

RealDolls™ and Real Men:

Understanding Socially Constructed Identity and the Subjective effects of RealDoll

Ownership through Amber Hawk Swanson's *Amber Doll Project*

A Senior Project By

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Submitted to the Art History Department, School of Humanities

In fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College

State University of New York

December 2022

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“Toys *always mean something*, and this something is always entirely socialized, constituted by the myths or the techniques of modern adult life... faced with this world of faithful and complicated objects, the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it”

– Roland Barthes on toys, *Mythologies*¹

Starting in the mid-1990s, a company called Abyss Creations based in San Marcos, CA began manufacturing a product known as the RealDoll, a silicone sexual surrogate doll manufactured to mimic a “real” human sexual partner.² For certain “hetero-outsider presenting men” who are frustrated with the complexities of dating “organic” women, RealDolls have become an alternative option (tool) for how they might structure their lives.³ These men find RealDolls preferable to organic women as both sexual and life partners. Amber Hawk Swanson, a queer performance artist and sculptor, discovered RealDolls through online forums of such men who buy, live with, and claim to have complex and loving relationships with their RealDolls. After going through her own difficulties coming out as queer and struggling to date women, Hawk Swanson discovered an unexpected affinity with doll husbands from online forums who spoke of finding real fulfillment in their Doll relationships.⁴ Hawk Swanson leaned into the identification she found with these online, outsider communities and decided to buy her own RealDoll—with the specification that she wanted it to look just like her. Thus, both Amber Doll and the *Amber Doll Project* were born. RuPaul, the queen of commercially televised drag,

¹ Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York, NY: Noonday Press, 1991. P.53-54

² Whitney, Jennifer Dawn. “‘Beyond Fake’: Real Dolls™ and the Posthuman Troubling of Femininity and Desire.” *Assuming Gender* 1, no. 1 (2010): p.71

³ Hawk Swanson, Amber. “Amber Doll.” Amber Hawk Swanson. <https://amberhawkswanson.com/Amber-Doll>.

⁴ Getsy, David J. “Queer Exercises: Amber Hawk Swanson's Performances of Self-Realization.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 19, no. 4 (2013): 465–85.

says, “if you can’t love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else?”⁵ But what if it’s not so easy to draw a line between self and other? And what if understanding and thus loving oneself comes not from finding and accepting some substantive or essential identity that exists internally, but instead through a social understanding of one’s place or identification within historically constructed frameworks of gender, desire, and power?

For theorist Judith Butler, identity is not an internal truth, but a compelled social performance of certain actions which, through repetition, constitute what we call “identity” (and frequently because of coercive social norms and injunctions results in cisgender, heterosexual identities). By this logic, to even have a “self” in the first place requires at least some sociality, and to understand and thus to love that “self” relies on a navigation of these external and socially constructed frameworks. Butler writes:

“the very injunction to be a given gender[identity] takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once. The coexistence or convergence of such discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment; it is not a transcendental subject who enables action in the midst of such a convergence. There is no self that is prior to the convergence or who maintains “integrity” prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field. There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very “taking up” is enabled by the tool lying there.”⁶

In some respects, love, along with other kinds of social interactions and relationships, is a “tool” of subjectification in a Butlerian sense, in that it acts as a discursive position (to be a lover and to be loved) which produces a certain kind of social subject (one which is desired, desirable, and thus accepted by other social subjects). When we think of sexual orientation, loving beyond the

⁵ Charles, RuPaul Andre. *Ru Paul's Drag Race*, Seasons 1-14. World of Wonder; LogoTV, VH1, 2009.

⁶ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York; London: Routledge, 2006. p.185

constraints of cis-het normativity produces “queer” subjects (and is a means of subverting discursive injunctions in an attempt to reconfigure and redeploy them). Thus, the *kind* of tool taken up (queer love as opposed to heteronormative love) produces various subjective effects which in turn produce different modes of sociality. What happens, however, when subjects abdicate the social roles of desire entirely, and what happens when the social roles of love and desire are directed towards an inanimate object? How does this change the subjects that are produced and how does it restructure the modes of sociality they partake in?

To answer some of these questions, I am analyzing the works of performance artist Amber Hawk Swanson, such as *Amber Doll Project*, *Amber Doll > TILIKUM*, *Doll Closet*, and *Dollstock / DollPile*, that involve RealDolls and the communities which surround them. I am reading Hawk Swanson’s work in conjunction with theorists such as Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, and Luce Irigaray whose collective writings help us understand the taken-for-granted contours of subjectivity itself—how it is constructed, experienced, and discussed—as well as the way that sexual specificity is at times ignored in the philosophical discussion surrounding subjectivity and how these discussions change when one views gender, sexuality, and race as being constructed elements which in turn construct subjective experience. These theoretical frameworks will help to illustrate the mechanisms that RealDolls provide that allow certain people—doll husbands—to use them as tools to fashion and anchor their sense of self and their subjective experience. They will also give us the language to specifically define the various models of selfhood that are constructed by engaging in RealDoll relationships. Finally, I will discuss how these asocial relationships allow for doll husbands to form new frameworks of sociality unique to their own communities of other doll husbands, mostly in instances of online interactions but also in certain cases of physically performed and in-person rituals.

