectly expressed in the music videos of these bands and progressively gets more and more absurd. Lone men playing unamplified electric guitars on the edges of cliffs, on rooftops, and, in the case of the Guns N Roses music video *Estranged*, walking on water playing to dolphins. Proof, if needed, of the Christ-like journey of the lone guitarist against the world.

¹⁵ Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality" in *On Record: Rock, Pop, & the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (USA : Routledge 1990), 371.

¹⁶ Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality," in *On Record: Rock, Pop, & the Written Word*, eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (USA : Routledge 1990), 374.

The history and imagery of rock music is all about repetition. Crotches gyrate clad in leather as guitars climax solos over glimpses of fawning, passive fans. The history of rock music functions in a similar, albeit less multifaceted way as aspects of art history. It has the same fascination with the concept of geniuses working in isolation creating misunderstood masterpieces. People like David Bowie or Eric Clapton, although they were working with a variety of equally talented people, began to be singled out and pushed above the rest. Publications like *Mojo* and *Uncut* are constantly re-examining and rewriting the same linear progression toward the hypothetical apex of the 60s and 1970s. As this era begins to recede more and more into the distant past, they have begun to make exceptions for the 80s and some 90s groups of a retro nature. By and large the rock fan today is a nostalgist, and an amateur archivist. I spent years of my life publishing fanzines of opinions on what was the “real deal” while satirizing what I deemed to be “false”.

This repetition is crucial to rock’s ongoing appeal to young men who see themselves as “different” and “not like everybody else”. To the viewer it becomes a sea of bland male peacocking. When these images are cut together it becomes difficult to discern where one band finishes and another begins.

In my video work *Flesh for Fantasy* I wanted to highlight this repetition and through that, bring into question the nature of the imagery. To use a musical term, I wanted to pursue a drone-like repetition. Through repetition of riffs that circle back on another for extended durations, drone groups like Earth provoke a shifting in and out from the listener which after a while takes on an immersive quality. I began by filming segments of music videos from the MTV era of the 1980s, a period that as a younger person I saw as a golden age in terms of iconography. I started by looking for power stances and guitar flagellation. As I kept accumulating and searching, I realized that it wasn’t just during one period, but a constant repetition through time. Rock music, being a commodity-based industry like anything else, has a long history of using the performer as an idealized, sexualized conduit for the fantasies of the viewer.

*Sometimes as a kid, pop music seemed like a substitute for experience, but it turns out to be an experience in itself. Part of the experience of growing up, of the myth of adulthood.*¹⁷

Alan Licht’s idea of pop music representing part of a “myth of adulthood” is something I began to think about a lot in relation to my own experiences growing up and being influenced by these histories and these figures. It also ties in with the ideas put forth by Frith and McRobbie about adolescents learning about sexuality through rock. Through the constant repetition of imagery in rock music and the construction of different “histories” and “canons”, these images begin to function in a similar way to propaganda and are often used to push an agenda. Generally, this agenda is a toxic heteronormative individualism as personified by individuals like Jim Morrison or Brian Jones, who take on a Messianic quality after they die for our sins. The iconography of the rock star functions in a similar way as the imagery of the cowboy or the superhero, a man against the world. It is an unrestrained ego and toxic masculinity. We see a reinforcement of the

¹⁷ Alan Licht, *An Emotional Memoir of Martha Quinn* (USA: Drag City Inc, 2002), 15.

traditional patriarchal structures reflected back at us. We also see a wish fulfilment for many young men who feel invisible. Oasis sum this up in the lyrics to their song *Rock N Roll Star*:

You're not down with who I am

*Look at you now, you're all in my hands*¹⁸

Part of the mythology of rock bands like Guns N Roses or Motley Crue is the audience's investment in the story of a group of "normal" young men who through hard work, or initially unrecognized "genius" overcome and transform into godlike figures who then act out the fantasies that for most are unachievable. Rock music also functions as a metaphor for the neoliberal world we live in where if one "tries" one can "succeed". If a person has talent, they will surely rise to the top, and if they don't rise they haven't worked hard enough.

These are "men's men", grappling with their egotism and pushing themselves up to the top. In this way it is similar to the sports cultures that a lot of men in music would be quick to criticize for the very same attributes. It's a performance of power, and control of an audience. It is also a performance of a male as a sad, hollow archetype.

