

A Practice-Led and Autoethnographic Engagement with Solo  
Performance and Stigmatised Objects

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## Abstract

This research took a practice-led and autoethnographic approach to querying themes of empowerment and objectification in relation to objects used in pole dance – high heels and the vertical pole. Throughout the course of this four-year study, I have created and performed three solo works, *The Ten Inch Heels (2019)*, *Unstable (2019)* and *Pol(e)arity of Self (2020)*, whilst simultaneously collecting data about the processes on which the works were built, as well as sharing the performances with audiences and gaining feedback from them. The data stands in a variety of forms including journal entry of my creative process and the autobiographical impulses that fuelled the works, video documentation of the live and digital performance pieces, and audience discussion from peer review groups, survey, written feedback, and verbal exchange. All data collected was thematically analysed and triangulated to find a recursive five-part model that clearly shows the ways in which I have used the pole and high heels, objects that have been accused of objectifying women, to achieve a heightened sense of agency in my practice. The found *Creative and Reflective Model for Navigating Autobiographical Objects in Solo Performance to Achieve Agency* demonstrates specifically how I have blended elements of my own autobiography, with that of the biography of the objects, to find creative ways of working with the objects that resulted in a heightened sense of knowledge and agency for me as the performer. The model details five components, including autobiography of the performer / choice to work with object, object biography via literature search, object (auto) biography and creative use of the object, audience gaze and achieving agency. The hybridity of this research, and its equal 50/50 weighting to both practical work (three works outlined above) and a written thesis (40,000 words) combines personal knowledge, found knowledge and practical knowledge, all of which come together to form an original contribution to knowledge. This knowledge extends discourse in areas of practice-led research, autoethnography, female

solo performance practice, autobiographical research, pole dance, and performing with objects.

### **Key Words**

Practice-led research, solo performance, autobiographical performance, autoethnographic performance, pole dance, and performing with objects.



## **Declaration**

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning. To best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made.

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I would like to express my thanks to my two main supervisors Dr. Pauline Brooks and Dr. Lisa Parsons, both of whom gave me considerable motivation, inspiration, and feedback throughout the course of this and previous studies. I may not have embarked upon this research journey if they had not encouraged me and or believed in my ability to pursue this investigation. I also thank my third supervisor Dr. Jo Frankham for offering guidance in the earlier stages of this research and for providing feedback on a small portion of my practical work. Besides my supervisors, I would like to show my gratitude to lighting technician, sound designer, videographer and photographer, Noel Jones, for not only his assistance in my practical presentations, but for always taking the time to discuss art and artistic process with me. These conversations aided my thinking, giving me something else to ponder in relation to my own artistic processes.

I would like to thank Physical Fest, Tmesis Theatre, Metal Culture UK, Cirqadia Festival and Secret Circus for hosting my work. These brilliant platforms not only gave me direct access to new audiences for my work, but they carved space for me to grow as both a performer and a creator. Related to audience, I give my deepest thanks to the audience participants who took the time to watch and feedback on my performance work, I am tremendously grateful for their input. Their comments made me see my own work through their eyes, which is incredibly helpful for not only this research but for how I plan to move forward in my future artistic endeavours.

A huge thank you to my girlfriend, Clare, for knowing me well enough to tell whether I needed the hardcore direction of “get on with it and deal with it” or the gentle “let’s go out” break away from this project. Both were necessary at different times of this research, and she always knew the appropriate time for each of them.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and who were all very supportive of my work, even if it did mean I had limited time with them.

## Chapter 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Autobiographical Forward

The first thing you should know about me is that before I became an artist / academic / lecturer in dance, I was a stripper. I was an erotic dancer between the ages of 18-21 (2008-2011). I worked at several strip clubs across the UK, and some abroad. Now, a history of stripping would not ordinarily be the first thing I would tell a stranger about myself, but the weight of my autobiography has tremendous meaning to the study you are about to embark on. For instance, whilst 50% of the time of working as an erotic dancer was as glamorous as Jennifer Lopez projects it to be in *Hustlers* (2019), it wasn't always that way. The abundant flow of champagne and £50 notes in the garter of my fishnet stocking and thigh high boots, were coupled with much ambivalence, docility, danger, shame, shock, and objectification.

I have been processing this experience of working in the adult industry and my feelings of existing as a visual object ever since and, given that creativity doesn't lie, you can quite literally see how I have navigated these thoughts across my entire professional solo performance portfolio, which I began making in 2015, all the way through to this PhD study and beyond.

*Does This Pole Make Me Look Straight? (2014)*

*Subject / Object (2017)*

*Double Aesthetic (2017)*

*Object (Auto) Biography (2017)*

*The Ten Inch Heels (2019)*

*Unstable (2019)*

*Pole(e)arity of Self (2020)*

*Erotic Dance for Self (2021)*

*Barely Visible (2022)*

Of course, there were other smaller solo projects in between, and collaborative performance projects with other choreographers, but the works outlined above were all operated in a space of practice-led

research and autoethnography, of which I asked questions, researched deeply, and reflected upon the works intensely. One work fed into the next and detailed reflections on each of the works confirmed repetitive interest in themes of female power, sexuality, pain, objectification, and control. However, there were two very specific and repetitious lines of enquiry across my work

- My use of pole as autobiographical and choreographic object.
- The sense of agency I felt as I moved through a self-curated movement process.

The funny thing about the pole existing in all, but one of my works, is that I did not often dance with the pole inside strip clubs as there was much more monetary value in lap dancing, private dancing and stage shows. However, I was still very much aware of the pole's presence in that arena, and I thus understood it as a static object that appeared in my autobiography, like a piece of furniture or a prop. This prop reminded me of a time in my life where I felt mostly obedient to constraints of femininity and of a time in my life when I presented my body as a package for someone else's viewing pleasure, never my own.

At this point, it is probably appropriate to evidence how I can 'pole dance' if I rarely pole danced inside strip clubs. When I started a Higher National Degree in 2013 to retrain in dance (after my strip club stint), I started attending pole dance classes at a local studio because I was curious about how pole dance operated in recreational form. I attended classes on and off until I decided to make *Does This Pole Make Me Look Straight?* (2014), which, as alluded by the title, included a pole. This work was submitted as 50% of my undergraduate dissertation and that is when I started making solo work, with the inclusion of the pole, and I haven't stopped since.

Once I saw the potential and felt the agency of working alone, with an object that spoke to my historically partial subordination, I started

my own personal resistance against aesthetic, particularly regarding how, as a woman, I might present my body on or with a pole under the view of male gaze, and I focussed instead on what the dances I created meant to me as a woman. It was at this point (2015) that I curtailed my attendance to pole dance classes and I began working in a self-taught environment so that my bodily engagement with the pole, or should I say, my 'voice', was not being overly influenced by the pole dance industry as it stands in its growing popularity today. Thus, although this study has much to say about pole dance and how the pole can be navigated in solo performance, it is not a study about pole dance, nor is it confessional autobiographical tale about my journey from stripper to international performing artist / academic / lecturer in dance / entrepreneur -- it is a practice-led and autoethnographic study about

- The ways in which I have used stigmatised objects, including high heels and the pole, in my solo choreographic process.
- The steps I have taken to curate and maintain a sense of agency in my own movement process.

## **1.2 Background of the Study**

Given the context of my background in the erotic dance industry, as well as my current working practice with the pole, this research responds to the gap in pole dance research whereby despite the growing popularity of women who are claiming empowerment by consuming activities such as pole dancing or wearing high heels, various researchers have referred to the pole and the shoes as objects that sexualise and repress women (Levy, 2005; McRobbie, 2009; Walter, 2010). Researchers who have attempted to address this prominent and static binary, through interviews and case studies, have concluded the notion of empowerment as unstable and difficult to address because of its consistent links to erotic dance and its

significance to male gaze theory (Trautner, 2005; Whitehead and Kurz, 2009; Griffiths, 2010; Holland, 2010). As noted in my autobiographical forward, I was once situated in the cultural terrain of pole dance, as well as now using it as a stimulus for my work, so my motivation to undertake this study was to discourse how my unique, insider lens, had much more to say than say about dancing with a pole than that of stagnant debates that only include male gaze, female docility, increased strength and attaining femininity. I anticipated that if I examined the actions I took as a creator -- how I worked with the objects to feel empowered, instead of objectified, then I would bring a fresh perspective to dancing with the pole. Because of the consistent focus to topics of objectification, empowerment and agency in this study, I provide immediate clarity regarding these terms. Throughout this research I align with empowerment as referring to self-confidence and self-awareness regarding how “individuals can recognise through analysing their experience of how power operates in their lives and gain the confidence to act to influence and change this” (Oxall, 1997, p.1). Empowerment is supported by and used interchangeably with the term agency because it concerns one’s ability to make choices and how they act on those choices. Opposite to this, I refer to objectification as relating to people being treated as object or things, where the individuality of the person is reduced to the status of an instrument or a series of body parts (Dworkin, 2000; Gervais, 2013). These terms then, empowerment and objectification, are concerned with both the cultural discourse of the objects used in this study, as well as my autobiographical connection with the pole object and high heels in strip clubs.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

As already alluded to in my autobiographical forward, my main research inquiry, throughout the course of this four-year study, was

to ask and answer the following questions through and with my practice

- In what ways have I used stigmatised objects, including high heels and the pole, in my solo choreographic process.
- What steps have I taken to curate and maintain a sense of agency in my own movement process.

To answer these questions, I approached this research with a dual methodology that blended practice-led research and autoethnography. Practice-led research allowed me to bring my artistic practice to the forefront of the research and to examine how I now work with stigmatised objects in solo practice, whilst autoethnography made space for me to draw heavily from my autobiographical engagement with the objects, when I worked as an erotic dancer. Both methodologies combined allowed me to also draw from the cultural aspect of the objects to assess how I was positioning myself in terms of agency. Consequently, throughout the duration of this four-year study I created three solo works -- *The Ten Inch Heels* (2019), *Unstable* (2019) and *Pol(e)arity of Self* (2020) all of which will feature as separate chapters in this thesis. By creating three separate performance pieces that attempted to answer the questions posed, I found a new, five-part model labelled *A Creative and Reflective Model for Navigating Autobiographical Objects in Solo Performance to Achieve Agency*. This model is the result of repetitively and recursively working with similar themes and processes across all works presented. It specifically demonstrates the ways in which I have found empowerment as a solo performer, even though I do dance with objects that have the potential to objectify me. To show the reader how the model operates, I have organised and written the performance project chapters to respond to each component of the model – this shows critical reflections of how the model operates, but also exemplifies how the more the model is



used, the more agency and liberation I felt as a creator and performer.

#### **1.4 Trajectory of the Study**

The process of the first two works, *The Ten Inch Heels* and *Unstable*, which were both presented and made for live audiences, followed a similar seven-month schedule whereby I used the theatre space twice per week for creation and rehearsals. The devising process was supported with training outside of the studio that included pole dance, contemporary dance technique, improvisation, and stretch. The third work, which was originally intended to also operate as a live solo performance, was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic in the sense that I could not leave my home, nor could I access live audiences due local and national lockdowns. Thus, to ensure continued research, I chose to create a digital work, *Pol(e)arity of Self*. The adaptation made and the impact of moving from live to digital work, will be discussed further in chapters four and seven. The creation of *Pol(e)arity of Self* followed a more intense process than the previous live works and it took place across one month of research experiments with the camera and editing suite. I then refined the process to performing, filming, and editing in four weeks.

Creative sessions for all works were completed in solo isolation to ensure that I maintained a process that was self-led and not overly collaborative with audience and or peers when in the 'making' phase. This approach successfully eased the pressure to create something that was aesthetically pleasing to audiences and became pertinent to my main research outcome, *A Creative and Reflective Model for Navigating Autobiographical Objects in Solo Performance to Achieve Agency*, of which I will discuss in the document outline.

The five-part model arose because of an in-depth thematic analysis that I did for each of the three works (p.165). However, although I had clear sense of my process from the thematic tables and found data, it came across as extremely convoluted for the 'outsider' reader. I thus made the decision to reshape the model by recoding my journal data and the thematic tables for each work to really assess what happened during each stage of my creative process. I then trialled the model out with other professional dancers, which helped me refine the questions that I had been asking myself during this study. As a result of refining and recoding, I arrived at a new version of the model that felt much easier to read. I share this information about my process of analysis here to justify the order of the chapters – when I arrived at the refined model, it made sense to not only detail how the model operated, how it enabled me to answer key questions of this research, and how the structured questions of the model have encouraged me to find agency, but to *show* the reader how the model operated across the three works I created as part of this research. Thus, three performance project chapters, were also rewritten to exemplify how the model was used in process / performance.

## **1.5 Document Outline**

After the introductory chapter, of which you are currently reading, the story of this thesis continues into chapter two where I offer a contextual framework and literature review. In chapter two, I discuss a bricolage of key theoretical and philosophical frames for this research, as well as offering a presentation of literature that pertains to the biography of the objects used in this research. The text explicitly illuminates how the cultural biographies of objects may or may not be contributing to female oppression and or liberation by addressing studies regarding pole dance, high heels and objectification. I also offer discourse related to relevant cultural

practices (Charles, 2014) including gender performativity, performance art, aerial dance and artist who work with objects. The range of the contextual framework adds body, texture, and juxtaposition to this research.

Chapter three expresses the practical nature of the research and how its performative dialogue offers a more suited and relevant approach to dealing with topics that support the use of objects in performance. It is here that I defend my uses of practice-led and autoethnographic methodology, my artistic medium -- solo performance with improvisation as a core creative method, as well as my methods of data collection that includes reflective practice via journal entry, video documentation, audience feedback via peer review, survey and social media. The dual methodological design of this research is unique and supports feminist researchers who have said that dance makers, audiences and performer should be working to illuminate new ideas within this area (Dodds, 1997; Hanna, 2010). Also in chapter two is my navigation of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Cohen et al., 2018), which began as soon as each performance process closed.

Chapter four introduces one of the main outcomes of this research -- *A Creative and Reflective Model for Navigating Autobiographical Objects in Solo Performance to Achieve Agency*. In this chapter I introduce the five-part model and explicitly express how I did not negate objectification to find empowerment in my autobiographical processes, I reframed it and used it to show how autobiographical objects can be utilised in creative process as vital tools for understanding self and how I have achieved a greater sense of agency through creative process and performance with objects that have the potential to objectify me.

What follows in the next three chapters are critical reflections on each of the three practical outcomes of this study -- *The Ten Inch Heels, Unstable, and Pol(e)arity of Self*. Each performance project

chapter is organised according to the subheadings of the five-part model to demonstrate how the interrelatedness of self / other, identity making, freedom of expression and creativity have all come together to inform the practicality of the model and how it has enabled an enhanced sense of liberation in my solo process.

Chapter five is the first of the three performance project chapters to offer a critical reflection on *The Ten Inch Heels (2018)*, a fifteen-minute solo performance work that explores the extrinsic value of sexualised and exaggerated femininity, questioning how engagement with high heels can either promote or dissolve female subordination. In this chapter, I show how I used a process of asking questions about the object's biography, to then using this information to physically give the object many different roles and meanings, to enhance my sense of agency as the maker and performer of the work. This chapter also expresses my learning that if a performance artist makes space for the viewer to shape the work, or to co-participate in the work in some way, it creates a sense of shared agency for both the performer and the audience

Chapters six is the second performance project chapter that offers a critical reflection on the work *Unstable*, a fifteen-minute solo work that includes two three metre poles. I address how the poles were not only used to metaphorically represent the instability of empowerment in pole dance, thus relating to the theoretical underpinnings of this study, but also how the poles each carried meaning and value for me as the maker of the work. This chapter also zooms in on the ambiguity I was facing about exposing my autobiography.

Chapter seven is the final performance project of this thesis that gives a critical reflection of the digital performance work *Pol(e)arity of Self*. *Pol(e)arity of Self* is a short film that underscores multiple, contradictory selves and how they navigate the internalisation of an external gaze. I express how the pole is simultaneously used a

splitting point and a meeting point for a self that is active and in control, a self that feels vulnerable, trapped, and objectified, and an ambiguous self that is attempting to accept all of the above. As this is the third and final performance project of this thesis, this chapter also exemplifies how, because I worked repetitively with my model of practice, the depth of agency I felt was heightened.

Finally, chapter eight draws this thesis to a close by reiterating the findings of this study and what implications these findings have in the areas of pole dance, performing with objects and autobiographical solo work. Chapter eight also identifies areas for future research, as well as noting the challenges / limitations of this investigation.

## **Chapter 2. Contextual Framework and Literature Review**

This chapter began as a literature review, whereby I took a traditional research approach (Randolph, 2009) to critically reviewing and identifying gaps in current research that concerning the objects I work with in my practice – the vertical pole and high heels. However, given the artistic nature of this research, I took advice from Gray (1996), and I opened the literature review out into a contextual review that was free to document and blend in any non-literary information that I felt would feed this study and my artistry within it. Thus, I map the terrain of this this chapter in the following two ways. Firstly, from a contextual perspective, I examined literature that expressed history about pole dance, high heels, gender performativity, fetishised and phallic objects, and theory of objectification, all of which aim to elucidate the biographical stigma of the objects and how they have been tightly woven into a binary of objectification and empowerment. Secondly, and more in line with the creative and artistic element of this study, I have uncovered research relating specifically to objectification in dance and pole dance, subjectivity and audience presence in solo performance, artists and their use of objects, and aerial dance. Each of the ten aforementioned topics each have their own subheading in this chapter and explicitly aim to cast a net around the purpose of the study (Rocco, 2011), to create “an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters” (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017, p. 5) and to evidence the expansive foundation on which my artefacts were built. The variety of literature found includes books, academic journals, video, live performance, and archived performance. Each piece of literature functioned as stimulus for my artistic process.

## 2.1 Pole Dance

As pole dance originated as a form of erotic dance in strip clubs, it is important to note Dodds (1997) who has looked at female striptease from an ethnographic perspective, whereby she viewed many performances of erotic nature across two clubs in London. These performances involved women removing their clothes to fully nude for their male audiences. Dodds comments on smaller details, such as the venue aesthetic, costumes of dancers, prices of performance and how women were treated by the establishment in which they worked, but, the main emphasis of the text looks at how strippers have been constructed through social indicators and how distribution of power is negotiated between audience and performer. For instance, when in discussion with the women who strip, financial transaction was one of the key motivators for their partaking in this profession. Additionally, it was used to define who has the power: the dancer or the customer (spectator). Pilcher (2009) offers a simple way to look at this; the dancer expresses feelings of power and control because not only does she have the ability to utilise her femininity and sexuality to grip the gaze of the onlooker, but her erotic act cannot be viewed until the consumer completes a financial transaction. Similarly, the customer feels in charge because he has the choice to purchase this particular 'act'. This presents a fluid contract of power that moves back and forth between audience and performer. However, although Dodds (*ibid*) does comment on the stage shows and the unique stylisation of each dancer's movement, she does not consider the agency of the dancers' compositional choices within the stage shows she describes; she notes that some dancers promoted sensual, erotic self-pleasure, whilst some women shimmied around the pole, making no eye contact with audiences. To my knowledge, there are no other texts that make a case for the compositional choices and the strengthened agency behind this type of work. However, coming from the perspective of a creator, I am prompted to think about the many creative elements of stripping (with

or without a pole) that always go unnoticed (*Pole Purpose Erotic Edition Choreography Cards*, 2019). Yet, I am also required to consider who the dancer is making those compositional choices for. In the setting noted above it is accurate to say that the women's choices were made to produce an erotic display to please their male viewer, which, again, circulates the position of power. This cycle of power negotiates and renegotiates the dancer as simultaneously objectified and subjectified. However, to add another layer of thinking to this, in an ethnographic study that draws from the notion of the performing self, Murphy (2003) considers a stripper's objectified self as fake because it is made up only to complete the transaction requested by the customer. Thus, subjectivity remains because the dancer is "performing" a self that may not be real. The women who strip are in control of a fictitious character that is conceived through their creativity that brings forth construction and reconstruction of a self that is constantly in motion. Ronai (1992) supports this, describing it as a process as "drawing, erasing, drawing again, composing, and destroying narratives of the self within contexts that are constantly in flux" (p. 128).

Relative to gaze and power, another study by Liepe-Levinson (1998) addresses the dynamics of desire between performer and spectator. The methodological approach of her study takes a common formula of interviewing exotic dancers and male and female patrons across a number of strip clubs, night clubs, theatres and sex emporiums across the USA and Canada. What was thought-provoking and relative to my research was that male and female audiences were observed as they viewed the performance, which allowed the author to produce a detailed comparison between spectator behaviour when viewing either men or women strip. For instance, it was observed that women do not consume dancing males in the same way that males consume females. As Liepe-Levinson writes, females laugh, they do not often become aroused, but they do desire the gaze of the dancing male. Or in other words, "women are taught to desire to be



desired" (p.11). Whereas the male spectator considers his level of arousal an indicator of how good the dancer is. He often remains very serious during his viewing, in his transaction of power. In some instances, however, the spectator wants to be part of the performance, both men and women desire to be seen by the performer and by the other spectators. I take note of this in the sense that if a spectator is waiting to be noticed by the performer this could, again, send control back to the performer. To acknowledge the difference between the way men and women consume erotic performance gives knowledge to me as a performer, who will use this information to regain subjectivity.

Returning to the exploitative element of the practice is the negative thinking that is tied to the act of dancing in a sexualised way. For instance, Bell et al. (1998) took a secondary analysis of interviews of thirty former topless dancers. They found that topless dancing, when categorically situated within the field of sex work, leaves no room for understanding lived experiences or opinions of women in relation to their choice to undress when they dance. An example is that if a woman was to claim anything other than exploitation from her nude dancing, she would be accused of "false consciousness" (Abrams, 1990, cited in Bartlett, 1993) and is thus suggested as delusional. Additionally, because of the stigma that surrounds sex work, the woman should be too fearful of dancing in a sexually explicit way and if she is not, she is said to lack comprehension. The most important findings here, however, are how the empirical data shows that one woman cannot speak for another and that the stigma, as perceived by the topless dancers, pointed the exploitation as growing from societal perception and lawful projection, not from the act of exposing breasts whilst dancing in a seductive manner. The dancing, as concluded by Bell, can actually provide an embodied experience, as opposed to an objectified and demeaning one. Barton and Hardesty (2010) echo this notion of embodied experience in stripping. They draw from seven audiotaped interviews to examine how exotic

dancers use the language of “spirituality” throughout their interviews. Findings not only suggest that strippers are objectified bodies dancing for the pleasure of a male audience, but the seductive movement connects them to their own perception of divine where their dancing becomes a personal and not an objectified act. As pole dance is still tightly attached to the erotic dance industry, it is useful to understand pole dance through the lens of the women who work within this setting. Particularly discussions surrounding their experience of pole dancing in relation to identity and self as this connects to my own experience in solo dance work with or without the pole. Barton and Hardesty’s (ibid) research adds to the multiple views on pole dance and could stand as a solid argument that pole dance, even though it is highly stigmatized as a sure way of objectifying the female body, is not dissimilar to other forms of embodied dancing. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the dancers use elements of dance composition to negotiate their identity and agency. A statement made by Ncube and Chipara (2013) support this empowering element of erotic dance. They state that women are undertaking a cultural deviance to reclaim power and

For that evanescent moment, the dancers are subjects and dominatrices, submitting spectators (who are mostly males) to the splendour of their eroticised bodies. The lustful suggestiveness of the erotic dance transforms the dancers into liberated subjects, who have broken free from the limitations of patriarchy. Within the spatiotemporal confines of the dance routine, the exotic dancers defy conventional representations of female sexuality as passive and acquiescent to men (p.73).

After having analysed two erotic dancers, the authors conclude that the removal of erotic dance from strip clubs or bedrooms to a more public domain, is beginning to tackle the status quo that is representative of an anxious female sexuality to a free and liberated sexuality. Further, the text demonstrates how the act of erotic dance, as performed by females, can open broader questions about female sexuality, agency and female eroticism.

I will now look at the shift of pole dance / erotic dance from strip club to dance studio and demonstrate how it is proliferating further questions about the women who take part in this practice recreationally and how the stigma remains. This shift in space is pertinent in pole dance discourse because pole dance exists in a variety of spaces, including dance studio, strip clubs, pole dance competitions and very rarely, in theatres. Fennell (2018) details the multiplicity of spaces in which pole dance exists and explains how the pole studio, where women go to learn the virtuosic and often sexualised practice, has the potential to construct a new boundary for the future of the movement form. His ethnographic perspective, as supported by theory of spaces between fields, shows that instead of studio owners negating the eroticism of movement, they were blending this aesthetic into the curriculum in order to stop students having to put themselves into a particular category of pole dancer – i.e. stripper style, acrobatic, contemporary, etc. Furthermore, in an attempt to reduce to male gaze affect, some studios deny access to men. An interesting observation, made by Fennel, in terms of fitness, is that participants were not encouraged to attend class with the goal to change the way they look through weight loss, but were encouraged to enjoy their current body, just the way it is. This supports the notion of an embodied subject, one who is feeling in the current state as opposed to disengaging from the present to obsess about their future self. However, in an article that examines the popularity of pole dance classes as an empowering leisure activity for women, which can be seen as part of the broader consumer trend of women emphasising their sexual assertiveness through the purchasing of “sexualised” commodities, Bahri (2012) argues that the “empowering” potential for pole dancing classes is limited because it can only be understood by fixing identities and subjectivities of exotic dancers as transgressive others. In other words, women who are not strippers are celebrated for their strength and sexual empowerment, whilst women who are strippers are exploited, objectified and have no choice. A powerful question, posed by Bahri (ibid), to arise from

this acknowledgement is if pole dance was unrelated to the erotic dance industry then how could pole dancing lessons establish themselves as anything other than an ordinary aerobics class? I find this question extremely thought provoking in terms of my own motivation to bring poles into a theatre space and how I approach creating with them. Relative to motivation is another study by Whitehead and Kurz (2009) who attempted to address, through discourse analysis, the motivations of the women who take part in pole dance. They found three key themes. Firstly, they contend that women might be engaging in pornographic activity, such as pole dance, to showcase their agency. Secondly, women state that pole dance affords ability to control and manipulate their own body size through physical activity. Thirdly, as the female who engages in the activity is paying to pole dance and not being paid to pole dance, she is in control of monetary exchange, and is thus not a sexualised object who is being consumed by the spectating male. This replicates the power cycle between spectator and performer in erotic dance, only, in this reading, the women are in control of the financial transaction. When considering these slants through societal expectations of women, new readings begin to emerge. For instance, the advertisement of pole dancing has much to do with the choice behind the contract between activity and consumer. Participants are promised empowerment as a result of their engagement with the activity, as well as training that would enable them to meet an erotic feminine aesthetic; promotional slogans attached to pole dancing classes are enticing because they align with the notion that females should be working towards a feminine ideal that is predominantly formed to appeal to men. Slogans include buzzwords such as empowerment, power, femininity, liberation, strength, fitness, sex appeal, sexy, and art of seduction. However, what is pertinent about this is that the authors point out that the majority of participants in the study, when discussing their engagement with the practice, were quick to point out the redefinition of pole dance as an activity that is no longer concerned with titillating men, but in how they know and

experience the self. The theme of control and choice is related because it brings in questions of consumerism and how because women have the financial freedom to purchase pole dancing lessons, they are not subject to objectification. Their agency and choice to spend money in this way can be seen, not as a way for women to directly construct themselves to appeal to men, but to adhere to social pressure of a liberated and empowered women. Donaghue and Whitehead (2011) have suggested that when women are aiming to achieve this level of liberation by engaging in pole dance class, they are part of an emerging post-feminist sensibility that is backing the notion of empowerment with sexual agency. To maintain a sense of liberation and empowerment can be, according to Allen (2011), fairly stressful particularly in pole dance, as in other dance styles, where women are expected to act and look a certain way. Whilst Allen's analysis of qualitative findings from participant observation in classes and in-depth interviews with pole dancers show reliable themes of participant motivation, such as self-ownership and increased physicality, she also finds that women who pole dance struggle to represent themselves. Oftentimes, participants describe themselves as something they are not -- a stripper, rather than as something they are -- a woman who enjoys pole dancing. Devereux (2012) accurately outlines this exchange between erotic dancers and the everyday woman. The 'to be like an erotic dancer, not an erotic dancer' is what makes it so desirable and so empowering. The everyday woman is not contaminated by such laborious and degrading work like the erotic dancer but uses it to present her femininity and gender. The absent monetary transaction it what apparently presents a choice, which evidently de-professionalises erotic dance and causes further stigma. If participants continue to negate the origin of the practice, criticise it and say they are far removed from it, this will only add to the stigma. To note pole dance as a form of erotic dance within my work is crucial as not only does it show my respect for the women who have been central to the discourse surrounding pole dance before it was popular, but it also

forces me to remember that I was once one of those women. To acknowledge my subjective experience of pole dance and erotic dance in the settings outlined above -- strip club and dance studio, I am able to speak from an experiential perspective, through my performance work, which, as I confirm in this study, takes place in settings that differs from those traditional spaces.

Expanding the scope of pole dance research into autoethnographic terrain is Anstock et al. (2016) who, as three female authors, reflect upon their own engagement with pole dance. Field notes suggest that confidence and embodiment can stem as a result of the fact that women are thinking about *self* and their bodies in more detail, through movement and exercises, both of which are amplified by small achievements each time a new 'trick' or routine is executed with accuracy. However, the notion of performing this activity for self is interrupted by an embedded and reinforced conditioning that this type of movement should be 'performed' for an imaginary male audience. The authors deliberate how this internalisation of the male gaze is promoting women to buy into practices that enable them to become the 'perfect woman'. Thus, tension in relation to objectification rises again because the researchers are unsure as to whether the recreation and manipulation of body is a reconfiguration for self, or if it is a way of meeting societal and male expectation of woman. However, this unsteady notion of self, in relation to male gaze, as Griffiths (2010) notes, can be disrupted when women are not viewed as one dimensional and their subjectivity is taken into account. For instance, whilst Griffiths does state that pole dance could possibly be moulding unrealistic ideas of femininity and heterosexuality, proposing that women who attend construct themselves to appeal to a male audience, she does not consider a female gaze, nor does she recognise that not every woman who pole dances is heterosexual. Within this research, I take Griffiths (2010) statement about subjectivity into account as I move through my own processes with the pole. I bring my lesbian sexuality to the fore, as

well as how I address the (fe) male gaze as a performer and choreographer throughout the creative process.

Another pertinent slant to uncover with relevance to the internalisation of gaze within pole dance is to acknowledge that some women enjoy being looked at and that it might have some benefits. Pelizzer et al. (2016) interviewed recreational pole dancers and undergraduate university students to examine the concept of enjoyment of sexualisation and how it relates to body image. Findings conclude that the sexually expressive element of embodying an exercise such as pole dance may be beneficial for women's positive body image. Furthermore, results show that pole dancers had lower self-objectification and higher embodiment and positive body image than university women. As the outcomes of their study demonstrated recreational pole dancing to be more positive than originally anticipated, it could help me develop an argument within my own research with regards to embodiment and positive self-image within pole dance solo work – even with the internalisation of a (fe) male gaze. This is useful to my research because of the diversity of women's choice to pole dance and how a quest to find an idealised form of self can come through the practice of pole dance. Further research from Hamilton (2009), who speaks to the impact that common perception of pole dance has on women's identities, expresses that even though women acknowledge the outstanding objectifying traits of pole dancing and how it was originally an activity solely for the purpose of pleasing men, it is evident that these pole classes can give participants a space to explore *self*. Furthermore, qualitative interviews suggest that each woman's experience of pole dancing is different and unique. For instance, the aesthetic of a woman who is motivated by her need to seduce men is very different from a woman who is fighting to find ownership of and connection to her body through physical movement. I am interested in the latter and how I can explore the biography of pole dancing in relation to and for *myself* throughout my creative process.

From a fitness perspective, according to Holland (2010), pole dance fits into wider discourses about liberation and physical empowerment due to the increased physicality, embodiment and confidence that results from the activity. Burbridge, (2012), Ruscello et al. (2016) and Nicholas (2019), Dittrich et al. (2020) Just and Muhr, (2020), and Weaving (2020) all confirm the physical output of pole dance and compare it to other athletic sports. Burbridge, for instance, conveys how the technical and acrobatic elements of the training can offer beginner, intermediate or advanced participants a full body workout. If the dancer becomes confident in any level of pole dance and has the desire to perform, she has the option to enter a pole dance competition. Research shows there are a wide variety of international competitions, including Pole Expo, Pole Theatre, Dance Filthy, Felix Cane Championships and Arnold World Classic. In relation to competition, Ruscello et al. (2016) have studied the physiological and physical demands of pole dance practice in a competitive setting and have confirmed that cardiac output of pole performer is similar to that of a gymnast, circus artist or break-dancer. Echoing these cardiovascular benefits is Nicholas (2019) who suggests this knowledge could satisfy American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) health guidelines. She expands that traditional pole dance competition sets usually last around 3-4 minutes with routines that involve a flurry of dance and acrobatic tricks. The pole dancer performs strong isometric contractions as she works against gravitational pull. Whilst it is brilliant that the expansion of pole dance has found a place in competitive terrain, which is offering platform for dancers to showcase their work, I believe the rules that come along with the competition are repressive to creativity and sexuality and I agree with Weaving that dancing to score points from judges can be just as harmful as performing to the gaze of men in strip clubs. Further, although some studies are pointing toward the physicality of the pole fitness, there is still a lack of research that attends to movement, intention and creative engagement with pole dance, which, if looked at through the lens of a choreographer, could unravel



fresh perspective and wider conversation. However, as Frank (2007) explains, stigmatised subjects sometimes receive less attention because it might brand the author as transgressive and deviant. Thus, a potential reason for the lack of address to the compositional and autoethnographic elements of pole dance could be due to the reflection it might have on the author, choreographer, and performer. I am confident in my wide lens view of this practice to meet any perception others might have of me with an open mind.

## **2.2 High Heels**

Like the vertical pole, high heels also have stigmatic and phallic connotations that can potentially add to or decrease female subordination. The following studies have uncovered the physiological, psychological and aesthetic changes that high heels offer the wearer. Parmentier (2016) looks at the cultural meaning of high heels and how they have shifted from being a marker of social class, wealth and authority for men in early eighteenth century, to them now being sought after by women in society today. It is noted by Lewis et al. (2017) that although women are attracted to the weapon-like stiletto shoe because the shoes indicate power, overt sexuality, seduction and control, the footwear, and the ever-growing size of the heel, often makes the shoes notoriously difficult to walk in. The damaging effect of the shoe, that women would sometimes wear to seek or to attain power or to conform to social pressures, was understood by feminists in the 1970's as a sort of foot binding that contributed to female oppression. Wright (2007), who is concerned with the design of the stiletto heel, echoes the cultural and biographical associations outlined above, adding that the heel of the shoes became a focal point of aesthetic femininity because of how they give extension to the body. Although Wright was quick to point out feminists' perceptions of the objects and how they have contributed to the objectification of women, given that women are

expected to enhance their appearance, she does not align to this thinking. Instead, she looks through another lens that exposes the growing height of the heel as a signification of power and liberation for women. When women first started wearing such shoes, they were not domesticated housewives, they were often single, rebellious and thus resistant to normative femininity. However, an interesting point put forward by Wright suggests that as the shoes became more popular with women, the power value of the shoe decreased because they were dressed on a female body, as opposed to the men who originally wore block heels, which, of course, are much more comfortable to walk in than a stiletto. Although I am not aiming to compare the pole object with high heeled shoe, it is relevant to point out a core similarity. Pole Mallakhamb is an Indian sport that has offered inspiration for technical feats in some pole dance styles today. The tall wooden pole, like the heeled shoe, was originally designed for male use only. According to Burt (2010) women were not even allowed to touch the wooden object because of its erect aesthetic. When the wooden pole was only used by male acrobats, it had no cultural association with objectification, yet when women started performing comparable feats and dancing with a steel, chrome or brass version of the pole, it became an objectifying object. Similarly, as research has shown earlier, when men wore the shoes, there was no discourse about their objectification. The shoes only became objectifying objects when they were worn by women. This notion of the objectifying object adds a significant thread to my study as it shows the extent of which objects shift in value.

The following studies by Gueguen (2015), Lewis et al. (2017) and Morris, et al. (2013) can reveal the reasons why high heels can be considered objectifying and or empowering for the wearer. Bringing attention to power and gaze, Gueguen looked at how women's shoe heel size can increase a woman's desirability as perceived by men. Four experiments were methodologically stimulated by previous studies that have looked at the morphological appearance of women

and how that has affected men's behaviours within social interactions with women. It was observed that heel height could increase a woman's desirability. In addition to heel wearing, it was also noted that women with tattoos, women with blonde hair colour, and women who wore cosmetics were able to affect men's behaviour because the heightened femininity can give off the impression promiscuity and sexuality. The thing that gives high heels 'the edge' on other forms of feminine practice, however, is the physical alteration it gives to the body. In a study that set out to investigate the relationship between wearing high heels and their effect on lumbar curvature, Lewis et al. (2017) discourse as to how wearing high heels makes women more attractive. By analysing images, accessed online, of the same woman in flat shoes and in high heeled shoes, the study confirmed that women might be extrinsically motivated to wear high heels because they do indeed enhance the curvature of the lumbar spine, creating a more attractive aesthetic. However, whilst Lewis' study reiterates how media-created associations between high heels and sexuality could be the driving force behind the ever-increasing annual spending of on high heels, it comes with many limitations. The most prominent limitation is that the study itself was set out to understand why women wear high heels, yet they approach this enquiry through an incredibly reductive lens that does not consider the women's motivation at all. Instead, the study seeks to find out how males view the female body when she is wearing high heels, which, only really looks at why men look at women who wear high heels. Sharing similar motivation to the above study is Morris et al. (2013) who also set out to discover how women's motivation to wear high heels could be linked to a potentially enhanced gait that increased femininity. Biomechanical analysis of a point light methodology led to the findings that women who wear high heels, as opposed to women who wear flat shoes, were viewed as more attractive and feminine because of how the female carries herself. For instance, the height of the shoe altered the movement around women's hips -- her strides were shorter and there was an increased

rotation and incline of the hips, thus drawing further attention to sex specific areas of the body. What is interesting to note in the study by Morris et al. is that the male and female participants who were judging the desirability of the women wearing the shoes, both agreed that the woman walking in high-heeled shoes were more attractive. Male spectators reached their conclusion through becoming aroused by the sex specific element of the walk, yet the women found the heel wearer more attractive because they became “aware of the potential competitors for a mate” (p. 180). From both of these perspectives then, where men think about sex and women think about how men assess the appearance of the woman who wears heels, there is another point of stigma which suggests the shoes signify sex, internalisation of male gaze and competitiveness with other women.

In a study that revealed the temporal and episodic nature of women’s use of high heels, Dilley et al. (2014) highlights the concept of women’s choice and how it is often motioned by displaying (or performing) femininity and doing gender. For instance, some women only wear high heeled shoes when there is an expectation of dressing up; such as a wedding, a night out or a party. Brennan (2019) recognises this expectation and speaks from an autobiographical perspective about her use of high heels within a professional setting, stating that she wears them to fit in and treats them as costume for her workday. She states,

I liked the idea of wearing them more than the actual wearing of the shoes. Still, without high heels, at work I didn’t feel quite put together. Like a man might feel who has forgotten to put on his necktie in a boardroom full of men in neckties. They made me feel powerful in a womanly way; suited up, compliant, like I was buckled into the workday (p.1).

In this way, high heels have the potential to elevate status and sense of power within the wearer, preparing them for a particular scenario. To achieve feelings of power by wearing high heeled shoes,

according to Crum (2016) is how women are competing to be on par or above that of her male counterpart. Extending this thought, she states, “in a way it’s kind of like the shoulder pads of the 1980s. They tried to make women’s shoulders look broader, and more horizontal. There are many, many ways in which women knit masculine ways of being into their personalities and their appearances today” (p.1).

Overall, whilst it is evident that this costume can enhance the form of the body and can have positive psychological benefits, such as feeling powerful or more sexually appealing, physical impracticality and excruciating discomfort remain. Moreover, these findings are complementary to my research into pole dance and offer another layer to my thinking with regards to use of high heels within this practice. The high heeled shoes, used in pole dance, also known as ‘stripper heels’, however, are in a ‘league of their own’ in terms of heel height, platform and weight. The most exaggerated design: Pleasers Beyond, those used in *The Ten Inch Heels* (2019), come with the following warning “due to their extreme heel height, this collection is not meant for walking or dancing in. They are for use in a sitting or lying position” (Alternative Footwear, 2020). Whilst this has given me choreographic stimulation, I must consider why I and others are being sold something so impractical and also why we are extrinsically motivated to wear them. What are some of the sensations that arise upon seeing and being seen in such an over-the-top pair of boots? Given the discourse that already exists around high heels, how is the female performer perceived by audiences when she is wearing these objects?

### **2.3 Gender Performativity**

As noted above, much of the biographical associations of pole dance and high heels have links to femininity, performativity and cultural inscriptions of what women should act and look like. Thus, this study

is also alert to theory that looks at doing and performing gender and how it is projected on to us from an early age. For example, Butler (1990), discusses femininity as a gendered societal construct that is ascribed to one's identity and tends to be fixed at birth. Here, reference is made to a birthing scene where a nurse might report "it's a boy/girl" based on the anatomical state of the body. This acts as the symbolic starting point, whereby the girl, becomes a *product* that is firmly located within the gender of femininity. The label "girl" imposes girlishness (at least to an extent) and, she is therefore imbued with it. The early fitting of socially inscribed gender prompts Butler to refute the idea of subjectivity and choice because the gender has already been arranged for the girl. However, if the girl was to manipulate the frame in which her gender is viewed, it is possible that she may be rendered intelligible if she adheres to this identifiable re-inscription repetitively. From this notion, the concept of 'gender performativity' is produced and is used as a way to discuss how one negotiates gender. For instance, performativity is something that someone *does*, rather than what someone *is*. This adds an incredibly relevant theory when considering how the objects discussed earlier are adding to and are affirming empowered or objectified identities in women. To understand gender as an act that is performative will enable me to question the temporality of empowerment and objectification within pole dance or dancing with high heels. Moreover, it could highlight how the notion of liberation is implicated in society, capitalism and female subordination.

To expand further on the topic of feminine expectation, it is fitting to look at Bartky's (1997) discussion of Foucault's Discipline and Punishment theory. This text enables a discourse about the political docility of female bodies -- how they have been trapped by self and societal surveillance and how their sex has been engendered to femininity. In discussion of the disciplinary structure of femininity, Bartky, and other researchers (Wolf, 1990; Penny, 2010), reference dieting practices that are used to control the size and shape of the

body, as well as the employment of beauty practices that women *must* undertake in order to be considered woman. These regimes include the removal of body hair, exfoliation of the skin, putting on and taking off makeup (or as she puts it – painting and disguising the face), applying anti-aging creams, regular facial massages to reduce the sign of wrinkles, exercise and adopting postural positions that restrict movement; sitting with legs closed or self-hindering movement through clothing or footwear. Similar to Butler, Bartky is clear about how femininity has been ascribed to women from an early age, stating how this conditioning coincides and is produced through schooling and relationships with female parents who are already in full swing of the feminine predisposition. These heterosexual women have already committed to their body as a project, of which will continue to be under self-surveillance, until it reaches the standard of object that is desired by their male partner. Feminine women who do not adhere to regimes of femininity for men, such as lesbian women and some heterosexual women, are internalizing a societal gaze and or feeding their own narcissistic self-indulgence. This means that, even if a woman is not directly working towards fulfilling a male gaze, her repetitive use of cosmetic feminine practices is an act of submission to patriarchal structures within her own panopticon. The societal factor is pertinent because if a woman was to completely abandon disciplinary practices of femininity, she might be left feeling undesirable, isolated, ashamed and in loss of her sense of self because she does not fit expected ontology of *woman*. A solution to this, as suggested by Bartky, is that in order to resist and reject disciplinary practices, without sabotaging oneself, women must acknowledge the cultural inscriptions of which their bodies have been branded and then move forward with as much agency as they feel they have left. Or, as I do within this study, I become enlightened enough about my own subordination (particularly when I share the stage with objects that add to this) and I manipulate them in such a way that I find subjectivity.

Another key text to add to the theme of gender is that whilst some women are utilising their femininity to achieve agency and control, such as in pole dancers who exaggerate femininity in stage performance (Dodds, 1997), women are also adopting facets of masculinity to obtain phallic power for their own liberation. Phallic power in women, according to Gardiner (2012), is a type of female masculinity that aligns with the notion that power is purchasable. For instance, if you purchase masculinity, you are buying into power. Yet, if a woman buys into femininity, particularly cosmetic femininity, which is quite often marketed with buzzwords such as “empowerment” and “liberation”, as outlined in Bartky’s text above, the woman is paying for docility. When looking at this symbolic notion of phallocentrism in relation to objects, there is a clear link between power and objectification in women. Gardiner expands,

theories about phallic power, despite their claims of dissociation from biological men, continue to naturalise connections between men, their penises and social control. The phrase is either redundancy, a vague synonym for social power, or a justification for patriarchal social relationships that disadvantage women (p.620).

However, despite the reaffirmation of female subordination, phallic objects are usually woven into the post-feminist ‘mission accomplished’ and ‘we have it all’ rhetoric. Women are gripping masculinity and, as a result of this, “female masculinity may be celebrated as superior to masculinity in men” (Gardiner, 2012, p.599).

## **2.4 Fetishized and Phallic Objects**

As the symbolic phallus is relative to the pole, high heels and male / female power dynamics, I will now look at literature that considers fetishized objects, particularly phallic objects, in relation to the female body, and its consummation of male gaze. A well-known essay by



Sigmund Freud, *Fetishism* (1928), discloses information about gaze in relation to the way men view women, why women may be considered by men as being bodily deficient and how men deal with anxiety about that said deficiency. Freud analysed numerous men who were inclined to object-choice as ruled by fetishism and concluded that fetish-like tendencies stem from childhood, where one has something and then it is gone, he wrote. "To put it plainly: the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (mothers') phallus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego" (p.161). Thus, the fetish exists as a way to compensate for the absent. To explain it differently, Freud poses the little boy as having the expectation that everyone has a penis, but when he finds out otherwise, he sees the woman as living with a body that is missing something. He then fears that his penis might be at risk of castration, so, in order to protect it and to settle some of the anxiety, he adds something (a fetishized object that is not exclusive to phallic representation) to the female body. The fetish acts as an aversion to the vagina, which allows repressed castration anxiety to stay hidden. Rarely did a fetishist approach Freud to gain treatment about the fetishist interests, instead they would usually revel in delight that they had found such compensation to make up for lack in the female form. I acknowledge this text, written in 1928, is incredibly dated, but it cannot be ignored considering many studies since then (Mulvey, 1993; Grosz, 1994; Dant, 1996), refer to this text as the master key. To highlight two of these studies that relate to this project is, Dant adds to Freud's take on fetishism and clearly states that any object can generate fetishism, but an object such as a high-heeled shoe becomes fetishized through its appearance because of its shape and extension it gives to the body. For instance, the shoe might represent a phallus, and if the shoe is worn by a woman, it fills the void of her "castration". This notion is further explored by Grosz who suggests that women who engage in femininity are fetishizing their entire body, treating it as a phallus.

As my study is pertinent as to how audiences view the female body and stigmatised (or fetishized) objects in performance, it is appropriate to note Mulvey's (1993) examination of fetishism in relation to the erotic and staged spectacle of women in film performance. Mulvey expands on the Freudian impressions of fetishism and draws from Marxist theory too. Fetishism in the Marxist conception fails to give value to a person and is a space where people are objectified for their labour, whilst Freudian fetish is built from inscription, that is, one constructs a mirage onto something else (usually a woman) as a means to substitute something that is missing (in Freud's terms: the phallus). As a result of this, Mulvey argues the semiotic implications of femininity as exposed through producers of film and consumers of it. This argument is positioned in such a way that it unravels how cinema has constructed the female body as a vehicle for drawing people into wider social and cultural interests. Then, in support of this, but on the flip side, Mulvey considers the marketing and production line of erotic objects, as drawn from said films and how they have encouraged women to participate in these self-fetishizing practices to make up for their so called "castration". The cinema sells a certain notion of femininity and then capitalist production lines profit by recognising said idea and then selling it to women who desire to be desired. Thus, as Mulvey supports, the woman shows subjectivity and choice when she plays her role as consumer and when she gazes and watches other women, but the motivations behind said choice and the visual steps that led to that transaction is what reverts her back to docile consumer, a theme discussed earlier. Her engagement with femininity is a deflection of a part of her body that she considers is at fault. Thus, as Mulvey writes "the body becomes increasingly the stake of late capitalism. Having the object-and the initial distance and distinction it presupposes-displaced by appearing, producing a strange constriction between consumer and commodity" (p.19). Of course, the argument reaches no conclusion, it goes in full circle and refers to the transaction between consumer and producer. However,

I question how this cycle can be ruptured through solo practice. Specifically, how can I generate a method of full agency within the process of producing a product that is to be consumed by audiences? An argument that contributed to my knowledge on the topic is the differentiation between who is responsible for production and consumer behaviour regarding the economic factors of value, power and exchanges of agency in purchase. For instance, although this essay is clearly geared towards film theory, it is applicable to female performance because of the identical transaction that takes place between audience and performer and provokes me to consider production in relation to consumer behaviour.

To recognise fetishism from a different angle and one that can add much to a creative process, Apter (1991) highlights fetishism as a form of magical thinking for the user that is somehow seductive and traumatic at the same time. As outlined above, historical symbolism of fetishism in materialist and psychoanalytic discourse is considered through Marx commodification and Freud's castration anxiety. Apter's rhetoric then questions the implications of both theories on modern aesthetic production, suggesting that fetishism has now taken a positive turn. With relevance to my study, high heels or a pole (classified as fetish objects) can act as metaphysical constructs that are employed for their erected form. This idea is used to highlight and manipulate interpretation of said objects. Fetishism, or the way I wish to continue to use objects in my work, aligns exactly as "an ever-shifting form of specular mimesis, an ambiguous state that demystifies and falsifies at the same time, or that reveals its own techniques of masquerade while putting into doubt any fixed referent" (p.14). Fernandez and Lastovicka (2011) echo the notion of fetish object re-appropriation and state that a mass produced material object is given the same status when it is manufactured, but once it comes into the hands of a consumer, its position changes and becomes subjective to the buyer. Consumers are therefore metamorphosing objects to elicit empowerment and increased

intrinsic value. For instance, the authors discuss how rock stars have given their instruments a special and or magical prominence. It gives them influence for their work and can go against its original purpose as produced by manufacturer, and in line with consumer motivations. This is interesting because it negates the notion of the docile consumer. I am to use this information to uncover how my engagement with fetishized and stigmatised objects can nullify or reimagine the exploitation that is so firmly attached to them.

## **2.5 Theory of Objectification**

As objectification sits at the core of my autobiography, and is attached to the pole and high heels, it is fitting to look at objectification in further detail. Research shows there are ten features of objectification, seven of which were listed by Nussbaum in 1995, including instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership and denial of subjectivity. In 2009, Langton added three more features to identify objectification, and these are reduction to body, reduction to appearance and silencing. For the purpose of this contextual framework, I will focus on the features applicable to performance practices. As sexual objectification is often heavily linked to pole dance, I will firstly look at how objectification might be recognised in a sexual or non-sexual context. I will then move on to studies that have shown the detrimental effects of objectification in young women, before moving on to discuss how objectification has been praised in the context of performance and dance. Throughout, I align with the following definition of objectification by Calogero (2012) “to objectify is to make into and treat something that is not an object as an object, which can be used, manipulated, controlled, and known through its physical properties” (p.574).

Nussbaum (1995) discusses the various dimensions of objectification and how, in various environments, objectification can be viewed from a positive or negative light. *Playboy* magazine, for instance, would be recognised as objectifying negatively towards the women whose body has been reduced to an instrument for male pleasure. However, in a mutually consensual and objectifying transaction, such as a marriage, elements of objectification become a source of pleasure. Sex, if both parties are seeking to pleasure and be pleased, are mutually and simultaneously objectifiers and objectified because they use each other's body to fulfil erotic desire. In this context, objectification extends the imagination. On a similar line of thought, Green (2000) who has investigated subjectivity / objectivity in pornography has put forward that objectification must occur in one way or another as we have to instrumentalise others because we are in need of their skills, their emotional, physical contact and their support. Each party has a purpose within the relationship, whatever that may be. A non-sexual, fleeting example of objectification in the context of marriage, is drawn from Nussbaum and how her husband rests his head on her stomach as a pillow. He has temporarily objectified a section of her body for his comfort. In this scenario, it is likely that the husband has concern for the comfort of his wife too, which brings forth her subjectivity and autonomy, overriding the feature of objectification.