The Amber Doll Project and Surrounding Works

In 2006 After Amber Doll was manufactured, she and Hawk Swanson were married in matching dresses at a Las Vegas ceremony, which was well documented through photography and video vignettes. The *Amber Doll Project* exists as an amalgamation of photography, live performance, broadcasted video performance, and written documentation by the artist. One such video documents the making of Amber Doll at the Abyss Creations factory in San Marcos, CA, starting with the process of copying Hawk Swanson's own features to make the Amber Doll mold, and ending with the artist dress shopping for her and Amber Doll's twin wedding gowns (a wry way of highlighting the size discrepancy between Hawk Swanson and Amber Doll, who despite being the largest size of RealDoll available on the market is still several sizes smaller than her "organic" original). After their wedding, Hawk Swanson lived and collaborated with Amber Doll, photographing moments of their shared domestic life and public excursions. In addition to the photographs, Hawk Swanson staged several instances of public encounters at ritually and socially charged sites, such as football tailgate parties or roller-skating rinks, where Amber Doll was left unattended, and Hawk Swanson could observe how strangers, friends, and colleagues alike would interact with her inanimate counterpart. During these experiments, Hawk Swanson noted how "Amber Doll's passivity seemed to provide passersby with unwitting consent."⁷ It is worth noting here that Hawk Swanson uses language when describing Amber Doll that implies full personhood. Hawk Swanson has given Amber Doll pronouns (she/her/hers), boundaries, and the identification she has with the doll runs to the point of feeling that "her" consent is able to be violated—an interesting implication given that a doll is not able

⁷ Hawk Swanson. "Amber Doll."

to voice consent in the first place. Beyond the stated feminist inquiry into self-objectification and hyperfemininity that the Amber Doll Project seems to pose, the subjectification of Amber Doll and other RealDolls is a structural foundation of the *Amber Doll Project*. My investigation centers on the nature of this foundation, and I will return to its interrogation later.

First, however, we need to consider the public and scholarly reception of the Amber Doll Project to further our understanding of the *Amber Doll Project* as a whole. Online, press about the *Amber Doll Project* elicited sexually charged and aggressive responses similar to those that happened in real life, this time directed towards both Amber Doll *and* Hawk Swanson. Commenters debated the efficacy of the project—whether the self-objectifying nature of Hawk Swanson’s work could really be an effective tool of feminist critique, the ethics surrounding the manufacture and ownership of RealDolls, the elitist nature of an overly academic art world that produces confounding work—as well as degrading Hawk Swanson by insulting her appearance and intelligence, commenting on her physical lack in comparison to her idealized silicone twin, or simply sexualizing the two with crude remarks.⁸ Hawk Swanson was equally disgusted and intrigued by the comments, and specifically took interest in the way online forums and the anonymity they offered allowed for an audience to, at best, freely critique and, at worst, dehumanize her without any perceived consequence. Hawk Swanson decided to self-publish every comment, verbatim, in a book titled *Online Comments* which eventually evolved into a sequel performance to the *Amber Doll Project*.

Over the five years that Hawk Swanson spent on the *Amber Doll Project*, she grew to be attached not only to Amber Doll, who she came to view as a partner in life, love, and art, but to the community of people she met through online forums devoted to RealDoll ownership. A large

⁸ Hawk Swanson, Amber. *Online Comments*. www.amberhawkswanson.com/Publications-texts, 2019.

part of Hawk Swanson’s doll project, which I perceive to be frequently glossed over in the literature surrounding her work, is the intensity with which she was involved in these marginal communities of Doll-owning men—who self-identify as Doll husbands—the sincere affinity she felt towards them, and the awkward fact of the seemingly earnest love that Hawk Swanson and other Doll husbands report having for their synthetic paramours. The complicated and uncomfortable nature of Hawk Swanson’s work in *Amber Doll Project* and beyond is that she engages with these communities directly, not with scholarly and critical distance as a cultural anthropologist might but rather as a community member herself.

When reading Hawk Swanson’s publication *All That is Left of You/ Everything You Are Now*, one is left with a clearer sense of the tenuous, confusing, yet deeply felt romantic nature of her relationship with Amber Doll. Hawk Swanson wrote *All That is Left of You/ Everything You Are Now* in 2011 after ending her relationship with Amber Doll by ceremonially transforming her into a crude model of the orca whale Tilikum who, as stated by the artist, “lived in captivity at SeaWorld and was involved in the deaths of three people.”⁹ Hawk Swanson’s mission in converting Amber Doll into Tilikum was to highlight the intricacies of both Amber Doll’s and Tilikum’s captivity and object-positions while also engaging with the form of visual spectacle to critique how those at the center of spectacle often end up quite dehumanized, literally torn apart. *All That is Left of You/ Everything You Are Now* was a peculiar byproduct of this performance, and serves as the sole documentation of the conclusion of Hawk Swanson and Amber Doll’s relationship (breakup). The writing is formatted as a longform confessional love letter, and is dedicated to the pieces of Amber Doll that were left over after her dismemberment and

⁹ Hawk Swanson, Amber. “Amber Doll > TILIKUM.” Amber Hawk Swanson. Accessed December 5th, 2022. <https://amberhawkswanson.com/Amber-Doll-TILIKUM>

transformation into Tilikum. Hawk Swanson gushes about her conflicting feelings towards Amber Doll in poorly edited, pre-teen-esque diaristic prose:

“i am here sitting next to all that is left of you and everything you are now and i’m just really grateful to you for everything but the thing is. that moment when i made the first cut i was thinking about us. about what we need like our needs...
i know you have a lot to say about being the fetish object from before (and where were you when i was the grotesque one but you don’t have to answer i know that isn’t fair and i know grotesque isn’t the word exactly). you are still an object this minute i think you’d say,”¹⁰

one could be forgiven for wondering whether these emotions Hawk Swanson writes about having for Amber Doll are “real” or whether they are merely part of an elaborate performance in which Hawk Swanson pantomimes love for her silicone body double to drive up shock value and garner attention. This question takes for granted, however, what constitutes “real” or “fake” and whether emotions may or may not constitute reality. Hawk Swanson makes clear in an interview with Nicole Pasulka for Diet Gallery’s newsletter that the inspiration for her work stems from deeply felt moments of unexpected affinity or impulses, and that while her initial interest in RealDolls was academic, her own desire and love for Amber Doll just “seeped in.”¹¹ Whether or not we believe in Hawk Swanson’s love and desire is beside the point: this seepage of love and desire, and the volatile aspects of identification and identity, are integral to our understanding of *Amber Doll Project* and the surrounding works.

