Confusing Gender: Strategies for resisting objectification in the work of Split Britches

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In this article I am concerned with three strategies for overcoming objectification of the female form found in the work of performance company Split Britches and how their strategies lead to a possible reading of the company's work as a theatre of resistance. This article particularly focuses on the show *What Tammy Needs to Know* by Lois Weaver. I will discuss how Weaver resists the female subject position of objectified sexual 'other' through foregrounding the construction of her femininity, both as herself and as her character Tammy Whynot, and by highlighting the labour and tools involved in this construction. I will also determine how Weaver's use of autobiography has enabled her to transcend the subject/object divide and to create empathy with her audience. Finally, I will examine how Weaver returns the gaze back to her spectators. For the purposes of this article the term objectification is defined within a feminist framework and refers to the female form as representing the 'other' in the psychoanalytic sense and this 'otherness' allowing the female body to be fetishized as sexual object.

Split Britches are a theatre company based in New York. The three principle members are Deb Margolin, Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver. Their first show, Split Britches (from which they took the name of their troupe), was premiered in October 1980 at the WOW café in New York. Weaver first performed the character of Tammy Whynot in the Split Britches show *Upwardly Mobile Home* in 1984, although Tammy has only been given her own show recently.[1] Weaver's one-woman performance *What Tammy Needs to Know* tells the story of Tammy Whynot, an ostensibly famous

[1] For a detailed performance history of Split Britches from 1980 to 1995 see Case 1-34 and for the script for Upwardly Mobile Home see Case 87-118.

country and western singer who now wants to become a lesbian performance artist. Tammy conveys this and other stories to the audience through a combination of country and western song and monologue. The principle part of the show is comprised of discussions with the audience. The script therefore has to allow for Weaver to repeatedly open up the performance space for her audience to speak and respond to what is presented and then find a way to return to the main structure of the performance. Due to the extremely high level of audience participation every show is different and can never be replicated, so in this article I am examining two particular performances of *What Tammy Needs to Know*, a shortened version that took place in the foyer of the Nuffield Theatre in Lancaster on 28th April 2006 and a full length performance that was staged in the Drill Hall Theatre in London on 21st May 2006. I am also considering the appearance Tammy Whynot made at the Performance Studies International conference at Queen Mary University in London on 18th June 2006, although on this occasion Weaver presented a cameo rather than a full show.

Two essential problems confront the female performer who is attempting to resist objectification in performance:

1. Performance is inherently objectifying.
2. As Mulvey outlines, female gender is socially constructed as carrier rather than creator of meaning, and the feminine body is socially positioned as an object to be viewed. (15)

All performance can be read as objectifying (and by this I mean performance in the realm of theatre and live art) since it relies on the audience being able to visually engage with the body of the actor as the space where meaning is constructed and located, that is, the performer's body is used as a tool to create meaning. The spectator must gaze at the body of the performer as the 'object' of the performance: that is,

something separate from them. In this way the performer is always *other* for the spectator. Mulvey uses a Lacanian model to examine how the objectifying gaze functions in narrative cinema. She argues that the cinematic viewing experience places the spectator in a privileged position where they are allowed to look on the unseen. This voyeuristic vantage point enables the spectator's psychic separation from the image of woman they are presented with and allows them to view the image on screen as sexual other, separated from them yet presented for their 'visual pleasure' (17). Drew Leder notes that it is only possible to move beyond looking with the objectifying gaze when empathy comes into play. He argues that empathy enables two people to experience the world from one viewpoint, removing any possibility of the objectifying gaze (96). He goes on to contend that as soon as either one of the two people stops extending her/his viewpoint from a shared look outwards towards the rest of the world and begins to see the other person as separate from them and as part of that 'rest of the world' the objectifying gaze comes in to play.[2] Leder's model of separation is always present in performance where audience and performer are entirely without a shared viewpoint, the audience *look at* the performer rather than *look with* them. This problem of objectification is doubled for the female performer who uses her body on stage - as a woman she is always already othered, resulting in her being objectified on two levels, both as woman and as performer.

