Essay

WOMEN'S BODY TYPES: REPRESENTATION IN THE MEDIA

Sarah Baird

Ten years after first writing *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1988), Susie Orbach points out that society is still "obsessed with women's body size and body shape,"[1] fatness and thinness are still markers of a person's worth. Now, in 2014, a further 26 years on, those statements are still valid. Orbach draws attention to issues that are still as prevalent today as they were in the 1970s and 1980s. Models are getting younger and smaller, often resembling teenagers or the undeveloped bodies of tweens. The thin body remains the constant ideal to aspire to, even though all other body-based objectives from hair styles, makeup and clothes regularly change over the seasons. Images and products marketed to us through mass media are still trying to promote the notion that we need to possess the thin 'ideal body.' With the technological advancement of mass media tools, sexual objectification of women is an even bigger, more widespread issue now than it was during second wave feminism. Orbach writes that women become overweight as a way of protecting themselves from being sexually objectified by men.[2]

In the text *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), Laura Mulvey addresses the concept of the male gaze in cinema, a concept that also functions when applied to advertising. Mulvey believes that the person behind the camera is perpetually male.[3] This makes the constructed image a male-dominated and active view, thereby creating the female (who is predominantly the subject in the image) as a passive object to be looked upon. The viewer sees the images through the eyes of the heterosexual male behind the camera, and from there learns to see women as objects to be consumed. Considering that images of women in media are still framed like this, women too learn to view themselves as objects, with disastrous results. Self-objectification occurs when a person has an intense awareness of their outward appearance and begins to look at themselves from the perspective of the third person. People who self-objectify often obsess over their body parts, comparing themselves to images in the media which they believe to be real. This leads to an aspiration to attain an appearance that matches one portrayed in the media. Often this becomes an all-consuming act and leads to disordered eating behaviour in order to achieve an ideal body.

In her book *Unbearable Weight* (1993), Susan Bordo argues that anorexia and bulimia are in part caused by pressure from our consumer culture – a culture that, at present, dictates that the thin, tall, blonde women is a marker of success. The media's widespread act of objectifying women through images is a fundamental cause of eating disorders among women who, bombarded with images of the ideal body daily, become exceptionally unwell trying to achieve it.[4]

Those images are employed in the work of The Representation Project movement.[5]

Online activism is beginning to play a major role in how women are represented in the media. The Representation Project tackles sexism in the media and highlights the issues at stake in short annual videos. The group's Youtube clip *How the Media Failed Women in 2013*[6] emphasises, by way of current media images, how the representation of women still focuses on one particular body size, a sexualised object capable only of selling various wares, mainly to men. It goes on to highlight news media presenters and news headlines that reinforce the value of a subject's appearance and female gender above her abilities and achievements.

Figure 1. Sarah Baird, *The Reality of It*, 2012.Photograph: Sarah Baird

What *The Representation Project*[7] is doing online now is similar to Jean Kilbourne's approach in book and television interviews during Second Wave Feminism. Kilbourne collected advertisements that objectify and dismember women and used those images in her work to educate her audience about the abhorrent messages they were transmitting. Her 2014 TED talk[8] used those same advertisements from the 1950s–1970s alongside current ones to show that little has changed in the way women's bodies are used in advertising.

In addition to magazine photospreads and advertising in all manner of forms, mannequins are another tool used to promote the unattainable body ideal. I use mannequins as the main subject in my work as they are a life-size replica of the ideal.

ONLINE ACTIVISM

In April 2014, Veet (a brand of depilatory products) was forced to pull their sexist advertising campaign, "Don't risk dudeness." The campaign warned women who didn't maintain their body hair that they would become less of a woman and turn into a 'dude.'[9] Aiming to shame women into removing their body hair, the adverts showed horrified reactions to unshaven body parts from paramedics, taxi drivers and bedmates. After being 'sprung' for having body hair, the woman under the spotlight turned into a 'dude.' The resulting backlash from this advertisement, in conjunction with the *#notbuyingit* campaign,[10] resulted in Veet stopping their advertising campaign. Their attempted apology issued on Facebook informed us that three *women* came up with the simple, funny idea that we (women) would all "really relate to these real-life moments."[11]

This is not the only advertising campaign that has been withdrawn from circulation following an online protest. The *#notbuyingit* campaign[12] started by The Representation Project in 2011 is widely used on Twitter, Pinterest and Facebook. The Representation Project has developed an iPhone application whereby users anywhere can publicise sexism in advertising, seen either online or in the physical world, and post the offending image to various social media channels. A tally of the worst offending companies and individuals is also kept on The Representation Project's website. In 2015, the worst offending company is Code Babes,[13] with 955 tweets. Code Babes is a website that teaches people (men) computer coding with the aid of female models who remove their clothes as you progress through the lessons.