The scholarly and critical reception of the *Amber Doll Project* tends to frame the work positively, as a successful feminist exploration of self-objectification, victim-victimizer dynamics, agency, complicity, and a post-humanist critique of hyperfemininity. A lot of this writing focuses on the objectification of Amber Hawk Swanson and the objectification of Amber

¹⁰ Hawk Swanson, Amber. *All That Is Left of You / Everything You Are Now*. Chicago, IL: BOLT Gallery, 2012.

¹¹ Pasulka, Nicole. “An Interview with Amber Hawk Swanson” Diet Newsletter. Miami: Diet Gallery, June 2008.

Doll. To consider this for a moment, it is quite interesting that Amber Hawk Swanson has invested our attention and concern in the objectification of something that is, in fact, an object. The *Amber Doll Project* asks us at times to see Amber Doll as a victim, and at all times to see her as an entity who is personified in her own right—even if that presumed personhood is inextricably entwined with Hawk Swanson’s own subjectivity. What is interesting about the writing surrounding Hawk Swanson’s work is that Amber Doll’s subject-status is rarely the point of investigation. Instead, writers focus on the feminist implications of the work and the way Amber Hawk Swanson as a subject partakes in self-objectification. My object of inquiry in researching and understanding the *Amber Doll Project* is to consider the taken-for-granted boundaries of subjectivity itself. I am concerned less with whether Hawk Swanson’s feelings about Amber Doll are “real”, but more precisely with the question of the real as it is used to define subjectivity and more specifically gendered subjectivity.

Four years after the *Amber Doll Project* came to a close, Hawk Swanson began a short-term project borne of a multi-year friendship, titled *Doll Closet*, which consisted of a seven-day livestream where she conversed with an anonymous doll owner and longtime online correspondent, “Jesse,” over a series of phone calls. Jesse spoke about how, as a cis-het-presenting man with a wife, having a doll was a site for gender experimentation and exploration. From a very early age, Jesse enjoyed what he described as “cross-dressing,” i.e. hiding in his grandmother’s closet and trying on her clothes. This was generally met with harsh negative feedback from his family members, so as he grew up Jesse learned to hide his desire to wear lingerie, paint his nails, shave his legs, and try on dresses and heels. He finally bought his first doll, Heather, in the late ‘90s when he married his first wife, so that he could enact this feminine self on a surrogate instead of implicating his own body in his gender exploration. Hawk Swanson

used her time on the livestream with Jesse to recreate a secret closet that Jesse built in his house to hide and store Heather. The conversations between Hawk Swanson and Jesse generally began with shop talk focused on the technical experience required to use power tools and build walls and doors, topics which were foreign to Hawk Swanson but familiar to Jesse. In exchange for his construction expertise, Hawk Swanson became a confidant to whom Jesse could open up about his complicated life-long relationship to a transfeminine spectrum, and the way that Heather acted as a “gender surrogate and psychic prosthetic” onto which he could project his feminine side.¹² Jesse explains on the livestream that in the rural, socially conservative areas where he lives, it would be easier for him to be “caught” owning a sex Doll than be outed as “being a cross dresser or something.”¹³ The complicated nature of Jesse’s gendered experience—both wanting to be a man for social and cultural purposes yet wanting desperately to experience femininity in his private physical, sexual, and emotional life—complicates and defines his relationship with Heather, and for the purposes of this investigation helps to elucidate certain psychological mechanisms that doll relationships provide for their owners.

It is important to explore how *Amber Doll Project*, *Doll Closet*, and the larger world of RealDoll relationships, offer a uniquely powerful way to reconsider the nature of identity as negotiated through desire, gender, and the construction of subject/object relations. While an outsider may assume that men who buy RealDolls merely want to use them for sex because they harbor a hatred for “organic” women and want to act out violent and misogynistic impulses that they otherwise could not, Hawk Swanson’s exploration into this world offers us another way to

¹² Hawk Swanson, Amber. “Doll Closet.” Amber Hawk Swanson. <https://amberhawkswanson.com/Doll-Closet>.

¹³ Hawk Swanson, Amber. *Doll Closet*. Belfast, UK: Paragon Studios Project Space, 2017. p.54

understand the purpose that RealDolls, and their specific form of asocial companionship, might serve. What Hawk Swanson and Jesse's relationships with Amber Doll and Heather, respectively, reveal to us about the larger nature of all doll relationships is, rather than being solely about the objectification of a subject (i.e. Hawk Swanson's self-objectification or the objectification of women in general by the sex Doll industry), RealDoll relations, on a personal level, appear equally to be about the subjectification of an object. These subjectifying and objectifying processes happen constantly, simultaneously, and work in both directions. To illustrate this point, I will expand on the phrases "objectification of a subject" and "subjectification of an object" and elaborate how these psychological and social (or asocial) processes relate to the construction of identity, subjecthood, and gender in the context of a larger philosophical conversation surrounding the nature of subjectivity.