The term Angry Young Men began picking up traction in the 1950s in England, describing a movement of authors and playwrights including Kingsley Amis and John Osborne. Films like the adaptation of Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*, the movies *Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Wild One* being the apex of the romanticizing of this archetype in film form. Colin Wilson's 1956 book *The Outsider* presents an overview of men who were fighting at odds with the world and became a hugely influential book on more than one generation of young men who felt they were also fighting against the world. I'm interested in how and why these narratives appeal so much to young men, and how they shape the world we live in. The men depicted are struggling for the control they believed they were implicitly promised in life, and these ideas formed a central foundation to the rock star identity, "The subtext is that in a world of men castrated by the system, here is a REAL MAN, a rebel aflame with the 'burning virility' Jimmy Porter craved in *Look Back in Anger*. You can trace this tendency all the way through rock: penetration, self-aggrandizement, violation, acceleration and death wish are all conflated in a single existential thrust"¹⁹

This masculine archetype is always on the verge of self-destruction, playing out into pantomime performances of masculinity that play heavily into a camp aesthetic. What interests me is the way in which this potent heterosexuality collapses into itself. In conversation with Eric de Bruyn, Dan Graham talks about how this kind of male phallocentric performer reached its zenith in the moment where Jim Morrison exposed his flaccid penis to an audience in Miami in April 1969²⁰. This idea of the exposure of the flaccidness of Morrison's sexuality killing the rock star became an idea I wanted to explore more heavily in the video *Flesh for Fantasy*. Whilst I agree with

¹⁸ Noel Gallagher, Oasis, "Rock N Roll Star", recorded 1994, track 1 on *Definitely Maybe*, Creation Records, 1994, CD.

¹⁹ Joy Press and Simon Reynolds, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion & Rock 'N' Roll* (UK: Serpent's Tail, 1995), 117.

²⁰ Graham, de Bruyn, "'Sound Is Material': Dan Graham in Conversation with Eric de Bruyn," in *Grey Room*, no.17 (2004): 108-117.

Graham's idea that on a conceptual level Jim Morrison negated this kind of male performance with that act of exposure, the fact remains that it persists in male art in all forms.



Fig 3: Live performance Luke Shaw / P Wits Artspace 2020

In my own sound performance works I have been exploring ways to counter the rock baggage of virtuoso phallic guitar showmanship and the pageantry of rock. Part of this idea comes from punk's initial rejection of the past and attempt to place music into the hands of technically unskilled players who had little interest in producing yet more conventional rock music²¹. Part of the charm of the punk movement to me is the challenging of the idea of entertainment for an audience, and likewise renegotiating the relationship between audience and performer. My approach is about an absence of spectacle and unpacking the potential of the many collaborations I take part in. This means that while the collaboration is ultimately free form, I focus on not overpowering the performance. As often as not I will choose to not play in segments if I feel the piece requires it. To me a collaboration is about complementing someone else, not playing over the top of them. In this way I reject rock's notion of battling egos and embrace a more fluid relationship with sound. The audiences I play for are almost always groups of friends or familiar faces from the experimental music or art communities. This means there is a casual community context to shows. Often the groups I play in will have little to no engagement with the audience beyond playing the piece and being in the "moment" for the duration of the piece. The only spectacle is the sound.

²¹ Of particular interest to me are the No Wave and the San Francisco scenes of the late 70's and early 80s with bands like Flipper and Teenage Jesus and The Jerks. It's important to me to acknowledge that these bands and their approach/attitude have had a profound impact on how I view music and art. However, a full discussion of punk and its cultural impact is not something I feel is needed to understand this body of work.



Fig 4: Live at Clare Inn 11/11/20

In the context of my performance practice, I also feel a sense of restlessness, it is important to me to try different things and push myself. While I primarily use the guitar in my sound work, I also make use of keyboards, tapes, bass and other electronics. As the writer/improviser Bruce Russell discusses in his essay *On the Guitar*²², there is no sense in denying the cultural baggage of it, the instrument itself is as open to subversion as any other sound device. It also has potentially even more possibilities in terms of subversion.

*Using the guitar purely as a noisemaker has the effect of 'gutting' the troubadour archetype of 'the guy with the guitar. The 'bits' of the archetype are still there, 'the rebel' (actor), 'the guitar' (signifying object), the stage (context), but put together in the wrong order.*²³

Often I will treat the guitar more as a pure sound signal and explore different methods of playing using various pieces of metal or other objects placed around the body and/or the neck of the guitar. This use of 'extended technique' and fluidity involves a sense of play and tension. It is reconfiguring the sounds and potentials of the guitar in real time and 'gutting' the phallogocentricity of the conventional rock performer. This style of playing is heavily indebted to the style of Keith Rowe, who from the 1960s onward, in both in his on again/off again ensemble A.M.M and as a solo artist, pushed the guitar's potential as a sound device with a totally non-conventional

²² Bruce Russell, *Left Handed Blows: Writing on Sound, 1993 – 2003* (NZ: Clouds, 2009), 61-66.