Weaver begins the version of the performance shown in the Drill Hall in London walking into the space as herself. She introduces herself to the audience by giving her name and her age. She also immediately asserts her sexuality by talking about a "she" who she hasn't seen for a long-time but still thinks about, and gives a sense that the performance is going to draw heavily on her own personal history

[2] Leder's model of empathy is part of a wider argument concerning how the body is experienced under the gaze of another, however for the purposes of this article I am only considering his notion of empathy involving looking from a shared viewpoint.

stating "I'm itinerant, but I'm loyal." For most audiences of the work this information will confirm what they already know about the show, either from the pre-show publicity, or from a more in-depth knowledge of Lois Weaver as part of Split Britches. There is no shortage of knowledge about Weaver and her work; as Gwendolyn Alker notes Split Britches were one of the most widely debated companies of the 1980s and '90s amongst lesbian theatre communities. After the first introductory section of the show Weaver begins to change into Tammy both by putting on costume and by adopting the mannerisms and attitudes of her character. Weaver's Southern drawl, perhaps diluted by years of living in New York and London, becomes stronger and more pronounced and she begins the physical act of putting on her costume, cowgirl style clothes, large and very obviously fake blonde wig, brightly coloured jewellery, make up and false eyelashes. As she does this she talks the audience through the process. She discusses the difficulties of putting on false eyelashes when you are over 40 and how she loves them because "you are acknowledging that your own eyelashes are inadequate". At the end of the performance Weaver performs a strip tease. She counts to 56, her age, while removing all the signs of Tammy until she is simply herself as the performer in a red dressing gown. However, in both the Drill Hall and the Nuffield Theatre performance, she does not remove Tammy entirely and finishes the show with an acoustic country song complicating our understanding of which elements of the performance just witnessed were presented as Weaver and which as Tammy. By foregrounding her 'putting on' and 'taking off' of costume both through her actions and her speech, Weaver is highlighting how easily roles, and by extension gender roles, are constructed and is naming the props and attitudes used to do this. She turns into the uber-feminine Tammy through changing clothes and adding make-up and adopting the conventions

of country and western and burlesque performance, both forms which foreground a very particular type of femininity. However Tammy is also presented as someone who has just adopted a lesbian lifestyle and who is striving to become a performance artist. She can neither be located as the tame, slightly coy version of femininity of burlesque and country and western or as the perhaps more challenging version of femininity of the lesbian performance artist, instead she inhabits a somewhat marginal space between the two.

Elin Diamond examines the performance of male actors playing female roles in historical theatre models. Diamond states:

> Most disturbingly, when male actors impersonate female characters, though they are merely theatricalizing a discrete set of man-made gender gestures, they are, by participating in a mimetic activity becoming dangerously *like a woman*. (368)

As I have outlined, this mimesis is also present in abundance in *What Tammy Needs to Know*. Through her performance of the *character* of Tammy, Weaver becomes more like a woman than any *real* woman could ever be. Not only does Weaver engage in this mimesis but she pointedly demonstrates it is nothing more than an impersonation. This tactic of foregrounding the performance of gender and of the labour it involves is one that Split Britches use repeatedly in their work. Jaclyn Prior remarks on it in Peggy Shaw's performance in *Dress Suits to Hire* stating "[…] every lip pucker and shoulder roll working as a kind of half-baked citation of the repertoire of the feminine" (751). This makes for a compelling example of a way to expose the falsity of any essentialist view of female gender. Our gender and our objectification as women is something that is socially constructed and therefore something that we can deconstruct. As Sue-Ellen Case notes when she talks about Tammy Whynot in the earlier show *Upwardly Mobile Home***:** "Tammy is both the country-western star, and

the deconstruction of such a persona" (23). Weaver destabilises the notion of fixed gender identification by presenting how artificial the construction of gender is as well as how this mimesis is adopted. Indeed, Weaver has also used this play of gender to adopt the conventions of masculinity in *Lust and Comfort* where she performs as a man. Butler argues that gender is created through a process of repeated performative and linguistic acts. She states:

> The subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. (original emphasis) (*Gender Trouble* 145)

What Tammy Needs to Know reveals this 'regulated process of repetition' in action.[3] If gender is simply constructed through repeated performance of certain codes and conventions, as Weaver's work suggests, then we can perhaps overcome the objectification inherent in playing one version of woman simply by playing something else.