Objectification has been addressed through numerous other slants including, substance abuse in women, why women might want to immerse themselves in self-objectifying behaviour (Szymanski et al., 2011) and how women accumulate the learned behaviours of objectification and self-surveillance (Matschiner and Murnen, 1999). This notion of self-objectification is important here because the solo performer must internalise and anticipate the gaze of the audience as she creates and performs the work. Calogero (2014) sought out to discover the effects of anticipated male gaze in a study with 105 undergraduate women. To do this, gaze anticipation was

manipulated in such a way that the participants were led to believe that after completing numerous self-reports that focus on body shame, appearance anxiety, and mental performance, they would meet males (there were two chairs arranged in the space). The expectation of interacting with a male, as opposed to meeting a female, amplified anxiety, and body shame. Depending on the social context, such as trying on a swimming costume in preparation for a pool or a beach, these negative effects can increase. What is most interesting about Calogero's study is that the observer is never present. It is the potential of a sexualised male gaze that causes the negative effects of objectification to arise. In light of the number of social contexts where women mingle with men on a daily basis, it is unsettling to see how many women might undergo this internal battle. Miner-Rubino, et al. (2002) echo the aforementioned study in their research with ninety eight college aged woman who were measured for trait objectification. Within their findings, it quickly became apparent that many younger women internalize a gaze, self-objectify and have experienced some of the negative outcomes listed above including insecurity, anxiety, less autonomy and abundant self-critique. A fascinating finding from both the studies presented by Calogero and Miner-Rubino et al. is that self-objectification is more prominent in younger age groups because as women age, their motivation for self-objectification diminishes as they are less likely to actively seek being consumed. Further, lesbian women are less likely to internalise the male gaze because they have no interest in attracting men and can sometimes pay less emphasis on their appearance. However, this does not stop them being gazed at and experiencing some of the negative effects of male gaze and objectification.

## 2.6 Objectification in Dance / Pole Dance

Although pole dance has already been discussed earlier in this text, it is important to draw attention to it in specific relation to objectification. In 2001, Tiggerman and Slater, used a test model, created through research into objectification theory, on former classical ballet students and 51 undergraduate college students to discover more about self-objectification and the consequences that ensue within these contexts. It was brought to light that the dancers, in comparison to non-dancers, scored higher on the disordered eating, self-surveillance and self-objectification, which was found to be mediated by body shame as opposed to appearance anxiety.

This suggests that for this group, the habitual self-surveillance which characterizes self-objectification can directly impact on symptoms of disordered eating regardless of whether or not one experiences body shame or appearance anxiety (p.63).

A similar study was carried out by Downs et al. (2006) who investigated 43 college women and 40 female exotic dancers. Each participant completed a questionnaire that related to body objectification and self-esteem. Similar to former ballet dancers (Tiggerman and Slater, *ibid*), exotic dancers were subject to greater body shame, self-esteem and paid more attention to their physical attributes instead of their intellect. In opposition, college women were proven to prioritise physical competence over physical attractiveness. This is not surprising considering exotic dancers, like ballet dancers, earn a living from their appearance. A note drawn from an exotic dancer suggests that performers are comfortable with their objectification because it is their sole role to use their body as a visual tool to fulfil the gaze of the onlooker. A dancer expands,

Dancing nude is the epitome of women as sex objects. As the weeks passed, I found I liked being a sex object, because the context was appropriate. I resent being treated as a sex object on the street or at the office. But as an erotic dancer, that is my purpose. I perform to turn you on, and if I fail, I feel I've done a poor job (Sundahl, 1987, p. 176).

The statement above brings focus to how objectification is reinterpreted in the context of dance. Cvejic (2015) unravels this complexity further through exploring European contemporary dance works that have interrupted traditional performance making practices. Such as, experimenting and bringing light to the complexities of bodies in motion, how audiences might receive movement and how solo artist negotiate their subjectivity. The author considers Deleuzian philosophy (movement-images 1986-1989) to pinpoint and discourse about the choreographers' decision-making process. In discussion of the solo work *50/50*, Cvejic (ibid) agrees with the notion that solo practice is a format to truly understand and present self to audiences. It is a space of individual subjectivism. However, even in solo performance, it is not uncommon, according to Cvejic, that the subject must interiorize emotion in order to complete the artistic process. What this means is that, even though the solo performer maintains a tremendous amount of control over the process, the audience comes first. The audience cannot see the works for what they are intended to be if the performer lets current emotional circumstance interfere with the state in which the work was produced. Thus, if I was to create a work in an elated state, then perform it on day where I had received bad news, I would have to somehow perform in that "elated" state and thus ignore my subjectivity. From this, when creator and performer of a performance artefact exist in the same body, a complexity of subjectivity and self-objectification occurs. This is something the audience cannot comment on, they can only account for the artefact presented.

A powerful lecture performance work, *Veronique Doisneau* (Bel, 2004), that quietly criticises the institutional and social structure of ballet underscores the complexity outlined above. This work, as Midler (2011) expresses, illuminates the hierarchy of bodies within ballet productions. For instance, in a solo re-enactment of a corps de ballet scene from *Swan Lake*, Doisneau performs movement that is rarely witnessed by audiences because of how focussed they are on



the main body, the principal dancer. Seeing one woman execute a dance, that is usually performed by 32 women simultaneously, is powerfully 'eye opening'. The long pauses and the repeated gestures clearly show the pain and endurance that is required by dancers to be able to successfully play the role of human décor. The idea that we are looking at bodies, as opposed to women, or subjects, reiterates the notion of objectification in dance. If a choreographer works with a concept that requires no element of subjectivity from the dancer, then the dancer is left to stand as an object. An object that is manipulated to create art. Alwin Nikolais has openly 'objectified' his dancers by using their bodies as vehicles to motion costume. In his works *Tensile Involvement* (1953), *Rooftops* (1963) and *Mantis from IMAGO* (1963) the dancers' bodies were cleverly enlarged using costume positioned on their extremities. This exaggerated their range of movement of which remained minimal and slow for audiences to better process. Nikolais wanted dance to be more than emotive expression between a man and a woman, which was common in this era of dance. Instead, he wanted motions, rather than emotions, to come to the fore in his work. This clarification between motion and emotion can be extended to performance artists who have literally damaged their physical body for the purpose of artistic intention. For instance, Spackman and Campbell (1998) have contemplated how artists such as Franko B and Orlan, have used their traumatized body in performance and how their emotional pain, as experienced through self-objectifying behaviour, can be overridden with physical pain. A clear example from both artists is that Orlan undergoes live plastic surgery that can be viewed on screen by audiences from all around the world, whilst Franko B punctures his skin in front of live audiences with the intention to utilise his bodily fluid to express the human element of the work-- blood, saliva, faeces, urine. Even though both performers take their art beneath the skin and physically objectify their body, the difference between Orlan and Franko B is that he feels the pain but she, through anaesthetic, does not. Their body morphs in an out of art installation. Every ounce of their being

has been instrumentalised to highlight their choice, subjectivity and humanness. This is a reticulation of objectification that brings forth a realness that not only captures the gaze of the onlooker, but it forces them to look inside themselves and to ask how they feel when they view subjectivity in an objectified performer.

Whilst literature, so far, has underscored how objectification can become easily apparent in dance, Katzman (2011) has explored how choreographic practice can go against traditional objectification of the dancing body and instead create an embodied experience through uses of qualitative methodology that includes improvisation and journaling. The overall theme of the paper insists that to attain subjectivity in dance can be complex, because of the inherent and “inescapable” (p.71) objectification of the body. However, a way to remedy this is to give dancers a voice throughout the creative process. Freedom to expose thoughts, add reflections and talk to the other member of the group about how the work empowers their subjectivity. A key point within this study, which could be emphasised is that the choreographer educated the dancers about objectification in dance. This knowledge promoted a shift in the dancers’ thinking, to a place that says ‘hang on, I am not just a body’, but my body can act as my voice. Yvonne Rainer understood objectification from this perspective and in an attempt to dance, but to resist the idea of a body being projected only as an object, Rainer created *Trio A* (1996) based on the “no manifesto”, which was, according to Spivey, as follows

NO to spectacle, no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendence of the start image not to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer of spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved (1974, p. 51).

This manifesto stands as a reminder for dancers to resist acquiescent behaviour through movement and instead use their body to speak their subjective truth.

## **2.7 Subjectivity and Audience Presence in Solo Performance and Process**

Subjectivity in performance has been addressed from multiple viewpoints including autobiographical work, performance art and how dance and performance can impact the maker and performer within the work, thus improving self-awareness. The notion of self-awareness according to Smith (2002), who studies the impact movement education has had on prospective dance and theatre practitioners, suggests that when performers learn to attend to their physicality through feeling and reflection, self-defeating arenas of judgement are released, empowering a unique voice through movement. Some other ways in which artists are finding heightened levels of subjectivity in performance is through manipulation of audience gaze, rejection of technical aesthetic and employment of autobiographical stimulation. According to Cooper-Albright (1997) solo artists, such as Bill T Jones, Johanna Boyce, Blondell Cummings and David Dorfman have used autobiographical performative acts to speak their "I", to challenge the objectifying gaze of the audience and to present their body as a speaking subject, as opposed to a mute object that is only concerned with choreographic form. Relative to speaking subjectivity, Mills (2017) has also addressed the ways in which modern female choreographers, Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham, have used dance as a way to communicate their subjectivity to audiences, through a body of movement that acts as a physical language. Thus, Mills projects dance as a method of inscription that can highlight the subjectivity of the 'speaking subject' – i.e. the dancing body, and suggests the body is used to articulate what cannot be said in words. For instance,

Xavier Le Roy is mentioned for his blurring the line between dance and performance art. His works, *Self-Unfinished* (1998) and *Still Untitled* (2017), bring forth any form of expression that arises during the process and is not restricted to "contemporary dance". However, because he creates with movement in mind, his work is rendered as choreography. Whilst there is discussion of subjectivity arising through rejection of aesthetic, it is important to note here that subjectivity does not negate the aesthetic value of movement, it enhances it. According to Blom and Chaplin (1998) when a dance artist works with improvisation, subjectivity is never at risk of exclusion and the experienced artist will know how to translate what feels good into something that is visually interesting and pleasing to audiences.

With the audience in mind, research has illuminated the complexity of subjectivity in performance because for a process to translate into a performance, the performer must interact with an onlooker (Esslin, 1987). Solo artist Del Amo, (2010) explains because there is only one performer on stage, a contract is formed between the performer and the audience, whereby the performer must deliver something that engages the audience's attention for the entirety of the work. In solo work, the focus cannot be altered by clever ensemble compositional elements that might create a canon of new faces, but instead, there is one person for them to look at. Implicating, the solo artist must give attention to audience throughout their process and how audiences might receive movement, whilst also maintaining subjectivity. Thus, this shared space between audience and performer complicates subjectivity, creating an intersubjective relationship (Schneider, 1997) between the author, the work, and the audience / interpreter of the work. Relative to erotic art and performance art, both of which have been apparent themes within this context of my study, I note Jones (1998) who considers the intersubjectivity of the eroticised body and how female-led body art can powerfully destabilise power structures with regards to male

gaze. Artists such as Schneeman, Kusama and Wilke were used as case studies to explain. For instance, according to Jones in Schneeman's work, where she often uses her body in an eroticized way, in that she is nude or literally having sex, "she projects herself as fully embodied subject, who is also (but not only) object in relation to her audience (her others)" (p.3). This subject object dialectic can be enlightening for audiences, particularly in relation to how spectators engage with the explicit body in performance. Schneider suggests when a spectator gazes upon the body of a female performer who overtly conveys messages through her body, the gaze is projected right back to the spectator and provokes them to form an internal dialogue of their own. A clear example of this is when audiences were invited to look at Annie Sprinkles vulva through a speculum with a flashlight. It was evident from Schneider's text that those who participated were left wondering if it was ok / normal to see a woman in such closeness and was it right or wrong to have a woman "perform" this for them. Whether it is right or wrong was subjective to each person, their cultural background and their experiences of viewing women in (non) artistic contexts.

Performance artists such as Schneeman and Wilke have recognised the notion of being looked at in performance and have, according to Forte (1998) utilised these implications as deconstructive strategies through engaging in self-objectification to expose female subordination – they have used their female body to make a point, they used their womanliness as a semiotic sign that removes woman as opposite to man. Additionally, they have drawn from the conditions of their own lives and their intrinsic understanding of oppressive living to expose social order and political representation. Their autobiographical projection of self, as female speaking subjects, even if it is somewhat witnessed as other, acts to disrupt traditional hierarchies. Performance therefore offers women a space to speak their subjectivity. The woman takes on all the roles with direct address to herself, from herself, with no one to manipulate

ideas. The work comes from an intensely personal space, rejecting any imposed power structures that see her as object only. It is the personal nature of the performance that allows the subjectivity to come through. Spackman (2000) echoes the strength of female solo performance and posits the artists' body a powerfully expressive medium that can mark subjectivity of artists. This subjectivity allows for a reconfiguration of identity that goes beyond oppressive authority and could therefore be fully utilised in theoretical articulation. For example, relative to the body in dance performance, Spackman refers to early practitioners, such as Isadora Duncan and Lois Fuller, because of how their influence on modern and postmodern dance presented a clear resistance to classical ballet, moving them away from patriarchal conventions of gender and sexuality. Thus, their resistance produced a presentation of self which shifted them from something that is socially defined and externally imposed, to something that is consciously self-crafted and identifiable by the artist. Hanna (1999) has suggested this process as a type of release for the artist, which could ultimately suggest further subjective engagement for the artist. Satin (2008) echoes the positive aspects of self-crafting in the solo process when discussing the presence of self in the work of Deborah Hay and how her work is rooted in who she is in the present. Satin writes,

Hay's solos are an arena in which she constructs and plays out her metaphors of self as paradox and change. And her desire to be seen, to be the focus of the viewer's attention, is at the centre of the paradox of the changing self she performs (2008, p.182).

So, here, the self in performance, constitutes a subject who wants to be seen through the telling of experiences, their projection of their perceived understanding of the world and how one has, so far, navigated through it. For Hay, her work involved many paradoxical questionings surrounding the notions of visibility / invisibility and subject / object within performance. On one hand, she invited audiences to view her work because not only did she want to be

seen, but she also wanted to indulge in the eroticism of looking and being looked at. It was a space for her to be seen without being consumed. However, this need to be seen was later translated and perceived by Hay as an experiential form of self-indulgence that was detrimental to her psychology. Upon viewing video tapes of her earlier works, she discarded the videos because what she was viewing did not correspond with her memory of the occasion or how she felt she was projecting herself to audiences. This realisation later strengthened her projection that as a performer, you must be available for the spectator, which is why finding subjectivity is crucial. This is important to note in relation to the detrimental psychological effects of objectification that were mentioned earlier. The performer must continually reconfigure, manage, and project self both mentally and physically. However, Legrand and Ravn (2009) ask if subjectivity and physicality can exist together. When drawing from ethnographic observations, interviews and reflective notes of 'body experts' (dancers), they found that whilst one is experiencing their own body, i.e. dancing, one is in experience of their self. The authors align with Valera et al. (1991) who have acknowledged this as reflective consciousness. This type of reflective practice means the mover can experience their body and mind simultaneously, which would essentially negate the idea of self-objectification and disembodiment via performance, particularly if the performer was the sole creator of the work. However, a keynote, in terms of audience is that, even when the dancer is in experience of themselves, their physicality is experienced by the onlooker as the object of their perception.

## **2.8 Objects and Artists**

As this research has led to the creation of artistic outputs that work with stigmatised objects, it is appropriate to discuss how objects have been used within various artistic mediums, including performance art, dance. Historically, according to Thompson (2004), the use of objects

and their presence in dance has varied greatly depending on the intention of the choreographer. For example, Trisha Brown, a pioneering postmodern choreographer who was part of the Judson Dance Theatre, intended the use of objects within her work *Man Walking down the Side of a Building* (1970) to provoke thinking between herself and the audiences to her work. This work, according to Thompson (ibid) “challenges understandings of virtuosity in dance and pushes the limits of what constitutes dance itself” (p.155). More recently, Chounaird’s work, *Body Remix* (2005), employs the radical use of objects such as rope, pointe shoes, horizontal bars, harnesses, and prostheses to express and explore the physical pain that is hidden behind the beauty of dance. Objects can be seen either to hinder and / or liberate movement of the dancers as they navigate their bodies with and around them.

In line with the objects used within this study, I have sought out choreographers who have worked with high heels or the notion of gender expectation. Dekeersmaeker’s *Achterland* (1990), for instance, is a work that draws from femininity to expose confines of gender symbolism. Throughout the work, the female performers are wearing suits and high heeled shoes, costumes that highlight intricate footwork and energetic movement. There is much emphasis to the ways in which the dancers are putting on or taking off their shoes. For instance, when dancers remove their shoes, there is much more freedom in movement, is it less stylised and more open. However, when the dancers are wearing the shoes, it is evident their legs become restricted. *I cried because I had no shoes until...* (Ashizawa et al., 2019), a physical female / male duet performance work built on Japanese Bunraku, Kabuki and puppetry, shares similarities with *Achterland* due to the centrality of costume and high heels within the work. For example, in a scene when Ashizawa wears red shoes, the male actor plays the character of a photographer who photographs the woman wearing the shoes. His initial quiet movement and an almost hidden presence offers a voyeuristic



undertone. He crept around the stage, following the female as she enjoyed the walking in the shoes. However, when Ashizawa removed the footwear it becomes quickly apparent that the photographer was not obsessed with the woman, but what she wore on her feet. He continued to photograph the shoes obsessively, shifting from an above-mentioned voyeur to a fetishist. Another physical theatre work, performed by jugglers who effortlessly manipulate multiple objects, including apples, plates and newspapers is *Smashed* by Gandini Juggling (2010). Like the previously mentioned work by Ashizawa, the male and female cast presents feelings and gestures of gendered expectation. This became evident in a section when the seven male jugglers sat down on a row of chairs near the back of the stage as the two female performers crawled past their knees, twice. During the first round, the dynamic of the men juggling was slow and controlled, with light touches of the apples meeting the female bodies as they passed. The second time, however, the women put the apples in their mouth, which reflected the apple as being a gag or some other silencing device, before repeating the crawl past the feet of the men. When the silencing of women was acknowledged by the men, they became excited and erratic in their juggling. The structure of the movement remained the same, but the increased speed exhibited their excitement.

The use of objects has also been explored in performance art. For instance, Marina Abramovic, in her iconic performance *Rhythm 0* (1974) which comprised of a table with 72 objects such as a knife, a gun and scissors, and a sign stating that she would remain an object and would take full responsibility for the actions of the audience, positioned her body as an object amongst objects. By the end of the performance, according to Warr (2000),

all her clothes had been sliced off her body with razor blades, she had been cut, painted, cleaned, decorated, crowned with thorns and had had the loaded gun pressed against her head (p.125).

Here, the severity of objectification stemmed not from the objects that were chosen to form the work, but from the choice to give control of the objects to the audience. Abramovic's selection of objects is not dissimilar to that of Duchamp and his use of *made and found objects* within his work; these artists' choice of ready-made objects challenges traditional aesthetic knowledge (Sejten, 2016). For instance, rather than creating objects, he followed a process of selecting and displaying readymade manufactured objects, such as a urinal in his work *The Fountain* (1917). The selection of the porcelain urinal, an object that is usually associated with human waste, enabled Duchamp to play with cultural representations and significations of the art object by encouraging onlookers to reconsider their interpretation of what could be considered art (Cousijn, 2016). Both the Duchamp's and Abramovic's selection of objects prompts me to consider the position of the poles and how their perception might change, depending on their environment. To go back to the notion of an art object and what can be considered art is pertinent within this research because as Eno (2012) expresses, artist intention, cultural context and position in time all play a role in how said art object is perceived and understood by onlookers. The sophisticated choices within the decision-making process of creating an artwork are all a result of one central question: "what if". What would it take to suggest another world? What does this world look like with the values of one person? How can a person present their view of the world to an audience? How can the ego of an artist be the driving force behind stylistic choices? These questions seem very straight forward, yet the intrinsic value of stylistic art objects is often compromised due to a damaged imagination whereby an artist should surrender to societal norms and audience expectation. The alternative is that the artist can take control and display their own interpretation of the object.

Although there is much research on how artists have used objects to evoke thought, it is important to note the work of Ashby (2000) who looks at the status of the female body in art and how an increased number

of artists are using their body as an object or canvas to highlight political and social observation. Ashby primarily reflects upon the work of Orlan, a performance artist who has used cosmetic surgery as a medium of expression, because of the central issues raised in her work and matters surrounding females in performance who have sought to, as mentioned earlier, quite literally, 'open up' the body. However, by using Orlan as a case study and other performance artists alike, such as Abramovic and Shneeman, Ashby found that because the female body is already ideologically marked and culturally loaded with inscribed standards of beauty, the views of the female body are disrupted and quite often further machinate oppression. This brings up the question as to how women in performance might find alternatives to patriarchal constructs in order to promote authenticity of *self* as woman, opposed to a *self* that adds to the destruction, mutilation of victim mentality of women. Orlan, for instance, covers up the pain that comes with her work, using it to challenge perceived relationships between the body and the self by suggesting the self as something that is never static. Overall, this text increased my awareness about how important the sex of the artist is. My female body tells a story before my movements do. Ashby suggests that when the artists recognises their female inscriptions, the performer might begin moving through a process of renewal. Nuding (2015) supports the idea of renewal when reflecting upon her own solo work *Shift, Spin, Warp, Twine*. She suggests that when an artist works with a thing or an object, the notion of self and other is constantly being renegotiated, and the acknowledgement of this changeability increases one's ability to connect with self. Having already experimented with some of these ideas I am certain of their valuable contribution to my research practice because of how they have already inspired me to further challenge my own perception of the pole and the high heels the space; renegotiating myself from object to subject.

Relative to the objects used and to note the change in meaning and the power of objects within the context of performance, Eves (2009) highlights objects as a surrogate text in performance that can act as a supporting paragraph to whatever it is the artist is trying to say. In previous works, the objects that have shared the space with me have spoken before I could. They have indicated what the work was about or what it was supposed to represent. Thus, objects are often perceived as standing for something, being representative of a certain idea. They have their own agency and biography to offer. In performance

They constitute the embodiment of a magician's potency, his power and ability to elicit effects in an audience. This is not power in the sense of power over others, but rather in the sense of the ability to realise projects that elicit profound effects, such as awe and wonder (p.251).

## **2.9 Aerial Dance**

A subcategory that must be acknowledged regarding the 'off the floor' feature of pole dance is aerial dance and how artists have addressed the spatiality and technical aspect of the practice. Lawrence (2010) Drawing from her own practice and that of other professional vertical wall artists, such as Wanda Moretti and Lindsey Butcher, is concerned with spatiality through the lens of a vertical dance artists. Methodologically, her research utilises six years' worth of various forms of data collection, such as observation and field notes. To promote discussion on spatiality, Lawrence uses three spatial models the 'edge' (Goulish, 2000), the 'in-between space' (Bhabha, 1994) and 'thirdspace' (Soja, 1996). Within this paper, the practice of vertical dance is quickly defined and differentiated from aerial dance. Although both forms of dance leave the ground, aerial dance is usually mid-air, whilst vertical dance still has a floor, only this floor is vertical – a space for the dance to return to. With this in mind, Lawrence discusses the spatial identity in relation to gravity,

horizontality and how vertical performer must navigate this sensory experience. For instance, one must consider how the binaries of side to side, high and low, back to front, is interrupted by horizontality. Whilst a lot of what is discussed throughout this paper is concerned with vertical dance, a lot of it can be applied to the aerial element of pole dance practice. Such as, the pull of gravity and the trust one must have in their equipment, in my case the flying pole. Moreover, there is consideration of how many steps one must take in order to stay in the safe space of the building in which they are dancing on. Similarly, when I dance with the pole, I have to mark the amount of steps I have to make when I climb up and down the pole, what parts of my body are the strongest in terms of grip strength and how I can navigate my body around the pole with further limbering. This reminds me that, whilst my work is heavily informed by theory surrounding women and culture, it is equally underscored by technique and a profound knowledge of my body. In further discussion of spatiality, Aumiller (2012) brings up the added dimension of space that choreographers work with when they take their dances into the air. Although her interests are not specific to pole dance practice, but more towards aerial silks, her discussion of technical accuracy of working with an object is transferrable to pole. One must consider the weight they give to the object, how the object works and how they may view it as a partner. She stresses the importance of knowing stylistic aerial techniques before taking them away to explore more innovatively. Not only for safety, but for precision, accuracy and efficiency. She confers how some of the companies she has worked with have seen their aerial object, not as an aerial object, but as an extension of what they already do. I feel that this is in alignment with what I do. The aerial element of the pole is not the focus of the work, but it is used to consider how I can bring new connotations and ideas to the work. This will be discussed in more detail in the findings of this thesis.

To consider the pole(s) and shoes as objects within the artefacts, as opposed to apparatus that I should perform specific skills with further encouraged me to explore their “object” dimensions. Object dimensions are discussed by Matuszak (2014) who converses with Andres Galeano, a performance artist who offers fruitful thought on working with objects in performance. A keynote is that if an object is close to a performer, it can carry personal memories, but if the object does not carry personal association, the performer might use the biography of the object as a starting point for personal perception to emerge. To balance the relationship between objects in the space and performer, Galeano offers in depth detail of his process of working with objects. First, he states how the performers gaze can flip audience perception of their status as either subject or object in the space. For instance, if a performer gazes at the audience, the performer is a subject, but if the performer is being watched as a moving object, he or she is an object. Adding to this, if there are inanimate objects in the space, the performer becomes an animate version of this. When working with objects it is important to see the process and relationship as a collaboration. So instead of manipulating the object only for its current uses, it is suggested to take the time to read the object, breathe with it and listen to it. Furthermore, pause should take place with objects during performance as this leaves room for audiences to produce their own semantic reading.

This chapter has given context to this study by raising the visibility of the cultural complexities of pole dance, the objects used in this arena – the pole and high heels, and how empowerment and objectification stands as prominent binary when it comes to asking questions about the agency of the female who dances with those objects. Moreover, literature found has provided various accounts of how subjectivity and agency can be read in contexts that differ from pole dance, including art and contemporary dance, which evidently brings much easier reading to some of the claims already discussed. The next

chapter outlines the dual methodological approach of this study, and it begins to unravel the autobiographical significance of the work and how the cultural complexities of pole align with my autobiography.

### **Chapter 3. Hybrid Methodology**

The purpose of this chapter is to detail the hybrid methodology of this study and to explain why I felt a dual methodological approach of practice-led research and autoethnography was most suited to answering the main questions of this investigation, which are

- In what ways have I used stigmatised objects, including high heels and the pole, in my solo choreographic process?
- What steps have I taken to curate and maintain a sense of agency in my own movement process?

As these questions clearly unveil a strong focus towards multiple topics, such as solo artistic practice, working with objects, stigma, choreography, and subjectivity / agency of the researcher, I believe the hybridity of this research, as I will argue throughout this thesis, has given me the ability to explore and experiment with methodologies that promoted an active dialogue between research and practice (Yardley, 2008). This incorporation of both scholarly and artistic perspective's structure and bring together the practical tools of this research and the theoretical underpinnings of this study (Stinson and Dils, 2008). According to Yee and Bremner (2011) the freedom to produce a model of inquiry that most aligns to the research question, such as my dual methodology, is the best operative for researchers whose practice is at the fore of their study. The model of inquiry I have developed and will now discuss, will be articulated under two main headings including practice-led research, autoethnography, and two subheadings -- solo performance and autobiographical narrative, and creative methodology. I will then discuss four methods of data collection including journal entry, video documentation, reflective practice / reflexivity, and peer / audience feedback, as well as procedures for data analysis and ethical concerns.



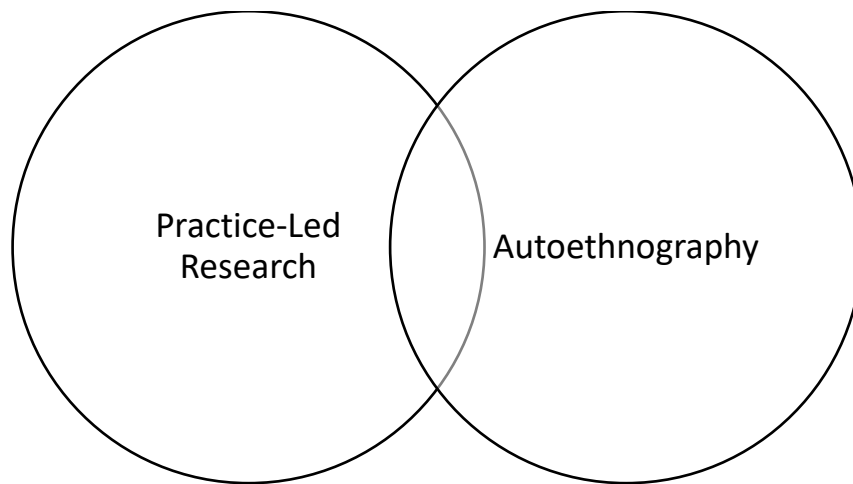


Figure 1. Hybrid Methodology (Gander, 2021)

### 3.1 Practice-Led Research

Practice-led research, a term used interchangeably with practice as research, artistic research, and practice-based research (Mäkelä, 2003; Little, 2013; Barton, 2018), is a methodological state that permits artist-researchers to draw from a dual knowledge economy that pulls from their experience existing in the world as a person and as an artist (Dean and Smith 2009; Protopapa, 2012). I have specifically chosen practice-led methodology to undertake this research because it authorizes my researcher role to ask questions, whilst my role as an artist, through choreography and performance, attempts to answer those questions through practice. According to Farrier (2005), when the subject can acknowledge both their researcher and practitioner role simultaneously, “there is a possibility for a production of work that has the capacity both to contribute to and extend the field” (p.141). The contribution artists make to a specific field is dependent on their discipline. Relative to my role as a choreographer, I align with Pakes (2017), who has conversed and advocated that choreography is a specific kind of knowledge and that it is a special mode of knowing that emerges from the creator. The epistemological value of this knowing, and “what we claim to know” (King and Horrocks 2010, p.8) is valued when the artist can clearly ‘back up’ their choices throughout the process and why they handled

their materials in the way they did. As I will later expand, I 'backed up' my creative choices, during the creation of three works, whereby I have been asking in what ways I work with autobiographical objects in my solo performance process and how am I able to maintain as much agency as possible in a creative process and performance.

By investigating my own practice, I concur with Nimkulrat (2007) that "in my research, I am not only a researcher but also a practitioner who investigates into her own art practice" (p.1) and in this space, my research thrives from practice and my practice thrives from the research. The questions that arose in practice often prompted me to research answers and those answers would influence the next phase of the practical process. A clear and easy example from my practice within this project can be drawn from a question I asked myself during a rehearsal, "how can I create a more intimate experience for the audience?" From asking that question, I read extensively about how artists have engaged with audiences and, after absorbing much of the information, I then made the decision to extend *The Ten Inch Heels* (2018) from a seven-minute work that followed a traditional proscenium format, whereby the audience were seated and I was onstage, to a fifteen minute work (2019) whereby the audience shared the stage with me at a limited capacity of twenty people per show. Another relevant point to make here is that the first seven minutes of that same show would not exist had I not carried out in depth research into the biography of high heels in the first place. These meta investigations would feature as two categories within my thinking -- the performance works that were being created during the research process, and how those performances, once complete, would stand as arguments to support partial answers to my overall research query (Rutten, 2016). Each artistic decision, made along the way, was traceable via three methods of documentation including journal entry, video documentation and peer and audience review.

### 3.2 Autoethnography

Already alluded to is the subjective nature of this research and how it focuses on my methods of practice as a choreographer and performer who utilises autobiographical objects in performance. Thus, the second methodology employed within this research is autoethnography. Autoethnography is a research methodology that stems from ethnography and the overall meaning of the term encompasses three key meanings. *Auto* refers to one's self, *ethno* means culture, and *graphy* refers to the research process or study (Wall, 2006; Ngunjiri, Hernandez and Chang, 2010; Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). The emphasis on the importance of each aspect of the word differ from study to study as the spectrum of autoethnography can shift between autobiography, focusing more on self, or it could sway towards the opposite end of the scale, concentrating more on ethnographic writing and the study of culture. For instance, Wall (2006) insists upon foregrounding the cultural relevance of the study, whilst others (Spry, 2001; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) have maintained their focus on personal experience. My research emphasises *self* as the focal point of the research as this supports my critical position as a choreographer and how my personal narratives, relating to the stigma of the objects and their autobiographical meanings, are consistently being renegotiated and reframed within my practice. Autoethnography has thus welcomed and accommodated my subjectivity, and it has acknowledged the value of my influence and emotional response to this research, instead of attempting to "hide these matters or assuming they do not exist" (Ellis et al, 2011, p.247). It is important to note here, however, that although the work I make is autobiographically charged, the autobiographical focal point of the narratives I project relate to many other cultural matters too - such as objectification, women, feminism, empowerment, working with objects, solo performance, thus balancing the self, culture and study within this research approach.

When approaching autoethnography, various slants have been adapted and applied to professional disciplines, such as education (Chang, 2008), performance studies (Spry, 2001) and psychology (Grant, 2010). Consequently, it has been suggested that autoethnography can take many forms such as “short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, scripts, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose” (Ellis, 2004, p.38). Relative to this study, I align with Spry (2001), who has taken on embodied performance as a method of expression. The performances I have produced and how they express my autobiography in conjunction with streams of cultural issues such as objectification, male gaze and empowerment, each stand as a “heuristic tool, not an added scholarly bonus” (Spry, 2011, p.160). I saw each work as an experimental experience of enlightenment, which consistently enhanced my overall sense of agency. Thus, I concur with Barbour, who states, “autoethnographic dance performance becomes a method of inquiry into my life, allowing me to engage with issues of reflexivity, identity, embodiment, cultural commentary, transformation, and empowerment” (Barbour, 2012, p.67).

The autoethnographic element of this research, and how I have studied myself as a choreographer who is working with autobiographical objects, is thus present in the artefacts, as well as this written document. Reflective writing has thus been paramount in this dual autoethnographic and practice-led study and, as supported by Wall (2006), is a way of answering any questions that may have arisen during the research process, as well as allowing the researcher, when ‘writing up’ to locate necessary narratives. The reflective narratives I have produced in this thesis, again, are detailed reflections that pertain to the processes I undertook when working with autobiographical objects in three solo performances. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) articulate the use of reflective autoethnographic writing and state it as a therapeutic tool for the

researcher, of which I deeply agree. However, I would like to add that making artwork about a particular memory, such as the aforementioned performances, and then writing about them, can enhance and amplify that sense of liberation for the researcher – this is explained further when I discuss my approach and motivations for working as a solo artist (p.63). Relevant to the subjectivity of the artwork and liberation ensued, it is important to note that although autoethnography has been criticised as a self-indulgent methodological approach to research (Madison, 2006), I believe that coupling it with practice-led research as a means of asking questions about creative process that are built on self, I have asked deeper questions about myself, which has added value to the autobiographical and empowering strand of this study.

As methods of autoethnography are akin to methods of data collection used in practice-led research I later expand on their uses below, but first I will justify my choice to work as a solo practitioner.

### **3.3 Solo Performance and Autobiographical Narrative**

As the nature of my professional and artistic research practice is predominantly situated in solo performance, it is important to iterate the contribution solo performance has made, as a method, to this study. For instance, my initial motivation to work with my own body in solo dance performance supports a statement made by Cixous (1976), in her short feminist essay *The Laugh of Medusa*, where she encouraged that “woman must write herself” (p.875). Or, as I perceived this, I must *create* and *perform* myself. In creating and performing ‘myself’ I had complete control of my processes, which, according to Claycomb (2012), meant I had the power to narrate myself into existence, assuming an authority that exerted control over how the self is perceived and how it is to be accepted into the discourse of women’s experience in general. This type of control, in a

solo creative process, according to Chiao-Ping (2002) gives the performer a deep sense of understanding and knowing of the work, a knowing that is uncensored and insubordinate to the control of other, such as that of an external director or choreographer. These uncensored and self-led acts of knowing within the solo creative process aided my ability to articulate and unveil fresh perspectives about the main themes within this study, which, again, refer to my navigation of the objects in relation in solo performance and how I can maintain subjectivity as a solo performer. These reflections and autobiographical connections have challenged marginalised areas associated to this study including sexuality and gender identity by revealing “not only the multiplicity of the performing subject, but also the multiplicity of discourses that work to forge subjects” (Heddon, 2008, p.39). Meaning, I was focussing on not only the I as a subject, but also the experiences that made me the subject I am. These autobiographical writings weaved into my creative journal and took hierarchal precedence to any creative decisions I made. My autobiography, in essence, was the creative decision.

### **3.4 Creative Methodology**

Throughout the creation of the three artefacts within this study, all of which negotiate themes of the objectified and subjectified body, improvisation was deliberately employed as a core creative method because it allows the mover to compose their artefact freely and spontaneously (Carter, 2000; Goldman, 2010; Kloppenberg, 2010; Bresnahan, 2014). This mode of creative engagement allowed me to experience and sit within states of objectification and subjectivity simultaneously because I was speaking through my body and then looking at my body to understand said communication. Furthermore, improvisation gave me the freedom to reject any traditional stylisation or steps that were previously embedded into my movement language (Carter, 2000; Bergman 2011; Brenashan, 2014). The negation of

traditional technique and disobeying the rules of any kind of dance composition or aesthetic ruling gave me a sense of liberation that made space for theoretical physicality to come to the fore. A theoretical physicality can be likened to a movement language that permits the mover to articulate unexpressed versions of themselves (Barrett, 2007), expose thoughts, add reflections and thus gives them the ability to meditate on the work and thus empower their subjectivity (Katzman 2011). Snowber (2012) expands on the expression of the body stating that movement enables a deeper understanding of the questions we ask as we move through life. To question the meaning of movement is to take in to account the steps of the dance, as well as the connection those steps have to the mind, body and spirit and the imagination behind the order and dynamic of those steps. In what is essentially theorizing through the body, reading into one's own movement is to search for deep meaning of one's entire existence. Movement gives movers the opportunity to grapple with complex topics and can shed light on cultural constructs and power structures (Katwyk and Seko, 2017). As I will later uncover when reflecting on the performance pieces, working with improvisation proved extremely positive way for me to connect my autobiography to the objects within each work.

To detail how improvisation operated throughout my processes is straight forward and follows a very simple cycle. Before entering the studio, in the beginning stages of the process, I meditated on a short draft of my literature review, using it to stimulate movement prompts and ideas within the rehearsal space. I was very aware of the bias within my study, so this technique enabled me to keep a firm hold of the theoretical driving forces behind the artefact (Skains, 2018). This method continued throughout the entire process to ensure I was reflecting upon other voices as well as my own. In terms of movement with or without objects, there were times when I would, as Manly and Wilson explain (1980), "experiment with movement steps and qualities, patterns and rhythms" (p.11) in an attempt to discover

appropriate movement for the work. Then, there were other times when I found movement that was so raw, vulnerable and visually powerful that I would compose instantly with no intention to ever develop or edit the movement. Manning (2009) calls this “instant composition” (p.25). To embrace unedited movement and to permit movement to exist in a state of undress was an empowering act in itself. It rejects any unnecessary edit that might be used to make the movement more beautiful or visually appealing, which of course, goes against the authentic voice of the movement and would thus begin to acquiesce to external gaze. When those movements emerged, they were captured by video recording and marked as useable material. From this, I worked on a loop of improvising, remembering, and structuring. During this process of remembering and structuring I was discovering more about myself by reading the movements (Snowber, 2008). I was attentive to my being, which was both liberating and frightening. Liberating because I was finding new ways of untangling past experiences by looking at them through a different lens (my body). Frightening because as I was becoming more and more knowledgeable about objectification theory, capitalism, femininity, and male gaze, and I realised that I have not been ‘awake’ in many of my previous life choices. The cycle of moving and reading directed me to a vulnerable place that I was unable to share with audiences until I had dealt with my feelings. Thus, I withheld external gaze, from peers and audiences, until the work existed in a semi-finished state. This approach was vital for me to understand the work (myself) and to thus perform the work with clarity and intention. If I had shared the work too early on, I may not have fully understood where the work was going and, if audience members commented with suggestions, I may have lost my voice entirely. On the subject of audience, within the process of improvisation, although I was alone in the space, I internalised and anticipated their presence, where they would sit, how close I would want to be with them and whether or not I wanted to or could look at them. I never thought about fulfilling their gaze or how I could let



them sit comfortably because I wanted to challenge their thinking. This approach, according to Carter (2000), can significantly change the relationship between the dancer and their audience and “it can result in some instances in ambivalence or even hostility on the part of dancers toward audiences and often leaving general audiences alienated and confused as to their role with respect to the dance” (p.188).

### **3.5 Documentation / Data Gathering**

#### **3.5.1 Video Documentation**

In support of the production of the performance works that drew from self and other (Loots, 2016), video documentation was used to visually document the process and final artefacts produced. Artistically and from a choreographic and performative perspective, video documentation aided my memory of movement, such as the steps sourced from improvisation and instant composition (Mock, 2000). Capturing and reflecting upon those movements in the early stages of the creative process endorsed an archive of raw and real movement, which I would later go back to as performance preparation. For me, this was a method of maintaining the raw essence of the work and a chance to revisit the choreographic ‘writing’ of the work, which, as Kloppenberg (2010) states, can sometimes be lost through repetition or rehearsal of movement. To add to this, being able to review video documentation of my movements also gave me the chance to view my work from an objective outsider viewpoint (Manning, 2009; Fraleigh and Hanstein, 2010; Bannon and Kirk, 2014; Graham and Hogget, 2014), which meant I could see my body in the same light as the audience would see it. As recommended by Moore (2002) I used a camera that boasted sound quality, instant replay and ease of accessibility, my iPhone X and iPhone 11 pro. When I knew where I wanted to position the audience within the works, the camera, as supported by

a tripod, would be placed where a member of the audience would later be standing or seated. This gave me directional cues for the facings and structures of my movement. When looking specifically for audience perspective by positioning the camera in a certain area of the theatre, I would make use of the instant replay by scanning through the video clip to review a specific section of movement. When viewing early improvisations, however, I would only reflect upon much of the movement outside of the rehearsal space. To experience my body from a *felt* state within the dance, to then an external perspective by watching the dance became central to my thinking in relation to my presentation of self. I let the feeling of the movement settle in my body before I used my body to present the movement back to me.

In terms of documenting performance, as opposed to process alone, Spatz (2015) has proposed that video documentation has been used to overcome the transient nature of performance research and can be used to confirm and represent the artist's view of the work as a scholarly discipline. In support of this, video documentation also offers the opportunity to work reflectively and analytically regarding how I viewed my body within the performance work (Moore, 2002; Ledger et al., 2011, Haseman, 2014; Tembrioti and Tsangaridou, 2014), but it offered a reach to wider audiences and/or peers beyond the space of live performance (McKechnie and Stevens 2009, Rowe, 2009). To acknowledge wider audiences by transmitting my artefacts to them via video documentation became particularly valuable during the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout this time, I was unable to perform to a live audience who would share the physical space with me. Instead, audience participants were invited to view a video link of the work and were asked to comment about their interpretation in either an anonymous online survey or in a group discussion with me via an online video conferencing platform (Zoom). Use of video documentation and disseminating artefacts beyond the space of live performance, as confirmed by Bakka and Karoblis (2010), gives

viewers an opportunity to view the exact same work repeatedly. According to Matuszak (2014), if a work is viewed repeatedly by different people, video documentation thus becomes an artefact in itself.

### **3.5.2 Journal entry**

As a commonly used method of data collection in both practice-led research and autoethnography, journal entry has worked in a similar way to video documentation in that it is a prominent source of data collection for artists to detail the process of the artefact reflectively and analytically (Holt, 2001; Duncan, 2004; Nimkulrat, 2007; Mäkelä, 2011; Greenfield et al., 2018). As recommended by Lee and Pollard (2010), I started a new journal for each work to record the details of each rehearsal, or any notes I made outside of the studio. The writing within the journal was heavily focussed on questions I was pondering, what I did, why I did it, and what external stimulus I was bringing to my internal space -- the solo space I worked with alone inside the studio. My journal is where I would note written reflections of how I felt when I was composing movement phrases through improvisation. Richardson et al. (2005) have noted this style of writing as reliable method of enquiry because it can monitor how the researcher is bringing their subjectivity to the work, whilst also providing the means for the artist to reflect and demystify their own process of research. Moreover, in recording the details of the creative processes from inception to completion I have uncovered how I have been blending personal knowledge with existing research, which, in turn, has given me the chance to expand my sociological understanding of the topics discussed (Ellis and Bochner, 1996). I was able to self-interrogate and review my own discourse that negates some of the imposed biographical elements of the objects used within my practice. An example could be something as simple as my choice to work with two poles in *Unstable*

(2019), both of which were physically manipulated to exist in motion or in a horizontal state. As a result of the decision to work with two poles, I reject a traditional floor to ceiling pole that exists only in an erect state which offers phallic semiotic value.

### **3.5.3 Reflective Practice / Reflexivity**

As mentioned previously, reflective practice has been key to my research. Consistent reflective practice that stemmed from the combination of methods previously outlined allowed me to develop a reflective-research cycle (Fig 2, p.64). Whilst I am aware of existing models of reflection that attend to ‘learning as a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience’ (Kolb in Russ, 1998, p.304), such as The Kolb Model of Reflection (1975-84), I arrived at my own cycle organically because I was exploring how I could be equally attentive to both the theoretical and practical questions of the research. Attention to theory and practice is mostly evident in how the cycle shifts from reading, to moving, to writing and it was inspired by Meehan (2015) who suggests that this way of working can reveal “the social worlds in which we live from new perspectives and upending the kinds of discourse being created” (p.323). In other words, I could see the reflection of movement within the cycle, and its attention to creative process, as rupturing the static outcomes of previous studies that have discoursed about how women engage with the objects in this study.

The starting point of the reflective-research cycle, always began at the literature review, and it was followed by improvising movement, writing reflectively, reviewing video documentation of said movement and then writing reflectively. The writing is key because it always dictated the next phase of the cycle. For instance, the words that I ‘zoomed-in’ on from the literature review sometimes prompted me to write autobiographically, which then led to a personal interpretation of

the text, leading to a physicality that was driven by emotion and semiotic imagery. As recommended by researchers (Janesick, 1999; Moon, 2006; Bacon and Middelow, 2010) I continually looped and repeated the cycle, in a linear path, starting at literature review, until the right movement was found, and I thus used it as a way to assess responses, ideas and beliefs within the various stages of the research process. My reflective research-cycle was therefore in alignment with Schön (1983) who suggests through reflection of each phase of the cycle, in relation to the entire research context, the researcher is able to discover evolving features of the work which will then prompt them to continually redraft new ways to move forward with the study.

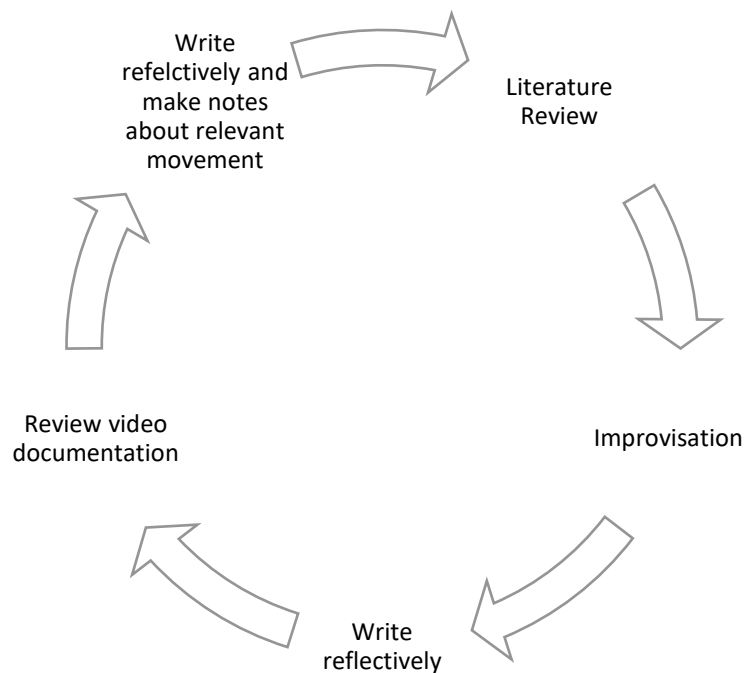


Figure 2. Practical Research Cycle (Gander, 2019)

To move back briefly to the notion that when physicality adds to a conversation, it conveys messages that one would not ordinarily be able to express, I should point out how solo improvisation has been, for me, likened to a reflexive physicality that allowed me to

concurrently ask what the world is and who I am in it (Pels, 2000). In opposition to ensemble dancers who are stimulated by both internal (thoughts, feelings) and external prompts (choreographer, other dancers, music, space), my enthusiasm and commitment to working alone has encouraged *self* to come forth, which will become apparent when I reflect upon the three works within this study. To fully engage with a reflexive stance, I was always questioning at which point choreographers should invite others to enter their process to give their perspective. I know now that if I would have shared the space with others, even that of audiences, too early on, it could have significantly changed the direction of the work in a way that shifts from my intentions as the choreographer and thus it would have disrupted my preliminary construction of the work (Yuko and Okada, 2012). For Pels (2000), this is like the non-artistic research process whereby the researcher must be able to expose themselves intently, always looking at their own reflection during the research. Whether or not identity becomes truly visible, depends on the maker and how their subjectivity merges into the object, or the object into their subjectivity. Given the hybrid nature of my research and the use of myself as a source of data, I realised that to 'expose' myself in performance, I would have to expose myself in the written report too. Thus, from a reflexive stance, I concur with Peshkin (1988) that "researchers should systematically seek out their subjectivity, not retrospectively when the data have been collected and the analysis is complete, but while their research is actively in progress" (p.17). For instance, when I read my notebooks, reflected upon the conversations I was having with audiences and when I watched my work back on video, I could see clearly what was making up each of the dance performances -- my reflections and motivations to undertake this research, combined with how audiences were reading my work, were clearly informed by my experiences as an erotic dancer. In seeing this theme repetitively, I experienced a tremendous amount of ambivalence on how much autobiographical content I would share when it came to later analysing data and discussing

findings. Ambivalence is noted by Southgate and Shying (2014) who specifically address the position of insider researchers who have previously occupied the position of a 'dirty worker'. They offer an anonymous case study of an academic who once worked as a stripper and expressed how her experience in that occupation was the driving force behind her research, yet she felt that she could never disclose such information in her motivation for research out fear of what colleagues thought of her. Although I shared this fear, the transparency of the performance works I had already created encouraged this lucidity to transfer to my writing too. Thus, my sensitivity to the data and the potential to self-censor was overridden by my need to find out answers. So, although, this study is extremely biased in its nature (Coffey, 1999; Chang, 2008) I concur with Wall (2006) who suggests, this level of subjectivity within a research project could be its main strength because of how invested the researcher is in finding out the answers.

#### **3.5.4 Peer and Audience Review**

In order to gain further confirmation about the themes of autobiography and subjectivity were being read through performer / audience interaction, I organised a total of three live and three online performance labs (Appendix 2, p.176) where I showed and discussed the work, in the later stages of its creation, to non-dance audiences, undergraduate / postgraduate students, professional choreographers, and dance lecturers. In doing so, I considered Brooks (2014) who suggests a model of performance and creative process in which the audience are considered co-participants of that process and Wechsler (2006) who advocates that this is also an opportunity to see if what was intended by the artist was 'perceived' by the audience.