In conjunction with a Change.org petition, the *#notbuyingit* campaign has been responsible for the removal of an overly thin mannequin from a lingerie store in New York.[14] The offending mannequin was removed from the store window within 14 hours of the initial tweet, which was accompanied by the following statement on Twitter: "The mannequin photographed has been removed from the store and will not be used again by any La Perla boutique. We are in the process of redesigning all La Perla stores with a new concept image and the mannequins that are currently displayed in our US stores will no longer be used."[15] However, these decommissioned images and advertising campaigns are still available for viewing even when not in official use by the advertiser. So in effect, the company still wins.[16]

> So much of the female body that we see is pushed up, pinned down, sucked in, tucked in, and airbrushed. It's only presentable state is when it's altered, and so when we look at ourselves in the mirror (naked, untucked, and vulnerable) we say "My body must be wrong."[17]

The concept embodied in the above quotation is the foundation for The Expose Project (2014), an online project that aims to capture unaltered images of women encompassing a diverse range of body types.[18] Their aim is, like that of The Custom Mannequin Project, (by the author), to expose people to bodies in a positive light that are not otherwise seen as such in the media. The Expose Project is now in its second year. Ninety-eight volunteers (up from 68 in 2013) gathered for a nude photoshoot in the knowledge that their naked, unaltered bodies would be posted online in order to show others that their bodies are acceptable and in no need of alteration.

The wide reach of such online projects is a step forward for altering the view of women in media. However,

these projects tend to be a fleeting moment online and most neglect to find a physical presence which is needed to consolidate the work. The Expose Project gained worldwide media attention, with a list of over 70 different websites covering the project. All this happened over just seven days in August 2014,[19] which emphasises the short-lived visibility of online projects. The project, which works within the realms of fat activism/body acceptance, is a collaboration between activist blogger Jes Baker and photographer Liora K. Baker; it has a large online following and is involved in a range of other, related projects with both a physical and online presence.[20] Liora K is a feminist photographer who has gained a lot of attention for her involvement in this project and a series of images consisting of topless women painted with feminist slogans, titled *The Feminist Photos*[21] This kind of exposure makes The Expose Project part of the collaborators' discourse and becomes a positive tool for them to draw on in future projects.

Controversial performance artist Vanessa Beecroft has attracted strong responses from feminists. In her work *VB46* (2001), the models she uses are predominately young nude or semi-nude women playing the role of living paintings in a museum or gallery. The models she selects regularly comprise a single body type and are further made to look as alike as possible, whether simply by their attire and makeup, or by more drastic interventions such as waxing and bleaching. The advertisements calling for models for the *VB46* work caught the eye of Toxic Titties,[22] a group of performance artists who challenge conventional notions of gender and sexuality. Two members of the group passed the auditions and set to work on a plan to infiltrate Beecroft's work. The models were required to have their hair and eyebrows bleached white and – something that was not mentioned during the auditions – all other body hair was to be removed using wax. These models were treated as objects to be gazed at, unapproachable and static.

Beecroft herself rarely deals directly with her models – contact is nearly always through another person. Rules for her models consist of statements such as: "do not move too quickly, do not move too slowly, be simple, be detached … you are like an image … interpret the rules naturally, do not break the rules." Toxic Titties' impact on *VB46* did not disrupt the performance itself, but resulted in slightly better working conditions for all the models involved. Payment for the three days' work, set at $1500, was later raised to $2900. Heather Cassils of Toxic Titties had the overtime rate almost doubled to $50 per half hour, and arranged free motel rooms for models too tired to drive home after doing 15-hour working days.

Beecroft's work consistently represents one body type and one body type only, in the same way that all mannequins are one body type. Differences are subtle or non-existent, being confined to eye, hair and makeup colours. Although for Beecroft such subtle differences are 'fixed,' I do not feel her work critiques the stereotyped female body. Rather, by striving to make all models look the same, the tired theme of only one body type being acceptable is played out yet again. The extent of this was evident in the *VB46* photographic exhibition held after the *VB46* performance. Cassils, a bodybuilder, had images of her body altered in the photographed works to smooth out her muscles, giving her the normative figure Beecroft sought. Cassils had decided to stand for the entire performance – not sit or lie down when tired as instructed – to show defiance and strength, as all the models were exhausted after the long days leading up to the performance. (Ultimately, this strategy failed, as all the images that included Cassils in the photographic exhibition were taken during the days leading up to the performance and showed her seated or lying down.[23]) Beecroft further refines the role of women in her work to make them fit a stereotype of passivity. For example, the models in *VB46* were instructed to have no interaction with the audience, making them objects to be consumed.[24]

Performance artist Nao Bustamante plays the exaggerated blonde bombshell stereotype in her performance *America, The Beautiful* (1995).[25] Wearing a heavily hairsprayed blonde wig, excessive red lipstick and bronzing powder, Bustamante contorts her nude physique with packing tape in an attempt to control her flesh and make herself closer to the ideal. The audience becomes engaged with this circus-like performance of 'becoming the ideal,' with Bustamante regularly looking to them for affirmation that she is acting the way the audience expect her to behave – critiquing the idea that constant approval is needed when becoming the ideal. Further on in her performance, Bustamante rejects the audience by becoming upset at their responses. She destroys a bouquet of roses and storms off stage, only to return moments later to continue her performance in a jubilant manner.[26] Documentation of her

performance is in text and video format, freely available on Bustamante's website.[27] Unlike Beecroft, there is no altering of the image to make it perfect; Bustamante shows us the imperfect reality of the stereotyped ideal.