Objectification of a Subject

Both Hawk Swanson and Jesse are interesting case studies as doll owners because of their explicitly stated identification with their Doll. In Jesse's case, his femininity is enacted on and activated by his doll. In order to maintain the illusion of a cisgender, heterosexual, male-passing subject, Jesse's femininity exists only in an object state through Heather. In Hawk Swanson's case, Amber Doll was made to look like her, and this added a layer of self-implication to the relationship between Hawk Swanson and Amber Doll that is echoed, albeit much more quietly, in other doll relationship dynamics. What is easy to see in Jesse and Hawk Swanson's relationships with their dolls is that Jesse views Heather as simultaneously being Jesse and not-Jesse just as Hawk Swanson views Amber Doll as simultaneously being Amber and not-Amber. What is difficult to see is that this is also true for other Doll husbands and their dolls. Whether

other users claim to experience self-identification with their Doll or not, they are practicing self-objectification by defining and performing their own relationship with femininity—specifically idealized hyperfemininity—through their Dolls.

The connection between Amber and Amber Doll was not just about same-sex femme desire, nor a cut and dry commentary about fetishizing non-human objects. Amber Doll became a site where Hawk Swanson could enact agency in her struggle to come to terms with femininity as a structure that has been imposed upon her, at the same time that she was able to explore her affinity for femininity both in the way she identifies with it herself (addressing the self-objectification we all partake in when performing as gendered subjects) and desires it in other people (as a self-described queer femme seeking and failing to have relationships with other women). This is the feminist aspect of Hawk Swanson’s work that most critics comment on when writing about *Amber Doll Project*.

Throughout their writing on gender and sexuality, Butler has discussed the ways in which we are always constantly seeing ourselves as objects in order to measure and perfect our performances of gender in comparison to what we believe an ideal gender performance might look like. Butler writes, in their 1993 book *Bodies That Matter*, that,

“Insofar as heterosexual gender norms produce inapproximable ideals, heterosexuality can be said to operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’. These are for the most part compulsory performances, ones which none of us choose, but which each of us is forced to negotiate...Such norms are haunted by their own inefficiency; hence, the anxiously repeated effort to install and augment their jurisdiction.”¹⁴

This “anxiously repeated effort to install and augment [the] jurisdiction” of our deeply internalized inapproximable gender ideals is part of this process of performing gendered

¹⁴ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York, NY: Routledge, 1993. p.257

subjectivity. In Hawk Swanson’s work, this kind of self-objectification is revealed to be— through her rigorous relationship with her own personalized inapproximable gender ideal in the form of Amber Doll—a requirement of appearing to be a cohesive, intact, and culturally legible gendered subject.

Elizabeth Grosz, in her book *Volatile Bodies*, writes that “all of us, men as much as women, are caught up in modes of self-production and self-observation; these modes may entwine us in various networks of power, but never do they render us merely passive and compliant.”¹⁵ Grosz attempts to rework our understanding of how subjectivity is embodied, not to make a case for sexual essentialism but so that we can better understand how corporeal experience forms our subjective experience and vice versa, rather than viewing the two as mutually exclusive spheres. In both *Amber Doll Project* and *Doll Closet*, Amber Doll and Heather could be said to represent the way Hawk Swanson’s and Jesse’s respective modes of self-production require self-observation and self-objectification, while simultaneously acting as a literalization of their grappling for agency within “networks of power” (codified and acceptable modes of expressing ones gender in the confines of cisgendered and heterosexual normativity) by toying with hyperfeminine ideals in order to both critique and partake in performances of femininity. *Amber Doll Project* and *Doll Closet* both highlight the ways that objectification is seemingly required in the relationship one has with oneself and one’s own subjectivity as it plays out in the processes of fashioning oneself as an object of desire and thus as a gendered subject in a social hierarchy where performing one’s gender well is rewarded.

¹⁵ Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994. p.144

Subjectification of an Object

The cases of Hawk Swanson's and Jesse's relationships with their dolls can be informative beyond attempting to understand their respective relationships with gender, femininity, and self-objectification. In many ways, it feels more comfortable to use Hawk Swanson and Jesse as objects of study because they are both keenly aware of the double movement of subjectification and objectification between them and their dolls. Hawk Swanson's and Jesse's queerness, and the explicitly stated self-referentiality of both their doll relationships, make their cases clearer to talk about in terms of how their own subjectivity is implicated in the subjectification of their dolls, as well as how they see themselves as objects in order to perform their genders. This raises the question: what does it mean to extrapolate their self-aware and self-critical understanding to a larger doll community who may or may not be aware of the mechanisms of subjectification and objectification in which they partake?

Hawk Swanson's work complicates and queers our preliminary understanding of what it means to have a sex doll, perform one's gender, or perform one's gender on or with a sex doll by pointing to the inherently queer act of sex doll ownership as a gender affirming practice. Even if these men aren't explicitly seeking out a means to play out the experience of being feminine—perhaps they are looking for a way to prop up their own sense of their masculinity by pursuing the fantasy of being with the “perfect” hyperfeminine women—they are still actively engaging with and animating feminine subjectivity, and this feminine subjectivity which they enact is their own internalized idea of what they believe ideal womanhood and femininity to look like, act like, think like, and have sex like.