To facilitate discussion, I drew inspiration from *Lerman's Critical Response Process Model* (Williams, 2002). This model prompted me to consider how I would facilitate a dialogue between peers and general audiences about their aesthetic and subjective interpretations of the work. To ask general audiences the same questions as those with a trained eye, removed a hierarchy of opinion and created a more democratic and open environment whereby all participants felt their opinion was valid, even if they were to comment on something minor or something 'silly'. Additionally, this approach allowed for a variation in audience intellect, perception and experience that resulted in a multitude of perspective and interpretation (Stecker, 1994). A focus on interpretation was important because of how audiences automatically begin to form interpretations based on the aesthetic and feel of the performance presented (Langelier and Peterson, 2004). Their interpretations would encourage them to engage with their own "cultural biographies" (Cooper Albright, 1997, p.21) and cultural identities (Risner, 2017), which then gave me the chance, after hearing their interpretations, to reflect and draw upon other voices to open up "new questions and avenues of inquiry" (Ellis, 2004, p.215). Dolan (2005) sums up audience experience of theatre, stating there is emotional value, cultural utopia, and capacity for communication. Utopia, in the context of a performance space, is to tap into the realm of the imagination and to distance the spectator from what is; their current thinking, in an attempt to create change, or at least prompt new ways of thinking about a set subject. All verbal conversation for each artefact was recorded and transcribed.

In addition to verbal dialogue, in recognition of some audience members who were not as confident to speak of their interpretation of the work in front of other people, or who wished to remain completely anonymous, digital surveys were offered to promote further inclusivity (Singleton and Straits, 2009). Post-show surveys are a common form of data collection in professional artistic practice that allows artist



researchers (Hanna, 1983), choreographers, and directors to seek out audience feeling (Arts Council England, 2019). Thus, this optional survey gave the audience an opportunity to add more texture to their interpretation, adding greater contribution to this study. In order to gain sufficient and relevant interpretation of the work, survey questions followed a structured format about themes, general interpretation, key imagery and memory of the work (McKechnie and Stevens, 2009). An example of survey questions, which included space for open ended comments about audience response to the work, can be viewed in Appendix 3 (p.179). Also relevant to digital response is the abundance of direct messages I received from audiences through social media, such as Instagram and WhatsApp, as well as direct emails through my web form on my professional website ([www.rowenagander.com](http://www.rowenagander.com)). Although direct messaging as a form of data collection was not initially intended, audience's response to my work could not be ignored because of how aligned they were to other forms of data collection, such as the survey and peer review. Thus, given that Aida et al. (2019) confirm instant messaging as a valid form of data collection that gives space for as much rich data as face to face interview and it provides much flexibility to both the researcher and the participant, I included audience comment, via instant messaging, as adding value to this study. This method was used mainly during the data collection phase of the third performance piece of this study *Pol(e)arity of Self* because it was easily accessible for both me and the participants during the Covid-19 Pandemic. To attend to audience anonymity, all direct messages were copied from the messaging portal and transferred directly to a password protected Microsoft word file that contained audience feedback on said work.

## **3.6 Data Analysis**

### **3.6.1 Immersion Phase**

To clearly absorb the data collected from the methods outlined above, the reader is advised to view appendix 2 (p.176) for a detailed overview of how, where and when each work took place, and the form in which the data was collected. This table shows that across three-performance works, which were all documented by video, 146 audience members and or peers reflected on the works in written form. Additionally, six discussions took place between the spectators and me. With the permission of audiences, these discussions were recorded and transcribed. Any other dialogue that took place between me and viewers in professional settings were noted in my choreographic journal and a word document if sent to me digitally. I carried a separate journal for each of the three works, as well as maintaining general PhD diary, for organised thinking. Each journal was handwritten and then typed up upon the closure of each process. My decision to immediately type up journals and handwritten surveys that were completed by audiences stood as a form of data transcription that encouraged familiarity and knowing of the emerging themes as they unfolded (Haseman 2006). Researchers (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Chang, 2008) propose that this familiarity gives the researcher a great start for in-depth data analysis and that it prepares the researchers for fluid and accurate findings during the final stages of the research. By engaging with data from the get-go I was reading and rereading and in the process of doing so, I actively identifying “themes, patterns and categories” (Bennett, 1994, p.345) as well as shared meaning (Cohen et al., 2017) as I was moving through the research. This ongoing, organic data analysis turned out to be a key part of my creative process, as I will underline in Chapter Six.

### 3.6.2 Thematic Analysis

Because I had already begun formulating ideas about the patterns and themes of this research as I was moving through it, I felt I was in alignment with phase one of six of Braun and Clarke's (2006) qualitative analysis guidelines whereby I was familiarising myself with the data through repetitive reading, transcribing, and reflecting. Thus, I decided to pursue their guidelines as a template to inform the rest of my thematic analysis, however, given their statement that there are no 'hard and fast rules' to adopt during the process of thematic analysis (2006), I took the initiative to add variation to the ways in which I would interpret and present themes in the report. Particularly regarding the artist nature of the performance works and how they were interpreted by both me as the creator and the audience as the perceiver.

Once all data had been collected and performance processes were closed, I categorised data by giving each artefact its own folder which contained individual files for audio transcripts, journal entry / reflective writing, typed surveys, direct messaging, and any pictures or videos I took during process. Then, as recommended by Creswell (2009) I analysed each raw data file individually by looking for patterns and, when codes began to emerge, I used the highlighter tool to bring attention to said code. These codes were identified by their repetitiveness and can be viewed in appendices 4.1 (p.183), 5.1 (p.234) and 6.1 (p.254) for each of the three works.

When I had repeated the coding process across each individual set of data, for each work, I then created a new word document, where I copied and pasted the codes that has emerged from the raw data analysis. Word documents were appropriately labelled, for instance, "The Ten Inch Heels. Grouped Data". I would then begin grouping data to find themes, whilst also making space for the triangulation of data in order to test its validity and credibility in making up the overall themes of this research (Olsen, 2004). I maintained the use of colour

coding to distinguish between each data set, but given the ease of digital analysis, I also experimented with text size and different fonts. I understood this method might not be as useful for the reader, so in order to maintain traceable clarity to my thematic network (Attride-Stirling, 2001), or, as Halpren (1983) labels, my 'audit trail', I also generated a thematic table (Appendix 4, p.180) for each work, which tracked my thinking so that my coding techniques could be justified and visible to the reader (King, 2004). However, I express here that when translating patterns into themes, I did not consider the quantity of data as vital to the theme, rather, I focussed on the quality of data and whether the data was relevant, related and offering something significant to the overall research focus (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Cresswell, 2009; Maguire and Delahunt, 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2020). Thus, in my thematic table of each work, I did not list the number of raw data relating to said theme because it was more fitting to bring focus to the quality of what was being said. Thematic tables for each work can be found in appendix 4 (p.180).

As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) when reviewing groups and themes, I was asking questions to the data. Such as, what does this mean in relation to my research question? Does this signal empowerment? Does this signal objectification? What does this say about solo creative process? What implications will this have to wider research? What does it say about the process of working with stigmatised objects in performance? I found this was an excellent way for me to further engage with data and to think about the implications of this research and how it differed and or complimented existing discourse on the topics involved. In reviewing themes, I also tested if any themes were overlapping, and they were. Across the three works, the themes that arose were following similar patterns, such as my motivations to work with the objects, how the objects were used and how audiences were perceived my relationship to them. It was here that I identified the strength of the research in that the themes would not only gain strength through

triangulated data within each individual work, but when zooming out, the findings from each artefact would offer a secondary crystallisation, or an overlapping, of what had been found. Zooming in and zooming out of processes confirmed the coherence of the themes.

In phase Five, Braun and Clark (ibid) suggest the author starts to discover what the themes are about. In this phase, given the artistic nature of this research, I began interpreting my own and audience interpretation of the work through a reflexive analysis in order to unpick, critically analyse and to understand the artefacts. However, it was not just the interpretation of the final artefact(s) that I questioned, but the implications of performance and how its meaning had been assembled during the creative process.

To support my reflexive approach to data analysis, I followed a model of thought organisation proposed by Teorija and Požiūriu (2015), which suggested that as the creator of the works, I should let go of any expectation I had of what the audience might read from the artefacts and instead give my attention to my own choreographic codes of *representation* and audience perception of what has been *represented*. This shift in thinking allowed me to ruminate on my choreographic choices, even those more abstract moments, to observe how my interior world, which was physicalized within the artefacts, had generated a transaction of interaction whereby the spectator weaved their own interpretation of their world with mine (Blanariu, 2013). I followed McNamara (1999) who states that interpretation is not always centred on one fixed meaning of the dance because multiple meanings become possible based on the situational aspect of the dance. This is, the time, space, cultural context in which the work was viewed by the interpreter. Thus, as I was analysing data, I considered the context in which the work was created, viewed and the form in which it was documented.

Phase Six asks the researcher to begin telling the story of the data through their chosen method of publication, in my case, my thesis. It is here that I began making an argument about the significance of the themes in relation to my research. I saw this stage as an iterative process that provided further reflection for my roles as both an artist and researcher. It is here that I went beyond the surface of the data, to find deeper meaning. I chose to unravel, reveal and discuss the data simultaneously because according to researchers (Thorne, 2000; Braun and Clarke, 2006), it was a continuation of analysis and another method of asking what the data is saying, how it fits a coherent narrative for the reader and what implications these readings have in relation to the main research question. Thus, this report offers four discussion chapters – one each of the three artefacts, and one to detail the found Creative and Reflective Model for Navigating Autobiographical Objects in Solo Performance to Achieve Agency.

### **3.7 Ethical Implications**

As outlined, data collection within this study stem largely from self-journal entry, video documentation and audience / peer review and discussion. Thus, as this research required input from other human subjects, ethical research policies of LJMU were followed and I was given ethical approval from the *University Research Ethics Committee (UREC)*. At the time of viewing the work audience members were given information about their contribution to this study and how their participation would be used within this study. It was also made explicit that their identity would remain anonymous and that any voice recordings would be stored on password protected university software. Each of the measures taken thus gave attention to relational ethics and ensured anonymity of participants remained in place as I shifted data collection from a live to a digital space to adhere to Covid-19 safety, effective from March 2020.

The goal of this chapter was to outline the hybrid methodological approach of this three-year study and how it allowed me to ask and answer questions about the ways in which stigmatised objects could be used in autobiographical solo performance and how a solo performer can find agency in her creative process. Also detailed were the procedures of this project – how data was collected, organised and analysed. The thematic analysis acknowledges that even though I, as the artist / researcher, brought much bias to the study, the audiences who participated by offering their interpretation of the work, and the texts I engaged with throughout, brought light to other voices and thus adds objectivity to the overall findings. The following four chapters simultaneously reveal and discuss the results of this study.

## **Chapter 4. A Creative and Reflective Model for Navigating Autobiographical Objects in Solo Performance to Achieve Agency**

By interrogating my autobiographical engagement with objects through the lens of practice-led research and autoethnography, during the creation of three solo works – *The Ten Inch Heels*, *Unstable* and *Pol(e)arity of Self*, a reflective model to aid agency for solo practice emerged. I have labelled the model *A Creative and Reflective Model for Navigating Autobiographical Objects in Solo Performance to Achieve Agency* because, as the title of the model suggests, the operation of the model guided me, as the solo performer, through a creative process of working with objects that had some significance to my life. The objects I have worked with, as I will discuss in this and the next three performance project chapters, were heavily featured in autobiographical moments in my life where I felt objectified and lacked autonomy. I was thus led to think about how I engaged with the objects *then*, to how I navigate them *now*.

In addition to introducing the model, this chapter offers an in-depth explanation of the five-part model, aiming to solidify how my artistic process and autobiographical reflections across the three works have answered the two main queries of this investigation, which are

- In what ways have I used stigmatised objects, including high heels and the pole, in my solo choreographic process
- What steps have I taken to curate and maintain a sense of agency in my own movement process.

This five-part model has simultaneously answered each of the questions posed and is a direct result of the unique artefacts produced and discoursed within this study. Although the model will be discussed under the following five headings autobiography of the performer / choice to work with object, object biography via literature search, object (auto) biography and creative use of the object,



audience gaze and achieving agency, I aim to show an interrelated and overlapping process that was used recursively across all three works. The repetitive use of this model, with small variations, as will be noted in the *Pol(e)arity of Self* chapter, adds further value to artistic pursuits because it positions each work produced as a reflection upon a reflection, or, as Schön (1983) describes it, a climbing of the “ladders of reflections” (p.118). Thus, showing that the more this model was used, the more agency I felt I achieved as a performer. Based on in depth research, and to my knowledge, there are no other artist researchers who have found a model that gives such detailed attention to agency in creative process, nor are there any studies discoursing or describing creative methodology, with the inclusion of pole or high heels – both of which are accused of objectifying women.

The structure of the model and how it was built on findings from the creation and performance of the three solo artefacts in this study, recognises Leventhal's (2005) advice who states that an important part of evolving a working model is that the creator can map out their experiences, thus holding themselves at the fore of the model so that the success of this model can be shown. I show the success of the model in the performance project chapters where I reflectively address each work under the subheadings of the model. In addition to mapping out my own process, as an enthusiastic facilitator, I have also used this model as a sample to guide workshops with professional and undergraduate dancers who worked creatively with objects of their choosing. In one workshop with six professional dancers (04/11/2021) it was clear that the use of the model enabled the dancers to generate micro autobiographically stimulated solo performances with the inclusion of objects. Their self-chosen objects varied and included a dress, a tattoo, a teddy bear, drumsticks, a ballet barre and a bench. To address my use of the model as a facilitator is beyond the scope of this thesis, but my pilot workshop of the model shows the applicability of the model outside of my own

process as a solo performance artist. The reader is invited to view appendix 7 (p.352) for a workshop plan that contains a list of key questions.

Before delving into each component of the model, it is important to draw attention to the significance of self-questioning as a key function across each stage of the model. I asked myself a considerable number of questions during each process, which was not dissimilar to how Bausch, a world renown dance theatre director, bombarded her performers with questions because “to answer the question was both a way to fill the dancer’s mouth with his or her own voice and also to shape the dancer’s body, to give him or her a new corporeality” (Hoghe cited in Lepecki 2006, 137).

#### 4.1 A Creative and Reflective Model for Navigating Autobiographical Objects in Solo Performance to Achieve Agency

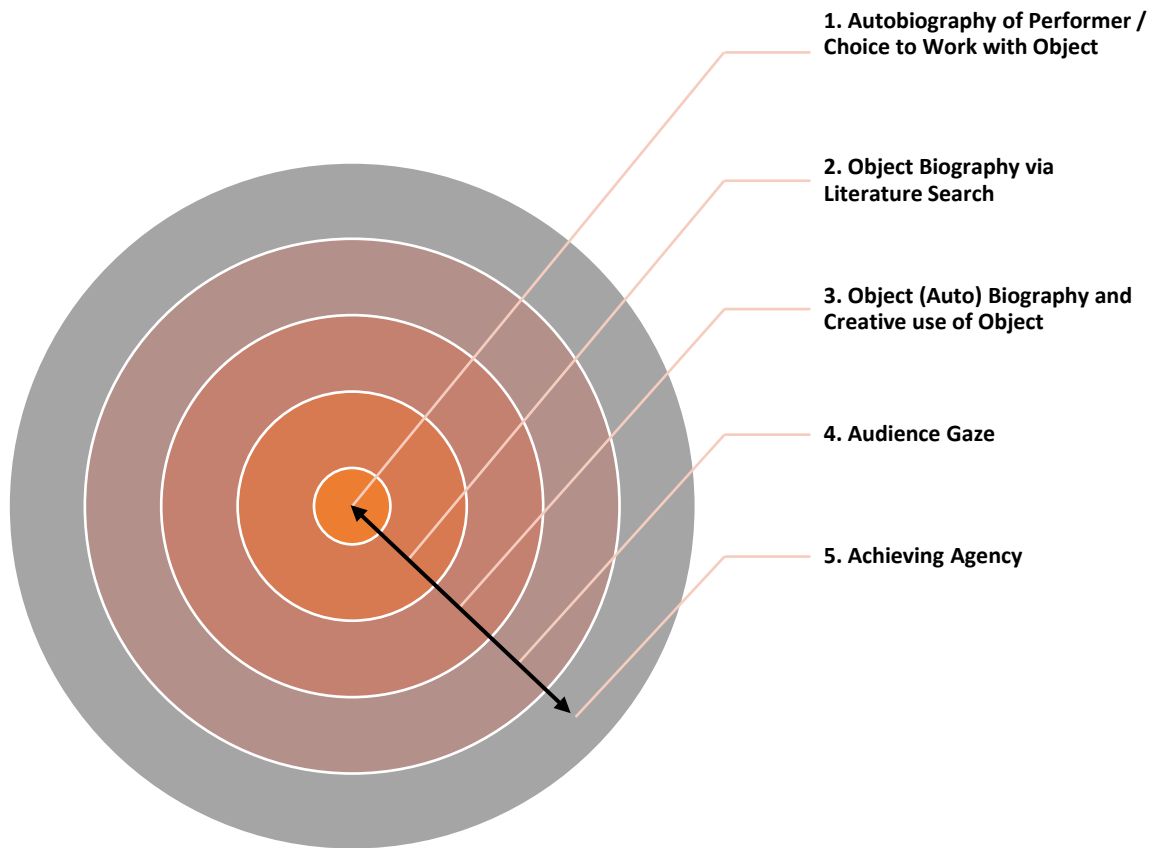


Figure 3. A Creative and Reflective Model for Navigating Objects in Solo Performance to Achieve Agency (2021)

## **1. Autobiography of Performer / Choice to work with Object**

At the center of all three works is the autobiographical traces of me, as the subject, creator, and performer. Here, the self was used as a source of material for each work, which indirectly injected subjectivity into the final products. Although this was not an easy process because it required the ability to remain uncensored, asking myself questions was arguably the most significant part of the process. Thus, the first stage of my process was to I ask why I was still so motivated to work with the specific objects, as well as noting if there was anything I disagreed with, from a personal and experiential perspective, regarding the literature search. The motivation to work with the objects was stimulated by my historical use of the pole and high heels in erotic dance -- I noted that the pole, for instance, for me, was a static object that appeared in my autobiography, like a piece of furniture, before it was brought it in to my professional performance research in 2015. When I made my first work, I realized quite quickly that the presence of the pole in solo process allowed me to heavily reflect upon a time in my life where I had experienced power and objectification simultaneously. I began asking questions about power, objectification, self-subordination, and my sexuality. The instant disagreement I had about the pole, however, is that it was fully objectifying or fully empowering. Given my autobiographical uses of the objects, I saw power and objectification as a binary of which I could not break -- I could never fully deny the 'objectifying' (stigmatic) end of the binary because the pole reminded me of how I had felt and experienced objectification when I worked in strip clubs and how I was always reliant on a sexual aesthetic with my creative choices. Similarly, I could not present myself as fully objectified either, because I had also felt a tremendous amount of power in that same arena too. It was thus always my intention to create honest, authentic work with these objects that showed a spectrum of power and subordination because both were simultaneously relevant to my autobiography and thus the source of my intrinsic interest in them.

This resulted in me having a clear understanding of why I worked with these objects.

To produce works based on uncensored autobiographical material required much vulnerability in both process and performance.

Although I do not define my work as self-revelatory, I do see some similarities in Emunah's articulation of what it means to move through self-revelatory and autobiographical theatre. He states

It means that there is a conscious effort to contend with the material, dive into it, untangle the issues and better comprehend their origins and implications. It means psychological self-examination as well as ownership of our own interplay with the forces that shaped us. And it means finding ways to be strengthened or softened or altered by the material and to 'move through it'. What does moving through mean? It can mean letting go, taking hold of, coming to terms with, confronting, embracing, shifting, admitting, committing, forgiving, inviting, revolting, revisiting, recreating. Each individual and each issue is different, with particular features and complexities, so there are no formulas (2015, pp. 74).

One of the things that I was consistently taking hold of was my ability to speak through my body, and in turn, this heightened my sense of agency. By using my life and my body as a source of material for the dances I made, I was putting a blanket of subjectivity over the dances which could not be penetrated by features of objectification. I felt that the autobiographical driving forces throughout each process was injecting iron clad subjectivity into my work, so this part of the model also supports that "my dance cannot exist without me, I exist my dance" (Horton-Fraleigh, 1987, p. xvi). In terms of objectification, a solo approach to dance, whereby the dance is based on self, removes the potential of performer fungibility, a feature of objectification (Nussbaum, 1995 and Langton, 2009), expressing that the body that made the work cannot be replaced with another body.

Still relative to choice of object is the consumers (performer / choreographer) decision about the size and finish of the objects they work with. Across the three works I made during this study, and

those before and after, I was never bound to one specific object. During this study, I worked with two pairs of heels and three poles – a consumer choice that ultimately gave me more creative control during each of the three works.

## **2. Object Biography via Literature Search**

Having worked with poles artistically for six years and having already studied the cultural parameters of the pole intently for my Master's study (Gander, 2016), I have developed "Object Biography" as a starting point for the physical creation of a work, of which extends from the conceptual element of the work that draws from choice of object (outlined in step 1). This method was employed in every performance across this three-year study, and it considers Kopytoff (1986, p.66) who advises that if one is curious about the origins of an object one might consider the types of biographical questions that relate to people and then apply those questions to the object. For instance, I asked: what is the ideal use for this object? What is it currently used for and what do people see as an ideal career for this thing? In addition, and in relation to the personal and the cultural, I also thought about Kopytoff's (ibid) suggestion to query the objects position in culture and what happens when the object reaches the expiration of its practicality. Most of these questions were answered through a literature search, or from observations and conversations with others who engage with said object. Finding out the answers to the questions above enhanced my understanding of the object from an objective perspective, allowing me to use the voices of authors, artists, and women in general, to learn more about the social and cultural parameters of the object. I then reflected on the question "what do I know now that I did not know before?", as well as asking if anything surprised me. I was always surprised by my lack of knowledge regarding gender inscriptions and how femininity relates to capitalism. This knowledge allowed me to later make many

creative decisions, such as those outlined in performance project chapters regarding how I transgressively manipulated, exploited, and positioned the objects in my work.

One example of an underlying disagreement I had about all of the objects I have worked with was that the objects were only used by women as tools to titillate men and that the female who engaged with them was victim to the male gaze. Yes, in strip clubs, for me, it was very much about male and female gaze, arousal, fun, partying, and presenting my body in a sexually appealing way to the viewer, but in an artistic context, where I felt like I could use my body in a way that was not restricted to sexual aesthetic, I was more concerned with my own sexuality and my own gaze. For instance, in each of the three works, there is a vicarious underscoring of my lesbian sexuality and I believe the quiet signals to my own sexuality, during each process, equipped me to deal with the male gaze because I did not desire it (Diamond, 2005; Usher, 2005). This 'disagreement' gave me further motivation to resist conforming to practices and movements that aided attainment of male gaze and instead encouraged me to adopt the thinking that if I was to perform to audiences, I would see audience as "audience", not as males. This action concurs with Dolan (1989) who suggests that lesbian subjectivity "seems a place to begin to envision new possibilities for representation" (Dolan, 1989, p.64).

Given that my body was also considered an "object that I would speak with", Kopytoff's questions were loosely translated to focus on my physicality. Before each work, I pondered my current level of strength and flexibility and how far each attribute could be pushed in each process. And, based on the solo aspect of the works, and my female body, I also attempted to critically assess how women's bodies are viewed in performance and or cultural settings. Here, I concur with Hanna who states, "awareness of the body's power and resourcefulness protects us against its exploitation and manipulation"

(Hanna, 1983, p.22). Also relative to the body is the instrumentality of it and thus the objectification of it -- Although I was utilising my body as an object in my work, so that I could speak through it, I was working with the understanding that whilst instrumentality is a key feature of objectification (Nussbaum, 1995; Langton, 2009) and would seemingly evidence verbal silencing and lack of subjectivity, it is vital that I remind the reader of the value of instrumentality in performance and how the dancer's ability to objectify herself is what adds to her means of communication (Fraleigh, 1987) and thus helps to raise her voice. To really know my body, to see it as my voice, and not only as an object that is capable of only presenting beautiful lines, was the second steppingstone to heightening subjectivity in my work, as well as then using this knowledge as a stimulus for dancing with the object(s).

### **3. Object (Auto) Biography and Creative Use of Object**

Object (Auto) Biography, the third step of the model, pulls from knowledge accumulated in the first two steps -- the autobiography of the performer and the biography of the objects, both of which were covered in the previous two steps of this model, to find some sort of difference in presentation and perception. Again, I did not align with everything that scholars were saying about the pole and high heels, in relation to male gaze and the passiveness of women. I thus felt that I had to challenge those assumptions and I did that through using the objects in ways that differed from their intended use. For instance, as I will repetitively underscore in the chapters for each artefact, the objects I worked with were used in ways that were exploited, manipulated, and or barely acknowledged for their actual uses; meaning, the objects were used in ways that could either live up to their 'expectation', such as the high heels being walked in, or they can be used in alternative ways such as the boots being a whip and weight, or the pole being a metaphorical 'person' in the space.



These alternate uses were arrived at through creative play -- improvisation was my method of play, for all the reasons outlined in the hybrid methodology chapter, but the main reason is because as Goldman (2010) offers “to engage oneself in this manner, with a sense of confidence and possibility, is a powerful way to inhabit one’s body and to interact with the world” (p.5). It was key that I interacted with the objects in ways that seemed appropriate for the reclamation of my own agency and voice. For instance, I did not want to wear the shoes as I did before in strip clubs, nor did I want to dance with the pole in a titillating way, because I felt that both of those approaches would limit my voice to only expressing something sexual. The isolated time I spent alone with the objects. gave me space to explore deeply how I wanted to physically blend my autobiography with that of the object. Because I worked alone, I never worried about aesthetic or whether I was providing something entertaining for an onlooker or director. I only focussed on what was meaningful to me. I improvised, and employed video documentation, and when I watched the material back, I looked for something that made me feel like I was saying too much. I cannot describe this moment, but I always knew when I had found it. Three immediate examples from each work can explain

- *The Ten Inch Heels* - when I found the position on my head and held it for a long time. I felt I was saying a lot about the strength of my body, but also the objectification of it.
- *Unstable* - when I witnessed the pole nearly hit me – to me, it represented risk, danger, pain, all of which I was feeling throughout the creative process for that piece.
- *Pol(e)arity of Self* - although a different editing process because it was digital, this moment occurred when I first saw two versions of myself, side by side, in attire that polarised my identity, with a pole splitting us (the two Me’s) apart.

Some areas of each work were composed instantly, then repeated and performed in the final works. Other areas were developed for aesthetic amplification, such as when the pole nearly hit me in *Unstable*. This was later developed to swing around me several times until it hit me (8:07). The choice to ‘develop’ this section was that it spoke to multiple themes at once -- the confines of femininity on women in today’s society, the pressures I have felt to be ‘perfect’ and the self-made prisons many women put themselves in to meet a certain ideal – be it going to a pole dance class to experience empowerment or wearing high heels to fit in.

I had no physical boundaries. If I had this ‘hunch’ then I would do whatever I could to train my body to perform better. I was doing it for myself, so it felt like an empowering process, not a laborious and acquiescent one, even if it was painful at times.

#### **4. Audience Gaze**

Given that gaze plays such a significant role in the cultural commentary associated to the objects that I selected to work with in my professional practice and throughout the duration of this study, especially in terms of objectification, this model does not infer that audience gaze should be removed from the equation, instead, it asks how it can be incorporated into both performance and process to enhance, not destroy, the agency of the performer. From the outset of each of the three works, where I knew my work would eventually be performed to audiences, I was always in consideration of a ‘gaze’ and I often pondered the ways in which I could challenge this gaze and how I could render any objectification that occurred, as a result of their gaze, as benign. I found three ways of doing this. Firstly, I recognised that my choice to show the work to an audience, was my choice – I was not being forced to dance with a pole or in heels. Secondly, I acknowledged that even if my body was being used as

an instrumental object, it was being used for the purpose of communication with audiences, instead of just being presented as a body to be looked at. Thirdly, I also appreciated that I could find ways to dilute the gaze of the onlooker by including them in the work in some way.

During improvisation, in step 3, for instance, although I was alone in the space, I internalised and anticipated audience presence, where they would sit, how close I would want to be with them and whether or not I wanted to or could look at them. I never thought about fulfilling their gaze or how I could let them sit comfortably, I wanted to challenge their thinking and to communicate with them. The strong motivation to communicate with audiences resulted in me sharing the stage with them, physically touching them, allowing them to sit in close enough proximity to hear my breath and the sound of my body in contact with the object, and to really look at them by projected my gaze back at them in live setting and or through a screen. Such positioning of the audience rendered them as active participants and, according to Assaf (2013), this type of activation allows for a heightened connection between audience and performer, which ultimately reduces the viewers capacity to objectify the performer.

In terms of feedback and the practice-led nature of this study, whereby peer review was used as a method of data collection, it is key to note that feedback from audiences was never employed to inform any of my choreographic decisions. Again, I was only ever concerned with the communicative aspect of using my body as an object and if audience reading of the work corresponded with what I was intending to project as an artist. I thus asked questions about interpretation and perception of the work. Audience commentary and their engagement in the work made me feel seen in my own process, which evidently verified that what I was saying through my body was being heard, thus heightening my level of subjectivity.

## 5. Achieving Agency

Although reflective practice is a constant and continuous feature of this model, additional space was always given for reflection at the end of each process. I saw this moment of reflection as a space where I would resolve anything that was not so fulfilling in my work, to reflect upon decisions made, to really assess my feelings of power in the work, and to evaluate if any lessons learned during this process could be taken into the next. Finally, it was a way to see if I still had more to say -- I always had more to say because I am continually inspired by the core topics involved in this study, and how unfortunately for me, and for other women, we absorb and experience new difficulties that relate to power and subordination each day. Having found this model across three works, and additionally using it toward the creation of a show that I am currently touring around the UK, I now know that I can use this model to reframe elements of misogyny, pain, and objectification through my work. I absolutely know that I can rely on this model to help me resolve situations where I felt I have lacked autonomy, or felt uncomfortable, objectified and treated as though I should be seen and not heard. The final step of my creative and reflective model for navigating autobiographical objects in solo performance to achieve agency, is not about assessing beauty, presentation, or the aesthetics of the work, it is about asking how loud I raised my voice, how I found agency, what I achieved, and assessing what I wanted to say next.

As I will show through the trajectory of my performance project chapters,

- *The Ten Inch Heels* demonstrated to me that there is a strength in admitting vulnerability, which I then used in *Unstable*.
- *Unstable* taught me that I could actively grapple with my internal ambiguities about my colourful past in front of

audiences (through presentation of solo performance), which I then took forward into *Pol(e)arity of Self*.

- *Pol(e)arity of Self* taught me that I did not have to hide anymore and that my openness about my own historical subordination had the potential to liberate me from it.

Although not part of this study, it is appropriate to note that because of the realisations I had through reflecting upon my level of agency as a maker and performer in the solo process, I went on to create another work as part of an artist commission with Metal Culture UK. The work was entitled *Erotic Dance for Self* and it aimed to ask questions about the situational context of erotic dance. Considering I was so quiet about my history as an erotic dancer, until I was heading towards the finish line of this study, I believe this model has given me the ability to accept myself fully and to truly engage with autobiographical material in an authentic and uncensored way. Moreover, given that all the works noted in this, and the following performance project chapters, speak to similar area of interest, I conclude this model by sharing my inspiration of Bausch, who, when accused of her works looking the same, she jokingly said “I have been creating the same work for 20 years” (Naude, 1998). For me, there is still so much to explore, but the five-part model outlined above, ensures that *my subjectivity* and the cultural and social issues that interest me, will stay at the foreground of my practice for many years to come.

This chapter has introduced a new five-part *creative and reflective model for navigating autobiographical objects in solo performance to achieve agency*. This model was found through examining three solo performance works that included stigmatised objects – vertical pole and high heels. I selected to work with the pole and high heels because of their cultural and biographical position in strip clubs, and how they provoked me to think about my lack of agency when I worked in that environment. I will now use the following three

chapters to zoom in (Risner, 2017) to each artefact to reveal how knowledge and creative manipulation of object has enhanced my sense of power as a performer and dance maker during the process / performances of *The Ten Inch Heels*, *Unstable* and *Pol(e)arity of Self*.

*The Ten Inch Heels (2019)*



*Image 1. The Ten Inch Heels (2019)*

Link to Performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFclwjrN54s>

## Chapter 5. Performance Project 1. The Ten Inch Heels

This chapter is the first of three chapters to critically reflect upon, analyse, and discuss the process and performance of the practical work I have submitted as part of this four-year study. Throughout this chapter, I specifically bring focus to *The Ten Inch Heels*, a fifteen-minute solo performance work that was performed to four live audiences at Physical Fest at Unity Theatre, Liverpool, UK (14/06/2019), in which I was a female bursary winner. Following ethical procedures, audiences were asked to fill out a digital survey via Survey Monkey (Appendix 3, p.179) about the work or to discuss their responses to the work with me. Additionally, a recording (Jenkins, 2019) of one of the live performances I did at Physical Fest was shown to three dance professionals, who could not attend the live event. Each of dance professionals made comment via digital survey. All survey responses, which did not request any personal information from the participants, were collated into a password protected word document. Additionally, as part of my preparation for Physical Fest performances, I carried out an informal sharing of the work with Tmesis Theatre Training Company at Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts (30/05/2019) whereby I made notes in my choreographic journal about the questions asked and the comments posed by the viewers. Before this, a short extract of the work, when it was in the early stages of its development, was shown LJMU Dance Platform at Sudley Theatre (20/11/2018), of which I also engaged in discussion with viewers. This dialogue was recorded and transcribed, and all participants remain anonymous. See Appendix 2 (p.176) for a detailed overview of performances.

To bring focus to my *creative and reflective model for navigating autobiographical objects in solo performance to achieve agency*, I have organised this chapter under five headings which include autobiography of the performer / choice to work with object, object biography via literature search, object (auto) biography and creative



use of the object, audience gaze and achieving agency. As is permitted in the use of the model, there is an interrelatedness and an overlap between the first three headings. All data drawn from in this chapter, including journal entry, video documentation and audience / peer review, can be viewed in its original format, along with a thematic table, in appendix 4 (p.180), 4.1 (p.183), 4.2 (p.194), and 4.3 (p.220).

### **5.1 Autobiography of the Performer / Choice to Work with Object**

My choice to work with exaggerated high heels, or 'stripper heels' is because I had worn them extensively when I worked at strip clubs. I wore them like a uniform, three nights per week, twelve hours per night, for almost three years. I did not mind wearing them at the time -- they were slightly more comfortable than ordinary stilettos, but looking back, and with the knowledge I have now, I was just conforming to an aesthetic ideal, and signalling to men that I was willing to wear 'slutty attire' for their satisfaction. The high heels then, like the pole in my earlier and later works, were objects that I engaged with in my life, but never questioned. I was thus curious to reframe and challenge the shoes through my practice-led and autoethnographic performance process -- a space where I had given myself absolute permission to reject aesthetic ideals, and to explore different ways to find agency.

### **5.2 Object biography via Literature Search**

It is already clear from the text above that at the start of the *The Ten Inch Heels* process, I identified how the shoes were used *then*, to how I wanted to navigate the shoes *now*. I felt like I had two choices - - I could wear the shoes as I did in the strip club and I could roam around the stage, pretending as if I was fully in control, or I could

stop and think about the intended use of the shoes. I began my inquiry with a focus on consumerism by researching what the maker of the footwear had in mind for the wearer. Pleasers Extreme, for instance, the brand of boots worn in *The Ten Inch Heels* do not recommend this footwear “for walking or dancing” because of their extreme height. I originally thought this was ridiculous, considering I could easily walk and or dance in them... with some training. However, I stopped, and I questioned why I should have to undergo the labour of ‘training’ to wear a pair of shoes. This awakening question allowed me to see past the visual ‘improvements’ the high heels had to offer, including heightened femininity, extended legs (Morris et al, 2013), and to be more desirable (Lewis et al, 2017). And instead, see that if I ‘trained’ my body to operate the shoes for use of walking or dancing with ease, then I would have been conforming to an aesthetic ideal that positioned me as no less of an object than I was when I worked in the clubs – clearly not what I wanted for this work, as evidenced throughout this chapter.

Asking this initial question about my autobiographical connection to the object set the aesthetic boundary of the work and, again, it allowed me to consider how the object was used *then*, to how I wanted to use it *now*. The question about the intended use for the object by the maker was utilised to amplify my motivation for how I would use the object in process. By pondering how I would have to ‘train’ to obtain the visual improvements the footwear had to offer, I was given impulse to transgressively utilise the objects to avoid acquiescing in the same way I did before.

By reflecting upon how objects were autobiographically positioned in my life, as well as obtaining more information about the biography of the object, before entering the creative performance process, I had much fuel to work with as I entered the practical stage (stage 3).

### 5.3 Object (Auto) Biography and Creative Use of Object

I now bring focus to my creative use of the object through the process I thought of as object exploitation. Object exploitation brings much attention to how the high heels were subjectively navigated through creative process and in performance for *The Ten Inch Heels*. The following extract from my reflective choreographic journal exemplifies how I was directing myself through the process of object exploitation by simply asking a series of questions that were based on the intended use I saw for the boots in the work, as well as the theoretical research I had undertaken.

I will handle the shoes in my way, not in the purely feminine way, but in a way that does not conform to original use only and in a way that plays with control and power. How can I project the power and knowledge that has arisen from the initial research? How can I produce a more masculine way of handling the objects as opposed to a manipulated and societally conditioned way of treating the objects? How can I demonstrate a lesbian way of managing the objects? How can I manoeuvre the objects in such a way that it eradicates the notion of male gaze and docile consciousness? How can I handle the objects in a subjective way? (Appendix 4.3, p.221).

The questions I was asking about how I would navigate the objects, clearly suggests that I was in search of exploring the shoes differently. Video documentation of the early, seven-minute, version of the work (Gander, 2018), shows how I used the shoes interchangeably as

- weapons ([0:50](#))
- weights ([2:30](#))
- metaphorical puppets ([2:18](#))
- a hairbrush ([4:26](#))

At the time, I was reading about the spectrum of masculinity and femininity, thinking about the constructs of gender (Butler, 1990) and how high heels are connected to male gaze and consumerist docility because they are part of feminine practices (Wolf, 1990;

Penny, 2010). Thus, the shoes being used as a hairbrush, or the metaphorical puppets that were talking to each other, were connected to my reading and how I was responding to it. To add, when I extended the work to fifteen minutes, inviting an intimate audience of twenty people to share the space with me, I operated the boots in more sexualised and fetishised ways. I made this decision for the following two reasons

- to maintain close reference to my autobiographical and experiential knowledge of how high heels worked in sexualised and fetishised domains, such as strip clubs,
- to understand, amplify and articulate the biography of the high heels and their inherent link to power structures (Martinez, 2020) in discourses on sexuality (Freud 1928), consumerism (Gueguen, 2015), and objectification (Lewis et al., 2017).

Identifying and understanding these themes offered considerable creative stimulation for the overall frame of the work, how my relationship with the objects would evolve and how I felt empowered because of my creative decisions. Specifically, the above prompted me to imagine a cyclical power structure between a dominator and a submissive, or, as Katya describes, as an “authority-based relationship” (2017), in domains of BDSM. I self-directed to literally “objectify and exploit the object. Dominate the object” (Appendix 4.3, p.222) and I began, as video documentation shows, exploring the high heels in a similar way to which a dominatrix would use rope, whips, ball gags and, of course, high heels.

- I trampled the length of one boot with the heel of the other boot to emulate the infliction of pain ([12:18](#))
- I used material of one of the boots as a whip to command attention ([12:05](#))

- I inserted material from both pieces of footwear into my mouth ([13:25](#)), as though they were a gag, and I carried them with my teeth whilst my hands were briefly behind my back ([14:12](#)).

The power play is vital to note because it evidences a power structure, via object exploitation, between myself and the shoes, of which I was using to find and feel subjectivity and control. If I refer to Fernandez and Lastovicka (2011) here, who discuss how one can attain empowerment through re-appropriation of a mass-produced object, then the questions I asked myself about how I would physically operate the shoes gave me a framework to re-position, re-frame and to take charge of the shoes in a way that made me feel like I could produce my own meaning. My research has thus found that a process of asking questions about the object's biography, to then using this information to physically give the object many different roles and meanings, can provide a deep sense of agency for the maker and performer of the work.

My creative use of the high heels and the reference to power structures allowed me to see that when I worked alone with the object, I saw it differently, as the following reflection of my experience of creating the work can detail.

[...] if you really tear it apart, it is not easy to keep up with a display and there is not enough training on how to deal with this level of femininity. Of course, when you are performing, it is rehearsed, and it is fine because it is performance. However, when you are alone with the object, it works differently. You explore it and yourself in new ways (Appendix 4.3, p.220).

I noted a pressure to adhere to femininity in the public sphere, but immediately after I also noted there is room to reconsider and change this narrative because “when you are alone with the object, it works differently” (ibid). This indicates the value of solo process and how the time spent alone, where there is no audience to please, gave me space to contemplate my relationship with femininity. In my

contemplation, although overlapping with earlier discussion, shows how I was still reflecting upon the gendered expectation and disciplinary practices of wearing high heels (Burcar, 2019), the pain of wearing high heels (Kerrigan et al., 1998), and the overall expected ontology of *woman*. From these reflections, I knew that transgressively using the object would not be enough to accurately present my relationship with the heels because it gave me too much control. I had to be vulnerable too. I had to feed my need to actively expose the expectations and the pressure that feminine practices have had on not only me as a woman who has worn exaggerated high heels in strip clubs, but as a woman who exists in this world as a woman. The beautiful thing about working alone is that I gave myself permission to fully commit to this vulnerability in the final work that was presented to audiences -- I created visual effect that would seemingly suggest the objects had control of me. This was expressed throughout the work in many overlapping ways, including the use of a tight costume, hair covering my face, almost like a mask, and the 'struggle' to find a firm position to stand in whilst I was wearing the boots. Spectators who interpreted the work via survey, observed these signs, perceiving a journey of "suffering to empowerment" (p.202), "overcoming oppressive stamps that have been forced on us" (p.203), and "the situation of woman in today's world" (p.202), and how these items or thoughts trap us in a world of confinement (p. 204).

The interesting point about audience interpreting my signs of struggle and overcoming pressures of feminine display, is that they linked my actions to the wider experience of women, meaning my experiences were related to *other*. To apply my use of high heels in performance, to space outside of performance, clearly brings focus to the cultural relevance of autobiographical work with objects. Specifically, it emphasises more than the aesthetic of the footwear and zooms in on what the aesthetic might mean. On one hand, the meaning plays to the cultural significance of the shoes,

and how, in some quarters, they are adding to female subordination, whilst on the other hand, I literally took charge of the shoes and rendered them fungible. This was a vital shift in narrative that, between transgressively using the objects and 'disobeying' a set aesthetic, relates to me moving from a seemingly vulnerable and objectified figure, who was trapped in the confines and pressures of being a woman, as I have evidently felt in previous times, to an empowered subject, who was free to move around the room and into the space of the audience. As the two images below represent.



Image 2. A Vulnerable Figure. The Ten Inch Heels (2019)



Image 3. An Empowered Woman. *The Ten Inch Heels* (2019)

Video documentation ([10:57](#)), can evidence the shift from vulnerable to empowered performer, particularly in the mid-section of the piece where, after having dragged my body across the floor in multiple directions, towards different audience members, I calmly removed one of the boots, and this is when I began to regain control – I revealed my facial identity, which had been withheld from the viewers, and from that point onwards, I moved in closer proximity to the audience, I looked them in the eyes, I touched them, and I directed them to touch each other. This shift



in power was observed by two spectators who add “when the shoes came off there was a distinct shift of power from the shoes to Rowena. It was like she had broken free” (Appendix 4.2, p.207) and “[...] she became more present as herself (standing up, showing her face, interacting with her audience) as the heels came off” (Appendix 4.2, p.210). It was at this point in the work that I *felt* most liberated, and it was then that I realised why I made the decision to come into proximity to the audience and it was because I wanted to heighten my connection to them -- I was not operating the same power dynamic with the audience, as I was with the boots. I did not feel the need to attempt to control audience because I was always trying so hard to find that control within myself.

#### **5.4 Audience Gaze**

Given that I felt no need to control the audience, and thus did not attempt to, I was curious about their responses to the work, particularly in areas where I had approached them in the space. Post-performance surveys evidence how audience members responded positively to my navigation of the shoes by expressing a sense of gratitude and a heightened sense of liberation (Appendix 4.2, p.203). When audience members express a feeling such as gratitude by saying “you made me feel that I can have power as a woman” (Appendix 4.2, p.206), it means they have been shown something that aligns to their reality, or that they have been prepared for something to come in future (Richardson, 2008). This can be linked back to the autobiographical nature of the work, which, according to Langlier (2004) asks the audience to consider looking inside themselves and to liberate themselves. An area of heightened agency for the audience can be evidenced with video documentation ([12:44](#)) in a very specific point in the work where I directly asked one audience member to co-participate and to shape part of the work by

helping me remove my footwear. I did this by resting my boot on her lap where I proceeded to slowly unzip the boot to a halfway point. I then gazed at this spectator to unzip the rest of the boot for me and three out of four times, she did. One of the women who unzipped the boot sent me a direct message via my professional Instagram account to say that “I just don’t have words for that, honestly you made me feel the strongest feeling ever [...]” (Appendix 4.2, p. 219). From a creative perspective, I suggest that such a statement evidences an interrelationship between an active audience participant and performer and if a performance artist makes space for the viewer to shape the work, or to co-participate in the work in some way, it creates a sense of shared agency for both the performer and the audience. Evidently, then, when the intersubjective relationship between audience and performer (Schneider, 1997; Jones, 1998) is used to confirm equal measures of control, this process, through human connection, can also strengthen the agency of the performer.

## **5.5 Achieving Agency**

This chapter has already unveiled some of the ways in which I felt I achieved agency during *The Ten Inch Heels*, but the thing that I reflected on the most after making, performing, and speaking to audiences about work, was how freeing it felt to perform a piece that contained so much vulnerability on my part as both the maker and performer. It was not easy to show ‘weakness’ or to maintain an unwillingness to wear the shoes in a way that people might expect, especially when the title of the work encouraged an expectation of something sexy. However, I found power in acknowledging how I wore the shoes in strip clubs, where I did live up to the aesthetic of a ‘sexy woman’, to now wearing them in ways that rejected a exploited that aesthetic. In particular, I absorbed that the empowering feature of working with high heels in my solo show did not come from wearing shoes or by being

fetishised by them (Grosz 1994), but from my creative decision-making processes which entailed exploiting the boots, fetishizing them, and exposing their negative and stigmatic traits. In essence, the agency I felt was a result of spending time alone when working with the objects and giving myself the permission to authentically express how I truly felt. As noted throughout this chapter, I felt vulnerable because I now recognised and accepted the potential subordination that I had experienced in my historical use of the heels. I took this knowledge and ability to be vulnerably into my next works, *Unstable* and *Pol(e)arity of Self*, where I felt I had a clearer sense of why I was making the type of work I was making, how I was doing it, and how the audience would be included / involved.

To conclude, this performance project chapter that critically reflects on *The Ten Inch Heels*, has found that a process of asking questions about the object's biography, to then using this information to physically give the object many different roles and meanings, can provide a deep sense of agency for the maker and performer of the work. It has also shown that if a performance artist makes space for the viewer to shape the work, or to co-participate in the work in some way, it creates a sense of shared agency for both the performer and the audience. The next work was clearly informed by these reflections, as will now be discussed in chapter 6, performance project 2, *Unstable*.

*Unstable* (2019)



Image 4. *Unstable* (2019)

Link to Performance:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grvImMcr1tE>

## **Chapter 6. Performance Project 2. Unstable**

This chapter aims to critically reflect on the creative process and performance of the second performance project of this study, *Unstable*. *Unstable* was performed live at three events in Liverpool, UK, including, Secret Circus Fashion Hub (07/12/2019), LJMU Dance Platform at Sudley Theatre (06/12/2019) and Cirqadia at District (08/11/2019), as well as two informal sharing's at Sudley Theatre (5&6/12/2019), with undergraduate dancers and lecturers in dance. In addition to live performance, where data was collected through audience survey and verbal dialogue, video footage from live performance (Jones, 2019) was used to form an artist and audience discussion via Zoom (18/05/2021) during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As with *The Ten Inch Heels*, this chapter is organised under the following five headings autobiography of the performer / choice to work with object, object biography via literature search, object (auto) biography and creative use of the object, audience gaze and achieving agency. Each heading speaks to my use of two three-meter poles, how they were used during autobiographical and choreographic solo process, as well as how this process increased my sense of agency.

### **6.1 Autobiography of the Performer / Choice to Work with Object**

Throughout my first five years of making work, I was reserved about my motivations to work with the pole because I felt that I would not be taken seriously if I had been honest about my exposure to poles in strip clubs. So, when people asked me how I got started with the pole or why I wanted to work with it, I would usually answer with something like "I enjoy the physical challenge" to bring their attention to the physical demands of the training. Or, when more specific questions were asked about the name of the work "*Unstable*", for instance, I would often refer to the instability of empowerment in pole

dance discourse and how researchers could not fully confirm or deny the empowering / objectifying traits of the practice. On the surface, I was telling the truth, and was very much interested in the binary, but *Unstable* went much deeper than that for me – I felt that I had to prove to myself that I could reframe what this object meant for me. I had to know, from my core, that I was not just dancing with the pole for external validation from audiences, whether in their appreciation of strength or sexuality, I had to reposition myself from an object that has been looked at, to a woman who is looking back and saying something – even if that *something* was an internal dialogue and fight about my own ‘unstable’ relationship to my colourful past, and how some traits of objectification were still present in my thinking. I thus had to see and know the purpose of the pole(s) in my work from the outset of working with them in this piece. I felt this was possible, considering I had already made pole work that was provocative and experimental (*Double Aesthetic, 2017; Object (Auto) Biography, 2017*), but I had to ask how I would do it again, with a new pole. The pole used in *Unstable* was unlike the traditional floor to ceiling pole, that usually remained erect and static in the space. It was trussed-up, hung from the ceiling, and when in motion, covered three meters of diametric space. The actual instability of the pole gave me a cover story that connected the pole back to the “unstable” theoretical underpinning of this study, thus allowing me to easily answer any probing questions that I received about my motivations to work with this object. I was not prepared, at that time, to announce to anyone that I used to be a stripper because I did not want to deal with their questions, raised eyebrows, or judgement. I just wanted to get on with my work. So, I did, and it became a fight with myself -- one that I won in the end.

## 6.2 Object Biography via Literature Search

It is important to note here that at the time of researching the biography of the pole for *Unstable*, I had already been practicing and researching pole dance for five years – during my performance career and my time as a student at BA and MA level, so I had an excellent understanding of it physically and theoretically. With this knowledge, I was under no illusion about how physically demanding the practice was, I thus predicted the flying pole would take more work, so I began training before delving into my creative process. Training focussed on strength drills, such as climbing and inverting, as well as transferring some of my already established movement vocabulary from my normal pole discipline, which was static, to the flying pole, which, of course, swung, and was much harder to balance.

As I was moving through this training and was experiencing the demands of manipulating my body around the movable pole, I found it poignant that recent studies were recognising the formidable physicality of pole dance (Nicholas, 2019; Dittrich, et al., 2020; Weaving, 2020) and how they were stating physicality as an element that could potentially liberate pole dance from its tarnished history. But what my extensive reading acknowledged was the detrimental effects of self-discipline and the pain we, as women, might put ourselves through to meet a certain standard of *woman* -- my reflections on femininity in my previous work, *The Ten Inch Heels*, and how some high heels can cause pain for the wearer, for instance, forced me to reflect upon the physical pain I was experiencing during the process of training for *Unstable*. I bled during most rehearsals, the skin on my hands and thighs was burnt and torn, I felt nauseous from the spinning and swinging of the pole, and I accidentally hit myself with the pole many times – it weighed 20 kilos. I felt that I was almost punishing myself for the sake of proving a point, to myself. The point was inevitably to validate myself as a subject

and not just a body. This is where this process became very complex, or 'unstable', because I recognised that even before the creative process began, I was internalising my own gaze, which was not dissimilar to how I used to think about my performance when I danced for men – thus reverting back to the biographical information of the object. I felt the internalisation of my own gaze, and its link to physical pain, as potentially disempowering, but I also felt empowered because I knew I could use the work to navigate my way through this messy terrain. I thus carried on training and my physical and emotional power grew stronger, which meant I had much more choice when it came to working artistically with the swinging pole.