Throughout history, mannequins have reflected the ideal body image of the time. The body shape of mannequins is regularly modelled on real people, namely a model who fits the current body ideal. A sculptor models clay on an armature until the desired form is reached. From there the clay form is further 'refined' and made thinner in all manner of unexpected places. The hands, head and feet are made smaller, the stomach and waist whittled down, and the legs, arms and neck made longer. Leading mannequin designer Ralph Pucci has openly stated that mannequins are refined from the model in this way.[28] Mannequins serve to display the fantasy body that everyone is supposed to aspire to. In the fashion world, mannequins are used to sell the latest styles to the masses.

An image showing plus-size mannequins at a Swedish department store has been circulating on the internet since 2010; it was taken by Rebecka Silverkroon and posted on her blog.[29] In 2013 the image went viral after it was shared on the Women's Rights News Facebook page.[30] Although online conversation about these mannequins was predominately positive, there were still elements of negative body shaming, including discussion of the body types men are attracted to and the standard argument that advertising plus-size bodies (in mannequin form or not) is promoting obesity and general ill-health.

My mannequin project *The Reality of It,* 2012, is exhibiting and promoting 'one of a kind' bodies. There is no permanent reusable mold. Just as people can not be replicated en mass, neither can these mannequins. People identify with the mannequins in the project because they cover a range of body types. They're never going to match everyone completely but they are a whole lot closer than the current one size fits all approach.

Figure 2. Sarah Baird, *The Custom Mannequin Project,* 2014 BVA Hons installation at SITE 2014.

The key focus of this work is giving people a close up look at body types that they are not widely confronted with. On exhibiting the mannequins viewers will be able to walk amongst them, which enables them to identify with particular features and realise that their bodies exist in reality, what is shown in the media doesn't. Too much emphasis is placed on looking a certain way to conform to the current trend. To women, life is advertised in ways to achieve a better, thinner, younger body. My work makes people stop and think about their relationship with their body, teaching them their body is valid in its past, current and future forms.

Sarah Baird completed a BVA (Honours) from the Dunedin School of Art in 2014 and is a current candidate for a Masters degree.

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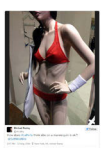
2. Ibid.
3. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure And Narrative Cinema," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader,* ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2014), 57-65.
4. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
5. The Representation Project, www.therepresentationproject.org/about/ [accessed 8 June 2014].
6. "How the Media Failed Women in 2013", 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NswJ4kO9uHc.
7. The Representation Project, www.therepresentationproject.org/about/ [accessed 8 June 2014].
8. Jean Kilbourne, The Naked Truth: Advertising's Image of Women, TEDx Talks, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uy8yLaoWybk.
9. "Don't Risk Dudeness" – Veet TV Commercial Ad, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxCHLXQffsg.
10. #notbuyingit is a hashtag initiated by The Representation Project. It started on Twitter and is now used across all social media channels to highlight sexist attitudes and behaviour relating to products, companies and public figures.
11. "Veet Pulls Stupid, Sexist Ads After Viewer Backlash", 2014, www.jezebel.com/veet-pulls-stupid-sexist-ads-after-viewer-backlash-1561331561.



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15. LA PERLA • @LaPerlaLingerie, 2014, www.twitlonger.com/show/n_1s1npcs.
16. See image online: #NotBuyingIt Michael Rudroy, La Perla Lingerie Removes Mannequin, https://storify.com/RepresentPledge/notbuyingit-win-la-perla-lingerie-removes-ribbed [accessed 12 September 2014].
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20. Jes M Baker, www.jesmbaker.com [accessed 28 September 2014]; Liora K Photography, http://www.liorakphotography.com [accessed 28 September 2014].
21. Liora K Photography, www.liorakphotography.com/photography/fine-art/feminism [accessed 28 September 2014].
22. Julia Steinmetz, Heather Cassils and Clover Leary, "Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate Vanessa Beecroft," Signs: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 31:3 (2006), 753-83.
23. Ibid.

24. Vanessa Beecroft, VB46, 2001, www.vanessabeecroft.com and at http://www.gagosian.com/artists/vanessa-beecroft [accessed 12 September 2014]

25. Nao Bustamante, *America, The Beautiful*, 1995, www.hemisphericinstitute.org

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30. Women's Rights News, www.facebook.com/womensrightsnews [accessed 27 April 2014].