On the one hand, men who present as cisgender and heterosexual but who partake in relationships with hyperfeminine sex dolls seem to reproduce and support heteropatriarchal power structures, such as the objectification and dehumanization of women, in order to reproduce women's bodies as a sexual commodity that is constantly available for male consumption. This understanding of sex doll relations centers the heterosexual masculine subject and concretizes his power. The hyperfemininity and inexhaustible sexual availability of a passive doll confirms and stabilizes the male user's identity (masculinity) and power in a comforting way, even when he cannot sustain relationships and exercise power over so-called "organic" women. In fact, a part of the fetish of the sex doll appears to be that a male user's subjectivity, his sense of self, is affirmed in a way that a relationship with an "organic" woman might not allow, because living people are volatile and unfixed in a way that dolls are not, and dolls allow the ultimate display of male dominance and ownership over a completely passive and feminized object. This conception of sex dolls as objects of male power, and counterparts which serve to prop up male subjectivity, is certainly valid and can be used to understand aspects of sex Doll relations as well as the way some men relate to or view their Dolls. Within the RealDoll's hyperbolization of femininity and seemingly heterosexual desire, however, there lies a contradiction wherein a masculine subject is animating the feminine by projecting his own subjectivity onto his RealDoll.

Jesse's relationship with Heather and the self-aware way in which he realizes she is a locus for his own feminine identity demonstrates, in a queer context, the mechanism of psychic projection that allows him to use his Doll as surface on which he can perform femininity while maintaining the illusion of a cisgender, heterosexual, male-passing subject. Whether they identify as queer or not, all men who own, dress up, have sex with, and claim to love their

RealDolls are performing their version of feminine subjectivity through their dolls. Just as Hawk Swanson and Jesse are using languages of self-objectification to sort out their own relationships to femininity and desire as they simultaneously subjectify their dolls through psychic projection of their own feminine consciousness, cisgendered and heterosexual men who own RealDolls are sorting out their relationships with masculinity and femininity through similar processes.

To recapitulate these processes, subjects are objectifying themselves in order to perform gender (and specifically to enact their gendered subjectivity on a silicone sexual surrogate), they are subjectifying their dolls by this act of projection and animation, and this process of subjectifying their dolls reinforces their own conception of their gendered subjectivity within themselves which means that they are also subjectifying themselves as they subjectify their dolls (and objectifying themselves as they objectify their Dolls). It is clear to see these processes at work in doll-human relationships because RealDolls lack their own subjective experience and are made to be activated by human users. Judging this phenomenon as a good or bad practice is not so much my point of investigation as it is to take an interest in the ways in which we all, RealDoll user or not, employ these same dual processes to perform gendered subjectivity and frame that subjectivity within the social context of our relationships with others. The question at stake here is to investigate the ways that the constructed nature of personhood itself is dependent—or is not dependent—on intersubjective relationships.

Defining and understanding the dual movement of subjectification and objectification helps to elucidate how doll relationships provide mechanisms of subjectification at the level of gender performance (social identity) and projective displacement (psychological self-understanding). This type of subjectification fashions subjects that are able to situate themselves as social entities within in a cultural context along with other legibly gendered subjects. Whether

or not we name them using the terms I have used (such as self-objectification, psychic projection, etc.) these are social processes which we all partake in and are likely aware of on some level. Social fields may inform the construction of our subjective experience through intersubjective relationships, but the types of relationships in Amber Hawk Swanson's work that I am addressing are not intersubjective, except insofar as doll husbands form communities with other doll husbands. Otherwise, they are notably self-referential, and the asocial nature of RealDoll Relationships produces different effects than the subjectification that happens in social relationships. In a chapter of her book which addresses phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and body images as "inside out" modes and mechanisms of self-production, Elizabeth Grosz discusses how the phenomenon of consciousness is also affirmed through processes rooted in the body—more specifically in perception and sensation. To understand the subjective effects that asocial RealDoll relationships produce, another layer of investigation into the way the self is created not as a cohesive identity for social purposes but as a collection of perceptual phenomena is necessary.

The Flesh and the Void

Turning to Elizabeth Grosz's discussion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theoretical paradigm of "the flesh" may help to define some of these alternate, perceptual subjectification processes. In Grosz's terms, Merleau-Ponty uses "the flesh" to define subjectivity "not as plenitude, self-identity, or substance [essentialism] but as divergence or non-coincidence... flesh is being's reversibility, its capacity to fold in on itself, a dual orientation inward and outward... the (potentially reversible) position of both subject and object."¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty uses the

¹⁶ Grosz. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. 1994. p.100

subject-object reversibility of the flesh to argue that subjectivity is constituted by perception, and that perception is a simultaneous mind-body process that rests on “the condition of both seeing and being seen, touching and being touched,” in short, the condition of being both subject and object.¹⁷ If the self-reflexive awareness of touch is part of the definition of “the flesh” and thus foundational to the way we create and perceive our subjective experience, do we need others to complete our process of self-realization? I think men who have relationships with RealDolls would say no—they feel that their doll provides this service of reflexivity for them. RealDoll owners commonly talk about the phenomenon of seeing and feeling seen by their doll, much like Grosz describes Merleau-Ponty’s double movement of the flesh touching and being touched as implying that “seeing [and touching] entails having a body that is itself capable of being seen [and touched], that is visible [tangible].”¹⁸ In essence, submitting oneself to objecthood is a means of the self-realization of one’s subjecthood, and RealDoll owners are satisfied by the ways their Dolls fulfill this process without having to involve another, “organic” person.

Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the flesh is not entirely unproblematic, however, and Grosz takes interest in it specifically for this reason. She points out how Merleau-Ponty tellingly describes the reflexivity and enfolding of the flesh’s perceptual self-realization as “invagination,”¹⁹ which carries into a discussion of Luce Irigaray’s critique of the flesh that calls into question the viability of a framework which places visibility and tangibility, as perceptual processes, on equal footing when, by definition, “the tangible provides the preconditions and the

¹⁷ Grosz. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. 1994. p.95

¹⁸ Grosz. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. 1994. p.101

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 104

grounds of the visible... the one is in fact the foundation and origin of the other.”²⁰ Irigaray’s prioritization of tangibility as precursory to visibility is grounded in her concern with the prenatal condition, the relationship the fetus has to the mother in the womb, but which also applies to any situation where an interior may be felt while remaining out of sight. Irigaray’s critique of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the flesh reveals how “the feminine” is situated as “the unspoken, disembodied underside of the flesh,”²¹ literally an unseen depth which, much like the interior of a vagina, cannot be seen but which can be felt and entered and, in the case of men and their sex dolls, used for masturbatory purposes (both sexually and in terms of personal identity-formation). It is also true that in the case of RealDolls, the invaginated, “disembodied underside” of the flesh which represents femininity and acts as a subjectification tool for masculine consciousness is literally unspoken—it lacks a voice because it is an inanimate, passive, endlessly available object. In this parallel I have drawn, the RealDoll’s role in the processes of self-realization is to act as a prop in the theatre of the flesh, or more accurately, to play the role of unspoken witness to a user’s self-formation through visual and tactile perception.

In understanding Irigaray’s critique of Merleu-Ponty, it is made clear how the construction of phallogentric language allows those aligned with patriarchal systems of knowledge and thought to prop up their masculine subject-status by using this unnamable void of femininity as a self-formation or subjectification tool (a means of using the other to define the self), to construct masculine agency and plenitude as a binary opposite to femininity’s passivity and lack. If masculine subjectivity is constructed upon the feminine, however, and the feminine itself is a void created by phallogentric language processes, then the masculine, too is a construct

²⁰ Ibid, 106

²¹ Ibid, 103

created by phallogentric language. What we learn from reading the work of Judith Butler in conjunction with Irigaray is a fuller picture of the way all identity, masculine as much as feminine as much as nonbinary identities, are constructed upon what is essentially an empty void masked by a naturalized artifice of internalized identity, and that the “congealing” of these various identities into the appearance of static, reified forms “is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means,” or more accurately, the exigencies of phallogentric culture.²² To Butler, what we perceive to be the essential truth of our identities are more accurately internalizations of the products of social frameworks of meaning-formation. These socially constructed and encoded facades mask and conceal the radically negative core of non-identity that Irigaray argues is positioned as the feminine by phallogentric language. Thus, all iterations of seemingly reified gendered identity are subject to the gravity of this internal void.

Furthermore, I think it is accurate to assume that the men who identify themselves as Doll Husbands turn away from conventional social relationships because they are unsatisfied specifically with the performative identities that result from traditional social relationships and desire. It is no accident that, after having difficulty existing in communities and relationships alongside organic people who are successful in following cultural injunctions specific to cis-heteronormativity, Doll Husbands invest themselves in relationships that by their peculiar nature may estrange themselves from normative communities and relationships and result in other ways of being and being with. Doll ownership is an extremely specific mode of self-production that does not come without cost or risk—that is, monetary cost of at least \$6,000 (the cost of an off-the shelf RealDoll with no customizations or modifications) and the considerable risk of

²² Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York; London: Routledge, 2006. p.43

alienating oneself from normative communities who do not understand and do not care to understand the complexities of Doll relationships. What Doll relationships provide for their owners are a tool to contend with the vertigo-inducing reality of non-essential identity. Not only do the vacuous, penetrable orifices of RealDoll physiognomy echo this emptiness, but their very Real presence offers anchor-like companionship for those who feel the effects of the sprawling vacuity of contingent and socially constructed identities. What they also provide, however, is an alternative type of performative relationship and resulting subjectification processes that are a subtle and subversive departure from the well-trodden path of cis-het male subjectification while also still masquerading as a type of heterosexuality (because Doll husbands maintain a performance of masculinity in the context of their own organic corporeality and their hyperfeminized RealDoll counterparts play the role of “woman” in their relationships). This departure asks us to view Doll ownership as a performative in the Butlerian sense—a fundamental process of identity formation that depends on the cultural specificities of the communities it governs and results in socially agreed upon commands for existing as gendered subjects. In the following section, I will discuss Doll relationships as sites for fostering alternative injunctions, and how this allows us to better understand why one might choose a Doll relationship as opposed to an organic one and the specific subjective effects and community formation that this choice produces.

Inscription to Injunction

A subsequent section of Grosz’s book, titled *The Outside In*, explores the exterior of the body as inscriptive surface and purviews the various techniques that can be engaged as mechanisms of social self-production. Grosz notes that “inscriptions mark the body as a public,

collective, social category, in modes of inclusion or membership; they form maps of social needs, requirements, and excesses”²³ Butler, in their writing, also talks about how bodily inscriptions act as a means of signifying cultural belonging or exclusion, but warns us against viewing the body as “a ready surface awaiting signification,” but rather “as a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained.” Integrating these two statements gives us an understanding of the way the body itself is produced through cultural definitions and offers us a framework for viewing RealDolls as sites of alternate inscription which decidedly do not mark or signify the corporeal form of their user for specific reasons. If taken that RealDolls act as a projective surface onto (or into) which a user may (dis)place portions of their psychic activity, it is possible to view the RealDoll as a type of prosthesis or extension of the body that operates as a not-body body (as I previously referred to Heather as a not-Jesse Jesse and Amber Doll as a not-Amber Amber). It is then viable to consider the ways RealDolls operate as sites of bodily inscription and gendered bodily inscription for their owners (much like how Jesse used Heather to explore and perform his femininity on an alternate surface). The fact that RealDolls could be an alternative means of bodily inscription which circumvents corporeal inscription is important in that it not only protects Doll owners from either identifying themselves as queer or being identified by others as queer and signals to other doll users an investment in a very specific type of self-production.