During this training period then, the literature served as a point of reflection that was pertinent to the way in which I set up my relationship with the pole. It fuelled me to unpack the internal dialogue I was having about wanting and needing to prove myself, within and through my work, which evidently formed the basis of this work.

### **6.3 Object (Auto) Biography via Creative use of the Object**

As already expressed, *Unstable* originally began with just one pole, but when I moved from training to the improvisational creative process, I also brought in a second pole. Both poles developed in meaning for me. The flying pole was assigned with baggage of my autobiography, with which I was constantly and actively fighting, and the static pole stood as a safe space for me, that did not carry anything, metaphorically or literally, that could control me or hurt me in any way.

Throughout the process, I noted my navigation of the poles as object manipulation. Object manipulation is akin to the object exploitation method, used in *The Ten Inch Heels*, only the objects were not



'exploited' in this work, they were manipulated and activated. Video documentation ([7:50](#)) shows that I activated the swinging pole by assigning it with the role of a prison and is supported by my journal entry which noted "I played with the swinging pole sort of generating a cage for me to play in, to be trapped in, to hurt myself with. Why am I doing this to myself, I thought, as part of it" (Appendix, 5.3, p. 299). The insinuation of pain refers to the personal navigation of objectification that I referred to earlier. The swinging pole, then, although fixed to the environment, was fully moveable, and to me, it represented the battle I was having inside about me being 'found out' / being trapped in my own gaze. I motioned the swinging pole to pull me through the space and on to the floor ([4:27](#)), to swing dangerously close to my face and my body ([4:44](#)), to keep hold of my legs whilst my upper body tried to escape ([6:20](#)) – referencing, again, that although I wanted to free and liberate myself, I was holding on so tightly that I was physically stuck

The horizontal pole, however, aside from three points in the work, where I effortlessly carried and manipulated it with my hands ([1:10](#)), rolled across the space ([11:07](#)) and carried the pole off stage ([11:29](#)), remained motionless and inactive. This pole was subservient to my touch and was deliberately used to impress that it is "just a metal pole" (Holland, 2010, p. 178), when the pole is not erect and or held by a woman. Because I was easily able to manipulate this pole, I felt strong, and thus did not see the weight of my autobiography in it.

When I performed the work for audiences, it was clear that the designation of roles / activation of poles were read. To illustrate, spectators made the following comments "the use of the pole as another performer was brilliant. It had its own role, and you knew it as another being, really well" (Appendix 5.2, p. 263), "the poles being two separate entities, one being good and the other being evil" (Appendix 5.2, p. 266), "I felt that the poles had good and bad representation. As if the piece was showing the strength and

personal control it takes to make the pole represented as more” (Appendix 5.2, p. 267), and “negativity from the silver pole. Positivity on the black pole (Appendix 5.2, p. 268). These comments clearly show the pole as having separate meaning.

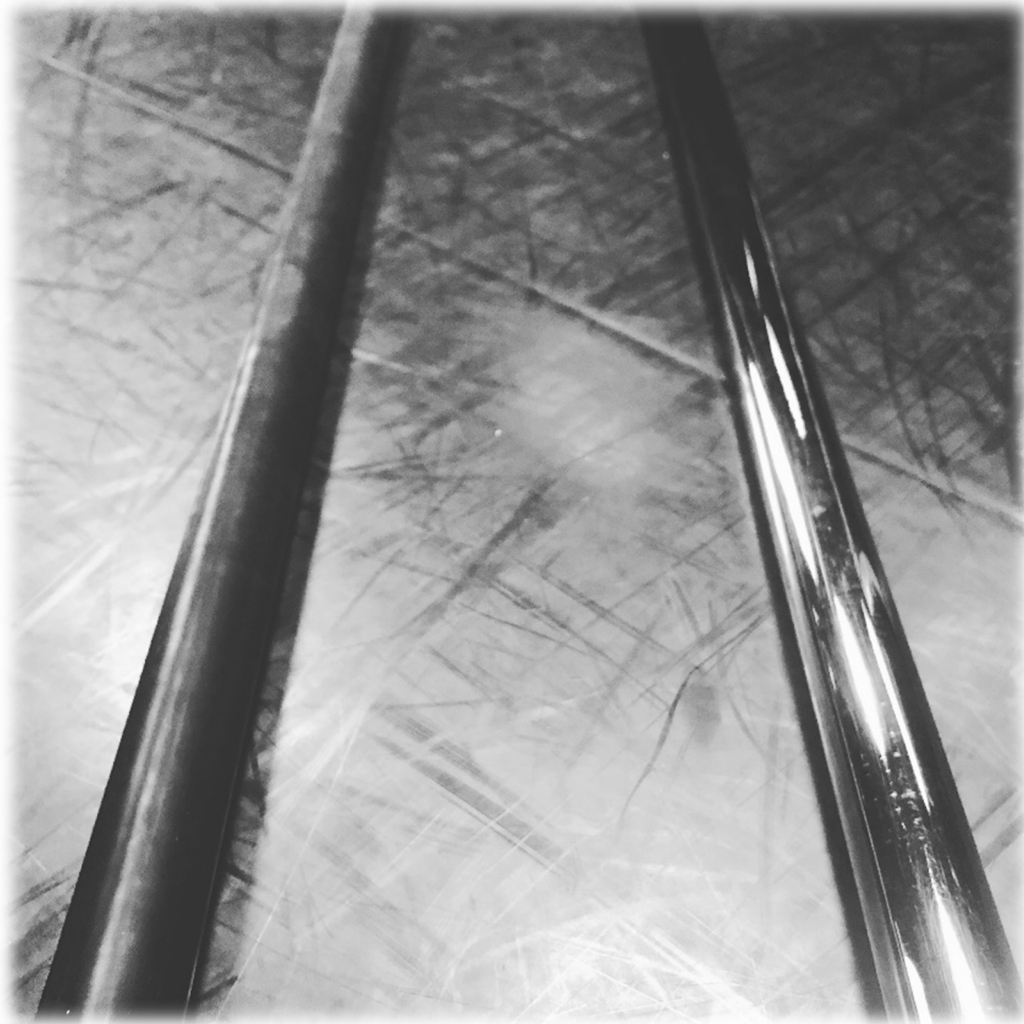


Image 5. Two Poles. Unstable (2019)

To add to observation about the poles carrying separate meaning is further comment from a zoom sharing with peers (Appendix 5.2, p. 246), and how some audience members could not decide if the work was a solo, duet, or a trio, given that there were such large objects in the space with me and that they were activated in the ways they were.

What I read from these comments as an artist is that my navigation of the objects elicited an anthropomorphic perception (Chandler and Schwarz, 2010) that inspired audiences to see the objects as alive and as attaining subjective (or biographical) significance. It also offered that the identity of the stigmatised objects was being redefined by both me (consumer) and audience (viewer). I felt powerful knowing that I could change my own and audience perception of the pole and I thus concur with Fernandez and Lastovicka (2011) that re-appropriating an object, can elicit power to those involved.



Image 6. Performer Moving a Hanging Pole (2019)

Whilst the examples of object manipulation have only given brief insight into my creative process, there are enough to justify a heightened sense of agency for me, as the maker and subject of the

work. My worries about self-objectifying for the sake of proving my own point were overridden by my creative decisions because as Lepecki (2012) supports, when artists make decisions about the materials and objects they work with, it is a projection of subjectivity and authority, of which the performer has over the object. This is supported by Chen (2015) who posits that props and objects in dance can show the inner world of the artist, which can therefore open the inner state of the performer. When combining how the objects were received by audiences – how the poles carried meaning, with my initial choices to work with the poles, it is clear that although motivated by questions of self-surveillance, the work was not built purely on an internalisation of gaze, as pole dance is often accused of (Griffiths, 2010; Anstock et al., 2016; Mukherji, 2016), nor was there an obligation, on my part as the performer and creator of the work, to conform to practices of raunch culture (Allen, 2011; Owen, 2012), as is also common in pole dance. What I offered and found instead is that autobiographical composition, via object manipulation, actively rejected and destabilised the stigmatised meaning of the objects, allowing me to achieve a deeper sense of agency. The agency I felt and experienced arose from my ability to make creative choices about the meaning that I assigned the poles and the actions I took with them.

#### **6.4 Audience Gaze**

Relative to audience gaze and their interpretive response to the work, I was surprised by the abundance of survey data that highlighted how viewers were interpreting themes of struggle a battle, a war, a fight, being stuck, and various other metaphorical descriptors (Appendix 5.2, p.264). Their reading of pressure, fight, and struggle positioned the work in a space where I felt I was being listened to and heard, instead of just being watched. The gathering of interpretive responses from audiences, and their reading of a fight, in

relation to the actual 'fight' I was having with myself, taught me that it is ok grapple with issues in front of audiences and that I could be uncensored in front of them, in the same way I could be uncensored within my process when I was alone, when there was no audience present. It felt like I had been given permission to go deeper into my vulnerability as part of a live performance, instead of just process, which became evident in my next work *Pol(e)arity of Self*.

Another thing that I found quite liberating about this level of vulnerability, and the way the audience perceived a fight, is how it indicated that the dance I performed with the pole(s) had gone beyond stigmatic association of male gaze, sexualisation and female exploitation (Hamilton, 2009; Griffiths, 2010; Allen, 2011; Donaghue, et al., 2014) and instead into an artistic space where a relationship between me and the pole were being read by audiences. This was confirmation to me, that I could exist in a performative space with the pole, without being seen as a sex object, or being exploited by the object, as I sometimes was during the times I danced with the pole for men inside strip clubs.

A final and unexpected finding to have emerged from performing *Unstable* came from the decision I made to have some audience members sit on the stage with me. I made this choice specifically because of how comforting I found it to have the audience in the space with me in my previous work *The Ten Inch Heels*. As shown in the image below, some audience members are sitting on the outskirts of the stage, whilst others are sitting in the theatre seats.



Image 7. Shared Space. Unstable (2019)

Given that both the audience sitting in the space with me and the audience sitting in the theatre seats saw the same work, it is insightful to look at their responses to the question how they felt as viewers of the work. Spectators who shared the space with me generally said they felt more involved in the piece and that they could feel my 'struggle' and that they wanted to step in (Appendix 5.2, p. 270). Whilst those who were at a further distance from me, and clearly separated from the work, commented more on the 'spectacular' elements of the choreography. Those who were close to me then were active viewers who reported kinaesthetic empathy (Sklar, 1994) through experiencing the movement from a felt dimension, as opposed to passively observing, like those in the theatre seats. This proximity between me and the audience reduced the 'spectacular' physicality and asked audience to hear my breath, to see my sweat and to listen to the pole scratch against my skin and to be 'in' the work with me. In essence, because the spectators shared the space with me, the fourth wall (Davis, 2015) was broken, and the gaze of the audience was diluted because they became a part of the piece. Considering how male gaze is partly why pole dance carries such stigma (Murphy, 2003; Pilcher, 2009; Donaghue

and Whitehead, 2011; Bahri, 2012; Ncube and Chipara, 2013), with how I performed for mixed sex audiences, I was observing that pole performance need not deny male gaze, as other researchers have suggested (Fennel, 2018), to reduce the harms of an objectifying gaze. Instead, the performer could 'break the fourth wall' by setting up optional viewing points for audiences to either be in the space during the performance, or to watch from afar, as I did in this show. I felt that because I had given the two options of either sitting further away, or in the space with me, that I had authority on who was viewing me and from where. I noted that audiences should be brought closer to the performer to become more involved in the piece, so that they could see something real or something they could relate to. To add to this reference of space and audience is that whilst this work was neither performed in a strip club nor a fitness studio, but in a theatre setting with an audience, it can challenge any previous claims that have been made regarding the removal of audiences to dissolve objectification in pole dance within spaces that exist outside strip clubs (Donaghue, and Whitehead, 2011). I clearly did not remove the audience to protect myself from objectification. I brought the pole and the audience into a space where dialogue could take place. Evidently, and again, these findings were all contributing to my own fight about having something to prove in relation to the current discourse on pole dance, and thus increasing my sense of agency.

### **6.5 Achieving Agency**

I achieved agency in the making and performance of *Unstable* because I was true to my feelings throughout the making of the work – I avoided performing as a powerful woman who was always in control, as I could easily have done by presenting strong, well-rehearsed movement that showed my strength. Instead, as in *The Ten Inch Heels*, I highlighted that I would have to fight to find that

kind of strength. Journal entry concurs and shows that the process of working with the poles gave me a platform and a space to think about and to solve the personal issues I was having in relation to my creative process, and how it was a somewhat physically and mentally painful process to go through.

My work illuminate's choice. It says, here is the struggle, but you have a choice. You are never the result of someone else's choice. You need to take responsibility. You are accountable for everything. Take responsibility for the way you deal with your life [...] I now know why I create the type of work that I create and that is to show people that they have choice. There is challenge, there is struggle, but you can get through it. You can always get out of a shitty situation (Appendix 5.3, p.305).

Although this data does not exactly reflect the detail of what the “fight”, “struggle” or “shitty situation” was about, many additional journal entries clarify intent of autobiographical projection throughout this piece. For instance, whilst this performance was about rejecting docility and stigma relative to pole dance discourse, it was also about acknowledging those themes in relation to my historical use of the pole and how I was trying to conceal it by saying the work was about the instability of empowerment in pole dance. A journal entry that I wrote upon completion of four performances of the *Unstable* shows how I personally narrated and understood the entire work.

I have hold of a long horizontal pole, it is heavy, but I am going to show you that I can move it with ease. I put it down to change my and your attention to the hanging pole, one that swings and it is above me. I show you how I can control that too. My body in the air. The pole throws me around a little bit and I begin to learn about some of the issues surrounding the practice and why external aesthetic may only be the driving force for my practice. Or, even that I am still somehow reliving my time working in a purely objectified position under the male gaze. I am trapped in this self-contained prison that presents me as an inauthentic confident woman. A gilded woman. I come forward on my knees as the pole drags along my breast and neck, I brush it off me like I don't like it. Change the spatiality of the pole to reframe what the audience pay attention to and how sexualised the movement can be without the vertical pole. I go back to the prison one more time. But this time, I am in



charge, and I remove one element of phallogentrism from the space. I win, but the vertical pole still swings. It swings on its own. It keeps its energy (Appendix, 5.3, p.302).

The meaning of this excerpt could be interpreted in many ways, but with a focus on achieving agency in my process, the notion that “I win” is enough to express the significance of the presentation of this work. A sense of winning in the end was also noted by viewers of the work “[...] It told the story of no matter what position you’re in that you (the woman) can handle it straight up, lying down and even upside down” (Appendix 5.2, p. 267) and “the struggle and burden of something weight[sic] you down. I felt female empowerment. You conquered whatever it was at the end” (Appendix 5.2, p. 267). The witnessing of and the experience of conquering something or winning, would suggest growth, agency and empowerment (Bernstein, 2019) and thus presents dancing with the pole(s) as an activity that empowers a performer. Moreover, based on the embedded undertone of autobiography in this work, it is pertinent to also note that although research (Murphy, 2003) has defended pole dancers (both professional and recreational engagement) from experiencing detrimental effects of objectification through means of developing performative and fictitious characters, I do not agree that performativity is the answer to shielding performers from being silenced and or subordinate to gaze. I have found and firmly demonstrate the exact opposite by maintaining that liberation in pole dance, is achieved through subjective and authentic engagement with the pole. To expand, as data has shown, *Unstable* did not rely on building a fabricated character that would be used to protect me from the harms of objectification and or male gaze. *Unstable* was built on a series of autobiographical content that was self-exposing and, at times, difficult to navigate, for me as the maker and performer of the work. Each time I stepped into the rehearsal space or when I performed the work in front of an audience, I was

forced to meet and face myself through autobiographical stimuli. Much of the aforementioned data from my personal journals illustrates how I was facing myself through my work -- I questioned if my perceived agency was only a result of my physical strength, I asked myself what type of work I would be creating now if I had not made some of my previous life choices, I wrote about self-sabotaging behaviour and that I was worried that I might have been saying too much. Consistent questioning is not uncommon in creative process (Cameron 1994; May 1994; Gilbert 2016), but what is stimulating to add here is that when performances and training for the *Unstable* stopped, due to Covid-19 and closures of studios, to rehearsing intensively for a short period for an external professional performance, I found that the “fight” was not as challenging anymore. I noted “[.] it feels a lot easier now, the fight is not as significant” (Appendix 5.3, p.312). I was referring to how I had already dealt with the physical and psychological fight during my earlier rehearsal and devising process. This newfound sense of ease aligns my process with autobiographical performance artists (Forte, 1988; Spackman, 2000; Smith, 2002, Edward, 2018) who speak their subjectivity to achieve personal growth. However, differing to previous research in both pole dance and autobiographical work, I have found that personal growth transpired through directly working with the objects that were situated in the same environment in which my original lack of agency occurred. I felt that because I gave the poles new meaning and that I had navigated them in ways that did not adhere to expectation, be that sexualised movement, or only expressing physical strength, then I was in control.

Overall, it was a physically and emotionally painful process, one that was very convoluted, even for me, as the subject of the work, but I feel like an active agent for having gone through it.

This chapter offered a structured reflective response to the performance work *Unstable*. Throughout, I have revealed and discussed the ways in which I have used two three metre poles as choreographic and autobiographical objects. I have conversed how the poles were not only used metaphorically to represent the instability of empowerment in pole dance, thus relating to the theoretical underpinnings of this study, but also how the poles each carried meaning and value for me as the maker. Also discussed was the position of audience and their inclusion in the work gave me a sense of heightened agency. Finally, this chapter underscores the difficulty of presenting autobiographical solo work by stating the ambiguity I was facing in exposing my autobiography.

***Pol(e)arity of Self (2020)***



Image 8. Pol(e)arity of Self (2020)

Link to Performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxOluAxyfQA&t=7s>

## Chapter 7. Performance Project 3. Pol(e)arity of Self

This chapter offers a reflection on the third and final work of this research, *Pol(e)arity of Self* (2020). *Pol(e)arity of Self* differs in format from the previous two works in that it is presented in digital, instead of live form. The main reason for creating and presenting the work digitally was because of the Covid-19 pandemic whereby I could not access live audiences due to local and national lockdowns. Thus, I presented this work in the form of a screen dance as a necessary adaptation for the continuation of this research, not as a screen dance that is informed by research into screen dance. The inspiration behind the work remained consistent with the contextual framework (chapter two) of this study and it gave focus to the questions that were already in place.

This short film, created and edited in my home studio, was released online (26/10/2020), via my professional website, [www.rowenagander.com](http://www.rowenagander.com) in preparation for an Instagram Live audience / artist discussion, with Metal Culture UK (29/10/2020). Sixteen viewers provided me with digital notes, through Instagram direct messaging and email, about their interpretations and feelings towards the work. These notes were transferred to a word document to maintain anonymity of viewers. In addition to sharing work through my website, I took part in an undergraduate peer review session on (09/03/2021). Here, I gained feedback from seven undergraduate dance students, one dance lecturer and one theatre technician / screen artist. This discussion was recorded and transcribed (Appendix 6.2, p.332).

As with the previous two chapters, I have used my creative and reflective model to guide my writing, so the layout of the chapter follows the same five headings which are autobiography of the performer / choice to work with object, object biography via literature search, object (auto) biography and creative use of the object, audience gaze and achieving agency.

## 7.1 Autobiography of the Performer / Choice to Work with Object

*Pol(e)arity of Self* was heavily influenced by the richness and depth of research and reflection that I had undertaken in my previous two works, *The Ten Inch Heels* and *Unstable*. Before making *Pol(e)arity of Self*, I wrote

The work must be honest. I cannot work in any other way. It is paramount that artists speak their truth and that they are vulnerable. The final work should speak autobiographically about the time in my life that has motivated this entire thread of research. I am not an overtly feminine woman who is obsessed with high heels and femininity, I am a woman who has experienced objectification and actions attached to pole dancing and the stigma it has been tarnished with, such as lap dancing and fetishization. There was a complete disconnect from my sexuality -- I am a gay woman, yet I was an expert in teasing men because of my ability to 'perform' heterosexuality and femininity with ease. [...] I had to undergo a lot of shit objectification to even remotely be interested in working with these types of themes in my work. [...] I have moved away from the sexualised element of the practice, and I realise now that I was easily able to do so because I understand, from an intrinsic and experiential level, what it feels to be objectified and consumed. Because I know, I can resist it. The difference between dancing for the gaze of a man -- presenting my body for his gaze and performing my art for audience gaze, is not that dissimilar. In both scenarios I use my body to say something, to achieve a specific goal. Only, in the second scenario, where I am truly crafting my intention to something more than sexual aesthetic, I move through an intersubjective mode of thinking, and I am completely in control. I am awake, I am active, I know, and I oversee the entire process [...] (Appendix 6.3, p.341).

The above journal entry is vital for contextualising my choices to work with the pole and eight-inch heels in *Pol(e)arity of Self*. It iterates autobiographical relation to the objects, why they were present in my research, what the objects meant for me in terms of gaze, as well as exemplifying, again, the level of agency that has occurred throughout my solo processes. Here, I echo Cake et al. (2015) who state reflective practice in creative research, and the space it carves for wider reflection, generates a method of meticulous academic inquiry

that leads to new and creative ways of dealing with certain topics. The topics I was dealing with in *Pol(e)arity of Self* were still very much aligned with the overarching questions of this research, but because of my continuous reflective practice, I delved deeper into my own objectification, and I became more open about the sexualisation of my body. I was motivated to show this commentary through digital medium, whereby I could perform with different versions of myself. The *se/ves* I intended to work with were the young woman who quite literally put herself in the style of shoes chosen for the work, for the pleasure of other people, as well as the woman I am now, who is questioning why I did that and how I can reclaim my body for my own fulfilment. The third version, who arose in editing, was both the creative and psychological resolution to the difficulties I was facing both before and during this research. A reflective question to ask here, based on the digital element of the work, is whether this ‘third version’ of me would have appeared if the work had been live. Similarly, I ask myself if I had not been through the previous two artistic research processes, would I have realised this third figure as poignant enough to make the ‘final cut’ of the digital work.

## **7.2 Object Biography via Literature Search**

As already hinted at, my motivation to work with the pole, and the slightly shorter shoes – eight-inch heels, instead of ten, was still very much connected to the environment where I had experienced both objects and thus related back to the autobiographical strand of this study. Further, because my ambivalent feelings towards the strip club environment meant I could not define if I was fully objectified, because I sometimes felt empowered by the movement choices I made, the binary of objectification and empowerment was still very significant to my work. But now, I saw it as a spectrum that I could use to explore in more depth. For instance, just before making *Pol(e)arity of Self*, I felt in control because I acknowledged how my

ability to artistically negate objectification was because I had experienced it. This recognition aligns to Bartky (2003), who notes, women must acknowledge the cultural inscriptions of which their bodies have been branded and then move forward with as much agency as they feel they have left. Through reflection of my previous works and much reading, I became enlightened enough about my own subordination (particularly with regards to male gaze, objectification, and femininity) and I worked with those concepts artistically until I found my subjective voice. Because I felt I had found a sense of agency, I began branching out of asking questions about the biography of the objects (Kopytoff, 1986) and instead, I zoned into the question, “what do you know now that you didn’t know before?” Considering I had spent the previous few years challenging my experiences of the objects through choreographic solo practice, I had a wealth of new knowledge with which:

- I knew that if I took the pole into new spaces, I could immediately challenge the environmental perception of the objects and their position in culture.
- I found new and empowering ways of transgressively manipulating objects to give them anthropomorphic value.
- I knew that if I deconstructed the pole, I could destroy its phallic semiotic value.
- I understood that I could use the objects to start a dialogue with audiences about cultural topics that concerned women.
- I also knew that if I wanted to protect myself from the harmful gaze of an audience, then I would have to include them in the work in some way.

Thus, based on my practice, I felt like I knew the objects enough to move forward with them, but because I was now intending to work artistically with two versions of myself, as well as the objects, I investigated identity as a research topic too. I was inspired by Elliot’s text on *Concepts of the Self* (2014) where he discusses how



“information-rich societies” can cloud one’s judgement of self and can transform the way we perceive our being. This text triggered a thought process about the information I was fed as a young woman -- how I bought into feminine practices to ‘fit in’, or how I went to work at a strip club when I was 18 years old because I perceived my own body as an object that was for the viewing pleasure of other people. I remember feeling that because people looked at me anyway, for free, I might as well make some money from it. I did not know my *self* then, and although I am still working on getting to know myself now, I was reassured by Elliot’s text that I did not need to fully know because “selfhood is flexible, fractured, fragmented, decentred and brittle” (Elliott, 2014, p.8). I understood that knowing the polarisation of my objectified and empowered self would take work and that I could use my artistic project as a platform to unpack this binary. It was this point that I began working improvisationally with the objects and, of course, my body.

### **7.3 Object (Auto) Biography and Creative Use of Object**

By the third step of my process in *Pol(e)arity of Self*, I was in a state of self-interrogation whereby I felt like I was deconstructing / reconstructing different versions of myself. I was aware of Butler (1990) who suggests that when one recognises their shifting identity, they have the power to negotiate their subjectivity. I was actively working with the identity of a woman who used to ask no questions when her body was gazed upon, to now identifying as a woman who asks many questions of those who gaze at me. Original video documentation of my process demonstrates how this shift in identity took place -- In 45 minutes and 45 seconds, which is the length of time it took to film the entirety of what would be the final edit of this work, I utilised costume and different movement styles to channel two different versions of myself, both of which I had spent time exploring in the lead up to filming. During this lead up to filming the

final version, I recorded improvisations of me moving around the pole in both 'costumes' and thought about where the other version of 'me' would be in the space.



Image 9. Costume. Pol(e)arity of Self (2020)

I then layered the videos on top of each other in Adobe Premier Pro to get a rough idea of what the costumes looked like, as well as assessing if the relationship between the selves would work, not as a duet, or a dance off, but to bring my two polarising identities together. I was struck by the visual juxtaposition of costume and how it showed not only the difference in my height when wearing or not wearing the shoes ([1:33](#)), but also how my power might be perceived depending on the exposure and or concealing of my skin.

In terms of generating movement, I thought back to how I used to dance for men in clubs with rehearsed, sexualised, titillating movement that included body waves, undulations, touching myself, and, of course, the removal of clothes. The minimal attire I had chosen hinted at this, but because I did not want my body to be sexualised or “dressed up” anymore I resisted the potential sexualisation of my body in relation to the pole. Video documentation (5:06) shows how I stripped the topless nudity of erotic potential by speeding up and reversing the video material until my body was semi covered again. During the reversal of this material, the high heels were wrapped around my neck to evidence the reflections I had referenced in *The Ten Inch Heels* about the pressures of femininity and the sexualisation it brought up. I improvised, in process, and in the final film, with the notion that I would not do anything remotely ‘sexy’ with my body, as I used to.



Image 10. *Heels. Pole. Woman. Pol(e)arity of Self (2020)*

I noted,

I don't ever want my work to conform to traditional and stylised pole aesthetic, instead, I just want the pole to be present, and in this case, it is the separation and meeting point of my own contradictions, the contradictions that exists within my life (Appendix 6.3. p. 343).

When comparing how the poles were used in previous processes, it is evident that they were activated by my knowledge of their biography and my curiosity to exploit them – they were noted as duet / trio partners with their own role. However, the pole in this work was static. I did not manipulate it and I barely acknowledged its biography. I was focussed much more on the relationship between my 'selves'. Data from audiences (Appendix 6.2, P. 332) show that viewers felt that the pole became invisible and that the triadic relationship between the 'selves' was enough to remove and distort the visibility of the pole. The biographical information of the pole and heels were overthrown by my subjective projection of self. Although I did not realise this for myself until viewers had seen the work, it felt empowering to know again, that my artistic intentions were being read and that the stigma of the pole could be overlooked depending on the decisions made. My decision to keep the pole static in this work, made me feel like I was released from the feeling of being trapped by my history, and to see that people change and evolve over time. I felt a resolution that told me that I would eventually speak to other experiences in my work, not just my (self) objectification working as an erotic dancer.

Also significant to discuss regarding object positioning is the placement of the tripod, and thus, where the camera was situated. I have explored film making in an undergraduate screen dance module, and for various professional projects, so I am very aware of all the compositional methods that are available for a director to enhance their work. However, I felt that one static position for the

camera would afford me more control in terms of audience's gaze, as I will now discuss.

#### **7.4 Audience Gaze**

Audience gaze in *Pol(e)arity of Self* became particularly significant because, due to the medium of the work, I felt a new sense of control regarding how or what I would allow the audience to see / focus on. I did this through editing, camera positioning, and length of shots. The one position of the camera meant that I could show the audience exactly what I wanted them to see. The distance between my body and the camera, for instance, was controlled based on whether I came close to the camera (viewer) or not. Another example is how I withheld my gaze until midway through the work, until I looked directly into the lens of the camera and crawled towards it. Like my earlier works, I wanted the audience to be in an activated state, whereby they were not just watching, but they felt like they were being watched by me. This was most evident when three versions of myself were staring down the lens of the camera (4.26) show. As the following data shows, the strength of the figures (or selves) coming together to form one, impacted the ways in which my gaze was received. One audience member noted the three figures as a team who may be working together to come back for them “are they a team and are they working together to come back at us for watching them? Am I the one who is really being watched?” (Appendix 6.2, p.332). Another spectator supports this but adds to the shifting in power.

[...] the shifts in power and the voyeuristic play where both begin to look at the audience, knowingly being looked at, and knowingly looking at each other. They become equally powerful when they both look at me as an audience, I almost become noticed as the voyeur, so they have the power and not me (as audience)? (Appendix 6.2, p.329).

Further data continues to acknowledge an undercurrent of voyeurism and gaze, “there was an infiltration/intrusion of gaze” (Appendix 6.2, p.324), “I felt like I was forced to be a voyeur of the drama [...]” (Appendix 6.2, p.326), “watching it I felt empowered but also like I was being watched especially with your intense gaze it almost felt like I was being asked which figure I was more drawn to who would my eyes be on” (Appendix, p.327) and “I felt that I became the subject of the experiment” (Appendix, p.332). The insinuation of this data is that audiences felt as if they were not just in a space of witnessing, but they felt they were being watched, asked, or even forced to do something. This is clear evidence of an intersubjective relationship between audience and performer, which fosters and balances a cycle of objectification in performance. As De Vos (2015) recognises, audience witness until a gaze, so strong, is thrown back at them, in which case they are now part of the show and are as equally objectified as the performer. Particularly when the audience member does not know what is coming, “they become the object due to a lack of self-recognition” (p.33). Further data from my reflective journal suggests reversal of gaze was deliberate on my part as I noted “I look at the camera to challenge the gaze and I ask the viewer, with my eyes, what are you looking at? Do you think this display is for you? I objectify the objectifier” (Appendix 6.3, p. 343). The notion of flipping gaze back to audience is comparable to how I looked at audiences in *The Ten Inch Heels*, which also made some viewers feel that I was asking them questions, asking them to do something (unzip boots) and watching them. It is also similar to how audience members who shared space with me in *Unstable* showed a sense of witnessing, instead of ‘passively gazing’ (Albright, 1997). This acknowledgment is stimulating in terms of my agency as a performer because it shows that reflection of gaze in both live performance and film, balances the status of objectification between audience and performer. Reflection of gaze, as this study has found, thus stands as another means of managing objectification in

performance through the repositioning of the performer as active subject, thus strengthening feelings of agency.

Another theme, connected to the nature of audience and performer relationship, is the vulnerability offered throughout the work and the permission I gave to the viewer to experience my internal dialogue. Data collected from audience responses offer how viewers found this self-exposure reassuring, thought provoking and relatable. The confessional and personal tone of the work was noted by audiences in the following ways

[...] I think everyone at some point in their lives has felt that vulnerable and exposed, but it's easy to think of yourself as weak in those moments. It was almost reassuring to see you go through that process. I felt like I was witnessing your internal dialogue (Appendix 6.2, p.324).

Bannon (2015) discusses the role of the audience as active participants whose experience of performance conjures up feelings of pleasure, reflection and meaning. She offers "as voyeurs of the performers who bare all, we become absorbed in moments of reflective pleasure, glimpsed as we explore the civilising and social processes of art, in a context of being in the world" (p.143). In some ways, the voyeuristic gaze of the audience, as I had experienced in the previous two works, and this one, taught me that if I show the audience my world, they will tell me something about the way they have experienced their world -- it felt reassuring to hear that my struggles were being read because the viewers watching had also experienced something similar. To expand, data from peer review shows how my self-exposing work encouraged one peer to reflect upon her experience of sexual assault,

obviously with my dissertation being about sexual assault, and something that I have been fighting is like over sexualising like women's bodies and I think I just want to thank you doing that fight because I know that is like what you talk about as well, and I think it is really important that you have done this piece and you have shown, like, say if that was shows to someone they

would be like say she's asking for it and things like that so I am just really happy you have done that and it means a lot to me as well, and I am sure it does to other people so thank you. (Appendix 6.2, p. 334).

What is important to pinpoint about this peer comment is that she witnessed my 'fight' and vulnerability as giving voice to some of her own struggles. She expressed a sincere sense of gratitude which shows that *Pol(e)arity of Self*, although not built on a theme of sexual assault, almost validated her feelings and frustrations around the sexualisation of women. Additionally, and with higher significance to this study is that when audience connect their own autobiography to that of a performer, it means they have connected with the work on a level deep enough to penetrate their cultural and or experiential views. Although this audience-performer connection has been recognised in dance (Hanna, 1983; Cooper Albright, 1997; Langelier and Peterson, 2004), it has not yet been acknowledged in the realm of performance with stigmatised objects – a space where the female solo performers subjectivity is questioned so frequently.

### **7.5 Achieving agency**

Sending my gaze x 3, back to the viewer made me feel powerful and like I no longer had to hide, and whilst audience had commented on the strength of my gaze, I made my own reading that my multiple selves made up one to find equal power.





Image 11. Activating Audience. Pol(e)arity of Self (2020)

There was a vulnerable self, a confident self, and a self that is made up of those two parts. From my perspective as the creator, this narrative of three selves was presented in a way that seemed fitting to how I was seeing myself in my previous two works. I saw strength, but I also saw and felt a tremendous amount of vulnerability. According to Claycomb (2012) when the performer narrates a version of self, or selves, as I did in this work, it is an act of power. Further journal entry confirms this feeling of power and offers that it was noted as an editing decision in the final cut of the work.

To embrace, meet, understand and accept multiple versions of myself is liberating in itself and I can look at you in the eye and tell you that – this is why I look directly into the camera at the end (Appendix 6.3, p.345).



*Image 12. Reversing Gaze. Pol(e)arity of Self (2020)*

Here, there is a meeting of self, an exposure of subjectivity multiplied by three and there is clear confirmation that the solo artistic process gave space to allow that meeting to occur. The meeting of self in research process is supported by Sklar (1991) who proposes that reflecting on beliefs and experiences in research can be a space for meeting self. What I have found and would like to add to this, however, is that intense reflection on solo process and performance have encouraged a meeting of multiple selves, through the variety of roles I carried out during each of the creative processes within this study. Additionally, instead of just meeting myself, I 'became' myself by accepting the various versions of myself, whilst working with the very objects that were related to my experiential exploitation, which

caused my intrinsic interest in this research in the first place. I actively met, met again, fought, fought again to become a version of myself that felt right at that specific time. I thus agree with Braidotti (2002) who offers, “becoming is a question of undoing the structures of domination by careful, patient, revisitations, readjustments, mere changes” (p. 116). The changes I made, and the slight readjustments can be read across all three artefacts presented in this study.

To conclude, this chapter has offered an in-depth reflection on *Pol(e)arity of Self*, a short film that underscores multiple, contradictory selves and how they navigate the internalisation of an external gaze. Throughout, I have expressed how the pole was simultaneously used a splitting point and a meeting point for a self that is active and in control, a self that felt vulnerable, trapped, and objectified, and an ambiguous self that accepted all of the above. As this is the third and final performance project chapter of this thesis, this chapter has also exemplified how, because I worked repetitively with my model of practice, the depth of agency I felt was heightened.

## Chapter 8. Conclusion

This practice-led and autoethnographic study began as a means of unpicking the static binary of empowerment and objectification that exists in discourse relating to pole dance and high heels. I was particularly drawn to this binary because of how elements of my autobiography included those objects and thus echoed it -- I journeyed from an 18-year-old dancer, who worked at strip clubs, to now working professionally as a lecturer in dance and as a performance artist who incorporates the use of the pole in my work. Such a journey is vital to note within the context of this research because it shows how, when I worked as an erotic dancer, the feelings of objectification I experienced *then* were felt because of how I branded body as an object for the consumption of mainly the male viewer, and how I lived in a state of feminine obedience that promoted a sexual and desirable aesthetic that I never questioned. Whereas *now*, my motivation to work with the pole, or the high heels, as I have done throughout this four-year study, is not limited to, or motivated by sexual aesthetic, but has been a way for me to ask questions. The questions I have asked myself, as a woman, artist, and practice-led researcher, in every work I have made, since 2015, have brought me knowledge that has allowed me to feel like an active agent in my work and have given me the ability to negate / reframe objectification. The blending of my autobiography, with the actions I made as a professional choreographer and performer has valued “the nuanced, complex, and insider insights that autoethnography offers researchers, participants, and readers/ audiences” (Adams et al, 2014, p.103).

The following subheadings will address the main research findings of this study and the implications of this research in the areas of pole dance, performing with objects, autobiographical solo performance. Lastly, I will discuss recommendations for future study, challenges, and limitations.

## 8.1 Research Findings

The questions posed in this study were answered through four main outcomes – three solo performance artefacts, *The Ten Inch Heels*, *Unstable* and *Pol(e)arity of Self*, and a five-part *Creative and Reflective Model for Navigating Autobiographical Objects in Solo Performance to Achieve Agency*. The three-solo works, although outcomes in their own right, were coupled with performance project chapters that critically and reflectively underscored the ways in which I navigated stigmatised objects in process and performance, as well as addressing how I was able to maintain a sense of agency through the choices I was making in performance and process.

- *The Ten Inch Heels* chapter outlines my process of asking questions about the object's biography, to then using this information to physically give the object many different roles and meanings. I discuss how my creative choices to manipulate the object enhanced my sense of agency as the maker and performer of the work. *The Ten Inch Heels* chapter also shows how, because I made space for the viewer to shape the work, I created a sense of shared agency for both me and the audience.
- *Unstable* addresses how two three-meter poles were not only used to metaphorically represent the instability of empowerment in pole dance, thus relating to the theoretical underpinnings of this study, but also how each pole carried meaning and value for me as the maker of the work. *Unstable* also expresses how I grappled with feelings of insecurity I felt during process and performance, regarding the depth of autobiography I was willing to share.
- *Pol(e)arity of Self* reflects on the use of the pole as a meeting point for a self that is active and in control, a self that feels vulnerable, trapped, and objectified, and an ambiguous self ultimately accepted all of the above. As this is the third and

final performance project to be discussed in the thesis, this chapter also exemplifies how, because I worked repetitively with my model of practice, the depth of agency I felt was heightened.

The final outcome that emerged from my practice-led and autoethnographic research is my formulation of a five-part *Creative and Reflective Model for Navigating Autobiographical Objects in Solo Performance to Achieve Agency*. I arrived at this model through in-depth thematic analysis of data collected for each of the three works via methods of video documentation, audience / peer review and journal entry. These analyses were then crystallised further to refine the model to how it reads in chapter four. The model comprises five headings including autobiography of the performer / choice to work with object, object biography via literature search, object (auto) biography and creative use of the object, audience gaze and achieving agency. Each step of the model, as supported by performance project chapters, articulates the ways in which I have used stigmatised objects -- objects that have admittedly objectified me in previous settings, including high heels and the pole, in my solo choreographic process. The model specifically emphasises the steps I have taken to curate and maintain a sense of agency in my own movement process.

My findings not only bring attention and in-depth focus to autobiographical solo work with objects, an area not yet explored in dance / pole dance research, but they also detail the practice-led research and autoethnographic process and how the artist researcher can marry aspects of creative and academic practice. Thus, this research and its hybrid methodology can unquestionably offer an original contribution to knowledge in the areas pole dance, solo performance, working with objects in performance, and practice-led research, as will be discussed below.

## **8.2 Implications for Pole Dance Research**

Differing from previous research approaches that aimed to untangle the binary of objectification and empowerment in relation to pole dance (Trautner, 2005; Whitehead and Kurz, 2009; Griffiths, 2010; Holland, 2010), this study has dealt with elements of pole dance through practice-led research and autoethnography. The practical nature of this study has given much insight into the potential of pole as choreographic object. It explicitly expresses how a solo creative process, with the inclusion of a pole, can operate in research and professional performance arenas. Both of which have not been addressed in previous studies. The information I have given to the creative ways in which the objects can be used and approached, will inspire researchers who are interested in the notion of agency in pole dance performance to ask questions about the creative process from the perspective of the creator, rather than just examining performance outcomes and what the audience have to say about their viewing. Additionally, given the autobiographical strand of this research that incorporates discussion on how I used the objects *then*, in strip clubs, to how I use them *now*, in artistic performance, shows that choreography with the pole and or high heels need not be restricted to sexual aesthetic and that the meaning of the object can be challenged and manipulated by the maker in ways that feel empowering and true to the individual.

## **8.3 Implications for Performing with Objects**

As the five-part model includes the use of objects, I believe the outcomes of this study would offer fruitful creative methodology to dance students, movement researchers and choreographers who want to speak to audiences about an object they have autobiographical experience with. Moreover, given the visual stigmatic association of the objects in this study, I also suggest that

other choreographers might try to see, as I did, the creative potential of an object if they move beyond the aesthetic of the item and instead use the cultural biography of the object as stimulus to bring on a deeper experience for both themselves and the audience.

#### **8.4 Implications for autobiographical solo performance**

This study has unveiled much visibility to the processes involved in solo performance and how autobiographical narrative can be dealt with during practical research with objects. For instance, my explicit and uncensored offering of how I met and accepted myself through solo research, might influence transparency in other solo artist researchers. Moreover, based on the five-part model that emerged because of this research, I also clearly show how solo practice-led and autoethnographic research can be used to deal with complex topics, as well as highlighting how persistent commitment to asking similar questions, through various artistic processes, can result in very different visual outcomes. Lastly, my isolated solo process offers that the performers must always be aware of their audience and the cyclical power structures that take place in both live and digital work. This acknowledgement can offer much to the creative process in terms of audience positioning, engagement and proximity between audience and performer and overall audience passivity and or activation. Moreover, I propose that attention to audience positioning can balance the power structure between audience and performer, which ultimately enables subjectivity of the performer to remain present under audience gaze.

#### **8.5 Recommendations**

Whilst this research has focussed on my own choreographic practice and has found a model of working that can be used repetitively to



gain different visual and practical outcomes, I am motivated to investigate the use of the model in my solo work with new objects that carry a similar binary to the pole and high heels, such as feminine items like make up, handbags and restrictive clothing. Additionally, given the success of the two pilot workshops I facilitated with professional and undergraduate dancers, and how they were able to apply the model to objects they had selected to work with, it would be illuminating to delve deeper into how the application of the model can benefit the practice of others. Specifically, I would like to explore the model in different mediums, such as an audio guide for dancers who work alone in rehearsal space, a pocket-sized creative resource pack that contains visual images and questions that prompt the performer (similar to Gander, R. 2019, *Choreography Cards for Pole Dancers*) as well as in person intensives whereby I verbally facilitate the process for and with the dancer(s). I anticipate that disseminating the model in different ways will reach, impact, and inspire more dancers to evolve through solo practice.

It is my goal that practitioners and young dance students, who engage with the five-part model, in any of the proposed mediums above, will learn to create with complete sense of agency, authenticity, and a deep understanding of the decisions they have made and why. Attention to self is vital in a space where dancers bodies are often used as instruments to realise the vision of an external choreographer, and are thus inherently objectified, but the use of this model paves the way for solo dancers to consider their own thoughts and how they will use their body as an instrument to raise their own voice.

## **8.6 Challenges and Limitations**

By far this biggest challenge of this research was navigating the localised autobiographical context of my practice and revealing my

true choices to work with the vertical pole and high heels as autobiographical and choreographic objects. In some ways, I felt it was much easier to be self-exposing through practice and performance, where certain actions might be read differently by different people, but because of the 50/50 nature of this practice-led and autoethnographic PhD, I had to be transparent in my writing too, which I knew would be read by people I respected, such as supervisors and or examiners. I share this challenge to bring attention to the exposing nature of being an 'insider researcher', so that those who are considering adopting a similar approach to their research are aware of it.

The main limitation of this study, is of course, the subjective and biased nature of my work as a solo practitioner/artist-researcher. However, had I not recursively and repetitively worked alone, in process and performance, I would not have delved deep enough into my practice to find my five-part model. I thus see this limitation as a strength of the research and agree with Chang (2008) who states the strength of autoethnographic research stems from the researchers quest to find out answers. Furthermore, whilst I did work alone for the majority of this study, I attempted to balance the bias nature of the research with that of other scholars who were included as part of the found literature, as well as audiences and peers who have generously participated in this study.

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## Appendix

### 1. Video Documentation Links

The Ten Inch Heels (2018)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MeH0nR7vOm0>

The Ten Inch Heels (2019) -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFclwjrN54s>

Unstable - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grvImMcr1tE>

Pol(e)arity of Self -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxOluAxyfQA&t=7s>

## 2. Table of Performance Works: Documentary Evidence of Methodological Approaches

Dates and No. of Performances	Video Documentation of Process	Video Documentation of Final Product	Journal Entry	Audience / Peer Review Discussion	Audience and Peer Review via Survey / Digital Survey
<i>Pol(e)arity of Self (2020)</i>					
09/03/2021, Zoom Peer Review.	NA	Y	Y	7 undergraduate students and 2 lecturers. Discussion recorded and transcribed.	N
26/10/2020, Metal Culture UK, Instagram Live.	NA	Y	Y	1 supervisor emailed me their thoughts on the work	Following an Instagram live, 15 audience members contacted me, through social media WhatsApp and Instagram to offer their interpretations of the work. These comments were copied into one word document to prepare for thematic analysis and to maintain anonymity of participants.
<i>Unstable (2019)</i>					
18/05/2020, Zoom Sharing 1.	Recording from Sudley Theatre, 5/12/12, was shown.	Y	Y	Discussion recorded and transcribed. 6 participants	no
18/05/2020, Zoom Sharing 2.	Recording from Sudley Theatre,	Y	Y	8 participants Discussion recorded and transcribed.	no



	5/12/12, was shown.				
7/12/2020, Secret Circus, Fashion Hub, Liverpool.	N	N	Y	3 verbal comments from audience members	no
6/12/2019, Sudley Theatre, Liverpool John Moores University.	Y	Y	Y	N	25 audience members completed survey
5/12/2019, Sudley Theatre, Liverpool John Moores University.	Y	Y	Y	N	28 audience members completed survey
8/11/2019, Cirqadia Fest, District, Liverpool.	Y	Y	Y	4 comments noted by professional performers and choreographers	N
17/10/2019, Peer Review at LJMU.	Y	N	Y	27 participants. Discussion recorded and transcribed.	27 audience members completed a survey
<i>The Ten Inch Heels (2019)</i>					
14/06/2019, x4, Physical Fest, Unity Theatre Liverpool.	Y	Y	Y	N	26 people filled in a survey directly after the live performance. Additional survey was sent to audience members who wanted to expand their thoughts. This survey, and a link to the video footage from physical fest, was sent to dance professionals

					who could not attend the live performance. 24 responses to this survey.
30/05/2019, Informal Sharing with Tmesis Theatre Training Company at Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts.	Y	Y	Y	Y. 16 female audience members. Notes were written during discussion	N
21/11/2018, Peer Review at Sudley Theatre, Liverpool John Moores University.	Y	Y	Y	Y. Discussion recorded and transcribed.	N

### 3. Survey Questions

[Insert Name of Performance] Feedback Form

In a few words, what was your immediate response to the work?

What was your interpretation of the work? (Please offer as much detail as possible)

Thinking about your role as a viewer of the work, how did this performance make you feel?

What key words would you use to describe the work?

Do you have any other comments?

Thinking about your role as a viewer of the work, how did being in the space with the performer make you feel?

Questions were the same for each performance, aside from question three where I extended the question to suit the audience being in the space with me in a performance of Unstable on 5/9/19. For instance, "Thinking about your role as a viewer of the work, how did being in the space with the performer make you feel?"

## 4. Thematic Tables



### *The Ten Inch Heels (2019)*

Raw Data (Appendix 4.1)	Groupings	Themes	Video Doc
My understanding of the object and going against its use to find agency. Audience seeing the object as something other than heels – crabs, puppets, weights etc.	Intentional misuse of object in relation to its biography. Objects metamorphosing for audiences, giving the performer a sense of power.	Object Exploitation	Y
Autobiographical use of object in relation to themes of BDSM. Audience members felt like they were being told or asked to do something.	Power of Performer over audience, control without speaking.	Power of Performer	Y
Self-directed tasks to dehumanise the body through physicality. Use of body as instrument.	Control of body and choice to use the body as an instrument. Embodied movement / Control of my own process and body.	Body Object Manipulation	Y
Expressing how enhanced knowledge of the object allowed me to see the objects differently. Relating my experience to their own journey as women. Feeling empowered for having seen a struggle.	Dictated <i>what</i> was being communicated. Audience and performer connection.	Exposing the Situation	Y
Giving the audience the opportunity to participate in the work. Audience members expressing a sense of gratitude from having viewed the work.	Spatial design of the work Power of autobiographical and intimate performance.	Shared Liberation	Y

# Unstable (2019)

## THEMATIC TABLE



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# Unstable (2019)

Raw Data (Appendix 5.1)	Groupings	Themes	Video Doc
Audience interpreted that I was fighting or battling something.	Narrative and perception of the work.	Conflict – A narrative beyond stigma	Y
Trying to regain power through choice to work with poles.	The meaning of the objects to performer.	A fight via autobiographical narrative	Y
Audience interpret pole as person, pole as another performer, a cage, a prison.	Relationship between objects and performer. Use of object from autobiographical perspective. Further projecting fight.	Object Manipulation in Artistic and Autobiographical Process	Y
Audience commented on more than strength. Journal entries about intentional use of two poles. Authentic engagement with poles.	Strength of performer More focus was given to overall narrative, instead of aesthetic alone.	More than Strength	Y
Audiences who shared the space with me felt included in the work and reported kinaesthetic empathy. Choice to bring in audience to see more than spectacular feat and to offer realness to the performance.	Enhanced connection between audience and performer. Spatial design to amplify fight / struggle. Breaking the fourth wall.	Spatial design and Audience Performance Connection	Y

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## *Pol(e)arity of Self (2020)*

Raw Data (Appendix 6.1)	Groupings	Themes	Video Doc
Deeper reflections on artistic motivation to work with objects	Double seeing in research from working with same stimuli repetitively.	Meeting Selves	Y
Artistic choice to bring in third figure in editing.  Audience expressed their interpretation as third Rowena being the one who was in control all along	Finding power through artistic decision making.  Relationship between selves	Multiple Selves Equal power	Y
Audiences felt they were being watched and or told what to do.  Reflecting gaze to objectify the objectifier.	Experiencing the gaze of the performer and actively watching instead of passively gazing.  Breaking the fourth wall by looking through the lens of camera.	Reversing gaze and Activating Audiences	Y
Audience interpreting themes of exposure and relating them to their own lives.	Audience reflection on their own biography	Power of Audience / Performer Connection	Y
Audience noted they didn't see the objects as the relationship between selves was so strong.  Transgressively using objects, but in more subtle ways than previous two works.	Use of objects  Artist and object relationship	Object Visibility	Y

## 4.1 The Ten Inch Heels Grouped Data

Data was drawn from both reflective journal and audience feedback. Both data sets are supported with video documentation, which was highlighted as I identified themes in findings chapters.

Text from my reflective journal is written in black.

Text from audience feedback is coloured in light purple as shown in this sentence.

### Object Exploitation

Morph into Different Items; gag, whip, creatures, argumentative crabs, -- animalistic when shoes are in mouth. Manipulation of object for power gain and to also exploit them

“I will handle the shoes in my way, not in the purely feminine way, but in a way that does not conform to original use only and in a way that plays with control and power. How can I project the power and knowledge that has arisen from the initial research? How can I produce a more masculine way of handling the objects as opposed to a manipulated and societally conditioned way of treating the objects? How can I demonstrate a lesbian way of managing the objects? How can I manoeuvre the objects in such a way that it eradicates the notion of male gaze and docile consciousness? How can I handle the objects in a subjective way?” (Appendix 4.3, p.193).