Throughout their work Split Britches have performed a variety of femininities, be this the dangerous, dark world of the film-noir femme fatale in *Dress Suits to Hire*, the working women of historical rural America in their first show Split Britches or the woman adopting masculine performance in Peggy Shaw's solo show *Menopausal Gentleman*. When read as a whole, their work highlights the possibilities for plural femininities rather than positing a singular femininity. Weaver exaggerates a particular construction of femininity in *What Tammy Needs to Know* but contrasts this construction with a performance as herself. A further version of femininity is opened up by Weaver's common identification as a femme lesbian woman. What unites all

[3] For a full discussion of the social construction of gender see Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 1993).

these performances of female gender is the notion that femininity becomes something that Split Britches can adopt and disrupt as they choose and they never attempt to convince an audience that any of this is anything more than performance. The actors draw attention to their play at being these people rather than their adoption of a role in the usual theatrical sense and this adds to the power of Split Britches deconstruction of gender. [4]

Tammy Whynot often bears a striking resemblance to her creator, also a white lesbian performance artist in her mid fifties raised among Southern Baptists in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia[5], although Weaver has never had a career as a successful country and Western singer, and in her performance at Queen Mary University she confessed this to the audience in a bid to bring "authenticity and truth" to her work. Weaver does not use personal narrative to help the actor become more like the character; instead Tammy Whynot becomes more like the actor. During the performances Tammy tells a series of stories of things she has done or might have done, the line between truth and fiction is deliberately obscured. The audience don't know if these stories belong to Weaver, to Tammy, to both or to neither. For example, an audience with background knowledge on Weaver may well be aware of her strip for peace protest where she paraded naked at the Republican convention in America carrying a sign emblazoned with the words "more fucking, less fighting." During the show, Weaver tells this story as Tammy and hands around photos for the audience to have a look at. However, the woman in the pictures is clearly Weaver without the wig, false eyelashes and other accoutrements that mark her as Tammy. But then again in

[4] For a discussion of the play at work in Split Britches performances see Geraldine Harris, "Double Acts, Theatrical Couples, and Split Britches' 'Double Agency,' " *New Theatre Quarterly* 18 (2002): 211-221.

[5] Biographical information on Weaver gained from discussions with Weaver during a four day workshop run by Split Britches at Lancaster University as part of their Women Writing for Performance series of events.

these photos she has just performed a strip and is semi-naked; so is this Weaver or just Tammy undressed? Or is it Weaver performing Tammy undressed? These photographs immediately ask the audience to question whose story this is and who is telling it.

The level of autobiography and ambiguity between the character of Tammy and her creator is essential in terms of the show's critique of the performance and construction of gender. Without this complexity Tammy would not be an exaggeration of femininity at all, she would simply be a comic book character**.**

Laura Marcus notes that autobiography is a powerful tool that enables the author to move between subject and object position; the performer who employs autobiography in their work is both the object of study and the speaking subject that creates the work. Marcus argues that in this way autobiography "transcends" these subject positions making them redundant rather than "transgressing" a binary opposition (14). Weaver's use of autobiography enables the audience to share in her view of the world, looking out together from one viewpoint as in Leder's call for empathy in order to overcome the objectifying gaze. If, as Marcus argues and as I have argued through my application of Leder's proposal, through the use of autobiography it is possible to transcend the position of subject and object, autobiography must also be a powerful tool to overcome objectification. Claire McDonald maintains that autobiography enables a female artist to "confirm her legitimacy and coherence as a speaker while exploring the complexities and fragmentation of her experience" (188). Weaver in *What Tammy Needs to Know* is drawing on this "complexit[y] and fragmentation" through her use of autobiographical material. She employs her own seemingly contradictory background both as 'country gal' raised among Southern Baptists in rural America and as cutting edge lesbian

performance artist. She finds a way to bring these two elements together in the character of Tammy Whynot. Altogether, the complexity of the performance and the shared viewpoint force the audience to engage with Weaver -the speaking and multifaceted subject- rather than simply viewing her as the site of performance. When coupled with Weaver's stressing of the construction of gender it removes any chance of seeing Tammy as the normalised version of femininity that Mulvey argues is essential in order for the objectifying gaze to function. This is a significant step towards overcoming the objectification in performance.