To be clear, Grosz’s writing on self-production here mostly references body building, anorexia, and other concrete changes to a person’s corporeal form, but bodily inscription can be any process that produces the body as a cultural product— in essence, bodily inscription is any method that speaks to a larger community about who one is by using signs that speak at the

²³ Grosz. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. 1994. p.140

register of the body. Grosz clarifies that “There is nothing natural or ahistorical about these modes of corporeal inscription. Through them, bodies are made amenable to the prevailing exigencies of power.”²⁴ These means of production or inscription are culturally agreed upon and exist on a spectrum from normative to non-normative based on shared cultural understandings. They have something to do with personal choice, but that choice is always mediated by what is available to a person within a social and cultural field. Grosz notes that

“There is no “natural” norm; there are only cultural forms of body, which do or do not conform to social norms. The problem is not the conformity to cultural patterns, models, or even stereotypes [which is inevitable and impossible to extricate oneself from], but which particular ones are used and with what effects.”²⁵

In the case of Doll owners, it could be argued that the effects of owning a RealDoll is an act of bodily inscription which decidedly does not conform to “normal” cultural patterns. Rather, doll owners engage in alternative methods of identity formation as an investment into the doll community—disidentifying with normative injunctions that lead to stable heterosexual relationships and gender identities and engaging with new methods of sociality unique to Doll owning communities. Judith Butler speaks about the way that *failing* to follow culturally sanctioned injunctions produces “a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated.”²⁶ Failure to execute the injunction to be a given gender and perform heteronormativity in the case of doll owners (identifying with the feminine, choosing asocial relationships over social ones) produces the effect of exceeding and defying cis-heteronormative injunctions and resulting in identification with others who have also failed to follow those same injunctions in a similar way.

²⁴ Grosz. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. 1994. p.142

²⁵ *Ibid*, 143

²⁶ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 2006. p.185

This suggests that the appeal of doll ownership isn't solely about the processes of subjectification that the RealDoll offers, although this is certainly a factor, but rather that these processes are one part of a larger desire to agree upon new injunctions unique to Doll owning communities which allow Doll Husbands to find and identify with other Doll husbands. The online community of RealDoll owners represent a collection of hetero-cis *presenting* outsider men who might in fact disidentify with that label, whether consciously or unconsciously, and crave (social, human) relationships and community which foster and understands this disidentification. Despite their choice to have an asocial relationship with an inanimate romantic partner, they are able to find social connection through their online RealDoll community platforms. In Amber Hawk Swanson's own account of the Amber Doll Project, she makes clear that her initial foray into the world of RealDolls began not with the purchase of Amber Doll, but first with her discovery of online forums of Doll owners and the identification she had with the *men* she met online. It is interesting to consider the possibility that perhaps other doll owners also discovered their interest or affinity for RealDolls and the online networks that surround them in a similar, community-first way.

The same year as she began her online performance, *Doll Closet*, Hawk Swanson first attended the annual Dollstock meeting, an event (described as a convention) where Doll husbands and their Dolls would gather and meet for a few days at a hunting lodge or cabin, socialize as an in-person (rather than online) community, and share details about their experiences being Doll Husbands. Hawk Swanson offers very little documentation of Dollstock, other than a brief description of the event and a single photo of the cabin which housed the convention, although it has its own page on her website, indicating that it was an important moment in the iterative chain of Hawk Swanson's projects involving RealDolls. She does note

that, “on the final evening of every Dollstock, Doll husbands participate in a ritual titled Dollpile during which dolls are arranged—one at a time—into an elaborately staged and sensual pile.”²⁷ It is notable that there is little documentation of the event on Hawk Swanson’s part, suggesting there is something intimate about this ritual which only doll owning community members would understand or are allowed to be a part of. Hawk Swanson’s choice of language—describing Dollstock and Dollpile as ritual—is also an indicator of the importance of this event and the unique instance of sociality that it allows. It is also worth noting other language choices that are elected by those who purchase RealDolls and engage with online RealDoll forums, firstly the choice to call themselves Doll husbands rather than Doll owners, the capitalization of the word “Doll,” and the mission to have organic communities respect and acknowledge Doll relationships. These choices represent the desire, similarly to those who chose to use non-binary pronouns, to concretize a symbolic break from the normative and escape the ideological baggage of language by creating new words or redefining old ones.

Within her spare documentation of Dollstock, Hawk Swanson notes that “It is sometimes the case that desires to *be* the material of silicone or desires to dress in the clothing purchased for dolls come up in conversation during preparations for Dollpile.”²⁸ This statement certainly speaks to the previous discussion of the desire of Doll Husbands to both self-objectify and identify with femininity, but also gives us an understanding of the way that Doll owning communities create space for alternative modes of being, where desires and needs that aren’t conventionally acceptable can be voiced to an understanding audience. In this case, Doll

²⁷ Hawk Swanson, Amber. “Dollstock / Dollpile.” Amber Hawk Swanson. <https://amberhawkswanson.com/Dollstock-Dollpile>

²⁸ Hawk Swanson, Amber. “Dollstock / Dollpile.” Amber Hawk Swanson. <https://amberhawkswanson.com/Dollstock-Dollpile>

husbands' desire for and identification with the synthetic is a means of circumventing the "organic" not necessarily due to a hatred of organic women, but perhaps due to a discomfort with the way that cis-heteronormative gender roles and relationships have been historically naturalized (positioned as organic). In this reading, the desire for and to be synthetic is an apt metaphor for the synthetically and socially constructed nature of all identity, as well as a means to subvert normative cis-het identification.