“I saw them as objects that can complement other elements of my femininity, brushing my hair” (Appendix 4.3, p.193)

“Leave the boots on stage, they become nothing without the wearer” (Appendix 4.3, p.194).

“Objectify and exploit the object. Dominate the object” (Appendix 4.3, p.194).

“The hair was sometimes as prominent as the boots, in terms of it covering my facial features and it acting as a trigger to sexuality. So at times, drawn to the hair more than the boots. Slipping from one element of femininity to another” (Appendix 4.3, p.197).

“If we are to move past the argument of binaries and how one side may or may not be more dominant, we need to recognise that women, today, are simultaneously objectified and empowered and that the power we feel from objects is temporary and situational” (Appendix 4.3, p.201).

“When I take the boot off, I use it as a whip. I do this to remind the audience of the potentiality of the dominance and power that can ensue, but I whip myself too, to say that it is a cycle. Catching the boots, making a whip out of them. I physically demonstrate how the object can be used to attract attention” (Appendix 4.3, p.194).

“We can manage exploitation if we know its source” (Appendix 4.3, p.194).

“To expose myself on stage (through curiosity) is how I know. It gives me the capacity to connect with audiences in a way that does not uphold in verbal conversation. Yes, this process is more difficult for me to deal with psychologically, but it is worth it because of the very specific knowledge I gain. I can only be truly transparent when I write or when I create” (Appendix 4.3, p.196).

“By acknowledging the history of said object, one becomes enlightened. This knowledge can be difficult to manage and often asks many more questions” (Appendix 4.3, p.196).

“Anyway, I have come to the conclusion that what I enjoy working with is the notion of construction and deconstruction; going from subject to object, to woman, to pole dancer to subject. Because that is how I lived my life so far [...] In my work I assign myself the role as



both subject and object and take into consideration the artist who is to self-objectify for their art must consider the aesthetic value of it before commencing. This means I have to look at the state of my body..." (Appendix 4.3, p.198).

Using their vulnerability to settle my own – "I felt calm because they were in the space with me. I could feel their vulnerability and I could see it too. It put me more at ease to know this" (Appendix 4.3, p.195)

"I objectify my body so I can speak through it, it is my voice and if people don't pay attention to voice, they will pay attention to body" (Appendix 4.3, p.198).

"I felt like the shoes were like puppets talking to each other" (Appendix 4.2, p.176).

"[...] I think that the shoes become, they become an extension of you but that changes your identity completely [...]" (Appendix 4.2, p.178).

"[...] The middle part of the performance was like a power struggle, at times the shoes looked in they were control with hints of the performer gaining control. The end saw the performer with the shoes in her mouth and was a clear indication that she had control over them before leaving them limp on the floor. Discarded almost" (Appendix 4.2, p.184).

"[...] The heels remind me of lobster claws, and how powerful, and dangerous they are. Part of that sense of danger and power comes through in the performance -- with measured doses of vulnerability and seeming subservience [...]" (Appendix 4.2, p.187).

"Gripping the heels with the teeth gave a sense of control and power with animalistic features- an intriguing work. It was a fantastic performance that captured my attention throughout" (Appendix 4.2, p.186).

“Shoes are crab like, or at times, like armour” (Appendix 4.2, p.179).

“I love how you turned the boot into a whip and then you trampled all over it” (Appendix 4.2, p.180).

### **Power of Performer**

“There is a real dominance and sense of control, contrasted by a pure sense of vulnerability” (Appendix 4.3, p.200).

“There is a clear balance between being in prison and being in power” (Appendix 4.2, p.179).

“I was fully committed to take that boot off for you, and I was having a debate with myself whether or not I should release you from the prison, which is the boots, or if I should stay still and watch you become yourself” (Appendix 4.2, p.180).

“You looked at me in such a way that you told me what to do. To sit still and watch” (Appendix 4.2, p.180).

“Absolutely amazing, it was so powerful and almost scary how one person without using any language could be so in control of so many people” (Appendix 4.2, p.182).

“[...] It was interesting to see how a powerfully strong woman/performer represents vulnerability too, through the work, but ultimately power as a performer. My immediate response came from how quiet, how intimidated, possibly uncomfortable the audience were. You touched them, you even manipulated one to move and go to the chair (put had on shoulder?) of another. All the time that you put your hands on their arm/shoulder they seemed to hardly breathe. Frozen -- in fear? Embarrassed? Uncomfortable? [...]” (Appendix 4.2, p.183).

"[...] The performance was intimidating and overwhelming, but by no means in a negative way, she was so unbelievably in control of the whole room" (Appendix 4.2, p.184).

"When the shoes came off there was a distinct shift of power from the shoes to Rowena. It was like she had broken free" (Appendix 4.2, p.184).

"I felt like I had to submit, she was the dominator. Totally in control she ruled that room, the way she moved was with such elegance however so much power! She showed dominance and weakness multiple times throughout the performance but overall, she made the whole room feel weak. Personally, I felt like I was being told to sit and be quite even though she didn't speak a word throughout the performance!" (Appendix 4.2, p.184).

"[...] There's a kind of metamorphic stage of writhing and rolling of the floor which eventually reveals the dancer having a dominating and confident stance, which totally takes control of the audience, both physically and mentally [...]" (Appendix 4.2, p.187).

"[...] I moved from the sexual references towards the end to the power of a performer over an audience -- you walked to them, through them, among them, touched them, physically moved them. They did not touch you [...]" (Appendix 4.2, p.188).

"The performance immediately made me feel tense, it forced me to leave my comfort zone in an empathetic way for her. The performance made me feel like I was witnessing something so powerful, leaving the whole room feeling intrigued" (Appendix 4.2, p.188).

"Like a submissive. I felt like I was being told exactly what I needed to do without any words, she was the dominant and I was careful not to look around the room when she was near. I felt like I had to obey,

at one point she was looking at someone as if to open her boots. I felt like I needed to run over and open them for her and “do as I was told” (Appendix 4.2, p.189).

“I certainly felt involved in the piece. The room was set up in a very intimate way” (Appendix 4.2, p.189).

“Exposed and included at the same time. At times awkward and at times privileged” (Appendix 4.2, p.181).

“I felt that the performance took my mind out of my comfort zone” (Appendix 4.2, p.189).

“As a woman, I felt strong and empowered. I was also willing Rowena on to stand to be strong and to own who she was” (Appendix 4.2, p.190).

“[...] I wondered how it made you feel too as a performer - there seemed to me to be a vulnerability about it, juxtaposed with a challenging *fuck you* strength too [...]” (Appendix 4.2, p.190).

A note – when audiences were asked to use key words to describe the work, the word power was used to describe the work more than any other word. See Appendix 4.2.

“I was impressed with the power and skill of the performer. I am left pondering on the power of the performer over and audience and wondering about the universal theme of the power and vulnerability of women” (Appendix 4.2, p.192).

### **Body Object Manipulation - Subject / Object**

“How can we really dehumanize the body?” (Appendix 4.3, p.201).

“You are almost remind me of a mermaid [...] cos you brush your hair with your heel as well and it’s like you’re sat there on the beach like, I’m just going to brush my hair” (Appendix 4.2, p.177).

“But I think it’s interesting that this idea of sexuality, for me, that completely broke down, there was something not human about it, something almost alien about it. So it drew so far away from, which from me, really does relate to that previous work, because there was that sense of otherness going on in there, what is this becoming. It is emerging into something other than what we expect it to be and that is great because that is where you want the audience to be” (Appendix 4.2, p.179).

”You become more of a woman as the piece goes on” (Appendix 4.2, p.179).

“Your movements made me forget that I was looking at a person. The boots and your legs were objectified, and not being able to see your face for a long time, added to this tension and unsettling feeling” (Appendix 4.2, p.183).

### **Exposing the Situation**

“those shoes are not easy to walk in without the pole, so, you know because they are quite extreme, the high heels, pole dancers wouldn’t generally walk around wear a stiletto heel for instance, it’s always exaggerated high heel because the higher the heel on the shoes, the more you tower over people and the more dominance you could portray for instance, but to explore them without the other object, erm, is, you see the difficulty of me navigating my body with them. And I think that is really important because in terms of femininity as well, and what you’re expected to be as a woman sometimes, erm, its not actually easy to just switch that on, and sometimes you need training for it, so if I wasn’t a trained dancer, I might not even be able to balance to stand in shoes that are 6 inches smaller than those, so it brings in questions about that as well for me” (Appendix 4.2, p.179).

“Essentially, the work is about the high-heeled shoes as impractical objects when they are used on my feet, but they become more practical when I use them upright. A dislocation of body parts. Showing the temporality of empowerment through engagement with objects. I sexualise and hypnotise the movement because that is how to gain attention. But I should not need to do this to be a woman. I should not need wavy legs. This is why I don’t introduce myself as human, too much power and subjectivity will be shown, and that is not what this work is about” (Appendix 4.3, p.201).

“if you really tear it apart, it is not easy to keep up with that display and there is not enough training on how to deal with this level of femininity – of course when you are showing off, it is rehearsed, and probably do enjoy the adoration that ensues. However, when you are alone with the object, it works differently. You explore it and yourself in new ways” (Appendix 4.3, p.193).

“I fit all of the criteria for someone who is being exploited, yet I still feel powerful” (Appendix 4.3, p.194).

“The fact that I stand on my own, on a stage, in a performance space, automatically emphasises my capacity for strength. When she understands herself, she is knowing, embodied and aware” (Appendix 4.3, p.194).

“Liberation is exposing the situation” (Appendix 4.3, p.193).

“To me it was a representation of who we are as women. That our body is absolutely beautiful no matter what but can also be used to manipulate. By looking at audience it also made me realise how uncomfortable we can feel having someone else’s body so close to us in a social situation. As a society we build so many taboos around our physicality that it made us very judgmental and having negative connotations whenever we see uncovered parts of the body or certain body movements” (Appendix 4.2, p.184).

“I saw the performance as an explanation of not only the internal struggle to feel beautiful and feminine, but also showing the pressure to be beautiful to the outside world. The use of audience members, and making them connect with the dancer offered the observer an understanding of her struggles [...] When I left, I felt like I had been forced to see a reality that I am a part of, and needed to see” (Appendix 4.2, p.184).

“it was a strong feminine piece that offered different perspectives of a woman's image and attitude” (Appendix 4.2, p.185).

“you could be any woman the ridiculous height of the heels - symbolises the many things that women do to 'look' or feel in presenting themselves to the world - that these items or thoughts trap us in a world of confinement - often of our own making in contrast with the music which was almost church like - the whore and religion!” (Appendix 4.2, p.185).

“I understood it to be an indictment of the kinds of beauty standards that are placed on women. She struggled to get up and to move about on them, and she became more present herself (standing up, showing her face, interacting with her audience) as the heels came off” (Appendix 4.2, p.186).

“I interpreted the work as a woman who was finding her feet (literally). She started out timid, her face was covered, and the audience only saw her back. She was creating shapes as if to try and stand to be strong and understand her own purpose in life” (Appendix 4.2, p.186).

### **Shared Liberation**

“The show was amazing, and I really did leave feeling a kind of shift inside. There was so many possible explanations of what she was representing, that I feel every member of the audience will have felt

like they connected to her in some way or another” (Appendix 4.2, p.191).

“Powerful and uncomfortable. A tense journey through the suffering and empowerment of women” (Appendix 4.2, p.181).

“Overcoming, oppression/stamps that have been forced on us” (Appendix 4.2, p.182).

“A fleeting movement for perpetual fear suddenly replaced by empowerment” (Appendix 4.2, p.182).

“The situation of woman in today’s world” (Appendix 4.2, p.181).

[...] The vulnerability of women in general, of women in the sex industry, in life comes through some of the gestures, the floor work and the inability to stand. As do at times, the sheer ridiculousness of garments and attire we wear to create an image - an image that is not always what we think we portray [...]

 (Appendix 4.2, p.187).

“I was extremely happy to experience it and the performance was a kind of a reminder to be proud of being a woman” (Appendix 4.2, p.188).

“Your performance made me want to stand tall and be proud to be a woman!” (Appendix 4.2, p.191).

“I am grateful for the opportunity to watch this performance” (Appendix 4.2, p.191).

“I’m really pleased to have seen this. The work is very intense, and I feel like a better person having seen it” (Appendix 4.2, p.192).

“I just don’t have words for that, honestly you made me feel the most strong feeling ever [...]

 (Appendix 4.2, p. 192).





## 4.2 The Ten Inch Heels. Raw. Audience Feedback

21/11/2018, *The Ten Inch Heels* (2018). Peer Review Transcript.

Discussion took place at Sudley Theatre, Liverpool, UK.

[...] something about feminist music, but it was a little cut up.

P1: At one point, I felt like the shoes were like puppets talking to each other, that's kinda what I got from it, but I just wanted more conversation from the two puppets, I don't know why. It's kind what I got from it when you were doing the talking, like they were having an argument with each other.

Me: It's exactly what I'm trying to portray so...

P2: I got a real sense that the shoes were alive in different ways, like them being arms. At the end when you are lying and you are looking towards the audience, I almost kind of wanted you to look, because when you are crawling, its like you're trying to get away from your shoes if you will cos they have kind of got this hold on you in a sense. Erm, so I felt like I wanted you to acknowledge that they are alive and that you are looking at them and that they exist. That's just what I was feeling cos they are, they have this real power on stage, a real power and control, which is really you, but this is the effect that we are seeing. So I kind want you to acknowledge that they are there.

P3: Like Nathan, I kinda wanted something to come back, or with the tapping of the heels and the platforms that made the sound, which is very different to when they hit the floor, and the contrast between the two is great. And then when you're saying it was a bit like an argument, then I want them to have a little bit more of a dialogue [...] just something, that is a rehearsal thing isn't it? But I wondered if you had a conversation in your head going at that time?

Me: whilst I'm performing the work?

P3: I mean, just as the argument.

Me: I suppose I was thinking about my ambivalent relationship with femininity I think, so that is what that represents and also the different ideas in terms of whether these shoes are empowering to be up (taller) or whether they are ruining my body. And I think I have really represented those ideas throughout the work, but yeah, maybe a little bit more room to develop that more.

P3: it's not that we have to understand what is being said, but that rhythm of conversation back and forth.

P4: I think the sound from the shoes as well, I think you can have it with music as well I suppose, but without music as well, because you can really get a sense of the sound and where it is coming from. I don't know, it feels a bit more connected that way I think.

P1: you almost remind me of a mermaid in a way, in the sense that you don't ever stand on your feet. And I know you said it is finished but I'd love to see what happens if you stood up.

Me: Yeah, that would take it into a whole new work. But the reason why I don't ever stand up in them is because actually, it's an extrinsic motivator for me and it's not actually – you know a lot of women wear high heels to show off and to think about this kind of element, or an inauthentic element of power, and that's why I don't stand up in them, and that is why you see me pulling my body away. Because that is the difference. The internal feeling to the external.

P1: did you undo your zip at one point a little bit? Or was that me seeing things?

Me: no, I was reaching for the boot to acknowledge it.

[...]

P5: What made you just put the boots on?

Me: because, erm, well obviously you know, I do a lot of work in pole dance and stuff and these shoes are actually part of this practice, erm, so it was worth looking at, and especially in terms of, or high heeled shoes were coming up in the same line of thought as pole dance – so they either objectify or empower women, and it's the same binary. So that is why I wanted to work with them.

P3: Nathan, you said about the idea of a mermaid that is not getting up, but the is also in the history of our world, going back to exodus, and I have no idea when that was written, but a long time ago, that whole image of woman as serpent as well.

P1: cos you brush your hair with your heel as well and it's like you're sat there on the beach like, I'm just going to brush my hair.

P3: that whole siren thing going on.

P1: cos they seduce men and then kill them when they get close enough.

P3: so there are other, whether intentional or, whether its what the audiences brings to it, there are other semiotic readings that are coming through.

Me: that great. And you know, what I do is very deliberate. It is supposed to be hypnotic, it is supposed to be mesmerising. Erm, because actually that is a part of it. You know, it is not like everyone is blind and it is like oh I'm wearing high heels, people think it's hot and all that because it actually is sometimes and people are attracted to it or are attracted to the idea or the body being emphasised by objects. So clearly my legs are long because I have got 10 inch heels at the end of my feet.

P4: are they quite heavy to work with.

Me: they are, yeah, so I have had to do quite a bit of training to be able to balance upside down.

P6: I think it's really interesting in comparison to your other works, because there is a sense of otherness for me there. And almost, I think that the shoes become, they become an extension of you but that changes your identity completely. So whilst you're doing some of this movement that is clearly drawn from pole dance, the wearing of the shoes provides a different context for us to view the work and I think that is a really interesting place to have your audience. I just thought at the beginning whether you need more play with that, for me, the leg went into that, I don't know what you call it, so we'll just go with split, it went a little bit too quickly into that and I just wondered, did you want that straight into, ahhh, this is that objectification place, that you always being with, or historically in your work, you have always begun with and then that gradually breaks down and we see something other than that. But just wonder if, you know how at the beginning of your last piece where you had that cocoon type thing and then gradually that emerges. I just wondering if you could play a little more before you go straight into the split.

P1: Like a tease. Sorry to put it in that work, but like a tease into it.

Me: I have explored that, but I feel like it was unnecessary and I could just cut and get straight to the point. That was why.

P6: so you have explored.

Me: I literally, I first thought of this work last year and I played around and it wasn't the right time to finish it and I picked it up now so it has had an extreme amount of thought and research into it. It's not like, yeah, so I definitely explored loads of different ways, there was an extra ten minutes on this work the other week and I was like no, it was irrelevant and I was just speaking, you were just going around the houses when you don't actually need to because you can just cut

to the chase to do what you need to do. It's just cutting those layers of unnecessary. And I feel like I'm quite happy to be in that place now where I know I don't have to run around and do all of this just to, I don't know. Obviously I'm only in one space as well and then I pull myself off and I think to acknowledge that I am comfortable with that now and don't feel like I have to do other things. It makes me feel quite happy right, where I am as an artist, to be able to do that.

P2: I like that fact that you go straight to it. Because straight away you get the sense of the sexualisation and objectification. And then it starts to hypnotise you and this other creature comes out. So I like how you have just gone into it.

Me: I think it's almost like, if you see a woman straight away, wearing massive high heels, you are always instantly drawn to them, there is not much, you hear it before. You always hear a woman walking in, so maybe that is something to play with, the sound.

P6: it's interesting isn't it, I'm never really drawn to high heeled shoes and never even notice if people have got them on or not, but I think that is just my background and my cultural stuff and I don't read it similarly to a lot of others. But I think it's interesting that this idea of sexuality, for me, that completely broke down, there was something not human about it, something almost alien about it. So it drew so far away from, which from me, really does relate to that previous work, because there was that sense of otherness going on in there, what is this becoming. It is emerging into something other than what we expect it to be and that is great because that is where you want the audience to be. In that other place. It's working, it is definitely working as a process.

Me: I think it is like a showcase of my acknowledgement of, oh I don't know, the more research you do, I think I know nothing about the world, or what I do in it, but then I work through these ideas during the work so that is probably where.

P6: It's just an evolution and I think that is great to see through life and how it's developing and evolving through each new work. Just great.

Me: and plus, those shoes are not easy to walk in without the pole, so, you know because they are quite extreme, the high heels, pole dancers wouldn't generally walk around wear a stiletto heel for instance, it's always exaggerated high heel because the higher the heel on the shoes, the more you tower over people and the more dominance you could portray for instance, but to explore them without the other object, erm, is, you see the difficulty of me navigating my body with them. And I think that is really important because in terms of femininity as well, and what you're expected to be as a woman sometimes, erm, its not actually easy to just switch that on, and sometimes you need training for it, so if I wasn't a trained dancer, I might not even be able to balance to stand in shoes that are 6 inches smaller than those, so it brings in questions about that as well for me.

P3: it does and I think you reach those aspects of power, strength and then that vulnerability all in 7-10 minutes, to convey that and to get to the point.

[...]

**06/06/2019, *The Ten Inch Heels*, Notes from all female audience, Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts, Liverpool, UK.**

- Shoes are crab like, or at times, like armour.
- Freaked out because I did not know what was happening.
- You become more of a woman as the piece goes on.
- When you pull your hair to lift yourself up, it is like you are trying to reveal yourself, but not just yet.
- There is a clear balance between being in prison and being in power.

- The work was mystical and sensual at the same time.
- It was great to work in silence, hearing you breathe, the rhythm of your heels, your breath made me sit tight.
- I am not the type of person to go to a strip club, but you took me to that place, and a completely different place at the same time.
- Hold certain positions longer so we can absorb more.
- Maybe a little bit more struggle, I want to see more struggle.
- I saw this work in a catholic church and your legs were leading a mass.
- It was nice to see a woman in big heels like this instead of drag queens.
- I love how you turned the boot into a whip and then you trampled all over it.
- It was nice to feel the weight of the shoe on my body, I could then further understand what you were going through when you were in them.
- I was fully committed to take that boot off for you, and I was having a debate with myself whether or not I should release you from the prison, which is the boots, or if I should stay still and watch you become yourself.
- You looked at me in such a way that you told me what to do. To sit still and watch.

**14/06/2019, *The Ten Inch Heels* – Physical Fest Survey**

**(Completed through their portal and emailed to me afterwards)**

- Please tell us how the performance made you feel, in a few words:
- Empowered as a woman.
- Intimidated, guilty, empathetic.
- Fear, respect, confused, questioning, interested, stunned. Like there was something missing.
- Empower and struggle.



- Scared, fascinated.
- Completely emotional and weak and strong at the same time.
- Threatened and exciting.
- Very emotional but also proud of being a woman.
- Tense, anticipating, excited to be experiencing something different.
- Confused.
- Thoughtful – impressed.
- Uncomfortable, impressed, aroused.
- Anticipating what would happen next... tired and weak – at weight of heels. At the mercy of the performer.
- Bizarre, interesting and funny.
- Uncomfortable.
- Uncomfortable, intense, it was intimate.
- Empowered, empathy, sensual.
- Shocked, involved, and intrigued.
- Empowered, scared.
- Mesmerized by the movement with the heels.
- Naughty, sexy, empowered.
- Strong, to challenge authority.
- Intimidated, validated.
- In awe of your ability to make waves with your thighs.
- Exposed and included at the same time. At times awkward and at times privileged.
- Unsettled, intrigued, thought provoking.

**What would you like to see more of from the performer?**

- More of the same!
- Nothing! I love that she chose to hide/show her face.
- Walking in the heels.
- Everything, she is a very strong performer, full of energy and presence.
- I could see everything what she does. She is amazing.

- A longer piece.
- Anything really.
- Great just as it is.
- More of a narrative.
- Odd question – it was what is was.
- More of same playing with boundaries, proximity to audience.
- More performances of different pieces of work.
- Yes
- Powerful and intense interaction/performance.
- More contortion.
- Everything! She was fab, enjoyed the imagery at the beginning.
- I thought the music accompaniment was pretty powerful.
- Nothing.
- Liked to see her face more.
- Connecting with audience more specific.
- Her face. Just for a slight connection.
- To see the non-common sexualised imagery explained as anonymously as the none abstract movement - her face not involved.
- I don't know.
- Nothing, was great.

**If you were to describe the piece in a sentence what would that be?**

- A thought-provoking performance.
- Powerful and uncomfortable. A tense journey through the suffering to empowerment of women.
- A dramatic theatrical exploration of 10" heels – inventive.
- The situation of woman in today's world.
- Amazing.
- Strong and intense.
- Dark, strange and evocative.

- What being a woman really is.
- Surreal, questioning physical performance of high standard.
- Entertaining.
- Riffing on a theme – will echoes of an evolution.
- Wonderfully uncomfortable, impressively bendy and thoughtfully expressive.
- Interestingly unusual. Disconnected, yet incorporated.
- Very weird but excellent!
- The power struggle of female sex.
- Impressive.
- Powerful and strong.
- Exploration of women sexuality.
- Secretive, mysterious, in a bubble.
- Overcoming, oppression/stamps that have been forced on us.
- A fleeting movement for perpetual fear suddenly replaced by empowerment.
- Like an optical illusion at times.
- Intimate, exposing, vulnerable, empowering, owning.
- Unsettling, very talented.

**14/6/2020- 15/7/2020, *The Ten Inch Heels*, Online Survey  
Feedback for Audiences who viewed the work live at Physical  
Fest.**

**In a few words, what was your immediate response to the work?**

- Outstanding
- I was enthralled, slightly nervous and excited
- Thrilling and frightening at the same time
- I loved it, it was engaging and mesmerising
- Empowering, enthralling and breath taking

- I was amazed that you can express so many emotions with the body movement without saying a single word.
- I was immediately taken back and mesmerised by the amount of control she had over her body!
- Thought provoking and intense performance
- Captivating, suspenseful.
- Absolutely amazing, it was so powerful and almost scary how one person without using any language could be so in control of so many people.
- I was impressed as the way that you involved the audience was very interesting
- Loved the intensity
- I was amazed what a human being was able to create physically and mentally. The performance was loud despite of the lack of music in the second part.
- It was unlike anything I've ever seen and intrigued me.
- A feminist performer who explores the theme of sexuality.
- Power, anonymity, uncomfortable, symbolic
- An enticing performance, interesting and mesmerizing. The beginning section of the work really hooked me, I was completely immersed into the idea of the body and heels. The extension in which the 'Ten Inch Heels' gave is outstanding, beautiful patterns and control. The legs waved like arms. I also enjoyed the idea of the face being less on show, an unusual feature when looking at other works. I noticed the face remained either covered or side facing, this really helped I feel with my connection to the heels at first and gave me direction - the dancer was clear with her theme. The sounds created by the heels where sharp and direct, a sort of tube sound that created a natural sound score of it's own, accompanied by breath which I feel again gave realism and a natural connection to the work. The positioning of the body, being upside down, side on, elevating and dropping was beautiful,

and different, I feel linking with my connection to the variety of emotions as stated below.

- Your movements made me forget that I was looking at a person. The boots and your legs were objectified, and not being able to see your face for a long time, added to this tension and unsettling feeling.
- I have a very negative, patriarchal reaction to heels in the first place. I sort of feel like the artist might, as well, since she only showed her face as the heels came off. Depersonalization through male-gaze-friendly fashion.
- I was in awe of the sheer strength and power of Rowena.
- Athletic and full of dedicated passion
- Uncomfortable, unnerving, confused
- The initial view for the video viewer is dictated by the audience and this gives me a difference response in places to viewing it live. It was interesting to see how a powerfully strong woman/performer represents vulnerability too, through the work, but ultimately power as a performer. My immediate response came from how quiet, how intimidated, possibly uncomfortable the audience were. You touched them, you even manipulated one to move and go to the chair (put had on shoulder?) of another. All the time that you put your hands on their arm/shoulder they seemed to hardly breathe. Frozen -- in fear? Embarrassed? Uncomfortable?
- It was deeply erotic which unsettled me a bit, as your other work I've watched hasn't been really, more like contemporary dance. I also found the shoes funny (sorry) - only ever seen anything like them in skin bars on strippers and gay clubs on transvestites - I always find them a bit ridiculous, like clown shoes.

**What was your interpretation of the work? (Please offer as much detail as possible)**

- Feminism has many forms. Sexy doesn't have to be your sexy
- I felt morally confused and unsure of her of my place in the room. I didn't know how much power she truly had. Whether she was sexually empowered or exploited, and whether I was contributing to her domination or being dominated myself.
- A visual description of the struggle about how women conform to society.
- It's a very strong, individual piece. I enjoyed how simple the beginning was, but at the same time displaying a massive amount of strength and control. You can literally see the muscles in the core and legs working. I feel like it's an autobiographical work, I can sense an emotional connection between the performer and the choreography.
- Heels hurt your calves and feet!
- You made me feel that I can have power as a woman.
- To me it was a representation of who we are as women. That our body is absolutely beautiful no matter what but can also be used to manipulate. By looking at audience it also made me realise how uncomfortable we can feel having someone else's body so close to us in a social situation. As a society we build so many taboos around our physicality that it made us very judgmental and having negative connotations whenever we see uncovered parts of the body or certain body movements
- I saw the performance as an explanation of not only the internal struggle to feel beautiful and feminine, but also showing the pressure to be beautiful to the outside world. The use of audience members, and making them connect with the dancer offered the observer an understanding of her struggles. The performance was intimidating and overwhelming, but by no means in a negative way, she was so unbelievably in control of the whole room. When I left, I felt

like I had been forced to see a reality that I am a part of, and needed to see.

- My interpretation was that there was a progression of the performer taking control over the shoes. The beginning part was interpreted as though the shoes controlled the performer. This impression was formed by the shapes created and the power/strength of the movement. The middle part of the performance was like a power struggle, at times the shoes looked in they were control with hints of the performer gaining control. The end saw the performer with the shoes in her mouth and was a clear indication that she had control over them before leaving them limp on the floor. Discarded almost.
- I interpreted it as the shoes were in control of the dancer representing how women are controlled by uncomfortable standards in order to seem feminine. The floor positions were sexual and made me think of how women are objectified as sexual objects. When the shoes came off there was a distinct shift of power from the shoes to Rowena. It was like she had broken free
- I felt like I had to submit, she was the dominator. Totally in control she ruled that room, the way she moved was with such elegance however so much power! She showed dominance and weakness multiple times throughout the performance but overall she made the whole room feel weak. Personally I felt like I was being told to sit and be quite even though she didn't speak a word throughout the performance! She was dressed in all black with not a lot of makeup on and hair down, not how you would usually go out to party but she was the most beautiful soul in the room!
- In my opinion it was a strong feminine piece that offered different perspectives of a woman's image and attitude.
- To me it was an empowering display of feminine strength,
- The dancer's confidence. Absence of the music at the end gave more focus to the heels. Hiding the face behind the hair

made the dancer less visible. I was wondering if hiding the face behind the hair was meant to give more attention to the heels.

- At first, i kept seeing animal shapes/outlines, eg when your head was on the floor & legs in the air i could see a stag, then what i saw changed to a crab with pincers. As the performance moved along it seemed to tell a story of how the heels had held back the on-stage 'character', as they were, for example, dragged along the floor. Then it evolved to a how the shoes made the 'character' feel better in some way- the word 'sexy' comes to mind, as audience members unzipped the shoes. Perhaps it was both at the same time, representing a metaphorical double edged sword - that which helps one to be 'seen' in a particular way is also that which prevents one from being seen in their entirety.
- The Ten Inch Heels was alienating, instrumental and grounded with a feminine style that interacts with the audience. I saw fetishism by the boots and the subtle change of the upper bodis as costume added to that value. The headstand gives a connotation of a lobster whereas the use of the boots as instruments reminds the dance critic of what other genres are currently rife, i.e. tap and commercial/heels. As per your previous solo choreography, The Ten Inch Heels was reminiscent of Wendy Houston's performance in Strange Fish (1992) by DV8 throughout in the sense that it is a feminist and seemingly religious work.
- the hair over the face - so you could be any woman the ridiculous height of the heels - symbolises the many things that women do to 'look' or feel in presenting themselves to the world - that these items or thoughts trap us in a world of confinement - often of our own making in contrast with the music which was almost church like - the whore and religion!
- An interesting and fantastic exploration of heels as an object, an object which remains so powerful within this performance



work. I feel it is a clear indication of the struggle that can be pressed on people, specifically the idealistic concepts of a women. I feel the piece made me feel a variety of emotions, from the determination as the dancer began to stand and drop, to a struggle as the legs and heels where dragged along the floor, but then to exploring beautiful and exquisite movement that sometimes gave a natural sensual connection. The dancer involved audience interaction, I feel this gave the performance work a sense of realism and really aided in the relevance of society and the position of women. An audience member helped to unzip the heel, I feel this was automatically an acknowledgment of the heels presence as an object and a piece of art within the work. Also as an audience member, they were almost removing what could have been seen as a strain but an item that defines and shifts the movement in differing directions. The removing of the 'Ten Inch Heels' further prompted my initial thought of the heels as a metaphor, allowing the dancer to really grasp a difference in movement thus again changing my emotion. Gripping the heels with the teeth gave a sense of control and power with animalistic features- an intriguing work. It was a fantastic performance that captured my attention throughout.

- It seems the performance was an experience of being objectified and controlled by the boots. The person was a medium for the heels. The act of removing the boots and exploring the sounds - a 20 inch zip on a 10 inch heel! - and the textures felt like you were telling the audience, "but they are just leather, just zippers, just shoes! Tell me why we lust after these so?" Biting the shoes and holding them in your mouth at the end continued the questioning, and also suggested you were bound them, like a noose. But then you left them with the audience, moved on, separated yourself. It was a very intimate audience, but I also feel the act could

have been effective with shadow lighting and the illusion that you were in an empty space.

- I understood it to be an indictment of the kinds of beauty standards that are placed on women. She struggled to get up and to move about on them, and she became more present herself (standing up, showing her face, interacting with her audience) as the heels came off. In the beginning, it was beautiful and graceful... But distant and the artist herself receded into the background.
- I interpreted the work as a woman who was finding her feet (literally). She started out timid, her face was covered and the audience only saw her back. She was creating shapes as if to try and stand to be strong and understand her own purpose in life, she achieved this at the end when the audience were required to removed her shoes. Her ten inch heels did not define who she was and the music choice was particularly powerful. it had almost a hymn or religious feel to it and the juxtaposition of dancing to a hymn was really interesting.
- I loved it. It was a feast for the senses. visually, obviously, but there was the sounds of the heels clicking, boots clacking against each other, the squeaky sound when you're grinding your boot on the boot on the floor and even the sound of your breath after 'the rocketing around' segment. Also, touch, when you interact with the audience and get them to interact with each other. Brilliant. For me, the work was about the way that objects, (in this case a pair of very high heeled boots) can take on a role of subservience or power. The dance starts with very submissive movements. As the dance progresses, the dance becomes less subservient. There's a kind of metamorphic stage of writhing and rolling of the floor which eventually reveals the dancer having a dominating and confident stance, which totally takes control of the audience, both physically and mentally. Even the space used to dance is controlled. Also, during the whole performance, the dancer

uses her hair to cover her face as much as possible, to remain anonymous, as the piece is about the sexuality of the objects (boots), not the person wearing them.

- The performance to me was an exploration of fetishes, but if you take the sexual desire. A lot of fetishes, esp those of BDSM can be very painful and unnerving and if you take away the sexual desire, those are the 2 things you are left with which is what seemed to be portrayed during this piece. What further added to that is the disassociation of the performers body, eg, is that her arms, why can't we see her face.
- The music (an appropriate choice I felt) and your hair made me consider how through the centuries women and their hair have been closely associated. From the Bible with Mary anointing the feet of Jesus with her hair, to women who must cover their hair because it would be too enticing for men to resist the sexual power of a woman's hair (!) To how marketing today features how important hair is to women, and the vast amounts of products we can buy to make our hair glorious. So I thought of the "glory" of women's hair, and then contrasted it with how you used it as a mask to cover your identity, and in gestures to suggest sensuality. From seeing the extended work on film, the opening accentuates your buttocks in a way that seeing it live did not. That brought an immediate sense of the sexuality of the gestures, AND even more so than when I saw it live, of how HEAVY the boots are. In the silence of the small theatre, the sound of the boots on the floor accentuated their heaviness. The vulnerability of women in general, of women in the sex industry, in life comes through some of the gestures, the floor work and the inability to stand. As do at times, the sheer ridiculousness of garments and attire we wear to create an image - an image that is not always what we think we portray. The boots have many sexual connotations -- black, shiny, thigh length, heel height,

tantalising zip, silver eyelets etc but who would, could walk in them? (But that is probably not the point!) It became interesting to hear your breath after the exertings of the taxing floor work, but it also served to highlight the silence of the audience. From that point, I also was aware of their part in the work. Their silence, their stillness (none seemed to move unless you moved them) shouted volumes. Were they afraid to move, cough, in case it signalled they might be seen as prudish, or as aroused, or just merely uncomfortable? The heels remind me of lobster claws, and how powerful, and dangerous they are. Part of that sense of danger and power comes through in the performance -- with measured doses of vulnerability and seeming subservience. The new addition of the taking off of the boots plays with these extremes, and the whipping of them on the floor brings in, images of power, pain, S&M, -- the silence seemed to increase at this point! In a mixed audience, you went more to the women, was that always the case? I moved from the sexual references towards the end to the power of a performer over an audience -- you walked to them, through them, among them, touched them, physically moved them. They did not touch you. The film cut out after you left the theatre, I wondered what the response of the audience was to the work.

- I love dance and tend not to intellectualise it as a viewer, more aesthetic response. But it was clearly riffing on s&m, male gaze etc. It reminded me of some of the Warhol Factory "happenings" I've seen on video, especially the way the audience were so serious. The way you used your hair to occlude audience view was interesting - I always look at people's eyes a lot in performances, not being able to see your face / eyes very much sort of objectified you more, focus on body and props/shoes. Does that make sense? I hadn't anticipated the interaction with the audience, it was quite

disruptive, and I wondered if any of them were uncomfortable with it.

**Thinking about your role as a viewer of the work, how did this performance make you feel?**

- In order, engaged, enticed, awkward and triggered my thought process.
- It made me feel guilty. Almost as if I should stop her, help her take her shoes off and run away. But then thinking that made me feel guilty. That she needed to be 'saved
- A whole range of emotions. In some parts I felt uncomfortable, when the focus was on the audience, not knowing what was going to happen next. The first part of the performance was very hypnotic and I particularly enjoyed the rapid sequence with the noise from the heels.
- I was mesmerised throughout the work, I was constantly engaged. It made me feel empowered as a female, I think this piece and works like it break stereotypes and opinions that people have towards females, dancers, genres of dance.... clothing/costume etc - which is great! This piece is intense, and I love that.
- That there's more to life than wearing heels.
- I was extremely happy to experience it and the performance was a kind of a reminder to be proud of being a woman
- The performance immediately made me feel tense, it forced me to leave my comfort zone in an empathetic way for her. The performance made me feel like I was witnessing something so powerful, leaving the whole room feeling intrigued
- Intimidated!
- At times I felt on edge, worried and slightly anxious. Towards the end I felt empowered and confident. The performance was tense in the best way.

- Like a submissive. I felt like I was being told exactly what I needed to do without any words, she was the dominant and I was careful not to look around the room when she was near. I felt like I had to obey, at one point she was looking at someone as if to open her boots. I felt like I needed to run over and open them for her and “do as I was told”
- I suppose independence from the kind of position you are. It would definitely feel different for a man or a woman. Also it will have different interpretation in women of different ages or cultures. For my point of view it wasn't inconvenient but it would definitely had a bit of sexual feeling, even if the aim was to challenge the audience.
- I certainly felt involved in the piece. The room was set up in a very intimate way
- The dancer was moving freely, shamelessly and intensely. So if you are expecting to see something fragile, then it may cause some discomfort. I enjoyed watching this show, because it evoked conflicting feelings. It made me wonder what the dancer was trying to tell. I felt that the performance took my mind out of my comfort zone.
- It was incredible, powerful and scary all in one. Scary only because i wouldnt feel comfortable doing that. At first i felt awkward, but i think because i have been 'programmed' if you like, to not look at women's bodies. Once I recognised this, I found it easier to watch and not judge myself. (So it has been useful for me as an individual!). It left me feeling very inspired by the creativity.
- As an online viewer, I felt the most comfortable than I may not have done whilst tasting the live experience. After the end of the operatic O Vis Aeternitatis by Sequentia, I wanted to hear what other found music could support the opening soundtrack.
- At times in awe of the imagery that the body presented. Other times it made me feel uncomfortable

- As stated above, I feel the performance allowed for a development in a variety of emotions and feelings. From elegant and subtle movement that enticed me, to movement that created a sense of struggle - my emotions being thoughtful and moving to with this sense of struggle. The piece provided a sensual feel which was elegantly executed as the dancer moved around the space, with eye contact within sections it added power to this emotion. The dancer also slapped the leather of the heels down, repeatedly adding a powerful touch placing this with what I feel was animalistic as she gripped the shoes with her teeth, it created a sense of strength and power to continue.
- Curious, unsettling,
- The use of silence was disconcerting, and I felt like I was somewhere I shouldn't be.
- As a woman, I felt strong and empowered. I was also willing Rowena on to stand to be strong and to own who she was.
- Confused, also kind of like when you're watching a horror film and something is about to happen but you can't turn away, that kind of uncomfortable
- I wondered if I too would have sat and held my breath and hoped that you did not come to me. I wondered if I would have responded differently because I know you. In a normal situation where I did not know the performer, I think I too would have been still and quiet. I am not sure. I would not have attended such an intimate performance arena if I had not have known the performer.
- From aesthetic perspective it was lovely, but as I've said elements made me feel a bit uncomfortable and voyeuristic. I wondered how it made you feel too as a performer - there seemed to me to be a vulnerability about it, juxtaposed with a challenging *fuck you* strength too.

**What key words would you use to describe the work?**

- Engaging. Erotic. Painful. Pain. Feministic symbolism. Flow. Trapped.
- Intimidating. Enthralling. Sexually empowering. Sexually exploitative. Captivating. Confusing. Emotive.
- Sexy, thrilling, scary.
- Intense. Emotional. Strong. Individual. Through provoking.
- Engaging, enthralling, well thought out and performed in a damn well good way.
- An eye opener, feminism, emotional, heavy, proud
- Tense, powerful, beautiful, inspiring, and overwhelming.
- Intense. Impressive. Empowering
- Feminist, empowering, control, power, sexual
- Dominance Elegance Sexual Fascinating Eye opening  
Matriarchal Powerful
- Power, Self- confidence.
- Powerful Intense spiritual
- Possession; power; prominence; charisma; wild; mysterious; intense; girlpower.
- Unique, expressive, and creative
- Instrumental Fetishized Interactive Grounded Alienating
- symbolic, visual, experiential, explorative
- Powerful Beautifully elegant Struggle but determined
- Topical, poignant, timely, responsive, charged,
- Intense, dramatic, feminist
- strength, power, empowered, womanhood, perseverance, support, brave
- Powerful and absorbing.
- Provocative
- Power, vulnerability, awkwardness, woman, women, sensual, sexual, image, perception, challenging, confrontational.
- Erotic, transgressive, participative (a bit). It was beautiful too.

**Do you have any other comments? Please expand as much or as little as you would like?**



- I thought the performance was very symbolic in its attempt to create many levels of 21st century feminism through a very modern interpretation of dance and in some cases erotica. I felt each transition in all its glory through pain, angst and much fluid movement in such intimidating heels. Fantastic, captivating performance and I would happily see her again.
- I love how she used her face. Choosing to hide herself and reveal herself.
- When can we see more??
- Beautiful work, definitely a pleasure to watch! I loved the engagement and intimacy with the audience in comparison to the beginning where the piece was quite solo, individual and stand alone.
- Awaiting the next piece of work/performance.
- Would like to see more performances of this artists. She has an amazing gift of expressing wide range of emotions through her body.
- The show was amazing and I really did leave feeling a kind of shift inside. There was so many possible explanations of what she was representing, that I feel every member of the audience will have felt like they connected to her in some way or another.
- Very enjoyable performance- looking forward to seeing more!
- Absolutely adored it and would love to see it again
- I'm in awe, Rowena you are beautiful and a massive inspiration to me, if I am half the performer you are at some point I will be over the moon. Your performance made me want to stand tall and be proud to be a woman!
- I am grateful for the opportunity to watch this performance. It has been insightful and thought provoking.
- Consider how else you can make rhythm out of the boots you wear, taking safe practice into further consideration.
- The opening section is so strong - the visual imagery of the boots been worked by the feet. I almost wanted you to return

to that quality again within the frenzy - but that's just a personal opinion not a choreographic one

- The performance was unique and very much one of a kind. I have seen many works before but I feel this stood alone for all the good reasons. It was original and perfectly executed, the sound score was well chosen, allowing for the audience to create and become thoughtful at their own pace. I enjoyed the recorded sound, and the live natural found sound was so perfect, it did not distract or make me feel uncomfortable but added a fabulous touch to the performance work. Thank you for sharing this outstanding piece with us.
- I cannot help but see the performance as pole and exotic dance related. Yet it is so refreshing to see someone use the platform, imagery, and symbols of pole and exotic dance (10 inch heels, floorwork etc) to make a statement about the platform itself. Story telling in pole dance is common but this was a meta-story. Aside from this, I love the noise of the leather, zippers, and rubber. There are many noise musicians who could exaggerate these atmospheric sounds, which could lead to a collaboration of sorts. The dancer and music creating a wall of sound, a drone of textural squeaks and tension. Cool stuff!
- I'm really pleased to have seen this. The work is very intense, and I feel like a better person having seen it.
- I enjoyed this piece, it was beautifully choreographed and the music choice was great. I liked the power of the silence as well towards the end because at times it made me feel uncomfortable and I think a level of discomfort is needed in performance as it brings you more into being in that one moment. I would like to see more pieces that you do!
- A brilliant piece of narrative dance.
- I was impressed with the power and skill of the performer. I am left pondering on the power of the performer over and

audience, and wondering about the universal theme of the power and vulnerability of women.

- I'd like to see it performed live, as suspect it would be a very different (and possibly more unsettling) experience; especially when you start interacting with the audience - suspect this starts to compromise the gaze aspect, no longer able to objectify in same way as viewer maybe?

**Instagram Message, 14/6/2019**

I just don't have words for that, honestly you made me feel the most strong feeling ever ... thank you for that and to be a wonderful woman.

### **4.3 The Ten Inch Heels. Raw. Choreographic and Reflective Journal Entries**

**14/10/2018**

I was exploring the weight of the boots on my feet and it got me thinking about how femininity is sold. – it is present as something that anyone can do and achieve in an instance, yet it takes time and hard work to work with femininity at ease.

My body can easily control what the boots look like, when I don't have my weight in them, but when I try to move in them, it is a different story, I'm wondering when they will make me look sexy and how I can navigate through the space with these weights on my feet. If I didn't have the balance of a dancer, they would be difficult to work with.

I saw them as objects that can complement other elements of my femininity, brushing my hair.

**21/10/2018**

Such a bold statement that I wrote yesterday, and I definitely brought it into the space with me today. I looked sad and actually began to admit the fact that the reason why I wear something that displays exaggerated femininity is because it is just that... a display; and if you really tear it apart, it is not easy to keep up with that display and there is not enough training on how to deal with this level of femininity – of course when you are showing off, it is rehearsed, and probably do enjoy the adoration that ensues. However, when you are alone with the object, it works differently. You explore it and yourself in new ways.

If we are really talking about the sensation of movement, then I feel strong whipping myself around on the floor, but I feel weak when it comes to transitioning in and out of the floor.

Liberation is exposing the situation.

I feel frightened about what I create sometimes, it is always very intense. The music amplifies this.

**31/03/2019**

It is sad that we need material objects to make us feel powerful, especially ones that cause pain simultaneously. – I genuinely cried today. I was very sad for myself.

The seating arrangement allows me to be beneath the audience.

I will handle the shoes in my way, not in the purely feminine way, but in a way that does not conform to original use only and in a way that plays with control and power. How can I project the power and knowledge that has arisen from the initial research? How can I produce a more masculine way of handling the objects as opposed to a manipulated and societally conditioned way of treating the objects? How can I demonstrate a lesbian way of managing the objects? How can I manoeuvre the objects in such a way that it eradicates the notion of male gaze and docile consciousness? How can I handle the objects in a subjective way?

**15/04/2019**

I fit all of the criteria for someone who is being exploited, yet I still feel powerful.

How was my agency hindered earlier in the work?

I direct domination to the audience to ask them to reconsider the stigma of the shoe now that it is off my feet.

How do the shoes contribute to the visibility of power?

**21/04/2019**

When I take the boot off, I use it as a whip. I do this to remind the audience of the potentiality of the dominance and power that can ensue, but I whip myself too, to say that it is a cycle. Catching the boots, making a whip out of them. I physically demonstrate how the object can be used to attract attention.

I worked in silence this day and it was a very productive rehearsal.

I don't have any power really, until I remove the shoes.

We can manage exploitation if we know its source.

The pleasure it gives me to be so in control of my own body and my own process.

Hobble – a prosthetic limb that hobbles the wearer.

Leave the boots on stage, they become nothing without the wearer.

The transition from object to power is sudden, and that is ok. Make a quick transition. Because that is essentially what we do when we engage in performative activities. We make a quick transition to suit some sort of aesthetic value.

Objectify and exploit the object. Dominate the object.

The fact that I stand on my own, on a stage, in a performance space, automatically emphasises my capacity for strength. When she understands herself, she is knowing, embodied and aware.

Definitely a fetish aspect, self-inflicting discomfort. Post-feminist is in competition with men. She is an alpha female. What will she do to herself to reach that stage? There is a big boom around BDSM right now.

Sometimes it is ok to work on one section at a time. I get a lot done when I focus on one thing at a time. I did plan to do an erogenous

zone section, but I might change my mind for that. I think I need to change.

Don't show your face. Look directly at audience through your hair.

**18/05/2019**

Shoes in my mouth, boot in my mouth. This is the ending, behind the glamour, the social status, the ability to tolerate pain and the aesthetic of lengthening my legs, high heels are nothing more than a consumerist ploy to keep us quiet, sore and slow.

It's weird how I hurt myself. But it works.

**07/06/2019**

My general reflection is that the audience were fully engaged. You could have heard a pin drop in there. I think the dynamics worked really well, especially how I waited before coming really close to the audience. I felt calm because they were in the space with me. It was different them being behind the lights. I could feel their vulnerability and I could see it too. It put me more at ease to know this.

**28/12/2019**

I have to release my ego, I cannot create from a place of "I can do this so I definitely should", I create from a space of honesty,

What is the barrier between myself, the work and the viewer and how can I work to remove those barriers. How, by having the audience in the space with me do I feel so relaxed. – I think this is because, as you mentioned earlier, you feel at ease because you know the audience feel vulnerable too.

**25/01/2020, Sudley Theatre, Ten Inch Heels add on, 2-5pm.**

I started with a quick back warm up and a stretch of the legs.

I tried the mask in an attempt to remove my subjectivity and it reminded me that I absolutely have the audience in the space with me, and not only is my body enough to send some sort of internalized gaze back to them, I think it is rather effective to actually gaze at them as I dance at extreme slow motion in an erotic way.

I did about 5 improvised takes of me standing in the middle of a circle, and then I settle on some movement. I touch every inch of my skin, as one would during an erotic dance, the heels are in deep connection with exaggerated femininity in pole dance and erotic dance, so I thought it would be great to make that explicit. What's more is that I hope to gaze at each and every person in the room as I move through the slow and sensual movement.

The gaze thrown back at them is an attempt to provoke further thought on what they are watching. The Ten Inch Heels stay on the lap of the audience until they have all seen my smiling gaze.

I think the interactions with the audience I did previously are ok, but I just add the text that initiates them to move their seats. I make the setting even more intimate than before, but how do I exit?

The movement works to the likes of Philip Glass too, and other operatic music.

As soon as you drop the heels on the audience member, that is when you ask them to rearrange themselves into a circle. It is an order that they may or may not listen to, I have to make sure the movement is going to work either way, once the message has been passed on and they initiate movement, that is when I go into the center of the space, just turning around very slowly, bringing their gaze closer to me, but also mine closer to them.

**26/06/2019**



A few short notes on the video documentation of my performance. It even makes me uncomfortable to watch it. God knows how intense the audience must of felt. What I like about being able to see the audience reaction, as I could not through my hair, was their playful gaze and visible sense of relief when they realised, I hadn't picked on them. They want me to come close, but at the same time, they do not. They want to observe. I want to observe, but I also want to interact.

To expose myself on stage is how I know. It gives me the capacity to connect with audiences in a way that doesn't uphold in verbal conversation. Yes, this process is more difficult for me to deal with psychologically, but it is worth it because of the very specific knowledge I gain. I can only be truly transparent when I write or when I am on stage.

Maybe all of the research into pole dance is what is motivating this study, not what is the topic of the study. Sexuality, subjectivity and objectification are themes that you are exploring in your practice to bring light. Maybe because of what you already know, you are testing out the theories in your current practice and that is really what is going on here. Urgh!!! What did you know?

Pole dance is a subjective activity.

Objectification occurs in performance, regardless of content relating to sexuality or not.

Manipulation of object that contributes to exploitation of empowerment is key to knowing and understanding position.