Lacan states that the gaze can be a multidirectional model where the person viewing is also the object of their object or a newly introduced third person's gaze (72). That is, he develops the gaze from the one-way model he first proposes (and that is employed by Mulvey to examine how the gaze functions in narrative cinema) and makes it reciprocal, the person being viewed can look back and the original spectator is placed within the visual frame. Lacan's model presents some interesting possibilities in live performance where the performer can directly return the spectator's gaze and the audience can see one another. This possibility of seeing the people looking on is avoided through the use of conventions such as the raised stage and darkened auditorium in much West End/Broadway theatre. In Weaver's work these devices are dispensed with; the performance takes place in a studio space where both audience and performer are well lit and seated café-style with the performance taking place around the audience's seats and tables. Weaver looks back at her audience and directly engages them in conversation preventing them from inhabiting the voyeuristic spectator position outlined in Mulvey's gaze. Thus, the audience is as much part of the spectacle as the performer and at times the visual and aural focus of everyone in the room will be directed at individual audience members. Not only does

Weaver make the audience the centre of attention, but she also brings the focus to individual members of the audience preventing them from hiding as part of a larger crowd. In doing so, she turns the gaze back to the audience. The audience members are forced to write the performance on their own bodies and with their own words. If they are going to objectify Weaver with their gaze they are also going to have to face being viewed themselves, placing the spectators in a similar subject position to the performer.

Weaver's use of the devices of returning the gaze, autobiography and the foregrounding of the construction of femininity presents a compelling set of theoretical strategies for resisting objectification in performance. For the two full length performances discussed in this paper the audience has been almost exclusively female. It has also been staged in a venue noted for staging lesbian work and in a feminist theatre conference. Weaver's cameo appearance at the Performance Studies International conference at Queen Mary University was part of a discussion about the role of artists in debates on human rights. These are all arenas in which, it might be assumed, the audience is going to be supportive of a presentation of the possibilities for deconstructing gender and objectification, however, certain audience reactions to the work bring this into question. At the Lancaster performance Weaver had some difficulty taking off her neckerchief and an audience member offered to assist calling out "can I help you with that." Weaver accepted the help. Later in this scene she comes to remove her bra, this was greeted with an enthusiastic cry from the audience of "can I help you with that!" Although this could be read as an ironic response with audience members highlighting the performance of objectification that Weaver has presented, I propose a more complex reading of the role of sexuality and desire in Weaver's work. Instead of seeing the eradication of objectification as necessitating

the destruction of desire, Weaver presents a place where alternate models of desire are privileged. In order to overcome objectification it is not necessary to become sexless. As another performance artist, Carolee Schneemann, has said, we should still express our desire and be desired by others and we should acknowledge and embrace our existence as sexual beings in our performances (194). Weaver's work offers strategies which allow women to take control of our objectification and to define it within our own terms; not to be limited *only* to being the sexual object or other for a patriarchal society but to determine how we both celebrate and exploit our own sexuality and desire. As Elin Diamond says when discussing Tammy Whynot in *Upwardly Mobile Home*:

> Through subtle exaggeration, Weaver defuses the obvious fetishization inherent in that role, even as she reroutes Tammy's seductiveness for the spectatorial pleasure of her generally all-woman, generally lesbian audiences at the WOW Cafe in New York's East Village. Weaver foregrounds Tammy's exploitation "without" (as Irigaray puts it) "allowing herself to be simply reduced to it". On the contrary, Weaver, a skilled performer, can explore the desire that drives the fetishizing, exploitative gaze, but in a "stage set-up" that deliberately privileges the female eye. (373)

Through her strategies of foregrounding the construction of femininity, her use of autobiography and her turning back of the gaze on the audience Weaver performs a theatre that goes beyond resistance of objectification. She completely transcends the binary opposition of 'objectified' or 'not objectified' and offers an alternate way of looking at the female from outside the patriarchal construction of sexual 'other.'

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