This lands us at a point where we can see doll relationships in their failure (whether intentional or not) to reproduce heterosexual relationships as parody in a Butlerian sense, echoing Butler's assertion that "gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of 'the original'... reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original."²⁹ Here, we can substitute Doll relationships for the word "gay" in this social equation, wherein the constitutive failure of Doll relationships to emulate "real" heterosexual desire exposes the subjectivizing mechanisms and fictive naturalization of heterosexual desire itself and delivers doll owners into subversive modes of sociality—through enacting doll relationships as both a kind of heterosexual parody and alternative means of subjectification—in order to build new communities which are keenly aware of the historical project of constructing and naturalizing the gender binary as a means to regulate desire and ultimately control people.

In this paper I have explored the multiple mechanisms of subjectification that RealDolls offer as well as attempted to articulate what kinds of subjective effects each mechanism produces. In the sections discussing the "objectification of subjects" and "subjectification of objects," I demonstrated how self-objectification and psychic projection are dual processes

²⁹ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 2006. p.42

which aim to produce gendered subjects in a social context, and I discussed how Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz's writing conceives of identity as a socially produced and regulated performance. In my section on "the flesh and the void," I wrote about how subjectivity may also be formulated at the perceptual and sensorial level—at the same time as it is produced as a social reality—though Grosz's discussion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory of the flesh. This carried into a reading of Luce Irigaray's critique of Merleau-Ponty, which not only brought us an understanding of how the subjectification offered by the flesh produces gendered male and female subjects wherein the male subject is positioned as plenitude and the female as lack, but also allowed me to draw a visual metaphor of the RealDoll as a type of Irigarayan void (where we imagine identity and essential self-understanding to lie) which is constructed through phallogocentric language for the purposes of propping up masculine subjectivity and power. This was then carried into a reassertion of Judith Butler's theory of identity as a socially contingent, performative construction—a disorienting realization to say the least—and an illustration of how the subjective effects of RealDoll ownership act as an anchor for this vertiginous disorientation of identity. Thus, the doll is produced as an alternate not-body-body and becomes a site of alternate injunctions, a "taking up of the tools" that are available, tools which happen to be a silicone sex Doll and the parodic re-iteration of monogamy.³⁰ The RealDoll becomes a point of convergence for people who want to exist outside of the cultural regime of cis-heteronormativity (created by the cultural substantiation/ investment in subjective processes that produce masculinity and femininity as reified identities). These regimes are subverted through the parodic proliferation of synthetic and decidedly "unnatural" RealDoll relationships that appear to conform to cis-heteronormativity, but upon closer inspection point not only to the fictive

³⁰ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 2006. p.185

naturalization of cis-heteronormativity but towards the building of a kind of communities or worlds (both by way of online RealDoll forums and physical RealDoll conventions) which function as liberatory spaces for its members who are unsatisfied with the historically naturalized construct of heterosexuality.

The Harmony Show

Amber Hawk Swanson's most recent performance work, *The Harmony Show*, is an alternating series of broadcast academic seminars and cooking show segments, both of which discuss "the way the racialized other is constructed and regarded in the predominantly white doll world—from factory to forum—while also taking up sexual racism and racial fetishism."³¹ Hawk Swanson co-hosts the performance with Davecat (an outspoken member of the RealDoll community and a longtime friend of Hawk Swanson) and his Doll companion, Sidore. The seminars and cooking shows both feature a rotation of guest scholars, artists, and friends who illuminate discussions surrounding the RealDoll community and its complexities with the particular insights that come with their fields of expertise. *The Harmony Show*, through its candid and self-aware conversation, also brings visibility to the specificities of Doll relationships and certainly normalizes and demystifies the concept of RealDolls in general. The show's website, which archives past episodes and serves as a working syllabus of scholarly readings and discussion topics, also defines a term, iDollator, for individuals who chose to love RealDolls as well as those who define themselves as allies of the doll community.³² The existence of the *Harmony Show* as both an online community and a hub of information—for both Doll

³¹ Hawk Swanson, Amber. "The Harmony Show." The Harmony Show. <https://theharmonyshow.com/>.

³² Hawk Swanson, Amber. "The Harmony Show." The Harmony Show. <https://theharmonyshow.com/>.

community members and outsiders—speaks to the desire of Hawk Swanson and other Doll husbands to legitimize and normalize their way of life, create community for those who identify, as Hawk Swanson did with doll husbands, and also address issues that exist within the Real Doll community (no community is a utopia).

The Harmony show is named after the first RealDoll, Harmony, to have Artificial Intelligence elements. The introduction of AI to RealDolls adds a new layer of complexity to this discussion and warrants further research into how Doll relationships might function differently depending on the level of intelligence Doll programming is able to simulate. AI-enabled Dolls turns my initial question of the nature of subjectivity formation and the methods and tools that help produce or stabilize our conceptions of our own subjectivities (in this case, RealDolls) into one that also now needs to address the complexities of AI (as well as address how intelligent—or subjective—the AI Dolls are in comparison to human intelligence and experience). If our own identities and subjective experiences are social constructions programmed by language, history, and genetics, what does it mean for humans to program new entities with varying degrees of intelligence or self-awareness for our own comfort and pleasure? If all experience is structured by the exigencies of social construction, what makes anything real as opposed to artificial?

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