Object Biography stands as a valid frame when creating performance work with objects.

By acknowledging the history of said object, one becomes enlightened. This knowledge can be difficult to manage and often asks many more questions.

**01/07/2019**

After reading feedback about my work, "The Ten Inch Heels". One of the audience members described it as a Meta story, which is essentially a story within a story. All of the different media formats, or, in my case, movements, are each connected to bring about their own unique strength as part of one story.

**09/07/2019**

Where is the line between confrontation and control? There was a lot of discussion about control. Something I hadn't previously thought about was what if one of the audience want to take back the power. What if they wanted to dominate me in the space? How could I respond? --- Then, who is in control? Who owns the performance? What does the interaction suggest and where does it go from there? Why are the audience with you?

We spoke about time, and how, if given more time, would the audience be a bit more responsive. For instance, what would have happened if I would have stayed with the non-zipping audience member for a little bit longer? However, then I have to think about the technical factors of the theatre, where I had positioned the light, what I had told the technician about my exit.

On the work, Lisa said there was a bit of an anti-climax, but then she said "maybe I just didn't want you to go off", I wanted you to come back on and express more movement without the shoes. There was a sensory experience. What is it to be seen as a woman? Otherness, something other than identity.

The hair was sometimes as prominent as the boots, in terms of it covering my facial features and it acting as a trigger to sexuality. So at times, drawn to the hair more than the boots. Slipping from one element of femininity to another.

Time for a conversation with the audience afterwards.

### **25/02/2020**

In terms of closing the space off with people, it is interesting for me to use them as space closers. It highlights my objectification of them and in closing the space, it brings forth a metaphorical closing of a door. My movement extends into something a little bit more erotic and this show the situation aspect of the shoes too – what people do behind closed doors, particularly with these exaggerated fetish ones. Some people wear them to feel sexy, but what happens with that sexual feeling, where does it go? – I still have to acknowledge them as people who are watching though. Their presence, for me, is interchangeable from subject to object, as is mine to them.

Another key note is that when the forth wall is up, i.e.- the audience are separated from stage and performer, audiences maintain a critical perspective, but when the wall is removed, their critical observation becomes blurred because of the enhanced engagement and alertness to the scene (performance, in my case).

I objectify the bodies of the audience to create a forth wall. The audience exist as my room, a behind closed doors, they are gently acknowledged at times, how, as if they were present. Because after all, the feminine effect is to think about the external eye. The position of the seats and the closure of the space through bodies, offer functional use for me as the performer.

Davis, N. (2015) "Not a soul in sight!": Beckett's Fourth Wall, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 38 (2), pp. 86-102, Indiana University Press

**07/03/2020**

Anyway, I have come to the conclusion that what I enjoy working with is the notion of construction and deconstruction; going from subject to object, to woman, to pole dancer to subject. Because that is how I lived my life so far.

In other news, I had two sharing's of my work, *The Ten Inch Heels*, one with Eli and Claire, and the other with Pauline and Lisa. Both sessions went well and they said the work was powerful. It shows multiple versions of self. I will do a proper type up shortly – see Ten Inch Heels Notes.

TEN INCH HEELS, with intention to self-objectify in one's own work, this has been labelled "the rhetoric of the pose" – which means, the female artists unhook gendered expectation, uses it to create the work, exaggerates it and takes it beyond "patriarchal function"(p.152).

Double alienation.

In my work I assign myself the role as both subject and object and take into consideration the artist who is to self-objectify for their art must consider the aesthetic value of it before commencing. This means I have to look at the state of my body...

Narcissism and Self-Portraiture

Cartesian Subject: the body is a container that can be transcended through thought

**11/01/2020**

subjectivity is also what gives you power, so if I remove that I ask what power the body has left?

What power does the body have alone?

## **07/03/20 – The Ten Inch Heels, notes from talking to E and C**

- Ask yourself as you go, what is going on for me.
- Smaller changes have a lot of power.
- Change dynamic and tempo of feet during the argument. Sort of tease more, then hit.
- What are some of the emotions you go through in this piece? - can you amplify them a little bit more?
- When you first run your hands up the boots, really tug at the material, show the audience the rest of the material, rather than it being a point of provocation.
- When you go up into bridge, cover your face with your right hand, balance... Drop hand then drop to floor. (remove side bridge).
- when you first stand up tall, take your time and hold this moment. When you open your hair, peek at audience and then close it again before you drop to your toss over.
- When you shift from side to side, direct who you are going to, find a path way in the space.
- After you have brushed your hair with the boot, you must make eye contact with everyone in the audience, truly acknowledging them all. Ask yourself how you feel being looked at by them.
- Whipping can be more dangerous, tempo can be explored more. Straight, sexy, angry, aggressive, look at someone behind you and maybe someone at side.
- Same as above when you are trampling all over the shoe...

- If the person doesn't undo the zip for you, do small, small, long long, etc. Play with tempo of it.
- When you go for a walk to gather people for your next bit, simply look at them and stand by some of them, maybe you want to do something with them and maybe you don't. Change the pace of your walk every so often..
- you can wrap your boot around some of the audience to pull them, be more aggressive, maybe play with their hair...
- If no audience gets up with you, perhaps you can just make the rest of the work center around them, so they are looked at by everyone else.
- Before you put the boot in your mouth, tie your hair up, when you do put the boot in your mouth, as you turn your could be stuffing it further and further into your face... I did this and it worked, I was almost smacking myself in my face... well, actually I was.
- Can you bring sound back in at the end? - try with 1 min of breath. The boots again. Then let the work have its final peak from this point.
- At the end, you should be absolutely human and maybe stand remembering some of those moments you experienced within the work. Maybe this is a little bit where you add a bit more emotion....

### **13/03/2020, Notes on sharing with P and L**

The overarching theme is that we need audience to experiment with. I need to get to more open improvisation classes.

The only criticism was that there was a little too much walking but that will obviously change when I am responding to the live situation where audiences are with me in the space.

It was observed that multiple versions of myself are projected throughout the work. There is a real dominance and sense of control, contrasted by a pure sense of vulnerability.

I must hold the standing pose a little bit longer.

I can close space in any way I want really. I should just remain open to the situation.

It was picked up that as I evolve the object, it almost becomes a new work entirely. It starts this way from the point that I use the heel as a hair brush.

An interesting thing that happened during this session was that the zip on my boot broke, so I was forced to undo the laces on the shoe. I should take my time here and have everyone wait for me until it is all undone. It goes back to that sensual element of the work.

What is power without vulnerability? Don't we find power in vulnerability?

As you put the hair in your mouth in the bridge, take time to remove your hand from your face.

When I had the boot in my mouth, I reminded them of a dog playing fetch. How interesting. A gag, I am being told to keep quiet, but I am doing it myself and that has been observed on more than one occasion.

Miscellaneous Notes, No date

Many women cannot reach the epitome of femininity, and their drive to reach this is not even about men anymore, it is to claim empowerment when they are far from it. Empowerment should not derive from consumption of purchasable femininity, but through self-knowing and iterance of agency.

You wear the shoes, but you never stand up in them. This eliminates the intrinsic desire to wear high heels. Wade dismisses the idea of any kind of intrinsic motivation to wear heels. (FIND)

Am I intrinsically motivated to wear high heels? What do you feel like? What does it feel like when you take them off? What if those objects did not exist? Am I attracted to the shoes or am I attracted to what they represent? I know they are artificial.

Me – I objectify my body so I can speak through it, it is my voice and if people don't pay attention to voice, they will pay attention to body.

Essentially, the work is about the high-heeled shoes as impractical objects when they are used on my feet, but they become more practical when I use them upright. A dislocation of body parts. Showing the temporality of empowerment through engagement with objects. I sexualise and hypnotise the movement because that is how to gain attention. But I should not need to do this to be a woman. I shouldn't need heavy legs. This is why I don't introduce myself as human, too much power, subjectivity will be shown, and that is not what this work is about.

How does one liberate themselves from the constraints of femininity?

To acknowledge that we have no power is liberating in itself. (who said this)

How can we really dehumanize the body? This is interesting because I always like to show a little bit of myself.

What if I am both subject and object simultaneously, in the eyes of the audience?

Agency comes from acknowledging your body as an object and then you continue from there, using it to your advantage. – Which is what dancers do.



S&M – powerlessness into pleasure.

What about the pleasures of femininity? Is this the same pleasure one gains from self-objectification and is this why empowerment is so prominent in raunch culture through activities such as pole dancing and commercial dance?

If we are to move past the argument of binaries and how one side may or may not be more dominant, we need to recognise that women, today, are simultaneously objectified and empowered.

## **5.1 Unstable. Grouped Data from Reflective Journal and Audience Feedback**

Data was drawn from both reflective journal and audience feedback. Both data sets are supported with video documentation, which was highlighted as I identified and discoursed about themes in *Unstable* findings, chapter five.

Text from my reflective journal is written in black.

Text from audience feedback is coloured in light purple as shown in this sentence.

**Conflict – A narrative beyond stigma - Rejecting docility, creating self-contained prison that seek to unravel autobiographical narrative.**

“Some women are settled and find pleasure in their subordination. I am not one of those women and I will fight until I show otherwise. However, you must question your own power on stage. [...] I think, in short, the work was purely about control, physical control, metaphorical control and psychological control of your own objectification” (Appendix 5.3, p.245).

“But, do I want to dissolve them? And that is the questions isn't it? I have that conflict with myself sometimes. Do I want to remove a traditional element of this practice or do I want to keep it and ask the question why I should remove the traditional element, you know, and so it is working through all of those questions. And I think it is ok for that to be exposed through what I do on stage. I don't think I need to have an answer, erm, but yeah, it is like ongoing questions all the time. But I think when I speak to more audiences, and I speak to you now, I suppose some of those answers will become visible” (Appendix 5.2, p. 230).

“I find it really difficult to force the power side of things. There is still much room in terms of objectification. Lots. It just needs to be framed differently. Maybe I am in denial about things” (Appendix 5.2, p. 245).

“But I know this work is significant because the pole hit me and I read it as me hurting myself. I think, in some way or another, we are all hurting ourselves. For what? What did you do to yourself?” (Appendix 5.2, p. 244).

“It makes me feel quite good, but then there is something there, kind of nagging at me. Getting in the way of me. It swings past, against me, around me, and on top of me. It always comes back, yet I am the one who puts it there in the first place” (Appendix 5.3, p. 245).

“Negate the docile body and show that you are not a delusional robot” (Appendix 5.3, p. 244).

“This work is generated through an autobiographical lens whereby my relationship with empowerment (or confidence and knowing self) is unstable, complex and completely open and honest” (Appendix 5.3, p. 245).

“Somewhere along the way to finding liberation there is a complexity that talks of relationship with self hurts and you have to work that out” (Appendix 5.3, p. 245).

“I am still questioning if I need to stay in control the whole way through or not. But they know I am in control anyway. I truly am because I have made all of the decisions that put me in there in the first place” (Appendix 5.3, p. 246).

“Why am I so obsessed with power? Is it because there were times in my life where I have felt absolutely helpless? I sometimes still feel like that now to be honest, but I think I can manage it now because I have the tools to do so” (Appendix 5.3, p. 248).

“I now know why I create the type of work that I create and that is to show every single person that they have choice. There is challenge, there is struggle, but you can get through it. You can always get out of a shitty situation. I just want to illuminate choice. My work illuminates choice. It says, here is the struggle, but you have a choice. You are never the result of someone else’s choice. You need to take responsibility and make the choice yourself. You are responsible for everything. Take responsibility for the way you deal with your life. I absolutely show a vulnerability, that is oftentimes quite difficult for me to watch, but I always come out stronger. I am more resilient, disciplined, curious and knowledgeable. To expose myself on stage is how I know. It gives me the capacity to connect with audiences in a way that doesn’t uphold in verbal conversation. Yes, this process is more difficult for me to deal with psychologically, but it is worth it because of the very specific knowledge I gain. I can only be truly transparent when I write or when I am on stage” (Appendix 5.3, p. 248).

“Someone being trapped inside their own thoughts and wanting to be free. Or stuck in a cycle that you want to break” (Appendix 5.2, p. 217).

“My interpretation of the piece was as though you were fighting a struggle, but nothing could bring you down. I felt you portrayed a strong role with the support of the poles around you” (Appendix 5.2, p. 217).

“My interpretation was that there was some type of pull or struggle towards the pole. Sometimes a feeling of working out the pole; trying to understand it” (Appendix 5.2, p. 217).

“An expression of resistance to some force and possession. A battle of liberation and remaining free from oppression of some sort” (Appendix 5.2, p. 218).

“[...] You have power over the pole and then the pole has the power over you” (Appendix 5.2, p. 218).

“Showing that you have control over the pole. It showed power and strength in two ways. Strength of the dancer and strength the dancer had over the pole” (Appendix 5.2, p. 218).

“I felt like there was this war going on where you were taking back the art form as not just being overly sexual, but as a real art and the talent that takes strength and training. I felt there was acknowledgments to the way it can be “sexy”, but in a powerful way” (Appendix 5.2, p. 218).

“I felt like you were battling with something. In my opinion I felt like you were being challenged by something and you were not backing down from that challenge” (Appendix 5.2, p. 218).

When asked how they felt, the majority said they felt nervous.

“I felt like the work was retelling a journey as I felt there was an element of time included from the swinging pole relating to a pendulum or a clock. It became quite intense and, at times, the strength within the work was remarkable” (Appendix 5.2, p. 222).

“[...] she really mastered the pole” (Appendix 5.2, p. 222).

“It looked like a battle / struggle between the dancer and poles. But also like a relationship and control at some points” (Appendix 5.2, p. 223).

“You were trying to assert your power over the pole, maybe you were trying to take it back as an art form, rather than using it only for pleasure and entertainment. But when you were finishing, there was a sense of ritual and giving in to it” (Appendix 5.2, p. 223).

“Despite the stereotypical view that pole dancing is a female / feminine form of art – this piece showed its strength, battle and danger” (Appendix 5.2, p. 223).

“A saw a lot of struggle for identity and or power. Maybe even a recognition. Objectification seemed like a powerful and reoccurring theme” (Appendix 5.2, p. 223).

“the performer is fighting to reclaim movement.” (Appendix 5.2, p. 223).

“A powerful representation of empowerment” (Appendix 5.2, p. 223).

“My interpretation was the heavy load a woman holds on her shoulders. It told the story of no matter what position you’re in that you (the woman) can handle it straight up, lying down and even upside down” (Appendix 5.2, p. 223).

“The struggle and burden of something weight you down. I felt female empowerment. You conquered whatever it was at the end” (Appendix 5.2, p. 224).

“I felt that this was an exploration of the artists’ complex relationship with the pole, with herself and with the world in which she exists. She seeks to command and control but is ultimately overwhelmed into acceptance” (Appendix 5.2, p. 224).

“Felt like battling something with uniting, carrying a heavy load” (Appendix 5.2, p. 224).

“Female strength, how strong women have to be under the male gaze, it comes with a pressure that we more / less dependent on the situation. It swings, sometimes the pressure elevates us and sometimes it pushes us down” (Appendix 5.2, p. 224).

“The poles were representative of a struggle, pain and the longer she hung onto them, the more they defeated her and tried to overpower her” (Appendix 5.2, p. 225).

“[...] the performer seemed broken, but also at times in control” (Appendix 5.2, p. 225).

“when you are stuck in a position of your life where you can’t get out of it.” (Appendix 5.2, p. 229).

“I saw it similar to that, but, I saw it as you taking control of the pole, so rather than seeing it as you showing to the audience that it is a strength, I saw you as taking over the pole. And in control when it was taking you around [...] I felt like it was you and the pole” (Appendix 5.2, p. 229).

“I liked how, in terms of the work, it felt like you were seizing the moment and you looked really strong, and there were moment you threw it around yourself. It was like you can get yourself to a good place and feel like you have overcome a lot. But then it goes around again, and it feels like it is building back up and then you go down the hole you have just come up from. I kind of liked how you kept transitioning from, it was like, I have got a grip of it” (Appendix 5.2, p. 230).

“I found it like you were trying to break a cycle and the different facial expressions and your use of breath just said you don’t want to be what we want, but that you will be “who I am”. You show the world, this is who I am and I won’t meet anybody’s expectation but mine” (Appendix 5.2, p. 231).

“at the start, you were very proud of the practice and then you were like bound by the connotations and the social constructions of a woman dancing around a pole and it was like a resistance against that” (Appendix 5.2, p. 231).

“I think it was a work in progress, I was really intrigued and engaged with it throughout, I think there is semiotic representation of the horizontal pole that can lead to much discussion and interpretation. And there is this whole feeling that the swinging of the vertical pole gives a sense of freedom, but actually you are not free because then you become bound to it as it swings and there is a whole thing about that” (Appendix 5.2, p. 232).

### **Object manipulation: manipulating the object(s)**

“I caught the pole, balanced it on my body, and used it as a prison and instrument to represent a metaphorical subordination. I manipulate it, I objectify it, and I play with it” (Appendix, 5.3, p.253).

“I have to prove that I am in control of what happens in the space and how the poles move” (Appendix, 5.3, p.243).

“I played with the swinging pole sort of generating a cage for me to play in, to be trapped in, to hurt myself with. Why am I still doing this to myself, I thought, as part of it” (Appendix, 5.3, p.244).

“Unstable, instability of empowerment in pole dance. I will fight for confidence and self-assurance, even if I am considered docile. Building up our own prison is a huge contradiction in that there is a massive pressure to be an empowered woman and a sexually activated woman. I manipulate the poles physically and challenge the audience' preconceived ideas of the practice by having a pole that is trussed up, and also one that is not erect at all. Don't want to use the word flaccid as it seems inappropriate. Yet, I still somehow remain docile because my confidence, my liberation is attached to objects. ” (Appendix, 5.3, p.246).



“I have hold of a long horizontal pole, it is heavy but I am going to show you that I can move it with ease. I put it down to change mine and your attention to the hanging pole, one that swings and it is above me. I show you how I can control that too. My body in the air. The pole throws me around a little bit and I begin to learn about some of the issues surrounding the practice and why external aesthetic may only be the driving force for my practice. Or even that I am still somehow reliving my time working in a purely objectified position under the male gaze. I am trapped in this self-contained prison that tries to make me an inauthentic confident woman. A gilded woman. I come forward on my knees as the pole drags along my breast and neck, I brush it off me like I don't like it. Change the spatiality of the pole to reframe what the audience pay attention to and how sexualised the movement can be without the vertical pole. I go back to the prison one more time. But this time, I am in charge and I remove one element of "phallocentrism" from the space. I win, but the vertical pole still swings. It swings on its own. It keeps its energy” (Appendix, 5.3, p.246).

“Not letting the pole be in control of you but you have control over it and how it portrays you while you dance with it. The pole does not define you, you make it the object / objectified” (Appendix 5.2, p. 218).

“The use of the pole as another performer was brilliant. It had its own role and you knew it as another being really well” (Appendix 5.2, p. 221).

“The poles being two separate entities, one being good and the other being evil” (Appendix 5.2, p. 223).

“I felt that the poles had good and bad representation. As if the piece was showing the strength and personal control it takes to make the pole represented as more” (Appendix 5.2, p. 224).

“[...] Negativity from the silver pole. Positivity on the black pole”  
(Appendix 5.2, p. 224).

### **Strength of performer**

“The longer I was working with the object, the more confident I became with my strength and ability to control it. ” (Appendix 5.3, p.245).

“There is something so liberating about working with the body to a point of extreme. To then recover and go again” (Appendix 5.3, p.246)

“My aim is not to be the more dominant party, because if that was my aim, I only exist in a cycle of being greater than the “lesser” being I am now” (Appendix 5.3, p.249).

“Confusion with how it looked so easy, the elegance from moving to and from the pole” (Appendix 5.2, p. 216).

“Real joy from knowing the strength it takes and the way you make it look so easy” (Appendix 5.2, p. 216).

Powerful and strong was noted continuously – in majority of responses to work when asked about key words.

“Power and control. Mastery of body. Strength” (Appendix 5.2, p. 223).

“You are stronger than this Rowena, pull yourself together and control it” (Appendix 5.3, p.243)

**Questioning my own relationship with power based on audience perception that my power comes from my ability to present as a strong and powerful woman.**

“In near enough finishing and in closing the process, I felt relieved. I literally did create this hypnotic void that I would step into for just under 15 minutes at a time. I felt everything and then wondered why there was a hint of sadness in me when I would leave the rehearsal space. Some people really get the work and some people don't. They just see the power and strength. But not what goes on behind that. The effort, persistence it takes to maintain that kind of stamina and strength” (Appendix 5.3, p.249).

“There is Rowena the person who has worked for a long time creating work with objects. I think this has been a means to verify, to myself that I am not longer the object that I positioned myself as. Another part of me wants to question what if I am still that object? How, with my new found knowledge can I navigate in my position and find some sort of quiet agency. Then I have the artist / performer Rowena who is wanted to push boundaries through the objects I work with, whilst at the same time, I feel like an inferior artist because I have to create with things. I don't feel like a true artist because I am attached to three things in this PhD project; my body, pole and high heels. Each work could not exist without them. If those things cease to exist, then so would my practice. My body, however, must carry on. Is it perfectly ok to attach to one's own body? I must surrender myself to myself and for myself” (Appendix 5.3, p.250).

“The pole was your only kind of leverage, making it almost like your support. Your facial expressions at times looked very powerful and seductive, while other times you looked quite vulnerable. I felt like the piece had many meanings, but I don't quite know what they are” ((Appendix 5.2, p. 217).

“With all the work on the pole and all the positions she was in, I could only see her showing desperation for something. Like relying on the pole. Therefore, the pole must have represented something she relies on. I love the element of danger” (Appendix 5.2, p. 217).

“It was interesting to see the different representations of power you embodied; strong, physical and in control. But then in part way through, very submissive to the vertical pole, but then returning to that control” (Appendix 5.2, p. 223).

### **Spatial Design of the Work and Audience**

Whilst nervousness and risk was expressed because of the proximity between audience members and the poles, data shows that inviting the audience into the space with me made them feel included within the piece...

“Being in the space made me feel part of the performance” (Appendix 5.2, p. 225).

“Being in the space with the performer had purpose” (Appendix 5.2, p. 226).

“Loved the intimacy of being in the space with you. It made me feel part of the story and part of the piece” (Appendix 5.2, p. 226).

“I felt like I was part of the work somehow” (Appendix 5.2, p. 226)

“The intimacy of being a part of the performance was vital to feeling involved rather than standing outside the work or viewing from a distance” (Appendix 5.2, p. 226).

“I felt that being in the space I was included visually, but I was sad because I couldn’t help” (Appendix 5.2, p. 226).

“Made me feel more involved, like we were a part of the work, like we felt what you felt” (Appendix 5.2, p. 226)

“Made me feel involved, like I was there for a reason. A calling for help” (Appendix 5.2, p. 226)

“Audiences forget about the stigma that is attached to the pole when it is not fixed to the space, as it would be in a strip club. When it flies it adds an excitement that is more thrilling for them. When they are in the space with me, their shared vulnerability allows them to overlook the spectacle of the work and instead empathise with me” (Appendix 5.3, p.226)

## **5.2 Unstable. Raw. Audience Feedback**

**18/05/2020 *Unstable*, Online Sharing via Zoom, Transcript.**

Me: Researcher

A1: Audience Member

Session, via Zoom, began with me introducing the work. I gave them a link to view the video and the same questions as live audiences were asked upon viewing the work. I told them I was generally looking for their interpretation of the work and how they viewed the work in this medium, i.e. a video documented version of the performance as opposed to watching it live.

A1: I just kept thinking what incredible strength you must have in your body to do those things cos I was sitting there thinking there is no way I would be able to do that. But the other thing that kept going through my mind as well is why has she called it Unstable? I am thinking what is unstable about this, is it the pole, is it because it is not a static pole and is actually swinging through the air. Is it may be part of the interpretation or is it the unstable emotional aspect of the performer. There is a time when you show your strength and then you are dragging your body along the floor. Is it that that is unstable?

Me: all of the above. It is definitely open to interpretation and the name does kind of play on the instability of the pole. That is why I decided to use a flying pole instead of a floor to ceiling pole which is fixed. But also the notion of empowerment and it being unstable in pole dance discourse. So I was kind of playing with that as a theme as I was creating the work and so it stuck with the name.

A2: it felt like a power shift, in the beginning it felt very much like you are deliberately doing different things and in control and the second half felt like there was some sort of dissonance going on, it felt like the power shift, it went to a struggle. Two separate parts. The first

part you knew what you wanted to do and you manipulated the poles as instruments and they were going to obey you. And the second half felt like there was more of a conflict between the tool and almost your body.

A3: I put almost the opposite, I put for the first part that the pole owned the dancer and then the dancer owned the pole. Because I thought that your movements were more free in the second part, whereas in the first part it was quite primitive and probably in the music as well.

A2: I got the complete reverse of that for me, in that performance.

A4: it was really interesting for me in the beginning because it was quite dark and the spotlight seemed to be on and it was slow and gentle and it all became more powerful when the lighting got bright.

A5: then something else I noticed in relation to power was, I noticed a difference between the attached pole and the one you were carrying around, I felt like the hanging one was following and chasing you while the other one you were carrying around like something as a weight for you.

A6: like a weight lifter, yes. And at the same time it reminded me of a position you would be in if you were being crucified. The poles were crossing over briefly and you were holding onto the cross bar. Erm, yes, one of my first reactions watching is was, having done a bit of reading and thinking this morning about the ways in which we objectify bodies in relation to pole dancing, my first reaction was oh my god, athlete is what I see, acrobatic is what I see, strength is what I see. Having come into it wondering about this sort of objectification of women, erm, acrobat, athlete and weight lifter don't tend to, if you see what I mean, collate with that notion of a sexualised body or a female, a passive female form or a sexualised female form, so it was very interesting to see how that yard, what I thought might be my

initial reactions, they weren't those, they were much more full of agency, thought at the same time, that crucifixion slightly jolted me, and it felt powerful, a person in control and then, the person being controlled, always in a certain dialogical interaction. Sort of fits with what people are saying about the different parts and they could see things within them. Lots of changes over time.

Me: I think for me when I was creating the work I acknowledged the pole as this object of stigma, which would suggest that the female who dances with the pole is objectified because she is dancing with this sexualised object, it has its phallic connotations, but because I have manipulated the objects and brought two poles in, one is swinging from the ceiling and one is freehand, for one I am showing the weight of the object, and for two I am trying to emphasise a struggle because you know, even though people come up all the time and say wow, you are so strong to do that, but actually there are a lot of people who raise their eyebrow as soon as I say, you know, I do pole. And so you have to work with those connotations all the time. And it is not necessarily me struggling to get through them because it is part of doing whatever I do, but it is acknowledged and I see that is it not always a powerful activity for every woman who performs with the poles. I understand from that perspective too.

A6: certainly you can't deny those meanings are in circulation, can you. But you destabilise them and play with them.

A7: I had the same things written down, it was very powerful, and it was very strong, and the music was tribal and the weight lifting. But in the middle there was a bit that, not looked like you were a puppet, but you were on the floor and it totally changed then for me.

Me: can you remember back to what part specifically.

A7: I am not going to act it out, (laughs).



Me: the head bid.

A7: it looked like you were a puppet on a string, yet so strong and powerful.

A2: another thing I had written down is that you were more. I thought that the movement started more, sort of, isolated and then became more fluid. As it went through really.

Me: are there any thoughts about you viewing it as an online audience as opposed to being there in the space with me?

A5: I really wish I would have been there with the other people so I could see better and follow every detail of the performance. I mean, as an overall, I got it but I think I would prefer to be there. Something I thought also about the viewer and the performer, we are online viewer and the viewer in the video, we were all static and sitting and staring at you, which was the opposite of you performing.

A6: From an online viewer perspective, it was great to have the opportunity to view this performance from my own home. I could see different things, I saw the whole picture instead of focussing on one fixed position from the audience. I made it bigger on the screen.

A4: I think being there in person would change the perspective. The light and the darkness because the people who are in that room are on the other side, and not as close, so when you were doing like the floor pole, obviously that would have been further back for them and I wonder what their perspective is. Is it darker for them because of where they were positioned? Whereas we were on the other side of the camera, so you were in our foreground so that could change perception as audience.

A2: also, the audience were sitting on the floor so they would have been looking up at you. I imagine that would be quite intimidating, them sitting on the floor while you were higher up the pole.

A1: the other thing I noticed along those lines of acknowledging the different perspectives is, the swinging pole, from the angle the camera was at, the pole went backwards and forwards, whereas if you were sat in the audience, it would have been more sideways, although on an angle, sort of action. So they would have got a different perspective of that as well. And it would have looked a bit more three dimensional if you get what it is that I am trying to say?

A2: like not just oscillating back and forth. But also I thought the shadows, you know because you could see the shadows on the wall and if that shadow crossed you, it would feel quite different.

Me: yeah so in live you might not actually focus on the shadows because you can see the performer and your eyes are fixed on the performer.

A4: at some point I thought oooh, there are three Rowena's because there were two shadows.

Me: you know what, as I was rehearsing and stuff, I have watched that a lot and I only noticed those shadows today and I was like, oh my god. Each time it is new and you can actually focus on different things, even me as the choreographer and performer I am like, ahh, I have not seen that before.

A6: That is interesting to me because I didn't see the shadows until near the end and thought, oh was I supposed to be paying attention to those shadows all the way through. [...] it wasn't intentional and it is an example of how processes do us as well use doing and being in charge of processes. And it makes it into a new dynamism. Ironically, people talk about how it is not the same looking at the recording of the performance as it is being in the performance, I mean we can talk about that at some other point, but I think one of the things that they are trying to say is that, um, a recording, in a sense, it becomes an object, separate from the people who are looking at it. And compared

to how an audience in a performance might interact, react and change the performance because they are in the space. We found an example of how the recording of the performance is dynamic in how these shadows and your own noticing of something that is happening that you hadn't intended. It brings it back into a sort of live mode if you like. I was surprised talking about the differences between being there, as Clifford Geertz likes to talk about it, and not being there because we were watching a recording. And I was surprised about how I immediately felt, and we can talk about why this might be, I felt very drawn into this and there was a great deal of atmosphere, although I am sitting at my desk in my study / dining room, surrounding by plants that I am growing from seed and all of this, I felt very there with you. That might be something to do with our professional relationship, I don't know, do you understand what I need. You are not anyone's dance I happen to be looking at, you are Rowena from the department, and I have an investment in wanting this to work for you as an event this afternoon. I felt taken into it, right into it, very quickly [...] did other people feel pulled into the event or did you feel separate as viewers.

A2: I agree because I wasn't looking around the room, I was totally engaged while it was on.

A6: it was very arresting you might say. Very arresting

A1: one this I noticed, which I should have said earlier on, it was quite early in the video, that would make it normal, but I don't mean normal, it was more relevant because the clothes that Rowena was wearing. Whereas if she was stood there in the ten inch heels, and dressed more saucy, if you like, it might not seemed as relevant to me cos I don't wear that sort of stuff. Do you get what I am trying to say?

Me: so the costume played a part in the work for you?

A1: I would say so, yes. Cos I was thinking you are wearing clothes that I would wear.

A6: I see what you mean by normal, it sort of normalises it. I feel less alienated as a woman viewing it as a woman who wouldn't particularly want to wear ten inch stilettos.

A7: that for me, is another way you challenge our perspective, Rowena. Because you are right, there is so much, we all bring our perceptions of whatever we think pole dance is and our expectations of what you would be wearing and will be doing with these poles, but your costume does challenge and your artistry with what you are doing with both poles. You challenge those perspective and expectations we bring. Whether it is normal or something to emphasise the power and strength of women as opposed to other images of women. It is very important to me. [...] I am debating myself whether this is a duet or a trio.

Me: I have that debate myself, P, so I know exactly where you are coming from. Because when I was creating it, there were times when I deliberately push the poles so it continues to move as I move, that is me giving the pole some sort of space to move and to perform within the work. Maybe I will reach that decision when I write my thesis.

A7: I have been fortunate enough to be in the theatre with Rowena and watch it live and I can't tell you enough how much the increase in strength and power comes from being in that space because you are able to see how much distance rowena and the pole cover that the camera doesn't show.

A6: it is that three dimension that someone else said about watching the pole. We are watching it like a metronome in a way. But of course if you are in the space, there is all.

A7: she covers so many feet.

Me: even for me when I watch it, I feel like it looks safe, even though I know that it doesn't feel safe sometimes, I mean, obviously I train for it to feel like that, but I know that when I have been in the space with an audience, they have been like, woah, I thought you were literally going to come off the pole at any point and I was nervous for you and that nervousness adds to the experiences. You can't necessarily gauge that with the camera.

A4: I didn't get any sense of danger watching that, that didn't occur to me at all that it was risky. I had no concept of floor or space. I do think the poles had two separate personalities thought, I do think they were different. I wouldn't have lumped them as one, they were two different energies completely.

Me: nice way to put it, they have their own energy.

A6: although I didn't get a sense particularly of risk, though I can see it now people have started to talk about it, one of the things that did come across to me is that I felt the music change, am I right. [...] I felt more settled and uncomfortable. It reminded me of some of the music in the movie *Trainspotting*. And that beat that I associate with the days when I used to occasionally go clubbing and that dance rhythm [...] those context it feels like it is inside and outside the body. In *Trainspotting* it used that music in relation to disrupting the boundaries in terms of the inside and the outside and what it means to be addicted to heroin in the film. Unsettled, uncomfortable. It was interesting for me to stand outside the discussion, just for a moment, erm, I hadn't taken the word unstable into my viewing experience. Isn't it interesting how a mere title can already add a lens to what we are viewing? Then you do a puzzling act. But also, Pauline's question about duet and trio is interesting because it is not a question I think I would ever have asked or come to. It is a question within dance and performance [...] questions come from somewhere. They are

informed by different things. What it means to be a pole dancer is cultural and historical. Things just make us up.

A1: For Rowena regarding the duet / trio, do you feel differently when you work with different poles?

Me: when I was working with the flying pole for instance, that was new to me, that is not something that I have worked with before, I mean I have done pole for 6 or 7 years, but the flying pole for only one year. I had to learn all about it, its weight, how heavy it feels against my body and how heavy my body feels against it, so those are some of the questions you would ask if you were going to create a duet with another body. You have to learn the way the body moves. The horizontal pole, that is really heavy, and I brought this into show this its weight but also metaphorically to show that as women, we carry a lot of this stuff on our shoulder through inscriptions like femininity and what the expectation is to be empowered and in control and what type of pressures are on top of you to be that empowered woman. You know, do you have to go take part in a pole dance class. Pole dance classes are sold on the notion of empowerment, raunch culture is sold on the notion of empowerment and they were some of the things I was thinking and some of the ideas that I attached to the poles. It shifts and changes, my focus towards the poles.

[...]

Me: key words to describe the work to sum it up for yourself.

A3: deliberately spontaneous. Assertive. Definite. Confident. Symbiosis between the two. Beautifully structured.

A6: I have a lot but I feel hesitant to only give you one. Unsettle, unsettling. [...]

A4: fascinating use of space and environment and how everything linked together so smoothly. It was really creative.

A5: duality, two poles and the two parts of the performance. And then you, you are a human person. Your strength against the elegance.

A7: I see many dualities within their. The sense of free flow and bound flow. [...] very deliberate in strong, bound movements. You play with it throughout, let alone, there is a duality of perceptiveness of women. Being in control and being manipulated. There are times when you are manipulated by the pole.

A7: manipulation and manipulating. Going back to the sense of a crucifixion; torture. There was a moment. [...] sense of you being lost to the pole and being tortured by it. One other thing that I started seeing, your body and the pole as a series of sculptures. Still moments. I see the work as a series of pieces of art. They were like series of sculptures. Frozen in those moments. A duality in that. It was fantastic, it was absolutely fascinating. I would love to talk to you about how you develop a piece like that Rowena. The development of a piece of art like that.

### **17/10/2019, Unstable, Informal Sharing, Audience Feedback from Survey**

#### **In a few words, what was your immediate response to the work?**

- Really strong. The first moment you gave all your weight to the pole was really impactful.
- Confused, intrigued.
- Thrilling, interesting, creative.
- Inner battle, almost psychosis.
- Mental thoughts made physical. Emotional but in a discreet way.

- Powerful. I felt that there was a lot of emotion in there.  
Intense.
- Drawn immediately. Creative
- Attention drawn right away.
- Intense, but creative.
- Empowered. I was amazed, it made me want to learn.
- It was choreographed really well. The pole made me feel a bit uneasy as I felt like something bad could happen.
- Very abstract. No sense of what the theme was – desperation?
- Amazement of strength and power.
- Very unique and different.
- Powerful use of the poles. Strength and control.
- Empowering, strong, strength through resistance.
- Choreographed really well. Everything linked really well together.
- Scared because the pole wasn't sturdy. The detail in which the lines of the pole helped created the piece. #
- Scared with some of the moves on the pole. Confusion with how it looked so easy, the elegance from moving to and from the pole.
- Use of suspended pole is not something I have seen before.
- Sexual, power struggle, stunning, beautiful, visually stunning, music, superb, pole as partner, object.
- I felt excited about what was going to come and how you were going to use both the poles and connect them both.
- Powerful, strong and lots of complexity within the movement.
- Intriguing, engaging, thought provoking, interesting.
- The piece was bold, powerful and strong.
- Real joy from knowing the strength it takes and the way you make it look so easy.
- I liked it, very interesting and creative.



**What was your interpretation of the work? (Please offer as much detail as possible)**

- I wasn't sure. I was totally just immersed in the movement. Possibly about your personal connection to the pole. But there was also moments of femininity before going back to neutral.
- Sexualised, animalistic, ritualistic.
- Working with gravity in different forms. – Pole dancing, life on a hanging pole. Use of body with prop.
- Inner conscious battle, empowerment by pole, yet defeated by pole, confused state.
- Showing your emotions and experiences through active, physical piece. Slow aesthetic made it more intriguing with room for the audience to create their own response and representation.
- Someone being trapped inside their own thoughts and wanting to be free. Or stuck in a cycle that you want to break.
- The pole was your only kind of leverage, making it almost like your support. Your facial expressions at times looked very powerful and seductive, while other times you looked quite vulnerable. I felt like the piece had many meanings, but I don't quite know what they are.
- Working with a pole that is only secured by the ceiling, that allows movement gives an already intense, nerve wrenching movement as I was thinking what will it be used for an how. The pole seemed to be the unstable moments and having one on the floor added to that.
- Working with more than one object in the space, but finding a way to show the relationship between the object and performer. Also, trying to show that the object is a major factor to the piece.
- My interpretation of the piece was as though you were fighting a struggle, but nothing could bring you down. I felt you

portrayed a strong role with the support of the poles around you.

- My interpretation was that there was maybe some kind of struggle or she felt as if she was gravitating towards the pole, even though she didn't want to. She also used the swinging pole for help.
- With all the work on the pole and all the positions she was in, I could only see her showing desperation for something. Like relying on the pole. Therefore, the pole must have represented something she relies on. I love the element of danger.
- My interpretation was that there was some type of pull or struggle towards the pole. Sometimes a feeling of working out the pole; trying to understand it.
- The work had elements of danger and sometimes it felt quite confrontational, as though there was a tension between the dancer and the pole. However, when dancing on the pole it was more empowering and graceful.
- I felt like the piece was about power and strength. With a strong focus on the poles, like you were drawn to them in some sort of way.
- An expression of resistance to some force and possession. A battle of liberation and remaining free from oppression of some sort.
- My interpretation is that the poles were enabling you to dance, without touching the poles you stopped and shown gestures of watching the pole moving in the space and reacting to it.
- Dancing with the pole. How the pole helps create movement. Exploring weight in the pole. At the start music helped to create speed, whereas afterwards when it was slow movements, you saw the movement slowly to see the detail. Core strength needed.
- Exploration of weight with the pole. Use of femininity within the movement.

- First of all, the performer was proud, then it progressed into labored.
- Not letting the pole be in control of you but you have control over it and how it portrays you while you dance with it. The pole does not define you, you make it the object / objectified.
- I interpreted to be based upon the daily rat race of working life and how by the end you are racing to make something of your life before your time runs out. The gestures in the beginning reminded me of working labor, especially when it was on one shoulder. It also represented the weight of the daily stress being on both shoulders. I found the pole to represent a ticking clock and how we clock watch through our lives until a specific movement. I found the hands behind the back a display of being stuck and tied to a thing we don't want to be stuck to.
- Narrative came and went. It has episodic feel. You have power over the pole and then the pole has the power over you.
- Elements suggest powerful womanhood of the sensitive comparison between the horizontal pole that you can carry, throw away, leave behind, is something to explore more. With it you approach the audience in a challenging and confrontational way. The upright pole can appear phallic representation, but also suggestive of more play.
- Showing that you have control over the pole. It showed power and strength in two ways. Strength of the dancer and strength the dancer had over the pole.
- I felt like there was this war going on where you were taking back the art form as not just being overly sexual, but as a real art and the talent that takes strength and training. I felt there was acknowledgments to the way it can be "sexy", but in a powerful way.
- I felt like you were battling with something. In my opinion I felt like you were being challenged by something and you were not backing down from that challenge.

**Thinking about your role as a viewer of the work, how did this performance make you feel?**

- Totally immersed, intrigued by intention
- Anxious, curious, invested.
- Nervous, but excited.
- Entranced, fixated, especially large pole swings, immersive.
- Almost uncomfortable because of the eerie feel and moment of silence.
- It made me not want to look away as you didn't know what would happen next.
- Made me feel really impressed, quite shocked actually because I had no idea. I felt nervous as well.
- It made me anxious at times, however, it did offer moments of calm even in the parts that felt unsettling.
- During the piece I felt nervous watching it but it was eye gripping to watch.
- The performance made me feel empowered, motivated to do more and interested in the way you have explored movement with and around the pole.
- A bit confused in some places, but still enjoyable.
- Calm, but a little confused. In a good way.
- It made me feel on edge at times but it also made me feel empowered by what you can do.
- Empowered, tense, fascinated.
- I was intrigued by what I was watching, I felt focused on the pole. It drew me in. I also felt somewhat empowered.
- Calm as the performer always remained in control. Inspired to continue the strength shown in the piece.
- It made me feel very interested about how you can move with a prop that big and learn different ways of using it.
- Vulnerable, unknowing of what was going to happen next.
- Vulnerable, confused by ease of movement.

- In suspense when the performers face and body comes close to the floor and upside down.
- Inspired. You make it look so effortless. I wanted to see more of it again and look from a different perspective.
- This made me feel inspired to move and to also make each movement count instead of viewing it as one entire dance.
- Captivated. Empowered.
- I genuinely felt proud, that may seem weird, but I guess because I do aerial, I understand the strength needed and you honestly made it look so flawless. It was such a powerful piece and shows such powerful character.
- I felt on edge throughout the entire piece but I liked that feeling. I was just thinking, what is going to happen next.

**What key words would you use to describe the work?**

- Unique, strong, developed. Looks simple but it is not simple.
- Physical, animalistic, sexualised.
- Thrilling, innovative, unique.
- Powerful, feminine strength of the body, physicality.
- Intricate, powerful, personal, emotional, amazing, difficult.
- Physical, demanding.
- Powerful, innovative, seductive.
- Intense, exciting, dramatic.
- Tension, relationships, exciting.
- Abstract, unique, interesting.
- Powerful, different, I couldn't keep my eyes away.
- Dangerous, powerful, calming.
- Strong, powerful, edgy.
- Unique, powerful.
- Focused, dark, intriguing, strength.
- Freedom, strength, resistance, liberation, resistance, oppression, calm.
- Daring.

- Femininity, daring, no fear.
- Resistant, dark, time (pendulum)
- Visually stunning, a tale of conversations with self of object (pole)
- Empowering, intense, captivating.
- Control, power, strength.
- Powerful, creative, warrior, fascinating, captivating.
- On edge, creative, captivating, indulging, terrifying.

### **Do you have any other comments?**

- Possibly develop the relationship between the two poles as they currently only come together in the end unless this was intended?
- Liked both pieces of music, engaged more with first song. I liked the start where there was the switching of the hand – created noise with the pole. Use of the floor pole more, maybe?
- Articulation of limbs in front floor section was inventive and unique.
- Captured the word unstable perfectly. Although was confused with the relationship with the first pole. (Note to self, it is object manipulation, object connotation).
- I was a bit confused with the first pole and how it linked.
- What was the concept, where did it come from? Really well done. I really enjoyed.
- I couldn't take my eyes away from the performance.
- Loved the piece. The performance was amazing.
- I like how you didn't just use whatever moves you could to show off your ability. You thought about what would look and go with the theme best.
- Well done. I love the idea of one pole suspended and one not.
- Loved how different the performance was. It was intriguing.
- Really enjoyed watching.

- When the music stops and we can hear breath, you focus in on the physicality of the movement.
- Well-choreographed, flowed nicely together.
- I saw the pole being used in a non-sensual way.
- Really enjoyed watching the work, made me want to be in it myself.
- Amazing.
- The use of the pole as another performer was brilliant. It had its own role and you knew it as another being really well.
- After you finished the pole the first time, although I was still intrigued I felt like something more was going to happen and was disappointed when it didn't haha. Other than that, you are amazing.

**5&6/12/2019, *Unstable*, Audience Feedback from Survey**

**In a few words, what was your immediate response to the work?**

- I was questioning if the dance would be without music for the entire duration? This was then answered by powerful music.
- Strength and agility, flawless and seamless movement and transitions between movements.
- Seen as struggle or hardship.
- Amazing, mesmerizing and beautiful.
- Powerful, emotional in the sense of power play, drawn inwards to myself and the feeling.
- Scared, amazed and excited.
- Unique, challenging, intrigued.
- Intrigued, amazed, engaged, and energetic.
- Nervous, expressive, scared.
- Confusion / chaos, until the piece unraveled and took us through ideas.
- Powerful demonstration of ritual, dominance and assertion.
- Powerful.
- Weird uncomfortable.

- Great strength, solid commitment to pole technique and contemporary technique. The pole was actually quite intimidating as it moved.
- A physically impressive piece of dance.
- Awesome, different, using the style in a new way.
- Strength and stability.
- Fantastic, inspiring performance.
- Fantastic and theatrical. The use of the pole was excellent.
- Good control and well balanced.
- I would see the fight as well as a disheartened feel towards the movement and the poles. Despite this feeling of struggle and fight she still carried on reclaiming movement with the pole.
- Powerful, intense, it looked like there was a battle.
- Powerful. I was impressed by strength.
- Amazed, interested and engaged.
- Intrigued, precise and powerful.
- Beautiful, athletic and empowering.
- A powerful piece, created and performed by a beautiful woman. Animalistic and skillful.
- Anxious, intrigued, expressive and emotive.
- Confusion, but after taking it through with someone, I understood.
- Captivating and thought provoking.
- Brilliant with a full range of expression and emotions.
- A dramatic piece of physically dynamic dance. It challenges the brain and puts you in a position to ask questions.
- I am stunned by the power, physicality, drama and artistry. I feel breathless.
- Amazing, powerful, strength.
- A strong, physical and empowering work.
- Powerful and strong.
- Astonishing, stunning.
- How did you do that?



- Emotional, battling, fighting, uniting.
- It was very powerful.
- Incredible strength, vulnerability and bravery.
- Moving, emotive, clear connection between object and performer.
- The work required a certain level of skill.
- Incredible, powerful.
- This work took a great deal of physical and emotional strength to complete.
- Powerful and strong.
- Dramatic, intense, dark and energetic.
- Breathtaking.
- Very creative and physical.
- Creative, imaginative, innovative.

**What was your interpretation of the work? (Please offer as much detail as possible)**

- I felt like the work was retelling a journey as I felt there was an element of time included from the swinging pole relating to a pendulum or a clock. It became quite intense and, at times, the strength within the work was remarkable.
- Was true to the description in the show note. Not sure about the title. This work offered a new and innovative approach to the 'pole' style. Added depth to a typically sexualised style of dance but offered a new outlook, utilizing style rather than the style 'using' the dancer. The dancer was in control and often the pole can distract from the performer, but she really mastered the pole.
- That is was using exploitation of stereotypical pole dancer and mimicking it to exploit the pole.
- Struggle, power play, pole as friend, enemy, object, exploration in space, another.

- The hanging pole seems to be drawing you to it when you want to be with the floor pole so you try to resist it.
- It looked like a battle / struggle between the dancer and poles. But also like a relationship and control at some points.
- Attracted to your relationship with the poles and the different forms it can take.
- The poles being two separate entities, one being good and the other being evil.
- Acknowledgement to sexuality and a message to be shared.
- You were trying to assert your power over the pole, maybe you were trying to take it back as an art form, rather than using it only for pleasure and entertainment. But when you were finishing, there was a sense of ritual and giving in to it.
- It was about taking control of the poles.
- Not my cup of tea. (No comment really).
- Despite the stereotypical view that pole dancing is a female / feminine form of art – this piece showed its strength, battle and danger.
- A personal challenge and progression.
- A saw a lot of struggle for identity and or power. Maybe even a recognition. Objectification seemed like a powerful and reoccurring theme.
- It challenged concepts of male gaze and sexuality associated with the pole.
- Trying to work through a problem.
- Empowerment to women. Women are strong in their own right.
- Well put together and well-choreographed. The amount of trust when using the props was very high as she let it swing even though it might have hit her.
- It was interesting to see the different representations of power you embodied; strong, physical and in control. But then in part way through, very submissive to the vertical pole, but then returning to that control.

- How any movement to do with a pole is seen as sexualised but throughout the piece the performer is fighting to reclaim movement. Wariness is displayed but with an undertone of fight still left.
- A powerful representation of empowerment. It was very tense, it made me feel uncomfortable, but was still nonetheless captivating and interesting to watch.
- Power and control. Mastery of body. Strength. Something to do with gaze.
- Balance, equality and energy.
- To me this could have been a number of things. But it was mainly submissive, or slightly figuring out where said person could become in control. She was testing her viewers.
- My interpretation was the heavy load a woman holds on her shoulders. It told the story of no matter what position you're in that you (the woman) can handle it straight up, lying down and even upside down.
- The struggle and burden of something weight you down. I felt female empowerment. You conquered whatever it was at the end.
- I felt that the poles had good and bad representation. As if the piece was showing the strength and personal control it takes to make the pole represented as more.
- The sexualisation of pole dancing. This was clearer at the end.
- How women are seen as slaves and giving into a man's power. Also how women are seen as sexual objects.
- I just enjoyed it.
- A different portrayal of pole dancing that challenges the concept of the objectified female dancer. There was an aspect of constriction dictated by the pole and the heaviness of it. Could represent a male figure.
- I felt that this was an exploration of the artists' complex relationship with the pole, with herself and with the world in

which she exists. She seeks to command and control but is ultimately overwhelmed into acceptance.

- Freedom, breaking down barriers that other people try to put in your way.
- Taking control and using the pole in a non-sexual way.  
Changing how you imagine it to be. Very strong performance.
- Relationship between the person and the pole. Some sort of struggle, dependent, independent, balance, give or take, the strength, the risk.
- Felt it showed a struggle, like climbing a mountain. Or maybe a life struggle.
- Felt like battling something with uniting, carrying a heavy load.
- As I read the programed notes just before being given this form I feel that I cannot answer with full honesty.
- The performer was battling / being attached to something outside of herself.
- The performer was very in touch and in control with the pole and knew its limitations and where it could assist her.
- The work represented power, strength and struggle.
- Based on reading synopsis before I saw the performance, I could see a struggle / conflict with the dancer and the pole. This relationship was being challenged.
- Female strength, how strong women have to be under the male gaze, it comes with a pressure that we more / less dependent on the situation. It swings, sometimes the pressure elevates us and sometimes it pushes us down.
- Some sort of struggle internal and external with the pole as a symbol.
- The longer she spent with the pole, the more it defeated her and brought her down. Negativity from the silver pole. Positivity on the black pole.
- The poles were representative of a struggle, pain and the longer she hung onto them, the more they defeated her and tried to overpower her.