²³ Bruce Russell, *Left Handed Blows: Writing on Sound, 1993 – 2003* (NZ: Clouds, 2009), 62.

approach. His use of the body of the guitar and the resonance of the body of the guitar have stuck with me. I also am indebted heavily to The Dead C's legacy of de and reconstructing rock's sonic properties and expanding the field of sound for the traditional band set up of guitars and drums. Their relationship to gutting and deconstructing rock music and the surrounding aesthetics I feel in some ways mirrors my own.

The world has changed so much since the time of rock's glory days and the genre itself is no longer as relevant to popular culture, but I think in a lot of ways it illustrates the problems and excesses of the male ego. Just as with any history, I think it is important to dissect and look at how the contemporary moment is shaped by them and think about ways we can unlearn or deconstruct the flaws that are now, with the benefit of hindsight, more obvious.

It also illustrates the complicated, contradictory ways a "male" is constructed in our society. In *End of The Monarchy of Sex*, Michel Foucault talks about repression of sexuality being a means of social control. This idea of the repression of a played-out reinforcing of patriarchal ideas functions as a form of social control in that it attracts the same person playing out the same fantasies of the past on an infinite loop. The punk movement and its legacy influencing riot grrrl and other movements to reject the ideas of "legacy" and to question the traditional dynamics of rock has had a huge influence on how I read these histories.

Is It My Body?

When I decided to explore the idea of gender in rock music, I started with my established practice of print-based collage. I went through music periodicals and books for source material, and started layering these music histories in absurd combinations and cutting them apart physically. I also began to immerse myself heavily in the photography and imagery of bands and performers in the history of rock. This process led to my looking at how these men present themselves, their figures in movement, and the performance as part of the presentation of music. I played against the usual presentation of these performers by incorporating imagery of an explicitly sexualized male form. Looking at these still images made me think of the performance of the guitarist and about the surreal hyper-sexualized music videos I used to view as a teenager. Concurrent to working on the print-based works, I began to accumulate a folder of video examples featuring the kind of surreal sexualized imagery I was thinking about.

I filmed these segments on my iPhone as I came across them. I liked the way that by re-filming I was channeling the way that one views the television or computer screen. It is imperfect and occasionally has reflections or dirt on the screen. It also meant that in a way it simulated the gaze of myself as a younger person digesting this imagery.

Initially I was interested in strange imagery that did not quite sit in the narratives of the videos they were in, but as I kept viewing and curating the images, I became more and more fascinated by the presentations of male/female interactions and the sexualized, idealized forms of the performers. There was an interesting tension to me in the way these men's bodies were presented in a closely similar way to the eroticized female forms. This unspoken eroticization of the bands became somewhat of an obsession for me over the course of collating the material, and the phallic extension/substitute of the guitar became more and more explicit. The individual

pieces that were initially created as heteronormative reaffirmations of dominant power structures became more and more open to a queer reading, and the gender ideas these videos intended to reinforce became more ambiguous.

It was important for me to test the work in a live performance outside a gallery context. I then tested it with an install as part of a collaborative set I performed with Christchurch artist Luke Shaw at the Wine Cellar. The Wine Cellar is a music venue on Karangahape Rd which caters to alternative forms of music. I decided that since my friend and fellow artist Beth Dawson was presenting a video work alongside her set it would be a perfect opportunity to present my own piece too. The work was projected as we played an improvised piece on 2 guitars. The performance on the guitars was a perfect way to test how sound could sit with the work. The projection sat behind us as we performed, slightly above the stage. As we performed, I became aware of the video not being centered, meaning the viewer was only seeing about a third of the image due to cropping. This to me somewhat negated the impact of the work.



Fig 5-6: Luke Shaw/P Wits Wine Cellar 26 May with *Flesh for Fantasy* projection

However, the audience response was overwhelmingly positive to this setup. A friend of mine observed that he did not even notice the sound component for about ten minutes as he was so drawn into the visuals. This made me reassess my initial idea of doing a loud audio collage piece for the final install. His comment made me think that in order for people to appreciate the drone-like quality I intended, I should pursue something a bit more subtle to sit alongside the work in a more nuanced way for the install. I want the sound to sit alongside the video in a way that accentuates and softly plays into and against the imagery.