**Thinking about your role as a viewer of the work, how did being in the space with the performer make you feel?**

- Space between myself and the performer was comfortable, but the space between the swinging poles caused me to consider the amount of rehearsal time.
- Uncomfortable at first, but included in the performance as it promised.
- Uncomfortable at some points, empowered at others.
- Like you were trying to push the comfort of the viewer, it made me feel “wow”.
- I loved it, but I really wanted you to come further away from the pole towards us, explore what would happen if the pole was closer to us.
- I liked viewing it from a different angle but it did make me feel more anxious.
- Sitting in the space made me feel more involved in the piece. It offered a different perception.
- Felt very engaged sitting in the space.
- It absolutely steps up the experience and gave me a new perception.
- I felt included sitting in the space with you.
- There were several moments of presentation to the seats, which although the piece performed in the round, made me feel like the viewers shouldn't be on stage.
- Being in the space gave me a connection to you and the piece, as opposed to if I were sitting in the seats.
- Out of your comfort zone and potentially taking the audience with you to that space.
- Anxious, excited to see what trick would be done on the pole.
- It made me feel unsettled, but it made the physical feats more impressive.
- Entranced and focused.

- I felt involved and very able to concentrate on the body of the performer.
- Being in the space made me feel part of the performance.
- It made me feel more alert and engaged to be in the space with you.
- I watched from the seats but it was interesting to see the audience responses from those who were in the space with you.
- I felt involved in your expression. I could clearly see you and your face.
- I felt like I was more part of the piece than I would be if I was sat in the seats.
- Uncomfortable, worried by proximity, impressed by strength and agility. Uncomfortable because the performer seemed broken, but also at times in control.
- I loved viewing the work from the back. It was a very interesting angle.
- Being in the space with the performer had purpose. I could feel that it strengthened the story.
- Loved the intimacy of being in the space with you. It made me feel part of the story and part of the piece.
- I was alert yet I knew I wasn't at risk. I could hear your breath and your determination.
- Nervous by how the poles moved in the space.
- I felt like I was part of the work somehow.
- I was thinking constantly what the work was about.
- Great to be in the space with you. I want to be even closer if possible.
- The intimacy of being a part of the performance was vital to feeling involved rather than standing outside the work or viewing from a distance.
- I felt that being in the space I was included visually, but I was sad because I couldn't help.
- I felt really involved in the performance.

- It felt intimate, sitting with you.
- A great experience. Being a part of the work. A few moments made my heart jump.
- I felt a part of the work but it was a bit scary when pole was swinging, I almost wanted to grab it.
- Became much immersed in the movement.
- It made me feel involved.
- Immersed in the performance, a part of the work.
- Unnerved, on edge and exciting.
- Being in the space made the piece more immersive.
- Made me feel more involved, like we were a part of the work, like we felt what you felt.
- It added a certain element of risk, especially when the pole was spinning. It made the viewer concentrate more and it made me feel a part of the piece.
- It was easier to see the power and strength and effort it took to create the piece.
- I felt involved.
- I would have preferred to sit in the seats.
- Made me feel involved, like I was there for a reason. A calling for help.

**What key words would you use to describe the work?**

- Mastery, control, strength, agility, new.
- Empowering, strong, interesting.
- Strong, mature, brave/
- Powerful, detailed, stunning, object as partner.
- Acrobatic, intense, tiring.
- Daring, dangerous, intense, struggle.
- Interesting, powerful, dynamic, strong.
- Artistic, terrifying, amazing.
- Powerful, thought provoking and intuitive. STRONG.
- Powerful, immersive, topical, meditative, strong, dynamic.

- Empowering and strong.
- Slave, upset, puppet.
- Exciting, dangerous, energetic, strong and feminine.
- Power and strength.
- Objectification, society, power, different, involving, drawing in.
- In control.
- Skillful, dramatic and energetic.
- Thought provoking, energetic, and strong.
- Trust, control and balance.
- Skillful, mesmerizing and engaging.
- Fight, disheartened and struggle.
- Empowering, intense, captivating.
- Controlled and uncompromising.
- Strength and stamina.
- Power, intrigue, looking for a sense of tranquility.
- Power, struggle, art, real.
- Powerful, skillful, a fusion of styles, strong, empowering, burdened.
- Expressive, intense and interesting.
- Powerful and thought provoking.
- Sexualised and powerless.
- Powerful, but also calming that I knew you ultimately had the control.
- Stamina, dynamic, powerful, it made me reflect, it engaged my brain, it is more than just a visual piece of art.
- Powerful, mesmeric, traumatic, beautiful, disturbing.
- Strong, determined, physical.
- Interesting, energetic, strong and inspiring.
- Swing, bang, strength.
- Visually very pleasing, stylistic, surprising and beautiful.
- Brilliant and dramatic.
- RAW
- Powerful, strong, feminine and full of admiration for the strength of your abs.



- Powerful, emotional and raw.
- Different and engaging, it opens up a new understanding of dance.
- Immersive, skillful.
- Strong, powerful, empowering, struggle, imaginative.
- Personal, intense and physical.
- Strong, powerful, both effortless and full of effort.
- Dark, emotional, sadness, struggle.
- Creative, eye catching, physical and engaging.
- Powerfully developed, eye catching, strong.

**Do you have any other comments?**

- Overall, I liked it. I have not seen anything like it and it was refreshing to see such an innovative piece on a pole, as I am typically not a fan, but this performance changed my mind.
- I think the work lends itself to being in the round because of the turning on the pole. However, some movements are more visually pleasing from the front.
- You are great. Keep going. I see the development from last time I saw this.
- I enjoyed it.
- Can see more of a connection and relationship between both poles since we last saw it.
- Maybe consider costuming, the leotard and jeans work well, but there were times when you were upside down that the top looked like it might come over your head.
- Can see so much progression from first time we seen it.
- Your core is unreal.
- Love the development of music.
- The feeling of isolation and going into the unknown.
- Amazing piece, breaking boundaries and stigma.
- Great balance between movement on and off the pole.
- Inspiring.

- I like how the story of the piece progressed. Also how she was in time with the music and used the beats for her advantage.
- The ending with the horizontal pole becoming upright and static feels like a part b.
- Loved it.
- Great piece of art, I want to see the next step of the journey.
- Loved it.
- What a woman. Very impressive.
- Amazing work.
- Fantastic piece of work that held my attention throughout.
- As discussed, perhaps give the audience visual images of stereotypical gender expectations.
- The work touched a hidden part of me and it will stay with me.
- Very powerful and beautifully performed.
- I love it and I would really like to see more. Please.
- Well done. Your skills are amazing and thrilling to watch.
- Technically amazing.
- A really captivating piece that gave a real beauty to female strength.
- Music added to atmosphere.
- I know from experience how much strength and concentration this takes. You made it look effortless.

**17/10/2019, *Unstable*, Peer Review.**

Me: Researcher

AM: Audience Member

Me: I will let you start, hey, general interpretations of the work, general reflection.

[...]

AM: I found it to be about, erm, when you are stuck in a position of your life where you can't get out of it. What I wrote was that the positions of the pole in the beginning reminded me of guards and when you have got the weight on your shoulders and then when you were watching the pole it reminded me of a clock and how you clock watch because you want to get out of whatever it is you are doing to get to something better. And then your hands doing this and being behind your back reminded me of when you can't get out of anything as well but you just stay with it. That is what I took from it.

Me: Does anyone feel the same way or completely different?

AM: [...] I kind of felt like in the beginning you were preparing to take on a battle, even if it was a battle within yourself. And for me, the piece was about you taking back this art form and showing it as the powerful nature that it is. There was almost like essence of, and I feel like some bits sometimes, people just view pole as really sexual in nature and they don't think about the strength that it takes to actually do any of the stuff that you have done. And there was hints of that, and what that is to some people. And I thought about how it made you feel, the power that it can bring to an individual. Being able to do stuff like that. You are preparing to take on the people and show them what it really can be and what it can be used for.

Me: Uninformed opinions, they are always interesting to work with as a stimulus I think. Definitely.

AM: I saw it similar to that, but, I saw it as you taking control of the pole, so rather than seeing it as you showing to the audience that it is a strength, I saw you as taking over the pole. And in control when it was taking you around [...] I felt like it was you and the pole.

Me: definitely an element of control. Any other thoughts?

AM: The way I looked at it, I didn't look at it like you were trying to tell a story, I looked at it as though you were trying to show a relationship between obviously yourself and the pole, but also that the pole is not just an object and that it is a part of the piece and a part of the space.

Me: Object manipulation, yes.

AM: Erm, I just thought it was like an exploration of the pole, the different weights of the pole. When it is lying down compared to when it is hung up. So it was like you were exploring the lines. [...]

Me: yes, because it gives a different connotation as well, to have it in a horizontal plane to a vertical plane.

AM: for me there is a whole area of representation. The object and how you portray it and how you make a connection with it and it changes drastically throughout the piece. From the beginning there is some different symbolic moments. Traditional, to very sexual, to almost religious in some parts. The opening position of the pole is the main one, I guess. And it is interesting you know, your hands tied behind your back. That representation of a woman, kneeling and it is a very powerful moment when you came forward on your knees, you have the pole on the floor and you go on top of the pole. That is a really powerful moment. And it is that female perspective in relation to pole that [...].

Me: I think about sometimes as well, how we can build our own prisons. Now there is a definite pressure to be this liberated person, woman, erm, and that is quite difficult to achieve if you are aligning with societal standards and, you know, and you need to kind of work from a place where you are not building your own prison, essentially, so the fact that I am making this with my own body, it is like, ok, it is self-inflicted, but is a result of what happens externally, constantly, on a day to day basis, erm, throughout your entire life basically. So it is

quite pessimistic in some areas, but to show the empowering element, you have to go to that place where it is not so free.

AM: yes, so that is tricky isn't it, representation, how do you open up those barriers, with all of that stigma attached and all of those representations. It is a really interesting notion of artistic practice. The object, its representation really shifts and changes. How do you dissolve expectations and connotations?

Me: But, do I want to dissolve them? And that is the questions isn't it? I have that conflict with myself sometimes. Do I want to remove a traditional element of this practice or do I want to keep it and ask the question why I should remove the traditional element, you know, and so it is working through all of those questions. And I think it is ok for that to be exposed through what I do on stage. I don't think I need to have an answer, erm, but yeah, it is like ongoing questions all the time. But I think when I speak to more audiences, and I speak to you now, I suppose some of those answers will become visible. Any other thoughts. The music was definitely, the music is a work in progress, and some transitions I am working through, that is why I am not asking you to comment too much on that. But if there is anything that you think really doesn't work for you, I would be happy for you to share.

AM: I liked how, in terms of the work, it felt like you were seizing the moment and you looked really strong, and there were moment you threw it around yourself. It was like you can get yourself to a really good place and feel like you have overcome a lot. But then it goes around again and it feels like it is building back up and then you go down the hole you have just come up from. I kind of liked how you kept transitioning from, it was like, I have got a grip of it

Me: That is the reality of it for me. I haven't got a grip of it and I am ok to admit that, I don't stand on stage and expect everyone to think that you know, I am perfect, because I am not and no one is. I

suppose it is being transparent about that in discussion of the work as well as when I am performing. [...]

AM: I found it like you were trying to break a cycle and the different facial expressions and your use of breath just said you don't want to be what we want, but that you will be "who I am". You show the world, this is who I am and I won't meet anybody's expectation but mine.

AM: I really liked the first piece of music and I like the way it came on just before you jumped on the pole and that made my heart jump. I literally jumped. Erm, but I didn't like the next piece of music you used when you were on the floor. I think it sounded demonic and it was creeping me out. I felt like it fitted the movement you had at that movement. My opinion.

Me: that is ok. It is not staying that way, it works for me during the process to work with different music all of the time, and that is the most recent track. Thank you.

AM: I liked it because of what Angie said about women's power and the religious element and even if there wasn't intention for a religious element, I felt there was a symbolic nature. It was cool because, it semi had a layer of religiousness and that is probably not right to say, but you use it as something and it felt like it can change to be almost like...

Me: Well, religion says a lot about ritual doesn't it and the ritual says a lot about the way we exist.

AM: Sometimes when you watch, I don't want to call it a cult, but, in movies, they have a ceremony where men drink out of big cups, stuff like that, and the music seems to be a bit like that and that is to do with old rituals, .

Me: does anyone else want to talk?

AM: at the start, you were very proud of the practice and then you were like bound by the connotations and the social constructions of a woman dancing around a pole and it was like a resistance against that.

Me: you are definitely all reading well. There are so many different strands of theory and thought that go into these works, so whatever you are saying is great because it is your interpretation. And you have to acknowledge that each audience is going to view your work, in some ways, differently to what you intended. What do you think about bits in silence, would you prefer to have music for that? You think it works ok in silence?

AM: I like how the music comes in when you first come on to the pole. It is a really poignant moment. And I think the music adds a depth to it. And I did like the second bit, although it did make me feel a bit uncomfortable, I think that is a good thing because you are trying to represent the discomfort. Like the pole and walking backwards, that adds to it.

Me: I think it is quite difficult, I don't create for music at all. I am sure you have probably spoken to Lisa or Angie about working with music in your choreography classes, but I don't create for music, so it always the most difficult part of the process for me. It to find music to create an atmosphere that I am trying to achieve. So that is why most of it in silence for now, but if silence is ok then I am very much ok with silence.

AM: I think it is nice when you hear the pole.

Me: Like the screech of it against my skin?

AM: yeah, cos that can represent a bit of a struggle as well,

Me: it burns your skin, it does actually burn your skin.

AM: it is nice though, it sounds like you can fully hear how much pain.

Me: it adds to the exertion.

AM: I liked when the first song comes in. and when it is silent later on it is good because you can hear the physicality of. You can hear pole but also your breath and how much strength it is taking to do what you do. And that adds to the meaning of the work.

AM: I thought the start in silence helped me focus more.

Me: and what was the start about for you?

AM: for me it was more, cos I got a feeling at some points you were trying to exploit the pole a little bit. So for me the start was about you using that strength to move the pole in a mental sense.

Me: any other reflections?

AM: I really like the start in silence, but I thought, cos I really enjoyed when you were twisting your arms and making the noises, but like, when you brought the energy, and when the music cut out I became less engaged with what you were doing, but like obviously I was still watching, but I wasn't excited by it. But then the second piece of music came on an I felt like I was back in it. Even if it wasn't something so high energy, throughout the whole thing, even if it was something to just slow it down generally.

AM: I think it was a work in progress, I was really intrigued and engaged with it throughout, I think there is semiotic representation of the horizontal pole that can lead to much discussion and interpretation. And there is this whole feeling that the swinging of the vertical pole gives a sense of freedom, but actually you are not free because then you become bound to it as it swings and there is a whole thing about that.



Me: you can't physically detach when it is swinging.

AM: There is something I have just written, how can the two objects come together and do they have to? But when you did bring them together, there seems to be something really interesting there. The fact that you brought these two objects together in that space, I wanted to see more then. It became a new object [...]

AM: I was waiting for something to happen with the unattached pole.

Me: you see, I have been in this process for some time now, and I have explored quite a bit of movement with that pole on its own, but it never quite works aesthetically. I don't think. Which is why it is quite minimal. Right now it is not in the plan, and I think it ok for you to just build your own interpretation.

AM: are there other pieces that you just have with each?

Me: what do you mean?

AM: [...] is there something that you can explore just with the floor pole as a separate bit, thinking of a better word, or is this something.

Me: I am a bit confused, sorry.

AM: [...]

Me: I supposed it is just a representation of the different planes and the different ways you can view them. This is not going anyway unless I touch it, but this still has movement when I leave it. So, in a sense you could say this has got more power than that one. So that is how I have been thinking about it, and when I leave the space in the end, you can still see that relationship, so one is absolutely still and one is still in motion. I don't know if this clarifies or confuses you more?

AM: that is really interesting isn't it, but then you can go on and on and on.

Me: you could and when is the point where you just say stop, we haven't got our entire life to spend on one piece. So where do you draw that line and say this is where I am at and this is where I am leaving it. I am closing the process. But you can never truly know where you are at in the process until you show an audience because performance doesn't exist without audience, you can argue that. Erm, so I will go and reflect upon what has been said today and then I will go back into the studio and explore a bit more and I will probably ask myself some of the questions you have asked me so I can be clear on what needs to be clear.

AM: I am sure you have Rowena, but have you played on the vertical pole with the horizontal pole underneath?

Me: briefly.

AM: I like how you went against the spectacle of what you can do, but rather showed.

Me: it might well, that is the thing

AM [...]

Me: we are all coming from a different place aren't we. Someone straight away commented on the spatial design of the work whilst others thought about the theory about women. We all view performance differently, so for me to try and please everyone is absolutely impossible, so I will go in the studio and think what it is that I am trying to do and what it is that I am trying to get across. And from the comments generally, I think it is getting there but I think it needs more refinement.

Me: is there anything you will take into your own choreographic practice?

AM: I am going to start learning how to pole dance.

AM: I loved how you looked really calm, I the way through, even when the music was going crazy, you were calm and in control. That puts assurance in the audience and you gave off the impression that you were totally fine with everything, so that let us be fine with everything too. It is all in your confidence and then when there was breath in the silence you were really focussed in on what you are doing. I feel like because you are so in it, it makes us zone in on what you are doing as well [..]

Me: like a quiet confidence.

AM: you gave us confidence in you.

Me: like you could just get up and do it.

AM: I was going to say how important lighting is because how that was lit, it looks good on your body on your skin and how the blue tones, or whatever tones, they worked with what you were doing in the space and it was just like knowing what works.

Me: thank you very much for your feedback. Have you got any closing comments?

AM: I liked the feeling that you gave to the audience and that is the type of feeling that I would like to give the audience in my work. You kept us captivated and on edge at the same time. Especially when you did that spinning thing on the floor, I thought you were going to smack your head, and I was like "oh my god, she is spinning so quick" and that feeling for the person performing was kind of like, as audience you want to feel something, and as performer you want to make the audience feel something. So understanding what a

choreographer does to create that feeling, will help me create it. I think especially with the cue, Noel pressing the button on the music in that moment. The music came on, you jumped on that pole and my heart jumped.

AM: I think, erm, from the moment you gave the audience that stare at the start, you gave them that eye contact, and how it started so strong and simple, sort of pedestrian, I gave a trust in you, like normally when I watch a work like this, when the pole was swinging, I would be worried that the pole would hit the performer, but I knew you knew where that pole was from the dominance you set from the start. Like you looked at this audience and you said I am about to go on that pole, but don't worry, I know what I am doing. I knew it was going to hit you at some point, but I knew you had it under control and you knew what force it would put on your body, but it wouldn't be like, oh god, it has just hit me. It was like it was supposed to happen. I didn't feel like "oh god, she will hurt herself" because I know she has done it so many times before.

Me: and so many times it did in the process and it actually hit me.

AM: but you were so calm about it. I just trusted you completely. I didn't feel on edge at all. But when you were rolling around the floor, I thought "god, she is so close to the floor", but when it was going around your body, I just knew you knew exactly where it was. And it might hit you in face and if it does, you know how to react to it.

Me: have you got any questions about the process or anything like that?

[...]

Me: I use improvisation always. To get this level of confidence, I have just had to train for quite a while. Erm, because it makes me feel really sick to spin back and forth and round and round. But now it is

ok. I was wearing bands that help with nausea for quite a while. Sometimes you just have to push through barriers in the process, especially when you feel like giving up. This is completely different (swinging pole) way of working, what I can do on a floor to ceiling pole, or a stage pole is completely different to what I can do on that because you are off balance. It takes more training, and it is like doing contemporary technique on a wobbly floor.

AM: did you come up with the idea of suspending the pole?

Me: it is a thing. They mostly use it in circus and it is mostly men who work on flying pole. I thinking it is used in cirque du soleil and Chinese pole. But I just thought about, when I brought it into my work, I was thinking about the instability of empowerment and how there is still this notion of the docile female and it is just unstable. You can say, I am so strong and I can do all of these things but then there is still someone standing there saying, well, no, actually you are not, because of this, this and this. So that is why I got it because it is literally unstable.

AM: do you work with mirror because all of your lines are really clean.

Me: just video. I never work with mirrors. And that is is, from beginning to end, because I can't see otherwise. And then when it is in place of performance I stop viewing it then. I don't want to see it, it is difficult. I have no problem viewing myself at the beginning of the process, even when I am doing movement that is inferior to what will actually happen in the end [...].

[...] irrelevant

Me: a cycle helps me understand why I am doing what I am doing.  
[...] I never put pressure on myself to write something profound about

the rehearsal, it is just what did I do, why did I do it and what do I need to do next time.

AM: [...] what have you learned from this process.

Me: I think about what I have overcome, but in a theoretical perspective I have been thinking more about the prisons we build for ourselves. It has taught me to persist and overcome. I think more about the prisons we create for ourselves and how you might remove that. When you make a decision, when you make a choice, behind that choice is so many variables, like you were fed things constantly from consumerism, capitalism, gender expectation, and so I think about that. I am using this to go into a new process basically.

AM: do you always try to make your pieces quite female? To empower women through every piece.

Me: I think I want, not necessarily just women, but I want anyone watching to acknowledge that they have their own choice too. I think there have been times in my life when I felt like I had no choice at all, so I think now that I know I have this agency, I think that always comes through in my work, even if that doesn't come through to you, I know exactly where it has been driven from. So not necessarily just female, but I think it comes across that way because I am female.

AM: and because of the pole, you automatically think women.

Me: I am bringing to this pole a different intention. I am not there to impress, but to provoke thought. That is what I am trying to achieve.

**18/05/2021, Unstable, Online Sharing, Transcript,**

Session, via Zoom, began with me introducing the work. I gave them a link to view the video and the same questions as live audiences were asked upon viewing the work. I told them I was generally looking for their interpretation of the work and how they viewed the

work in this medium, i.e. a video documented version of the performance as opposed to watching it live.

A1: I just kept thinking what incredible strength you must have in your body to do those things cos I was sitting there thinking there is no way I would be able to do that. But the other thing that kept going through my mind as well is why has she called it Unstable? I am thinking what is unstable about this, is it the pole, is it because it is not a static pole and is actually swinging through the air. Is it may be part of the interpretation or is it the unstable emotional aspect of the performer. There is a time when you show your strength and then you are dragging your body along the floor. Is it that that is unstable?

Me: all of the above. It is definitely open to interpretation and the name does kind of play on the instability of the pole. That is why I decided to use a flying pole instead of a floor to ceiling pole which is fixed. But also the notion of empowerment and it being unstable in pole dance discourse. So I was kind of playing with that as a theme as I was creating the work and so it stuck with the name.

A2: it felt like a power shift, in the beginning it felt very much like you are deliberately doing different things and in control and the second half felt like there was some sort of dissonance going on, it felt like the power shift, it went to a struggle. Two separate parts. The first part you knew what you wanted to do and you manipulated the poles as instruments and they were going to obey you. And the second half felt like there was more of a conflict between the tool and almost your body.

A3: I put almost the opposite, I put for the first part that the pole owned the dancer and then the dancer owned the pole. Because I thought that your movements were more free in the second part, whereas in the first part it was quite primitive and probably in the music as well.

A2: I got the complete reverse of that for me, in that performance.

A4: it was really interesting for me in the beginning because it was quite dark and the spotlight seemed to be on and it was slow and gentle and it all became more powerful when the lighting got bright.

A5: then something else I noticed in relation to power was, I noticed a difference between the attached pole and the one you were carrying around, I felt like the hanging one was following and chasing you while the other one you were carrying around like something as a weight for you.

A6: like a weight lifter, yes. And at the same time it reminded me of a position you would be in if you were being crucified. The poles were crossing over briefly and you were holding onto the cross bar. Erm, yes, one of my first reactions watching was, having done a bit of reading and thinking this morning about the ways in which we objectify bodies in relation to pole dancing, my first reaction was oh my god, athlete is what I see, acrobatic is what I see, strength is what I see. Having come into it wondering about this sort of objectification of women, erm, acrobat, athlete and weight lifter don't tend to, if you see what I mean, collate with that notion of a sexualised body or a female, a passive female form or a sexualised female form, so it was very interesting to see how that yard, what I thought might be my initial reactions, they weren't those, they were much more full of agency, thought at the same time, that crucifixion slightly jolted me, and it felt powerful, a person in control and then, the person being controlled, always in a certain dialogical interaction. Sort of fits with what people are saying about the different parts and they could see things within them. Lots of changes over time.

Me: I think for me when I was creating the work I acknowledged the pole as this object of stigma, which would suggest that the female who dances with the pole is objectified because she is dancing with this sexualised object, it has its phallic connotations, but because I



have manipulated the objects and brought two poles in, one is swinging from the ceiling and one is freehand, for one I am showing the weight of the object, and for two I am trying to emphasise a struggle because you know, even though people come up all the time and say wow, you are so strong to do that, but actually there are a lot of people who raise their eyebrow as soon as I say, you know, I do pole. And so you have to work with those connotations all the time. And it is not necessarily me struggling to get through them because it is part of doing whatever I do, but it is acknowledged and I see that is it not always a powerful activity for every woman who performs with the poles. I understand from that perspective too.

A6: certainly you can't deny those meanings are in circulation, can you. But you destabilise them and play with them.

A7: I had the same things written down, it was very powerful, and it was very strong, and the music was tribal and the weight lifting. But in the middle there was a bit that, not looked like you were a puppet, but you were on the floor and it totally changed then for me.

Me: can you remember back to what part specifically.

A7: I am not going to act it out, (laughs).

Me: the head bid.

A7: it looked like you were a puppet on a string, yet so strong and powerful.

A2: another thing I had written down is that you were more. I thought that the movement started more, sort of, isolated and then became more fluid. As it went through really.

Me: are there any thoughts about you viewing it as an online audience as opposed to being there in the space with me?

A5: I really wish I would have been there with the other people so I could see better and follow every detail of the performance. I mean, as an overall, I got it but I think I would prefer to be there. Something I thought also about the viewer and the performer, we are online viewer and the viewer in the video, we were all static and sitting and staring at you, which was the opposite of you performing.

A6: From an online viewer perspective, it was great to have the opportunity to view this performance from my own home. I could see different things, I saw the whole picture instead of focussing on one fixed position from the audience. I made it bigger on the screen.

A4: I think being there in person would change the perspective. The light and the darkness because the people who are in that room are on the other side, and not as close, so when you were doing like the floor pole, obviously that would have been further back for them and I wonder what their perspective is. Is it darker for them because of where they were positioned? Whereas we were on the other side of the camera, so you were in our foreground so that could change perception as audience.

A2: also, the audience were sitting on the floor so they would have been looking up at you. I imagine that would be quite intimidating, them sitting on the floor while you were higher up the pole.

A1: the other thing I noticed along those lines of acknowledging the different perspectives is, the swinging pole, from the angle the camera was at, the pole went backwards and forwards, whereas if you were sat in the audience, it would have been more sideways, although on an angle, sort of action. So they would have got a different perspective of that as well. And it would have looked a bit more three dimensional if you get what it is that I am trying to say?

A2: like not just oscillating back and forth. But also I thought the shadows, you know because you could see the shadows on the wall and if that shadow crossed you, it would feel quite different.

Me: yeah so in live you might not actually focus on the shadows because you can see the performer and your eyes are fixed on the performer.

A4: at some point I thought ooh, there are three Rowena's because there were two shadows.

Me: you know what, as I was rehearsing and stuff, I have watched that a lot and I only noticed those shadows today and I was like, oh my god. Each time it is new and you can actually focus on different things, even me as the choreographer and performer I am like, ahh, I have not seen that before.

A6: That is interesting to me because I didn't see the shadows until near the end and thought, oh was I supposed to be paying attention to those shadows all the way through. [...] it wasn't intentional and it is an example of how processes do us as well use doing and being in charge of processes. And it makes it into a new dynamism. Ironically, people talk about how it is not the same looking at the recording of the performance as it is being in the performance, I mean we can talk about that at some other point, but I think one of the things that they are trying to say is that, um, a recording, in a sense, it becomes an object, separate from the people who are looking at it. And compared to how an audience in a performance might interact, react and change the performance because they are in the space. We found an example of how the recording of the performance is dynamic in how these shadows and your own noticing of something that is happening that you hadn't intended. It brings it back into a sort of live mode if you like. I was surprised talking about the differences between being there, as Clifford Geertz likes to talk about it, and not being there because we were watching a recording. And I was surprised about

how I immediately felt, and we can talk about why this might be, I felt very drawn into this and there was a great deal of atmosphere, although I am sitting at my desk in my study / dining room, surrounding by plants that I am growing from seed and all of this, I felt very there with you. That might be something to do with our professional relationship, I don't know, do you understand what I need. You are not anyone's dance I happen to be looking at, you are Rowena from the department, and I have an investment in wanting this to work for you as an event this afternoon. I felt taken into it, right into it, very quickly [...] did other people feel pulled into the event or did you feel separate as viewers.

A2: I agree because I wasn't looking around the room, I was totally engaged while it was on.

A6: it was very arresting you might say. Very arresting

A1: one this I noticed, which I should have said earlier on, it was quite early in the video, that would make it normal, but I don't mean normal, it was more relevant because the clothes that Rowena was wearing. Whereas if she was stood there in the ten inch heels, and dressed more saucy, if you like, it might not seemed as relevant to me cos I don't wear that sort of stuff. Do you get what I am trying to say?

Me: so the costume played a part in the work for you?

A1: I would say so, yes. Cos I was thinking you are wearing clothes that I would wear.

A6: I see what you mean by normal, it sort of normalises it. I feel less alienated as a woman viewing it as a woman who wouldn't particularly want to wear ten inch stilettos.

A7: that for me, is another way you challenge our perspective, Rowena. Because you are right, there is so much, we all bring our

perceptions of whatever we think pole dance is and our expectations of what you would be wearing and will be doing with these poles, but your costume does challenge and your artistry with what you are doing with both poles. You challenge those perspective and expectations we bring. Whether it is normal or something to emphasise the power and strength of women as opposed to other images of women. It is very important to me. [...] I am debating myself whether this is a duet or a trio.

Me: I have that debate myself, Pauline, so I know exactly where you are coming from. Because when I was creating it, there were times when I deliberately push the poles so it continues to move as I move, that is me giving the pole some sort of space to move and to perform within the work. Maybe I will reach that decision when I write my thesis.

A7: I have been fortunate enough to be in the theatre with Rowena and watch it live and I can't tell you enough how much the increase in strength and power comes from being in that space because you are able to see how much distance rowena and the pole cover that the camera doesn't show.

A6: it is that three dimension that someone else said about watching the pole. We are watching it like a metronome in a way. But of course if you are in the space, there is all.

A7: she covers so many feet.

Me: even for me when I watch it, I feel like it looks safe, even though I know that it doesn't feel safe sometimes, I mean, obviously I train for it to feel like that, but I know that when I have been in the space with an audience, they have been like, woah, I thought you were literally going to come off the pole at any point and I was nervous for you and that nervousness adds to the experiences. You can't necessarily gauge that with the camera.

A4: I didn't get any sense of danger watching that, that didn't occur to me at all that it was risky. I had no concept of floor or space. I do think the poles had two separate personalities thought, I do think they were different. I wouldn't have lumped them as one, they were two different energies completely.

Me: nice way to put it, they have their own energy.

A6: although I didn't get a sense particularly of risk, though I can see it now people have started to talk about it, one of the things that did come across to me is that I felt the music change, am I right. [...] I felt more settled and uncomfortable. It reminded me of some of the music in the movie *Trainspotting*. And that beat that I associate with the days when I used to occasionally go clubbing and that dance rhythm [...] those context it feels like it is inside and outside the body. In *Trainspotting* it used that music in relation to disrupting the boundaries in terms of the inside and the outside and what it means to be addicted to heroin in the film. Unsettled, uncomfortable. It was interesting for me to stand outside the discussion, just for a moment, erm, I hadn't taken the word unstable into my viewing experience. Isn't it interesting how a mere title can already add a lens to what we are viewing? Then you do a puzzling act. But also, Pauline's question about duet and trio is interesting because it is not a question I think I would ever have asked or come to. It is a question within dance and performance [...] questions come from somewhere. They are informed by different things. What it means to be a pole dancer is cultural and historical. Things just make us up.

A1: For Rowena regarding the duet / trio, do you feel differently when you work with different poles?

Me: when I was working with the flying pole for instance, that was new to me, that is not something that I have worked with before, I mean I have done pole for 6 or 7 years, but the flying pole for only one year. I had to learn all about it, its weight, how heavy it feels

against my body and how heavy my body feels against it, so those are some of the questions you would ask if you were going to create a duet with another body. You have to learn the way the body moves. The horizontal pole, that is really heavy, and I brought this into show this its weight but also metaphorically to show that as women, we carry a lot of this stuff on our shoulder through inscriptions like femininity and what the expectation is to be empowered and in control and what type of pressures are on top of you to be that empowered woman. You know, do you have to go take part in a pole dance class. Pole dance classes are sold on the notion of empowerment, raunch culture is sold on the notion of empowerment and they were some of the things I was thinking and some of the ideas that I attached to the poles. It shifts and changes, my focus towards the poles.

[...]

Me: key words to describe the work to sum it up for yourself.

A3: deliberately spontaneous. Assertive. Definite. Confident. Symbiosis between the two. Beautifully structured.

A6: I have a lot but I feel hesitant to only give you one. Unsettle, unsettling. [...]

A4: fascinating use of space and environment and how everything linked together so smoothly. It was really creative.

A5: duality, two poles and the two parts of the performance. And then you, you are a human person. Your strength against the elegance.

A7: I see many dualities within their. The sense of free flow and bound flow. [...] very deliberate in strong, bound movements. You play with it throughout, let alone, there is a duality of perceptive of women. Being in control and being manipulated. There are times when you are manipulated by the pole. Manipulation and

manipulating. Going back to the sense of a crucifixion; torture. There was a moment. [...] sense of you being lost to the pole and being tortured by it. One other thing that I started seeing, your body and the pole as a series of sculptures. Still moments. I see the work as a series of pieces of art. They were like series of sculptures. Frozen in those moments. A duality in that. It was fantastic, it was absolutely fascinating. I would love to talk to you about how you develop a piece like that Rowena. The development of a piece of art like that.



### **5.3 Unstable. Raw. Reflective / Choreographic Journal**

The work started somewhere near the end of 2018 and it was complete the day of performance on 09/11/19. I spent the first few months getting to know the pole, the way it swung, how much weight I could give to it, and of course, conditioning the nausea I felt with it.

I caught the pole, balanced it on my body, and used it as a prison and instrument to represent a metaphorical subordination. I manipulate it, I objectify it, and I play with it.

**02/02/19**

I have to prove that I am in control of what happens in the space and how the poles move.

It just occurred to me that I have manipulated my body around, on top of, flipped the pole around and side to side, but I have yet explored the area underneath. That sphere of metaphorical subordination and how I can navigate that. Maybe that space is the stimulation.

**07/02/19**

Feminist discourse, empowerment, objectification, phallic objects, phallocentrism, power, masculine power. Woman making up for her lack of penis, but she is just as powerful without it.

**12/02/19**

I like the way the pole drags me around the space

**17/02/19**

You are stronger than this Rowena, pull yourself together and control it.

**21/02/19**

Session with Noel went well. We worked with flashing lights, I worked without the mats and thought it was fun to play without the mats. I literally felt like I was flying. There was an improvisation that was almost a complete work. I loved it.

I appreciate the quieter moments in performance. When we watched back, we were able to see some movements that were representative of power structures, especially with the go pro camera and me being directly underneath it. Constantly looking up.

Date Unknown

Question empowerment, take ownership of yourself.

Some women are settled and find pleasure in their subordination. I am not one of those women and I will fight until I show otherwise. However, you must question your own power on stage. [...] I think, in short, the work was purely about control, physical control, metaphorical control and psychological control of your own objectification.

**17/03/19**

Maybe it seems as though you are empowered on your pole, but you are not really.

Starting with the notion of being the second sex, and the thought that it might be different if women were men. Even though what I am doing looks physically powerful, I am still play with power roles that are embedded in gender.

I find it really difficult to force the power side of things. There is still much room in terms of objectification. Lots. It just needs to be framed differently. Maybe I am in denial about things.

I think this is because what I am reading is really pointing in the other direction. The objectification slant.

I played with the swinging pole sort of generating a cage for me to play in, to be trapped in, to hurt myself with. Why am I still doing this to myself, I thought, as part of it.

Objectification, disembodiment, a slave to what? Exploitation, capitalism, objects, submission.

Freedom, choice, empowerment, liberation, ownership, dominance, control.

When I was listening to some one else's PhD tutorial, the lecturer said, when writing your conclusion, think about the take home message. And I think the same applies to the end of a dance. What do you want to leave your audience with?

**13/04/19**

But I know this work is significant because the pole hit me and I read it as me hurting myself. I think, in some way or another, we are all hurting ourselves. For what? What did you do to yourself?

Set up pole and take it down in front of audience. Do the pole dance in perfect control, you are absolutely in control. -- This notion of choice. You deliberately show choice. (This changed later in the process. I took it out, because rigging points were unnecessarily complex and too high up for me to work with in short time frames at beginning and end of piece).

Negate the docile body and show that you are not a delusional robot.

Pollock, G. (DATE) "If you want to know more about femininity, inquire from your own experience of life, or turn to the poets, or wait until someone will give you deeper and more coherent information."

**10/07/19**

The longer I was working with the object, the more confident I became with my strength and ability to control it.

**08/08/19**

It makes me feel quite good, but then there is something there, kind of nagging at me. Getting in the way of me. It swings past, against me, around me, and on top of me. It always comes back, yet I am the one who puts it there in the first place.

Precision. Accuracy.

I often create spider diagrams for myself. Such as male gaze, internalizing it, becoming, prison of power and a pressure to be most confident self, confidence can be bound by the chains of surveillance, but somehow trying to see where I am.

**27/08/19**

Sessions off the pole have often been more fruitful the movement that I do off the pole, even for some of the movement I do with it. I think deeply about

You are not in a physical prison, Rowena. You are free. No, it is more complex than that.

I dance about the same subjects over and over, but each time I see them through a different theoretical lens. This work is generated through an autobiographical lens whereby my relationship with empowerment (or confidence and knowing self) is unstable, complex and completely open and honest.

What is my own confidence and power attached to?

By physical and metaphorical and literal manipulation I am showing the audience that I have choice.

**29/08/19**

Sometimes my work starts in a place of dance and then it end in performance art. I do this through picking movement that is only relevant movement. Doesn't follow traditional rules of dance composition because it makes me feel tied.

Somewhere along the way to finding liberation there is a complexity that talks of relationship with self hurts and you have to work that out.

**Date Unknown**

I think I need to remove the ladders from the space. There just needs to be poles. Two of them.

I started in a place with one swinging pole, no intention of taking it apart, and now I am thinking. I made number diagrams that follow the path of something like this...

1) Mark the space, to show choice, a bit regimental. This was later changed to a firmer intention of walking with the pole on my shoulder with ease so I can highlight my dominance.

2) Grip section, eas of pole manipulation, how easy it is to manipulate a phallus – or men I suppose when you think about the fetishism element of things.

3) To push the pole multiple times entails two things. One, to show that the pole actually moves and to build up an intensity and anticipation with the audience. Two, to have it swing infront of my hips as thought I am a man for a moment. Almost an arrogance to the way I project that.

- very tired putting it all together, but that will come with practice, I just need to rehearse and work with my breath a little bit more than I have been. Breathing exercises before the session work well.

I am still questioning if I need to stay in control the whole way through or not. But they know I am in control anyway. I truly am because I have made all of the decisions that put me in there in the first place.

There is something so liberating about working with the body to a point of extreme. To then recover and go again.

**10/11/2012**

Love the process. It is coming together.

Unstable, instability of empowerment in pole dance. I will fight for confidence and self-assurance, even if I am considered docile. Building up our prison is a massive contradiction in that there is a massive pressure to be an empowered woman and a sexually activated woman. I manipulate the poles physically and challenge the audience' preconceived ideas of the practice by having a pole that is trussed up, and also one that is not erect at all. Don't want to use the word flaccid as it seems inappropriate.

Yet, I still somehow remain docile because my confidence, my liberation is attached to objects.

I have hold of a long horizontal pole, it is heavy, but I am going to show you that I can move it with ease. I put it down to change my and your attention to the hanging pole, one that swings and it is above me. I show you how I can control that too. My body in the air. The pole throws me around a little bit and I begin to learn about some of the issues surrounding the practice and why external aesthetic may only be the driving force for my practice. Or, even that I am still somehow reliving my time working in a purely objectified

position under the male gaze. I am trapped in this self-contained prison that presents me as an inauthentic confident woman. A gilded woman. I come forward on my knees as the pole drags along my breast and neck, I brush it off me like I don't like it. Change the spatiality of the pole to reframe what the audience pay attention to and how sexualised the movement can be without the vertical pole. I go back to the prison one more time. But this time, I am in charge, and I remove one element of phallocentrism from the space. I win, but the vertical pole still swings. It swings on its own. It keeps its energy

**11/11/2019**

What I find most striking about the feedback from *Unstable* so far is that the swing in the pole and the fact that it is trussed up is completely eradicating preconceived notions of what pole dance is. Even though, it is, of course, the same object. Just in its unixed state. Yes, the swing offers a little bit more danger, and perhaps a bit more dynamic and space coverage, but the movements I perform on it are pretty much just the same.

Other questions have asked how long I have been doing the swinging pole for, not how long I have been doing it in total.

For me, performing it, I felt every movement. I felt in control, but also recognized and acknowledged that there is still some sort of control of me. What I am most proud of is my belief in the movement and why I do what I do. We had a q&a session at the end and I felt it was somewhat fruitful. We had to say what we got out of it. And for me, I said that I achieved closure on a process. I had been working on the piece for a while and just geared it towards the binary of empowerment and objectification, but when the Cirqadia spec was released, and it asked for circus works that focus on queer sexuality, I knew it was right for me to think about my lesbian identity rejecting some of the semiotic phallic representation.

Another thing I loved, was getting very close to the audience, swinging into them and missing them by a couple of inches. I have been told the work is incredibly unique, which is not unlike the comments I usually get for my work.

People came up to me and told me the piece moved them. They felt that it was more than circus, more than a spectacle. This is really interesting because I have been working towards negating those things for a long time. I want the work to be more than a show off, but, at the same time, still incorporate some of the key techniques that I have worked so hard to achieve.

**14/11/19**

My lower back was really sore this morning so I spent about 30 minutes doing gentle warm up exercises and stretches for it. Then I did some pole training, making combos on both sides. Then I relaxed and put poles away. I am learning to listen to my body. In the past, I would ignore the pain and just carry on. Probably doing a significant amount of damage in the process. Obviously, if I was performing this week I would have just got on with it.

For memory, I clarified the beginning part of the work. The part that was changed hours before performance on Friday at Cirqadia festival.

I feel incredibly fortunate to be able to move through these processes alone and with continued motivation and vitality. I must eat the best diet to allow for full recovery between training and any other physical activity that I do.

There was one point when I was almost playing twister with my body. I thought about using it for my next process as representative of the journey that I have moved through. I think it is important to recognize journey.



## Flying Pole Reflective Diary

The interface between my body and the stigmatised objects is fragile, it brings forth a vulnerability that I am not comfortable with, but it works for the work.

I've been around it, on top of it, wrapped around it, but I have never been underneath it. What happens to me if the patriarchy collapses on my body and I really am out of control? Or under control should I say. What if I start in a powerful place that leads to my demise out of the realisation?

Why am I so obsessed with power? Is it because there were times in my life where I have felt absolutely helpless? I sometimes still feel like that now to be honest, but I think I can manage it now because I have the tools to do so.

In a space where people are saying there is none...

I now know why I create the type of work that I create and that is to show every single person that they have choice. There is challenge, there is struggle, but you can get through it. You can always get out of a shitty situation. I just want to illuminate choice. My work illuminates choice. It says, here is the struggle, but you have a choice. You are never the result of someone else's choice. You need to take responsibility and make the choice yourself. You are responsible for everything. Take responsibility for the way you deal with your life.

I now know why I create the type of work that I create and that is to show every single person that they have choice. There is challenge, there is struggle, but you can get through it. You can always get out of a shitty situation.

I absolutely show a vulnerability, that is oftentimes quite difficult for me to watch, but I always come out stronger. I am more resilient,

disciplined, curious and knowledgeable. To expose myself on stage is how I know. It gives me the capacity to connect with audiences in a way that doesn't uphold in verbal conversation. Yes, this process is more difficult for me to deal with psychologically, but it is worth it because of the very specific knowledge I gain. I can only be truly transparent when I write or when I am on stage.

THIS GOES FOR ALL MY WORKS, ESPECIALLY UNSTABLE AND TEN INCH

The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation.

In understanding power, AUTHOR adapts a table by Jean Baker Miller (1976) in order to highlight some of the most prominent traits of dominant and subordinate behaviour. Dominant behaviour is listed as expected;

However, what is clear here is that subordination could not exist without domination and visa versa. When a subordinate, or woman I should more aptly say, recognises her inferiority, she may become defiant (openly or hidden) transgressed within the status of her behaviour against the dominant. This, then leads her "toward greater freedom of expression and action. Another point that has come up personally, for me is the ambivalence I have felt regarding truth and myth.

My aim is not to be the more dominant party, because if that was my aim, I only exist in a cycle of being greater than the "lesser" being I am now. What I want instead is to remove my ambivalent thought patterns and to know, to know from the core, what I want, what I am genially enthused by and why. I externalize my truth through my performance works and in turn, this answers the questions above. This is not an autoethnography, instead, it is an artistic journal that so appropriately tied to many themes that are at the fore of feminist research.

I have just finished a rehearsal for the swinging pole, without the swinging pole and it was really enlightening. I felt connected, the prison, but also the choice and the constant fight against this alleged docility that women are accused of. This is why I want to show the audience that I am fully partaking in the set up and take down of my engagement with the pole. I am an active subject and I suppose I want to show, too, that sometimes decisions can be questioned. If I change the meaning of the pole multiple times throughout the work, you will see that sometimes I have complete control, and sometimes I don't. This is the way the world works in general, isn't it?.

Fetishism, vulnerability and submission.

**03/11/2019**

What I find really interesting is that my "spectacular" power is still connected to the vertical pole, the swinging pole, the virtuosic one. I am going through all of my old notes for the unstable process and the work actually makes a lot of sense with everything that I have been writing down. I just need to type it all up. See what I have got. It has been an interesting process to say the least and I have realised that it is time for me to work with a sound designer. It is really hard otherwise.

In near enough finishing and in closing the process, I felt relieved. I literally did create this hypnotic void that I would step into for just under 15 minutes at a time. I felt everything and then wondered why there was a hint of sadness in me when I would leave the rehearsal space. Some people really get the work and some people don't. They just see the power and strength. But not what goes on behind that. The effort, persistence it takes to maintain that kind of stamina and strength.

Reduce the noise in your life so that you can create.

Stoic practice in the final dance process has given me the tools to live a flourishing life of which my practice, nor my personal life is bound by things. This does not mean I must give up these objects, not at all. It simply means that I acknowledge that my liberation and strength as an artist and woman can flourish without their presence.

The only material object I need to attain power as a performer is my body. This body is capable of much. Reclamation of my body as the source of power.

Nikam, N. A. (1953) Detachment, 3 (2), pp.167-175, University of Hawai'i Press

How interesting "To be detached is to be detached from the desire or effort for detachment. If detachment means attachment to the desire for enlightenment, is it detachment or enlightenment." (p.171). – this helped me performatively.

I found this interesting and relative to my project because I am thinking about a work that will exist without objects. That can be performed any time, any place, without the use of the objects that I have worked with previously. I am bothered that my perceived power and liberation is absolutely tied to objects. This is not to say that I will not work with these objects again, but for the purpose of this practice that will ultimately lead to a written thesis, it is the only way forward. I am nervous about it and the fact that I am seeking enlightenment and liberation without external influence, means that I am shifting my attachment to the notion of knowing, which seems less material than poles and shoes.

There is Rowena the person who has worked for a long time creating work with objects. I think this has been a means to verify, to myself that I am not longer the object that I positioned myself as. Another part of me wants to question what if I am still that object? How, with

my new found knowledge can I navigate in my position and find some sort of quiet agency.

Then I have the artist / performer Rowena who is wanted to push boundaries through the objects I work with, whilst at the same time, I feel like an inferior artist because I have to create with things. I don't feel like a true artist because I am attached to three things in this PhD project; my body, pole and high heels. Each work could not exist without them. If those things cease to exist, then so would my practice. My body, however, must carry on. Is it perfectly ok to attach to one's own body? I must surrender myself to myself and for myself.

**21/11/2019**

What would the body move like if there was a psychological detachment? What would it produce without the use of objects? One could argue that the female body is stigmatised in itself, but one could also just stay strictly embodied through focus on the body.

**07/12/2019**

Back – spectacle

Front – close to me and involved in the work. They could feel what I was going through.

I noticed it was difficult trying to get people into the space with me and it was also hard trying to get people to fill out surveys. Pauline made a good point and that is that people don't like to write just as some people don't like to speak.

I am not ready to let go of the objects in my practice, instead, I am ready to absolutely exploit them.

I need to negotiate them together. Extend the works and bring them together.

Love your process. Love it.

Document, don't create.

Have women pole dance, in a traditional style, on scaffolding.

You definitely have intense bouts of creativity

Enlightenment has allowed me to see that I am a construct, I am a result of everything I have been exposed to. I have to unpack this.

Reclaiming the body, reclaiming our own practice.

UNSTABLE – Audiences forget about the stigma that is attached to the pole when it is not fixed to the space, as it would be in a strip club. When it flies it adds an excitement that is more thrilling for them. When they are in the space with me, their shared vulnerability allows them to overlook the spectacle of the work and instead empathise with me.

**21/02/2020**

What I am certainly most interested in is flipping the gaze onto the audience, objectifying the objectified, but still somehow keeping it in a performance context whereby I remain in control and have the work present with various different diameters.

Pin point most interesting and exciting findings, such as dissolving the spectacle by having audience in space with me and also the flying pole being fixed from ceiling, instead of from floor, removes the sexualised element of the work.

Draw from both works to create a new work. And to even extend both.

Allow audience to interact with the work.

**31/01/2020**

Audience interpretation is a valuable part of any work (Brecht, Bausch).

**Notes from L 31/10/19**

When you are on the pole, you are subject/object intertwined.

There is a tension when the objects come together

You are embodied on pole, you are human being on pole. You flow.

You voluntarily position your hands

seamless transitions and clear intention throughout

The strongest moments in the work are when you are intertwined with the pole.

To work on

embodied state with the horizontal pole. Your presence and why it is there in the first place. 2 answers - it is just a metal pole, but that one is swinging, and also because I have agency to absolutely manipulate it to suit it to my needs. So then how can I translate that?

The challenge of the juggling and your gaze either at the audience or towards the pole. Give off a sense that the floor pole is as good as the one that is hanging. You can use weight to do this.

Integrated proximity.

Music end. Do you want it to support or go against what you are doing?

Notes for self

Take beginning back to the way it was. Walking on with it and showing that you are the one who will manipulate and control the objects. Use its weight. Question what you want your audience to know about the pole.

Shorten the proximity between poles in the beginning. Then walk to the central space. Show it as a separation between you and the audience.

Develop the final swing and find a unique way to move your legs to show that you are not fully restricted.

The fact that you go away from the swinging pole gives the audience a chance to settle, for those moments when you come back to it.

To experiment. Let it sway you from side to side after you juggle it. Catch the swinging pole and just lean over the horizontal one to reimagine it as something else. Or maybe to reiterate it as a barrier between you and the audience.

Be confident when you are standing behind the swinging pole with hands on hips.

**04/03/2021**

It was weird going back into the studio. I thought the work would be hard and painful but it feels a lot easier now, the fight is not as significant.



## **6.1 *Pol(e)arity of Self*. Grouped Data from Reflective Journal and Audience Feedback**

Data was drawn from both reflective journal and audience feedback. Both data sets are supported with video documentation, which was highlighted as I identified themes in *Pol(e)arity of Self* findings chapter six.

Text from my reflective journal is written in black.

Text from audience feedback is coloured in light purple as shown in this sentence.