When I initially started thinking about extending my print collages into video, I had an idea that I would create an audio collage to accompany the work, but when I set this up in the test space on level 5 I realized that when the visual content I planned was placed alongside the audio one they just competed for attention from the viewer/listener. This, along with my friend's feedback about losing awareness of the audio component at the live show, meant that I discarded these

initial audio collages in favour of something more directly drone-like. I recorded a new loop-based piece of a more ambient nature that I feel sits a lot better with the video. For the opening of the video I have invited 2 performers to play alongside the video work and will be performing a piece with Ducklingmonster under our band name Monsterwitch. The singer songwriter Roy Irwin is a nonbinary artist from Auckland who through their work has at times explored a similar conceptual territory of questioning the body/male pathologies of rock and underground subcultures and unpacking the construction of gender. Thistle Group is the sound project of Claire Mahoney, who creates ambient tape loop-based works with guitar and vocals. These are all people I have played with and published and are part of my community of sound/music makers. As I have touched on, this community element is an integral part of my practice and supporting and working with these friends I have made along the way is one of the most rewarding parts of creation for me. I also like the idea of the work having multiple forms across the duration of the install, with these artists giving their own unique voices playing with the work and then having the more permanent installed version. This harkens back in a way to Andy Warhol's *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* shows with The Velvet Underground and Nico providing audio for visual works by Warhol, and more recently has been explored by ensembles like Text of Light providing sound for silent experimental videos from the 20th century.

In some of the most masculine forms of rock - thrash metal, grunge - moshing becomes a form of surrogate combat. Slam dancing and stage diving offer contact between male bodies that is normally illegitimate; the masochistic pleasure of immersing yourself in the sweat and bloodbath of the moshpit is a kind of macho (per)version of oceanic feelings²⁴

With hardly an exception, the most vigorously and consistently heterosexual societies are precisely the ones which use the most blatantly homosexual forms of male bonding²⁵

This work has been one of the most difficult and time-consuming works I have taken on in terms of executing it and in addressing and articulating myself and how I view and engage with music and ideas around "male" gender.

It has also been the most rewarding in terms of bringing a deeper understanding of who I am and how I navigate the world. Taking on the unpacking of masculinity and how that idea is shaped in rock cultures is something I intend to continue going forward as I feel I still have a lot to work with. There is also still a lot to explore in terms of the homosocial aspects of musical fandoms and subcultures. The repudiation of any campness or homoeroticism, and its tension with the iconography used by rock bands, is something I feel I am even now only just touching the surface of.

²⁴ Joy Press and Simon Reynolds, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion & Rock 'N' Roll* (UK: Serpents Tail, 1995), 105.

²⁵ Kim Gordon, "Unresolved Desires," in *Is It My Body? : Selected Texts*, ed. Branden W. Joseph (USA: Sternberg Press, 2014) 65.

I also feel that by placing these ideas in a non-musical context they stand as metaphors for the issues with male identities in all art forms.

There is also a lot to explore in terms of future forms this research/making could take. *Flesh for Fantasy* has opened up my practice even more in terms of considering options other than those I feel immediately comfortable with and trying new approaches.



Fig 7: "Rocket Queen" 2020, collage

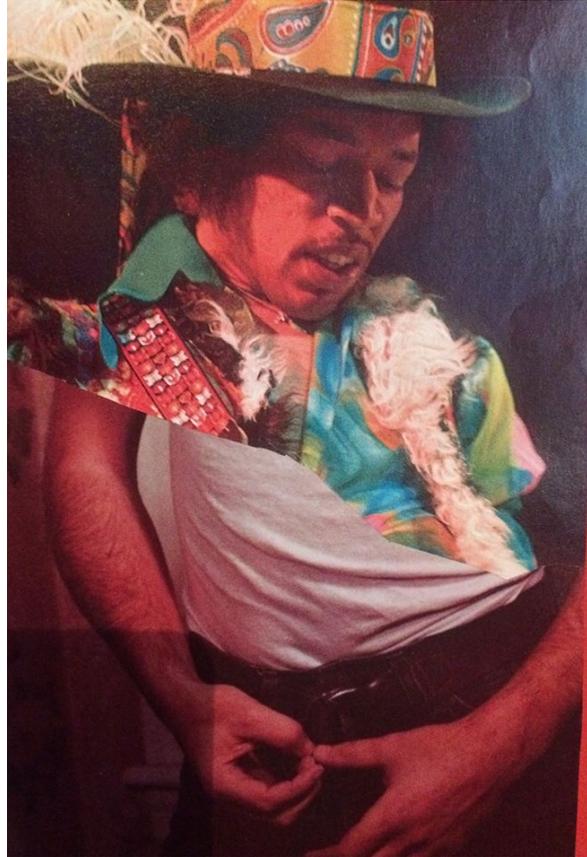


Fig 8: "Are You Experience" 2020, collage



Fig 9: Maxine Funke/ P Wits July 17, 2020



Figs 10-13: Test Install *Flesh for Fantasy*, Level 5 Lens Based Practice room

FLESH FOR FANTASY

THURSDAY 15 JULY 5PM
ST PAUL ST GALLERY 3



LIVE AUDIO FROM ROY IRWIN MONSTERWITCH THISTLE GROUP

Fig 14: Poster for screening/live performance happening



Fig 15-16: Documentation of the install in Gallery 3



Fig 17: Monsterwitch performance for Flesh For Fantasy St Paul ST Gallery 3

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