Thematic Table Appendix 4

### **Meeting Selves**

The work must be honest; I cannot work in any other way. It is paramount that artists speak their truth and that they are vulnerable. The final work should speak autobiographically about the time in my life that has motivated this entire thread of research. I am not an overtly feminine woman who is obsessed with high heels and femininity, I am a woman who has experienced femininity and actions attached to pole dancing and the stigma it has been tarnished with, such as lap dancing and fetishization. There was a complete disconnect from my sexuality -- I am a gay woman, yet I was an expert in teasing men because of my ability to 'perform' heterosexuality and femininity with ease. [...] I had to undergo a lot of shit objectification to even remotely be interested in working with these types of themes in my work. [...] The bizarre thing is about all of this, I started pole dancing because it sparked a connection with me and I got so good at it that now my services are in demand. I have moved away from the sexualised element of the practice and I realise now that I was easily able to do that because I understand, from an intrinsic and experiential level, what it feels to be objectified and consumed. Because I know, I can resist it. The difference

between dancing for the gaze of a man; presenting my body for his gaze and performing my art for audience gaze, is not that dissimilar. In both scenarios I use my body to say something, to achieve a specific goal. Only, in the second scenario, where I am truly crafting my intention to something more than sexual aesthetic, I move through an intersubjective mode of thinking that I am completely in control of. Let me write that again to be clear. In the second version of this, I am awake, I am active, I know, and I oversee the entire process [...] (Appendix 6.3, p.272).

[...] I have to ask how one, as a solo practitioner, can dig deeper and deeper to find authentic representation of self in performance. A self that can shift from a performative persona to dealing with the risks of publicly exposing my actual self through solo practice [...] What is my ideal self and how do I bring this through in my work? [...] Here I mostly discuss my subjectivity through the lens of a solo performance and choreography which deliberately plays with the notion of objectification. In turn, through these self-exposing activities of solo practice, I always learn something new about how my self has been formed. If I were to conclude my work as giving me a full sense of knowing, then there would be nothing left to explore. I must never truly know, because then I would never ask again. The self is always in a state of construction and can be modified at any time, with the aid of new exposures” (Appendix 6.3, p.269).

### **Multiple Selves find Equal Power**

“It is not a competition. It is a sort of curiosity. - - I didn’t want it to seem like a duet or a dance off.” (Appendix 6.3, p.269).

Pull from your internal dialogue and use it in conjunction with what audiences have pulled from the work. Ask yourself; do you know who you are and are you the full version of yourself? If not, what part of me am I in what situation? (Appendix 6.3, p.269).

“I have to acknowledge the ways in which I have been fed as a woman and a body, and an artist, but I also have to acknowledge interpretation of audiences and how their lens’ have been produced. Indeed, I have to ask how one, as a solo practitioner, has the capacity to dig deeper and deeper to find authentic representation of self in performance. A self that is able to shift through an information led persona and deal with the public risks of exposing my personal self through solo practices” (Appendix 6.3, p.269).

“What is my ideal self and how do I bring this through in my work? Well, I think I just want my eyes to be wide open, to see how my self has been and continues in construction. I am not built yet and I really understand that there are many more attributes to add to the formation of me. I don’t think the true version of self should appear as fully constructed until one is ready to leave that self behind. I often think about the different version of myself, in the various different contexts, here I mostly discuss my subjectivity through the lens of a solo performance and choreographer who deliberately plays with the notion of objectification throughout the dance making process. In turn, through these self-exposing activities of solo practice, I always learn something new about how my self has been formed. If I were to conclude my work as giving me a full sense of knowing, then there would be nothing left to explore. I must never truly know, because then I would never ask again. The self is always in a state of construction and can be modified at any time, with the aid of new exposures” (Appendix 6.3, p.269).

“Version One: speaks as if she is sharing something, she is always calms and presents herself professionally, as the artist or teachers would. She drifts in an out of the work. Version Two: She is unapologetically trying to use her sexuality to maintain some sort of power and address of the other versions. She has a smaller movement vocabulary, is very self-indulgent, and doesn’t have to do much to get her point across, her strong presence is more likely her

power. Version Three: A vulnerable, yet brave woman who is willing to push past the aesthetic that exists on the outside. She fights for herself to be seen, as opposed to just her body. What all three have in common is that they are having this dialogue in front of an audience which means they are inherently objectified. In order to combat this, version two and three will, at some point come towards to camera with some sort of to include the viewer in the performance. This might be as simple as directing the movement towards the audience” (Appendix 6.3, p.270).

“I know that I had to go through those experiences in order to reach the level of confidence that I have now. I could always play the role of a powerful woman, but to actually feel like a powerful woman is different. To know I have control over how I present my body is much more liberating. I know these answers because of these processes. I discourse about whether or not activities that are usually deemed as exploitative to women are indeed empowering and I can confidently tell you this. If you analyse why you engage with such an activity in the first place you will most likely feel subjectified and thus empowered” (Appendix 6.3, p.272).

There has to be something sexual, but there has to be something vulnerable like you looking at the camera, with music over you like what you say does not matter. Stare at the camera for longer and then start flashing back into the other sequence where you take your bra off. -- The sexualisation of nudity needs to be addressed in your screen work. It is a sexualised reversal. You show subjectivity and that disrupts that fantasy. Paradox, real and unreal, seen and unseen, subject and object. If a work is not recorded, the window to objectification via gaze is much shorter. Resist the labour involved or show it” (Appendix 6.3, p.272).

“What if she helps you in the end and you both look at the audience together in that strong and stern way! Use the power of your eyes” (Appendix 6.3, p.274).

“I use my semi naked body that is somewhat concealed by major facets of femininity to show the contrast between what is feminine and what is false. The laces wrap around my neck. It is interesting to look at but not the most comfortable to work with. [...] I deliberately throw myself around the pole, in a no seductive manner, to make fun of the notion that stripping is about arousing the external viewer. This whole video is a physicalised version of my internal dialogue. I show that I can take control, but not through exposing myself, I show that I can be vulnerable when I think of that version of myself. ALSO, I am trying to eradicate the sexualisation of nudity by allowing the less feminine one expose herself in a vulnerable way.” (Appendix 6.3, p.273).

“How my multiple selves, as perceived by audiences in previous performances, can exist in a constant state of contradiction. How can dancing with exploitative objects be an activity for self if the sole goal of creating the dance is that it will be presented to audiences? Can I, as the artist, maintain true agency even though I am directly objectifying myself through means of audience gaze, pole dance and femininity?” (Appendix 6.3, p. 275).

“The submissive style movement came first and the other, then for the more dominant style, I wanted her to sort of observe, occasionally and quietly control the other one, but she is a support for her too. The dominant figure is not there to manipulate, she is there to say that you can do better, you can be stronger” (Appendix 6.3, p.275)

“At first, I thought it was about a ‘doing’ self and a critical self, and that the introduction of the third character / self was about the better understanding and integration of the two, a vulnerability required to understand something better” (Appendix 6.2 p.261).

“I like it I thought it was interesting, what I think I interpretate from it is you in the heels is something you aspire to be or a darker side of you

that you are trying to tame. I like at the that there is a third you which I'm guessing is you have tamed and is both" (Appendix 6.2, p.261).

"[...] The vulnerable (non-heels) looked to be intimidated by the heels. Then eventually the ending showed the transformation and that maybe the confidence was always there within" (Appendix 6.2, p.261).

"There is under the surface (to me at least) a sense of co-dependence, or perhaps even shared experience, between the two, which I think you articulate very well in the pivotal moment where both dancers approach the audience in unison, Right nods and Left follows, only for you to then subvert the archetypal expectation, subsequently having Left nod and Right follow. Therein for me lies the polarity of the title, but also a demonstration of a type of unity between both "selves". And then, what can I say about the ending with the third self (or the "actual" self, perhaps the artist herself, or a self-perception rendered in character...?) At least, as I saw it, she is a vector combining the previous two dancers, implied both through the use of reverse video itself, and also with the added layer of the vulnerable nude "redressing" herself while dancing and "transforming" into the other personality" (Appendix 6.2. p.263).

"at the beginning the polarity between the selves seems like a power binary at this stage with 'heels' self, having more power, but then I see this changing, when 'other' self is on the top of the pole and 'heels' self is underneath. From this point the dynamics shift and it becomes more unstable as to who has power - interesting! [...] so whilst the dichotomy of the two selves can be read literally (in one sense, as a power balance, like a strong vs weak dichotomy), there is this threat of something more subversive to come, - the shifts in power and the voyeuristic play where both begin to look at the audience, knowingly being looked at, and knowingly looking at each other. They become equally powerful when they both look at me as

an audience, I almost become noticed as the voyeur, so they have the power and not me (as audience)?" (Appendix 6.2, p.264).

"When watching the work, I had a sense of self observation at the beginning, both powerful in their own way. I sensed that the pole was at the centre of these women, showing it to be the object that pulled them in, sharing the same desire but a difference in approach, as if two different sides of the same coin [...] There are moments when the performers look at one another, it feels like acknowledgment of one's self [...] towards the end of the performance, as you are stripped of both original performers, and for me you become one, one in the same" (Appendix, p.265).

"Not only two Rowena's but I didn't expect 3 or actually one combined." (Appendix, p.266).

### **Audience / Performer Connection**

"I thought the introduction of the third self was fantastic – I think everyone at some point in their lives has felt that vulnerable and exposed, but it's easy to think of yourself as weak in those moments. It was almost reassuring to see you go through that process. I felt like I was witnessing your internal dialogue" (Appendix, p.261).

"I thought it was interesting that the more "sexual" image of yourself was covered almost head to toe with barely any skin on show however presented a very feline, alluring shape. Whereas the version of you on the pole was practically in underwear but was very vulnerable and sometimes dominated by the "sexual" figure. [...] It was very powerful and compelling, it made me think a lot and made me think about how I view performers and people's presentation choices in day-to-day life" (Appendix, p.262).

"Not to say that I felt uncomfortable, or as if I shouldn't be privy to this event taking place, but moreso that it seemed explicitly personal as

an expression, and I felt that every aspect of its performance and production lent itself to exhibiting this feeling within me as I watched” (Appendix, p.263).

“I loved the introduction of the third Rowena - how vulnerable she was, and it seemed to me she was terrorised by the other two. Defo something I understand” (Appendix, p. 266).

“P1: obviously with my dissertation being about sexual assault, and something that I have been fighting is like over sexualising like womens bodies and I think I just want to thank you doing that fight because I know that is like what you talk about as well, and I think it is really important that you have done this piece and you have shown, like, say if that was shows to someone they would be like say she’s asking for it and things like that so I am just really happy you have done that and it means a lot to me as well, and I am sure it does to other people so thank you.” (Appendix 6.2, p.267).

### **Experiencing feelings of voyeurism and reversal of gaze, forced to view**

“To embrace and understand and accept multiple versions of myself is liberating in itself and I can look at you in the eye and tell you that. – this is why I look directly into the camera at the end.” (Appendix 6.3, p.275).

“I invite you to view a physical conversation between the multiple selves you can find in my performance works. I am in my own studio space because this is a space I use to tap into these personas and to build the alter egos. It is a space for absolute strength and vulnerability. Which one is vulnerable and strong is down to you... a short film about my selves” [...] In talking to you, the audience, I am activating your presence and giving you a place in the performance” (Appendix 6.3, p.270).



“I resist the sexualisation of the semi-nude body by showing it in a state of reverse, moving in a way that is not controlled, but is free, plus, I do that right after I have looked directly at the audience, in three versions of myself. This has the potential to enhance discomfort, and or alienation” (Appendix 6.3, p. 274).

“Do not forget about the fourth wall. The gaze is what the fight is about, really. Yes, because you are going to a, throw your gaze back to the audience, and b, you are in control of your entire process, the full work” (Appendix 6.3, p. 275).

“There was an infiltration/intrusion of gaze” (Appendix 6.2, p.261).

“I felt like I was forced to be a voyeur of the drama. Predation, security, self-denial, strangled and inverted by the myths of women through the male gaze” (Appendix, p.262).

“Watching it I felt empowered but also like I was being watched especially with your intense gaze it almost felt like I was being asked which figure I was more drawn to who would my eyes be on” (Appendix 6.2, p.262).

“[...] So whist the dichotomy of the two selves can be read literally (in one sense, as a power balance, like a strong vs weak dichotomy), there is this threat of something more subversive to come, - the shifts in power and the voyeuristic play where both begin to look at the audience, knowingly being looked at, and knowingly looking at each other. They become equally powerful when they both look at me as an audience, I almost become noticed as the voyeur, so they have the power and not me (as audience)?” (Appendix 6.2, p.264).

“are they a team and are they working together to come back at us for watching them? Am I the one who is really being watched?” (Appendix 6.2, p.266).

“I felt that I became the subject of the experiment” (Appendix 6.2, p.266).

“The strength of the power play between the difference selves is so strong and the play on voyeurism and you know, who is voyeuristic here, is it the audience, is it you, is it one of the selves? Who is voyeuristic? It just plays and explores those ideas for me the whole way through and it doesn’t ever let up.” (Appendix 6.2, p. 268).

### **Object Visibility**

“I work with two versions of myself in a way that can also explain some elements and origins of pole dance. I can take the objects off and manipulate them and I can resist using the objects altogether if that is what feels enticing to me at the time. I have expectations of myself that are unclear. I am to be physically strong” (Appendix 6.3, p. 274).

“I don’t ever want my work to conform to traditional and stylised pole aesthetic, instead, I just want to pole to be present, and in this case, it is it the separation and meeting point of my own contradictions, the contradictions that exists within the pole dance genre and most importantly, how the female body can live in multiple ways.” (Appendix 6.3, p.277).

P1: “[...] Absolutely stunning, choreographically, your journey, I can really see that now, that for me is one of the key things... I didn’t see a pole. So choreographically, that growth and that development was just [...]” (Appendix 6.2, p.266).

“I think I agree with A, I did not really see a pole, I just saw the piece as a whole, as like. The pole was not a major part for me, it was just the choreography for me. It wasn’t all about the pole, it was like how you had created these different personalities and merged them into one.” (Appendix 6.2, p.267).



## **6.2 Pol(e)arity of Self. Raw. Audience Feedback**

Those who have watched online and shared their thoughts with me through WhatsApp, Instagram and email.

A: Audience

A1: At first I thought it was about a 'doing' self and a critical self, and that the introduction of the third character / self was about the better understanding and integration of the two.. a vulnerability required to understand something better. Then, the boot laces started strangling you, or so I interpreted, so I'm rethinking it now – a metaphor for being strangled by yourself. I love how thought provoking your work is.

A1: I asked myself what she will do next and how she will fight that inner demon.

A1: I thought the introduction of the third self was fantastic – I think everyone at some point in their lives has felt that vulnerable and exposed, but it's easy to think of yourself as weak in those moments. It was almost reassuring to see you go through that process. I felt like I was witnessing your internal dialogue.

A2: There was an infiltration/intrusion of gaze.

A3: So clever! I loved seeing these 2 different sides of pole and personality. It feels like the heels aspect of you is in control or wants to be, but then it seems like things balance out at the same time as the 2 start to become more in synch and mirroring each other either side of the pole. I like the way you've shown such different sides of pole and that they can exist separately but aren't always exclusive. I also like that you kept everything else so consistent and simple with the black and white. I wasn't sure if the ending shows sexuality weighing you down or binding you in some way, but the 'rewind'

effect is very cool. And the editing is so clever - you must have put so many hours into this!

A5: I like it I thought it was interesting, what I think I interpretate from it is you in the heels is something you aspire to be or a darker side of you that you are trying to tame. I like at the that there is a third you which I'm guessing is you have tamed and is both. Choreography wise, I like the use of levels how heels you is grounded, and pole you is high on the pole and how heels you can still manipulate the movement of pole you. Very cleverly videoed and edited i can tell you put a lot of effort into it.

A6: I watched it a few times and had 2 ideas in mind. The main one being kind of a journey. The vulnerable you, shy, uncertain and very self conscious, yet inquisitive. And it was a journey of how you become the most confident and powerful version on yourself. I loved it when both versions crawled towards. The vulnerable (non heels) looked to be intimidated by the heels. Then eventually the ending showed the transformation and that maybe the confidence was always there within.

Another slightly different thought i had; they're both versions of you. Both within you from then beginning. Sometimes you feel like the shy, uncertain version and other times it's the confidence queen in heels. And the end dance (the backwards) was a moment of transition between the two.

I loved how at the end it's played backwards, I thought that was really creative. It's also very satisfying that the two don't overlap. TBC

So there's moments when both are on the pole and they never quite touch which makes it's very realistic and actually seem like two people. I really enjoyed watching it. I liked the use of music, for example near the ending when both versions of you jolt their heads back to certain beats. Also when the (sounds like a camera flash)

camera clicks and the version in heels appears and disappears. The only thing is the sound became a little irritating after a while. I enjoyed when you could hear the actual sound of the heels over the top of the music.

I hope this helps! Looks great - you can genuinely see almost two different people with the way you use completely different facial expressions and body language for both. Almost appears that the non heels version is intimidated by the heels. Whilst the heels is radiating major levels of confidence in herself.

I watched it a few times and enjoyed it every time - it was nice to stop different things each time :)

A7: Love it Rowena. My god you are such a powerful artist now. Always were, but now, holy shit, you blow me away.

A8: I felt like I was forced to be a voyeur of the drama. Predation, security, self-denial, strangled and inverted by the myths of women through the male gaze. I really thought a lot of it.

A9: the body and the perception of the female form is so at the mercy of the lens it is viewed through. I thought it was interesting that the more "sexual" image of yourself was covered almost head to toe with barely any skin on show however presented a very feline, alluring shape. Whereas the version of you on the pole was practically in underwear but was very vulnerable and definitely sometimes dominated by the "sexual" figure. The disappearance of that more dominant figure suggested to me this idea of you being one being with several sides and complexities and that you are able to present in whatever way you wish to, then at the end with the cowering figure who was undressed I got this idea of being "undressed by someone with their eyes" but then you reclaimed that as it went backwards and you began to make the choice to show up your body!

Watching it I felt empowered but also like I was being watched especially with your intense gaze it almost felt like I was being asked which figure I was more drawn to who would my eyes be on. It was very powerful and compelling, it made me think a lot and made me think about how I view performers and people's presentation choices in day to day life.

A10: In general, the piece spoke to me as another attempt from you to confront notions of self-image and sexualisation (especially as it pertains to pole dance as an artform), and the revelation of the existent shades of grey within these topics. As I said in my first email, I really enjoyed it and felt it was a great achievement. I think that the reason why is due to the deftness with which you express (in my interpretation) both the deconstruction and reconstruction of vulnerability, and what constitutes the "feminine" or as you suggest in the title, more generally, the self. The initial set-up with Left and Right is a standard tension of duality, artfully rendered, and their to-and-fro alludes initially to particular archetypes (perhaps master/slave, or prisoner/guard; the mechanical robot whines in the sound design elicited thoughts of science-fiction settings). However, as the piece continues, more than this becomes evident. There is under the surface (to me at least) a sense of co-dependence, or perhaps even shared experience, between the two, which I think you articulate very well in the pivotal moment where both dancers approach the audience in unison, Right nods and Left follows, only for you to then subvert the archetypal expectation, subsequently having Left nod and Right follow. Therein for me lies the polarity of the title, but also a demonstration of a type of unity between both "selves". And then, what can I say about the ending with the third self (or the "actual" self, perhaps the artist herself, or a self-perception rendered in character...?) At least, as I saw it, she is a vector combining the previous two dancers, implied both through the use of reverse video itself, and also with the added layer of the vulnerable nude "redressing" herself while dancing and "transforming" into the other

personality (also, the irony is not lost on me that to in order to shoot this chain of events, you were in fact doing the opposite during your performance, insofar as entering into vulnerability as the performer in order to portray the reversal in the final piece. It's a wonderful touch from an editing/filmic perspective; a perfectly stunning production choice).

As for my feelings as the viewer, I suppose I was most often connected to what I perceived as the intimacy of the piece; whether the wide angle lens explicitly showing the limited space in the room engendered this, or if it was through your choice to look directly into the camera at the key moments, or the sense that neither Left nor Right can seem to even touch each other, without Right disappearing. Not to say that I felt uncomfortable, or as if I shouldn't be privy to this event taking place, but moreso that it seemed explicitly personal as an expression, and I felt that every aspect of its performance and production lent itself to exhibiting this feeling within me as I watched.

A11: Sound score works well, it is more integrated with the intention/movement.

Beginning section, I was interested in the 'heels' self as a voyeur and then us (as audience) as voyeur, also I began in this section to see 'heels' self as almost predator like, this is emphasised when she re-appears in the background crawling. I feel that heels self appears dominating or predator like, with 'other' self being more fragile at the beginning, exemplified when she falls to the floor and sits in the corner with her back to the audience. But this is a fragile moment that really drew me in, I find as an audience I am drawn to vulnerability, as much as strength, so it is good to see you utilising both in this work.

Other thoughts: at the beginning the polarity between the selves



seems like a power binary at this stage with 'heels' self, having more power, but then I see this changing, when 'other' self is on the top of the pole and 'heels' self is underneath. From this point the dynamics shift and it becomes more unstable as to who has power - interesting!

Also in the first part 'heels' self almost seems like a parody at times, as not real, or a caricature, which I think can almost feel quite subversive in itself, not sure where I'm going with this, but thought I would just offer it. So whilst the dichotomy of the two selves can be read literally (in one sense, as a power balance, like a strong vs weak dichotomy), there is this threat of something more subversive to come, - the shifts in power and the voyeuristic play where both begin to look at the audience, knowingly being looked at, and knowingly looking at each other. They become equally powerful when they both look at me as an audience, I almost become noticed as the voyeur, so they have the power and not me (as audience)?

Introduction of third self: Is the 'third self' a unity of the two selves or an extension of one of the two selves? Or something different altogether?

On first glance it can seem quite easy to read, but I feel there is real complexity in this work and like most good art works, you need to go back to it again and each time you watch it, you find something new and of more depth.

It does feel there is less movement development, or, less movement content than previous works, perhaps choreographically, but this appears more conceptual than previous works, and as a screen work, clearly it will be a departure from your live work by necessity of the camera framing.

There were a couple of things in terms of editing: I wondered if at the

beginning there was too much appearing and dis appearing of 'heels self' ? Also in the final section of third self, - whether there was too much play with reversing/ fast forwarding, although this started to feel more like a parody or even more paradoxical, or absurd, which on the other hand was quite interesting? Not sure, I'll leave that with you.

A12: Stunning! Very powerful in artistry, choreography, performance, and film. Wow!!

A13: Brilliant!! Professionally executed and extremely expressive.

A14: Firstly, I would like to say how extraordinary your work is, you never fail to create something new and diverse. The performance is always perfectly executed and thought provoking. The work allows you to engage with the performer (as you break the third wall) and allows the audience to establish a relationship with each performer within your work (seen as versions of yourself, maybe?). Every movement is purposeful, this is always lovely to see as it shows true understanding of your own work.

When watching the work, I had a sense of self observation at the beginning, both powerful in their own way. I sensed that the pole was at the centre of these women, showing it to be the object that pulled them in, sharing the same desire but a difference in approach, as if two different sides of the same coin. Facial expression towards the camera audience are powerful and for me enhance this concept of personalities, or two separate performers. I really enjoyed the concept that you have taken, working with yourself but showing layers within yourself. There are moments when the performers look at one another, it feels like acknowledgment of one's self, its striking!

One performer (in shorts) seems to pull away or turn away from the second performer at times, I get the sense that this is a pulling and pushing, as if a fight or understanding within yourself maybe? The

layering of performers, as they move one above the other on the pole, is fantastic! At this point, I feel a sense of becoming one, although two. The swift movement of the head disconnects the dancers and one disappears, as if the performer is knocking one away. It's controlled and powerful. When the performer is found alone, it seems you have moved away from the pole, maybe the second performer is an added strength within, it really is fantastic to watch you perform with yourself.

Towards the end of the performance, as you are stripped of both original performers, and for me you become one, one in the same. It is, I believe a beautiful and interesting concept of self-awareness and understanding. The correlation between sound and movement in this section, created a climax for me, that allowed me to move with the performer and gave me a sense of the performers being entwined into one.

The performers show clear differences in costume, this I feel adds to the idea of the differences within the same performer.

Absolutely love the use of sound, it really allowed for the changes within the work and showed clear structure throughout.

The work made me feel that there can be two sides to everything, both can be strong and beautiful.

I really enjoyed watching this work, it's intriguing and fascinating, and so creative. The editing is also flawless, very well executed, and clean.

A15: This work displayed different characters; dom, subject, victim. Feelings and words I thought of are anxious, sexual, strength, scared, lonely, abuse, defeated, controlled, worried, giddy, victimised, exciting, naughty, turned on, leadership, animalistic, vulnerable, freeing, experimental, power, submissive, dominatrix.

Subject looking for approval, subject is the most powerful, subject is always being watched even when the controlling figure is not present. Dom has the ultimate control.

Questions I have: are they a team and are they working together to come back at us for watching them? Is the more vulnerable girl a follower of the more dominant one? Does she aspire to be her an look up to her? Am I the one who is really being watched? They gaze back to me is really powerful.

I felt excited, turned on, but towards the end, I felt that I became the subject of the experiment.

How flipping the gaze back to the audience can increase subjectivity...

Very clever, you are so multi talented, great soundscape, clever accurate editing which I guess is super hard as it looks seamless no overlaps consistent lighting. Not only two Rowena's but I didn't expect 3 or actually one combined. Lots to say and would love to do that over a cup of tea or glass of wine. I would be interested how that could translate to a live performance, projecting the second version of you a hologram if you get the budget. It's fab.

It's very clever isn't it.. very relatable, too. I loved the introduction of the third Rowena - how vulnerable she was, and it seemed to me she was terrorised by the other two. Defo something I understand! Lol

### **09/03/2021, *Pol(e)arity of Self*. Peer Review Transcript**

Peers were shown the film via Zoom, of which the convo took place.

P1: [...] Absolutely stunning, choreographically, your journey, I can really see that now, that for me is one of the key things... I didn't see a pole. So choreographically, that growth and that development was just [...]

P2: Oh my, literally watching that then I was so speechless, like every little bit, the editing, the room, the costumes, the three different personalities, are the same person but as different. It was so good. Like. Amazing. You thought everything through, like each person, they were stood differently, hair and face was different, so, I did not just see Rowena, I saw Rowena from like a different universe, and an alter ego, and then whatever, it was really good. So well done. [...]

P3: I think I agree with A, I did not really see a pole, I just saw the piece as a whole, as like. The pole was not a major part for me, it was just the choreography for me. It wasn't all about the pole, it was like how you had created these different personalities and merged them into one.

Me: that is so interesting in terms of the pole because I usually intend to give the pole a purpose, but in this specific piece, it was just like a meeting point, a split, a forward slash, you know, it had these different connotations, so it is interesting to hear more about that from your perspective.

P4: for me, I didn't see a solo, I saw like a duet, a solo duet and I thought it was really interesting how you managed to create another you at the same time and at some points I felt like there was an action and response going on, like when you were on the pole and then you were. On person but two people.

P5: I thought it was amazing, I loved it. I really liked the choice of sound because it hinted at ideas without you having to express them explicitly. When I saw you on the pole and the you all dressed in black you kinda got, the idea that it is a bit voyeuristic, like you are looking in on something and the other person doesn't really know that you are there. And then the sounds of, was it like cameras? Clicking. That alluded to it without you having to be overly specific about it and I think it really worked.

P6: I thought the reverse editing on the last section was really good, like that was the main section that had my attention the most because of the way it flowed. At first I couldn't clock if it was in reverse or not. So then as soon as your hair came out I could see that it was reversed and it was really effective. Erm, and like everyone else has said, the two versions of you coming towards the camera, doing similar movements, but at the same time, two different personalities, was really good. I really enjoyed it.

P7: [...] the difference between a live piece and when you have something as a piece of video, its got better, its got much better. I think when you are in it and going through this process and saying you know this is going to happen choreographically etc, its all very mechanical in that you have lots of specifics you need to attain to make the piece function correctly, so sometimes you hope that those artistic intents are still there. You know, that was October wasn't it? I think it is better now than when I saw it then, even though it hasn't changed. My distance from it and for yourself, the time you spend producing it and being involved in it, gives you that sort of clarity to say this can definitely stand by itself. Bravo.

P1: obviously with my dissertation being about sexual assault, and something that I have been fighting is like over sexualising like women's bodies and I think I just want to thank you doing that fight because I know that is like what you talk about as well, and I think it is really important that you have done this piece and you have shown, like, say if that was shows to someone they would be like say she's asking for it and things like that so I am just really happy you have done that and it means a lot to me as well, and I am sure it does to other people so thank you.

P8: I agree with N Rowena, I saw it with completely fresh eyes since the last time I saw it and it has got stronger and I agree I don't know how, but maybe it is just that space of not having seen it for a while and coming back to it. It does seem more powerful. The strength of

the power play between the difference selves is so strong and the play on voyeurism and you know, who is voyeuristic here, is it the audience, is it you, is it one of the selves? Who is voyeuristic? It just plays and explores those ideas for me the whole way through and it doesn't ever let up. It is just so powerful on those two fronts for me. It is an amazing piece of work and I think like [...]

### **6.3 Pol(e)arity of Self. Raw. Choreography and Reflective Journal**

**04/05/2020**

Started experimenting with overlaying myself in Adobe Premier Pro. I think it will look quite effective if I can create a sexy choreography first and then use that to stimulate a reaction of a vulnerable and authentic self, almost a judgement of myself maybe, or an adoration.

We transition through various streams of feeling powerful.

A squatted position down in the heels. Like you are watching yourself.

It is not a competition. It is a sort of curiosity. - - I didn't want it to seem like a duet or a dance off.

To embrace the multiple versions of yourself is liberating in itself.

Pull from your internal dialogue and use it in conjunction with what audiences have pulled from the work. Ask yourself; do you know who you are and are you the full version of yourself? If not, what part of me am I in what situation?

**08/05/2020**

I think to make this as simple as possible, I just need to film it in a day. Then spend time editing from there

I may have to create the movement and then spend time performing it with a gaze towards to camera and a gaze towards the other version of myself in the space.

I think it will be important to keep the movement somewhat similar in each version, but in the heels perform it with absolute dominance and control.



I also need to consider the full special edit of the screen.

I have to acknowledge the ways in which I have been fed as a woman and a body, and an artist, but I also have to acknowledge interpretation of audiences and how their lens' have been produced. Indeed, I have to ask how one, as a solo practitioner, has the capacity to dig deeper and deeper to find authentic representation of self in performance. A self that is able to shift through an information led persona and deal with the public risks of exposing my personal self through solo practices.

What is my ideal self and how do I bring this through in my work?

Well, I think I just want my eyes to be wide open, to see how my self has been and continues in construction. I am not built yet and I really understand that there are many more attributes to add to the formation of me. I don't think the true version of self should appear as fully constructed until one is ready to leave that self behind. I often think about the different version of myself, in the various different contexts, here I mostly discuss my subjectivity through the lens of a solo performance and choreographer who deliberately plays with the notion of objectification throughout the dance making process. In turn, through these self-exposing activities of solo practice, I always learn something new about how my self has been formed. If I were to conclude my work as giving me a full sense of knowing, then there would be nothing left to explore. I must never truly know, because then I would never ask again. The self is always in a state of construction and can be modified at any time, with the aid of new exposures.

I invite you to view a physical conversation between the multiple selves you can find in my performance works. I am in my own studio space because this is a space I use to tap into these personas and to build the alter egos. It is a space for absolute strength and vulnerability. Which one is vulnerable and strong is down to you... a short film about my selves.

In talking to you, the audience, I am activating your presence and giving you a place in the performance.

As Kawka suggests “Our dialogic selves, and our inner speech, develop as we internalise responses from other people to learn about ourselves and our place in the world in relation to others.” (p.276). So, in essence, what I have done as a choreographer and an eager researcher, I have used data from audience feedback to raise further internal dialogue about my selves, which have been apparent in my journal entries, as well as audience feedback sessions. The selves has formed a conversation, that I am quite literally telling and showing you in my final work. It is an art factual lecture demonstration. Within this final solo work, I bring hints of narcissism to the process, giving the idea of solo work being self-indulgent. I play on it and use it. There is not one of me to indulge in, there is three.

what is important is to keep it in the vulnerable, strong and dominant sense and not to get lost in other areas between.

There is me sending objectification back to the audience, or at least provoking some sort of discomfort in me.

Version One: speaks to them as if she is sharing something, she is always calms and presents herself professionally, as the artist or teachers would. She drifts in an out of the work.

Version Two: She is unapologetically trying to use her sexuality to maintain some sort of power and address of the other versions. She has a smaller movement vocabulary, is very self-indulgent, and doesn't have to do much to get her point across, her strong presence is more likely her power.

Version Three: A vulnerable, yet brave woman who is willing to push past the aesthetic that exists on the outside. She fights for herself to be seen, as opposed to just her body.

What all three have in common is that they are having this dialogue in front of an audience which means they are inherently objectified. In order to combat this, version two and three will, at some point come towards to camera with some sort of movement phrase. Maybe the tall one with the heels, kind of showing her legs, and possibly some sort of hair manipulation, whilst the version three will maybe just direct the movement towards the audience.

I know I don't have a lot of light and set, but I want this to be raw. Think lady gaga in marry the night and American beauty for the other version. Maybe look at how Pina has arranged her dancers in Café Muller.

I am aware of my internal selves because I have been under my own surveillance, within my practice, for the past 7 years, 2 of which have been part of my PhD practice.

**03/06/2020**

In this work, I am not thinking of the biography of objects, I am thinking about my multiple selves and their motivation to dance with it and how and why I continue to evolve within the aesthetic and how I feel about it. There is a part of me that wants to dance like a, and the other part of me hates that because of the objectification that ensues from it. I acknowledge the person that brought me to this place, and I love her.

**13/06/2020**

I have just experimented with a video of me talking to the screen, I need to play with Clare's camera to make sure it can pick everything up. It will definitely work if you try with the following...

Chopin music over while you talk at the screen, and the heels girl enters the space behind you. You are almost starting the work in a chaos then. You maybe feel like your voice is not working for you. This is like off the TV show the other day when the actors were screaming at each other but you couldn't hear what they were saying. Very effective.

I will talk to the camera and push myself back into the space. The music will stop and it suddenly becomes very heavy and much focussed into the "heels" woman, the notion of a woman that is sold to women as confidence. Not confidence in a literal sense, but what would a confident woman do? – This is good stimulus.

I don't necessarily need to do a ton of new research, I need to just go back to my original notes for the pressures of women and what the authentic woman looks like, multiple selves will still come through, but in a different way than I imagined in the beginning.

To do next experiment

Play with the level and height of Clare's camera and the settings within it.

Explore with the different costumes. I think the back pants with heels and a long sleeved open neck v for the top. For the "other", I want you to wear a vest top and some normal short, shorts that are not even tight. Just anything. And bare feet.

Dig back into all of that research you did in the beginning to the notion of empowerment as pressure.

Play with perspective, some back and some forward, pulling body in and out of shot.

Can you get Clare to wear the same outfit

Push yourself back from the talking head into the dance, explore the woman that is...

**20/06/2020**

I know that I had to go through those experiences in order to reach the level of confidence that I have now. I could always play the role of a powerful woman, but to actually feel like a powerful woman is different. To know I have control over how I present my body is much more liberating. I know these answers because of these processes. I discourse about whether or not activities that are usually deemed as exploitative to women are indeed empowering and I can confidently tell you this. If you analyse why you engage with such an activity in the first place you will most likely feel subjectified and thus empowered.

Strip away the fetishisation of the body.

There has to be something sexual, but there has to be something vulnerable like you looking at the camera, with music over you like what you say does not matter.

Just Start...

The sexualisation of nudity needs to be addressed in your screen work. It is a sexualised reversal. You show subjectivity and that disrupts fantasy. Paradox, real and unreal, seen and unseen, subject and object. If a work is not recorded, the window to objectification via gaze is much shorter. Resist the labour involved or show it.

**10/09/2020**

The work must be honest; I cannot work in any other way. It is paramount that artists speak their truth and that they are vulnerable. The final work should speak autobiographically about the time in my life that has motivated this entire thread of research. I am not an

overtly feminine woman who is obsessed with high heels and femininity, I am a woman who has experienced femininity and actions attached to pole dancing and the stigma it has been tarnished with, such as lap dancing and fetishization. There was a complete disconnect from my sexuality -- I am a gay woman, yet I was an expert in teasing men because of my ability to 'perform' heterosexuality and femininity with ease. [...] I had to undergo a lot of shit objectification to even remotely be interested in working with these types of themes in my work. [...] The bizarre thing is about all of this, I started pole dancing because it sparked a connection with me and I got so good at it that now my services are in demand. I have moved away from the sexualised element of the practice and I realise now that I was easily able to do that because I understand, from an intrinsic and experiential level, what it feels to be objectified and consumed. Because I know, I can resist it. The difference between dancing for the gaze of a man; presenting my body for his gaze and performing my art for audience gaze, is not that dissimilar. In both scenarios I use my body to say something, to achieve a specific goal. Only, in the second scenario, where I am truly crafting my intention to something more than sexual aesthetic, I move through an intersubjective mode of thinking that I am completely in control of. Let me write that again to be clear. In the second version of this, I am awake, I am active, I know, and I oversee the entire process. The only thing that cannot be controlled in this scenario is the audience interpretation, but of course that will depend on their truth and what they have experienced in life.

**14/10/2020**

Notes for self

Stare at the camera for longer and then start flashing back into the other sequence where you take your bra off.

**14/10/2020**

I feel like I must be literal in my exposing in my body. Showing the fight to want to objectify my body for the sake of performance, to the resistance I feel in that it is more appropriate to be covered up. It is a call out to some of the pressures I have felt in relation to pole dance, the more confident version of me is quite the exhibitionist, but I am actually very shy. But, in saying that, there is a sort of liberation in moving my body without clothes. I use my semi naked body that is somewhat concealed by major facets of femininity to show the contrast between what is feminine and what is false. The laces wrap around my neck. It is interesting to look at but not the most comfortable to work with.

I deliberately throw myself around the pole, in a no seductive manner, to make fun of the notion that stripping is about arousing the external viewer. This whole video is a physicalised version of my internal dialogue. I show that I can take control, but not through exposing myself, I show that I can be vulnerable when I think of that version of myself. ALSO, I am trying to eradicate the sexualisation of nudity by allowing the less feminine one expose herself in a vulnerable way.

I don't ever want my work to conform to traditional and stylised pole aesthetic, instead, I just want to pole to be present, and in this case, it is the separation and meeting point of my own contradictions, the contradictions that exist within the pole dance genre and most importantly, the contradictions that exist within this research.

I look at the camera to challenge the gaze and I ask the viewer, with my eyes, what are you looking at? Do you think this display is for you? I objectify the objectifier.

I work with two versions of myself in a way that can also explain some elements and origins of pole dance. I can take the objects off and manipulate them and I can resist using the objects altogether if

that is what feels enticing to me at the time. I have expectations of myself that are unclear. I am to be physically strong.

What if she helps you in the end and you both look at the audience together in that strong and stern way! Use the power of your eyes.

**16/10/2020**

Showed the latest version of the work to Pauline and Lisa, it still had some jolty parts, but it was all there. Here were the main comments

From Pauline – if it was possible it would be fun to play with camera angles etc. There is more room for development in this

Lisa said the opposite to this and said the static camera angle was enough. She also mentioned it was static and I just wonder if that is because she is used to seeing me on a spinning pole and obviously a flying one in a previous work. She said that this is far removed from previous work for her.

She used the term alienated – isolated and or estranged from an environment.

The background of my location was very sterile, people might not know it is my home, if they were watching it somewhere else in the world, for instance,

Music – does not really work. Try something else and maybe dip into silence

I was described as contemporary Row and Heels Row. Then the third one, which was a combination of the 2. Contemporary Row was subservient to the heels one. I was asked if this was deliberate and if I wanted that to be shown, and yes, I did. If I look back through all of my notes I will definitely see that.

My notes



I know you are watching, but I want you to look at the intersubjective transaction that takes place when I perform this type of work.

I resist the sexualisation of the semi-nude body by showing it in a state of reverse, moving in a way that is not controlled, but is free, plus, I do that right after I have looked directly at the audience, in three versions of myself. This has the potential to enhance discomfort, and or alienation.

For me, whilst there is room for development, there always is. I would say that it does not need development in terms of space or camera angle as this is just another string in the bow.

To embrace and understand and accept multiple versions of myself is liberating in itself and I can look at you in the eye and tell you that. – this is why I look directly into the camera at the end.

**17/10/2020**

It is always so fascinating to see how the creative process pans out. There is essence of original intention in the final piece, but it is never always the same. Things happen by accident in the creative process and I learn more and more and more. As long as there is fluidity and smoothness in transitions, I will be happy with this piece. Each time I watch it, I notice new things and I hope it is this way for the audience too.

I could actually tell the audience how I directed the work.

The submissive style movement came first and the other, then for the more dominant style, I wanted her to sort of observe, occasionally and questly control the other one, but she is a support for her too. The dominant figure is not there to manipulate, she is there to say that you can do better, you can be stronger.

Notes for me from me.

how my multiple selves, as perceived by audiences in previous performances, can exist in a constant state of contradiction. How can dancing with exploitative objects be an activity for self if the sole goal of creating the dance is that it will be presented to audiences? Can I, as the artist, maintain true agency even though I am directly objectifying myself through means of audience gaze, pole dance and femininity?

I almost want to see a fight in the work. Between the two. I think that could be exciting. Some sexual tension too. Bringing in ideas of the virgin / whore dichotomy that was also witnessed in the ten-inch heels. Audience have played a huge part in the development of my previous works, that is, even if they do not see it until it is in an almost finished product state.

Do not forget about the fourth wall. The gaze is what the fight is about, really.

Yes, because you are going to a, throw your gaze back to the audience, and b, you are in control of your entire process, the full work.

**06/10/20**

I filmed straight through, three sections, the heels one, the no shoes and the disrobing. It was straight forward enough but I wanted to be lit better so I am going to reshoot. I also think I could spend some more time looking into the camera. The “heels” person needs to find the pleasure in looking at the audience and being looked at, because, you know what, some people enjoy that. But others who say they dance for themselves might like to challenge that.

When I realised it was not a duet, I felt I could explore a little bit more in editing.

Now that it is not just a duet, you can play more with the movement up the pole. I constant flicker between the two.

The heels pole girl never needs to go up the pole, she doesn't feel like she has to climb to feel strong.

Sit in corner.

### Editing notes.

The technique and stylistic aspects of the movement were all played out as if I was dancing with another. If you were doing a duet with another person on stage, you would understand their steps like you understand your own. This process was no different. Each step aligned with what I had in mind for the other.

The video was used to amplify some of the contradictions as I move through different versions of myself whilst remembering experiences that were not so positive for me in terms of the sexuality of my body. The raw objectification of it and its instrumental use for pleasure of audiences.

I could not have made this work without the use of film, that is why it is only used in a minimal way, there is one camera angle and position throughout. It is my job to bring the movement back and forth, as opposed to someone being behind the camera directing me what to do.

Refined writing...

### **Pol(e)arity of Self**

Pol(e)arity of Self is a short film that underscores multiple, contradictory selves and how they navigate the internalisation of an external gaze. Throughout, the pole is simultaneously used a splitting point and a meeting point for a self that is active and in control, a self

that feels vulnerable, trapped, and objectified, and an ambiguous self that is attempting to understand all of the above.

This short film was released online on 26<sup>th</sup> October 2020 in preparation for an Instagram Live audience / artist discussion, via Metal UK, which took place 29<sup>th</sup> October 2020.

### Pol(e)arity of Self

This work was conceived by the notion of multiple selves, specially a more dominant version and a more submissive version of self that has been noted by audiences in a two of my previous performance works – Unstable and The Ten Inch Heels. In both works I deliberately worked with notions of empowerment and objectification to product a power that was never fixed but flipped between the two. In pol(e)arity of self, I was able to explore both simultaneously, whilst also showcasing a that version of myself that exists somewhere between the two. According to, there is a liberation in recognising the multiple versions of yourself and allowing them to come through.

The high heels and the pole were both used in the works mentioned above, so it was appropriate to continue their use in this work too.

The pole is used almost as a meeting place, a point that separated the submission and dominance, I seen it as the forward slash that one would use when they write sub / dom. As there is always a sexual stigma within pole dance, I connect lightly to its use in BDSM practices.

“I don’t ever want my work to conform to traditional and stylised pole aesthetic, instead, I just want to pole to be present, and in this case, it is it the separation and meeting point of my own contradictions, the contradictions that exists within my life”

The heels show a sign of dominance and the version of me wearing them does not have to do much physically. I use them to show the

physical difference in height as two versions face one and other. I hang the boots around my neck to show my internal ambivalence with femininity and to highlight my consistent questioning as to why I should want such a product to feel more powerful and or feminine. As the heels swing around my neck, my semi-nude body adds another layer to the question about power and asks why I should even have to use heels to feel more feminine when I already have a feminine form. This stems from the idea that “selfhood is flexible, fractured, fragmented, decentred and brittle: such a concept of individual identity is probably the central outlook in current and political thought.”(Elliott, 2014, p.8).

I strip the performance of erotic potential by removing my clothes, not in a slow and sensual way, but in an abrupt and freeing way. In doing this, my body is fragmented and distorted. The removal of clothes, or because it is played in reverse, the clothing resists the sexualisation of nudity in pole dance. The fast pace and removal of eye contact with the camera knows no titillation and breaks down their gaze.

The multiple selves the heels one is observant, somewhat controlling and encouraging at the same time. She is almost setting an example for the other version to say, “come on, you have got this, pick yourself up”. Between them there is definitely no competition, but more of a curiosity, I flashed the heels one in an out because I didn’t want it to appear like a duet, dance off, or even as a pole dance, but simply how these selves would inform each other. What they would do if they had to come together to challenge the gaze of an onlooker who might have other ideas about viewing their body in a sexual context. I used improvisation and writing as a way to stimulate movement in both areas. The final version of me, who moves alone shows that “‘the self’ is actually composed of a number of functionally independent systems” (p.108) that can, at times, work alone and be alone.

The fixed camera (audience) sits in one place for many reasons, the main one being that I was being watched by an audience who would view the work from one space. This allowed me to better play with gaze and to amplify my looking at them when I eventually did. Plus, the low angle gave me the opportunity to enhance the scale of the taller version in the shoes. This work would also not be possible without the fixed camera angle, the duet element would not work as location would be inconsistent. I break the fourth wall by looking directly at the audience. This opens up a challenge for the audience and prompts them to ask if they were sitting comfortable in my objectification before I made eye contact with them through the lens of the camera.

The sound, based on notions of gaze, and the potential of someone observing my physical dialogue between selves, was that everyone would be viewing on a different device, phone, ipad, computer etc. and of course, just a general camera. The camera sounds were used as an effect rather than in a literal way to say that people were observing me through their own lens'. The sound is also a statement about how we present and "perform ourselves" for camera, which is pretty much how we are being viewed, taking pictures and sharing them. The connection between presentation of self and surveillance, external viewers. It is also representative of how sometimes we might internalise the gaze of others as a way to determine how we might dress that day, or not. The persistent and variety of clicking is always a reminder of that.

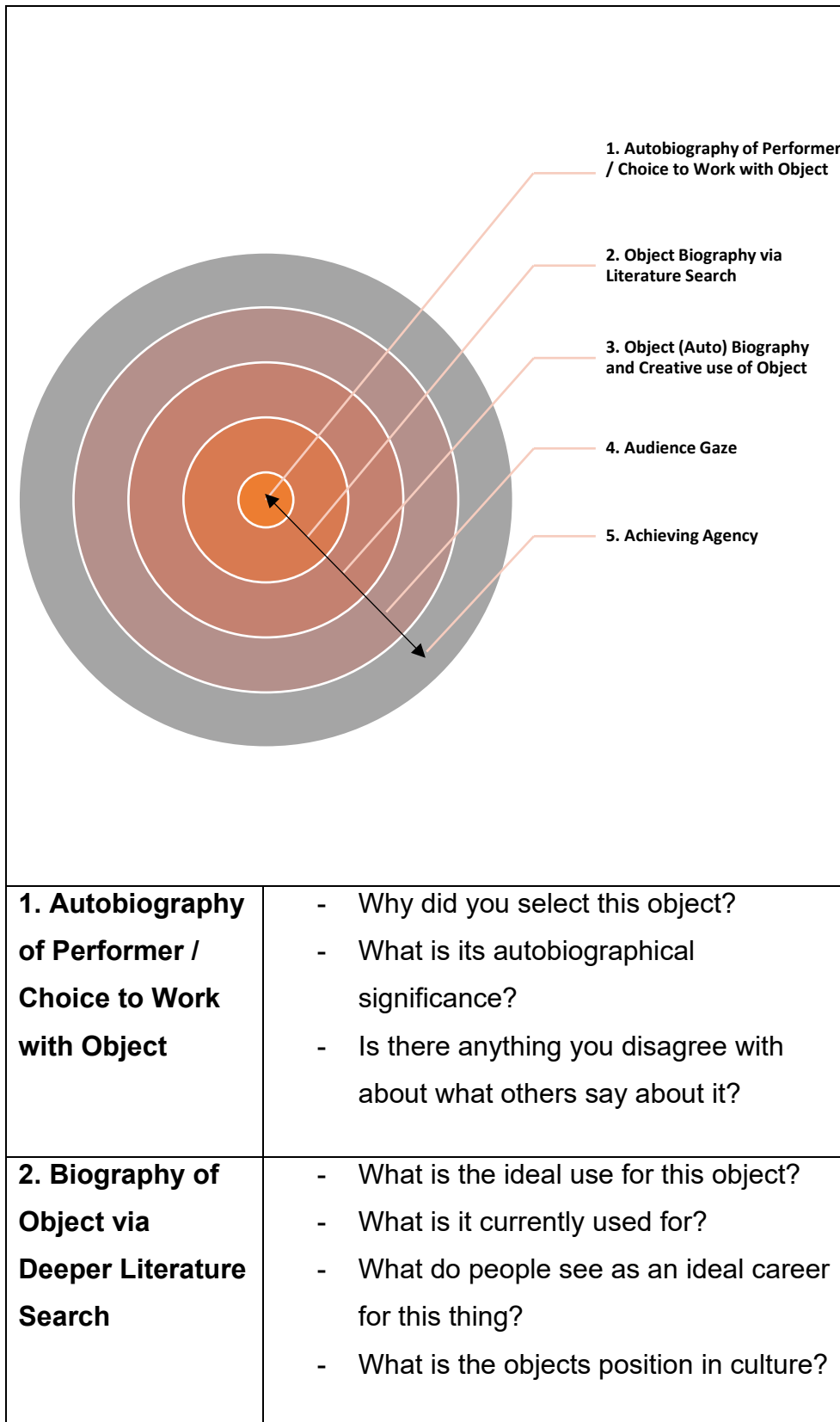
The challenges of creating this work was having to sit down for so long, staring at a screen. I like the editing, but the amount of detail and attention it took to make the times when all Rowena's were on screen, was quite challenging. There were many points where I got very frustrated with the exports.

What I have enjoyed most about the process is bringing the idea to life in a new medium. All of my previous works have been for live

audiences, with some audience interaction, so it was interesting to think about how I could still challenge to audience gaze in this type of format. I enjoyed directed the work like it was a duet, even though I knew it would not end up that way.

I also enjoyed and find it so fascinating to see how the creative process pans out. There is essence of original intention in the final piece, but it is never always the same. Things happen by accident in the creative process and I learn more and more and more. As long as there is fluidity and smoothness in transitions, I will be happy with this piece. Each time I watch it, I notice new things and I hope it is this way for the audience too.

## 7. Workshop Plan





	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What happens when the object reaches the expiration of its practicality?</li> </ul> <p>Then ask</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What do you know now that you did not know before?</li> <li>- Is there anything you want to challenge?</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Object (Auto) Biography and Creative use of Object</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How does your experience of the object compare to the position of the object in culture, in its biography? Is there any conflict?</li> <li>- Use the above to begin exploring practically, asking how your actions with the object can go against what you were told to do with the object? – i.e. what society had in mind for the object. These questions will stimulate your biography.</li> </ul> <p>Video record yourself exploring improvisationally and then analyse the video asking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What organic moments occurred?</li> <li>- In what moments did you feel you were sharing too much?</li> <li>- What moments were raw, almost literal of a particular memory you referred to in step 1?</li> </ul>

<p><b>4. Audience Gaze</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ask yourself why this work is worthy of sharing it to audiences? What do you want to say?</li> <li>- Do you want to share physical space with them?</li> <li>- Do you want them to participate and to be seen in your work?</li> <li>- Would you rather be distanced and watched?</li> </ul>
<p><b>5. Achieving Agency</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Where does your power lie in this work?</li> <li>- What have you reframed?</li> <li>- Did you fulfil a curiosity?</li> <li>- Was your voice loud enough?</li> <li>- Do you still have more to say?</li> </ul>